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Individuals, Power and Participation: Metaphysics and Politics in Spinoza

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University  
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## Abstract

### Individuals, Power and Participation: Metaphysics and Politics in Spinoza

By Ericka Tucker

I argue that Spinoza's affect theory provides a way to understand how the power of the state is a function of the power and organization of the affects of the individuals within it. By properly understanding normativity as the basis of social life, and yet as anchored in the affective life of individuals, Spinoza creates a foundation for a naturalized ethics and political philosophy. Spinoza's conception of the political subject answers critics of the liberal subject, while retaining an understanding of the need for empowered citizens in strong democracies. From Spinoza's ethical and political works I derive a set of principles and a conception of the political subject and then bring these to bear on contemporary questions in democratic theory and international development.

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## Abbreviations

Citations from Spinoza's *Ethics* appear as follows:

'E' stands for the *Ethics*, and is followed by the number of the book, 1-5.

'Def' stands for 'Definitions' and is followed by the number of the definition.

'P' stands for 'Proposition', followed by the Proposition number.

'D' stands for Demonstration, which may be followed by a number signifying the ordinal number of the demonstration (some editions of Spinoza's *Ethics* call demonstrations 'proofs').

'C' stands for Corollary, and may be followed by a number signifying the ordinal number of the corollary

'L' stands for 'Lemma', and may be followed by a number signifying the ordinal number of the lemma.

'S' stands for 'Scholium', and may be followed by a number signifying the ordinal number of the scholium; Spinoza did not enumerate his Scholia, these numbers therefore appear in brackets.

'Pref' stands for Preface.

'DefAff' stands for Definition of the Affects, and may be followed by the number of the definition.

So, a citation from the scholium of proposition 34 in the fourth book of the *Ethics*, will appear as follows: E4P34S.

Citations from Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* appear as follows:

TIE, followed by a paragraph number, not included in the original text.

Citations from Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* appear as follows:

TTP, Chapter #, [page number]

Citations from Spinoza's *Political Treatise* appear as follows:

TP, Chapter #, Section #

All page numbers refer to Morgan, Michael L. (ed.) Samuel Shirley (trans.) *Spinoza: Complete Works*, unless otherwise noted.



## Introduction

Political philosophy is often thought of as mere speculation, far from the political realities which occupy policy makers and social reformers. Political theorists are seen as battling among one another over the proper principle of justice or conception of human agency, without worrying how these choices affect practical political problems. Political philosophers are seen as individuals with little connection to either the real political and social problems of the world, ignorant of the social scientific literature which aims to study and in some cases direct policy to solve these problems.

Such interpretations of political philosophy, however, miss the practical political and social concerns that most often motivate these accounts and the political theorists who create them. Although carried on in language that could not be mistaken for everyday speech, political theorists care about the practical consequences of ideas and conceptions which play a role in politics and in policy but which may not receive the critical attention they deserve. These theorists try to show how our conceptions of persons, justice, community and agency can affect how we conceive of and therefore act in the social world. These conceptions guide our policies; they guide how we understand problems and shape solutions. By understanding and transforming our conceptions, we can reevaluate and critique policy.

In this study I will take up the work of three political philosophers, one early modern and two contemporary theorists, all of whom wrote works of political philosophy with an eye toward practical problems of their political present. Each takes up the terms of the political debate of their time, and transforms them to create a theoretical basis for a project of human emancipation.

The two contemporary theorists who I will engage in this study are in many ways exceptional, but are important for this study because of the way each tests and develops her political theory against evidence provided by their engagement in projects and movements of human emancipation. Both Martha Nussbaum and Iris Young explicitly tie their work to practical

democratization and empowerment projects, Nussbaum through her connections with development work in India and Young with her engagement with social movements in the United States. Each occupies an important place in the American feminist movement, as theorists and practitioners, but in this context they are divided, one liberal-Aristotelian, one post-modern radical democrat. I'll try to work out what these hyphenated titles mean through my discussions of Young and Nussbaum. Despite occupying two poles in contemporary feminist political theory, Young and Nussbaum are joined by their common practical concerns: they both are interested in developing political solutions to empower individuals. They focus on women, not always, but often, because of their shared experience as feminist theorists of recognizing the extent to which efforts to gain human empowerment have excluded women.

Young and Nussbaum's positive contributions to political theory rest on their rejection and reformulation of different elements of the liberal conception of human nature. Young rejects the liberal idea that humans can be conceived as impartial reasoners, particularly about the most important social issues, that they are best conceived as independent, and as the sources of self-generated desires. Rather, Young proposes we understand individuals not just as consumers of goods, and suggests that we understand issues of justice as more than just how much of these goods individuals have. Martha Nussbaum characterizes her capabilities approach as an internal critique of problems in the social contract tradition, but as retaining the important liberal principle that each individual be conceived as separate, as an end. Young rejects the liberal conception of human nature in rather stronger terms and suggests we need a conception of the human individual which recognizes the importance of social groups, which no liberal theory can provide.

My ultimate aim, however, is not to choose Young over Nussbaum, and to present yet another critique of the liberal subject. Rather, my aim is to develop the strongest parts of Young and Nussbaum's theories, and to show how they can be made yet stronger by joining them to a comprehensive naturalistic account of human individuals and political life. Thus, I hope to learn from their critiques of the liberal subject to show how a positive model of human nature can be

developed, and further joined to a social theory which will provide a set of criteria for institutional design to further human empowerment and emancipation.

The feminist critique of the liberal subject is motivated by the concern that this conception of the human is based on a very limited conception of human life, one based on a privileged male model. The liberal subject is understood as autonomous, rational and separate from other humans and able to transcend its environment, and its dependence on other individuals. Feminists have argued that various aspects of this conception of human nature mischaracterize human life and ignore the ways in which humans are interdependent, irrational or affective, and are formed by their environments. In contrast to this independent, separate model of the 'human' stands a model of 'woman' as emotional, dependent, and tied to the body and to the natural world. This model of the 'human' thus has been used to exclude women from what it means to be human.

This conception of human, or rather the exclusion of women from conceptions of what it is to be human, it would seem, must therefore be interrogated, abolished, and a new inclusive model of what it is to be human must be forged. However, although there have been countless critiques of the liberal conception of the human individual as a 'bad' or 'inaccurate' conception of humans, which disempower women and other politically marginalized or excluded groups, we have yet to have comprehensive new models of the human individual to replace this flawed conception. I will discuss why this might be in my discussion of the feminist critique of the liberal subject and its woes in my first chapter. My overall concern, however, is to raise the question again in its positive form: What conception of human subjectivity and sociality do we need for a project of human emancipation and democratic theory? Do our projects which aim at human emancipation rest on unexamined and therefore shaky psychological and metaphysical foundations?

I propose that we learn from Nussbaum, Young, and other feminists' critiques of this liberal conception of human nature and try to develop a positive alternative model of the subject.

In the first part of Chapter One, I will engage in a critical reappraisal of feminist and other critiques of the ‘liberal subject’, since these critiques go to the heart of the question that concerns me and these two formidable theorists, Nussbaum and Young. That question is: do certain of our conceptions of human beings disempower people? If so, can we reform these conceptions, or do we need to throw them out altogether and start anew? Is the entire project of coming up with a model of the subject itself part of the problem?

To answer these questions, I will introduce my third political philosopher, Spinoza. I will argue that Spinoza provides a model of the political subject which is positive, naturalistic, non-essentialist, and which makes sense of the importance of political participation for both individual empowerment and the strength and stability of political communities. Spinoza’s conception of the human individual counters that of the liberal model of the subject nearly point for point: where the liberal subject is autonomous, Spinoza’s subject is affected and determined by forces outside of his or her control; where the liberal subject is rational, Spinoza’s individual is primarily affective or passionate, achieving reason only when the passions are understood; where the liberal subject is separate, Spinoza’s is interconnected with others. For him, individuals’ self-conceptions and imaginative understandings of themselves and the world are created through affective interactions with other individuals. Spinoza believed that those around us help create our understandings of ourselves and the world we share. To become empowered, then for Spinoza, may require differing from these others, but it cannot be done alone, and it certainly cannot be done through pretending that we are not fundamentally influenced by those around us and by forces outside our control.

Spinoza’s *Ethics* provides us with a model of the human individual and a roadmap to human empowerment. *The Ethics* aims to answer the questions of what increases human power and how to achieve individual empowerment. Spinoza’s political works, the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise* show us that individual empowerment cannot be achieved alone, and that maximal individual empowerment can be achieved only through the right kind of

social and political institutions. Spinoza's subject does not exist in a vacuum, but rather exists in a series of relations with other individuals and can be empowered or disempowered by the institutions those individuals set up to govern themselves. Spinoza's account of the human individual is an important alternative to the liberal conception of the subject because he recognizes the interdependent and affective nature of individuals. His account is doubly helpful in that Spinoza's theory of the individual is integrated into his account of political and social institutions.

Spinoza's political philosophy is sadly under appreciated in the Anglo-American world, and is in a sense a road not taken in political philosophy. A democrat in the age of absolutism, Spinoza wrote his political and ethical works as an intervention in the political upheaval of his own time, the United Provinces in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Spinoza strove to show that the most stable government, contrary to absolutist theorists, could also be the most free.<sup>1</sup>

For Spinoza, the most 'absolute' or powerful state is one with institutions that ensure that the power of its citizens is used for the power of the state. For Spinoza, only through understanding ourselves and the natural world around us can humans increase their power. Thus, those forms of government which seek to control the beliefs and limit the search for knowledge of its people could never be optimally strong. With false limitations on what we can investigate and what we can know, human empowerment is artificially constrained. Democracy, for Spinoza, was the only form of polity that gained more from empowering its citizens than from keeping them in conditions of superstition and weakness.

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<sup>1</sup> While other forms of government, monarchy in particular, rely on keeping the people in a condition of fear and weakness so that they may be more easily ruled, democracies, Spinoza argued, could enhance the power of the citizenry without fear. With an empowered multitude as both ruler and ruled, with each individual having a stake in preserving the state, stability could be achieved more absolutely in a democracy than in any other type of government. The most stable government was also the most free. In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza goes even further: a free government is not only the most stable, but without freedom of expression, no government can be strong or stable. (*TTP*, Subtitle, Preface, Chapter 20)

Spinoza's political theory has something to offer to contemporary democratic theory, namely, a well-thought out understanding of the nature of human power and passions, which stand as the basis of his institutional and democratic theory. Spinoza provides not just another argument for democracy, but gives an account which shows why democratic institutions are better than alternatives, why, for example, maximal participation and inclusion yield stronger, more stable polities.

I propose that Spinoza offers a conception of the human individual and the connection between individuals and Nature that can serve as the basis of the building and reform of democratic institutions with an eye both to human empowerment and institutional and 'state' stability. Spinoza's understanding of individual empowerment suggests that maximal inclusion and maximal citizen participation makes for stronger states and stronger individuals. Spinoza is not just the '3<sup>rd</sup> theorist' but in fact, the hero of the piece. Spinoza's metaphysics have long been part of the Western philosophical canon, but the ethical and political ends for which he wrote them have only recently been appreciated in the Anglo-American world, and not quite yet in mainstream political theory.

Talking about Martha Nussbaum and Iris Young in the context of understanding the preconditions for a project of emancipation and participatory democratic theory makes perfect sense. But why drag a 17<sup>th</sup> century rationalist metaphysician into it? The answer is that both Young and Nussbaum's theories of justice rest on a reformulation or rejection of the liberal subject. Both have come after and have accepted in large part the feminist critiques of this liberal subject. Spinoza, however, developed his conception of human individuality and his political theory in opposition to this liberal conception of the subject at the time it was being developed. In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Spinoza could see clearly the implications of this conception of human nature, which would later be the subject of so many feminist monographs and articles in *Signs*. By understanding human nature as dualistic, this conception separated mind from body, separating reason from affect, thereby misunderstanding the nature of reason and the

fundamentally naturalistic connection between human affects and the external forces which impinged upon them. This separation of mind from body left mind free and body determined, which for Spinoza created confusion about the nature of ideas. For Spinoza, ideas are caused just as bodily movements are caused. Affects are caused and cannot be controlled by the human mind just as the natural world cannot be controlled by the human mind.

For Spinoza, the only road to reason is through understanding the affects, any model which suggests that the affects are contingent and ultimately controllable by the mind could never lead to reason, and could only yield a false and limited picture of human behavior. Such a model of human nature could never stand as a foundation for political philosophy. Spinoza did not encounter a shadowy 'liberal subject', but rather primarily the proposals of Descartes and Hobbes. In the second part of Chapter One, I will survey the development of the problematic aspects of the liberal conception of human nature in Spinoza's time and show how Spinoza's conception of the human individual was created in response to this liberal model of human nature, specifically through his critiques of Descartes dualism and Hobbes understanding of power.

Where the liberal subject has come to be understood as separate, independent, primarily rational, egoistic, not primarily embodied (that is, with its necessary rationality and practical reason un-tethered to contingent bodily properties or physical circumstances) Spinoza's subject is interconnected with others, primarily affective, defined by its desires, and necessarily embodied and part of nature. Human beings, wrote Spinoza, are part of nature. Each human being derives his or her power from Nature, of which each individual is a part. No individual is isolated, since each is affected by the individuals around one. The affects, which seem to rule the behavior of most people, are the result of the impact of the world, and other individuals on each person.

Empowerment, for Spinoza, is a process of understanding oneself and the world through understanding our affects, the ways the world causes us to feel, to desire and to act. Our power increases as we gain knowledge of our affects; this knowledge makes them 'active' rather than passive, and gives us the increased power to continue our investigations. According to Spinoza,

our power is increased first through joy and the ‘active’ affects, which increase our power of acting, and then through our knowledge, in particular our understanding of our affects and how they are caused. In Chapter Two, I will in greater detail show how Spinoza’s metaphysical investigations yield a picture of human individuals as interconnected, as able to increase their power through understanding themselves, increasing their active affects, like joy, and through joining with others. Spinoza, like Nussbaum and Young, is concerned primarily with human empowerment, and in his metaphysical and political works he aims to show how humans can become empowered individually and collectively.

Because human empowerment depends on understanding the affects and understanding humans as part of Nature, Spinoza railed against those theorists who would discount the body, scorn the affects and focus on human’s purportedly unlimited power of reason and the will to control the body. Those non-naturalistic accounts that Spinoza argued against were those of the ‘moral philosophers’ who wanted to blame human beings more than understand them.<sup>2</sup> Such moral philosophers took human individuals to be free, and thus to be a sort of empire within the empire of nature, a law unto themselves. While the rest of nature was determined and regular, these theorists claimed that humans can be understood as outside of the natural order in a misguided attempt to preserve the religious dogmatism of free will and human exceptionalism. Instead of stopping our inquiries into human nature at the church gates, so to speak, Spinoza’s naturalism allows us to follow our questions about human empowerment wherever they lead, even if that is to questions about the nature of the human mind and body and how they are improved and empowered. In fact, these are questions that were central to Spinoza. Spinoza’s thoroughgoing naturalism identified the focus of empowerment and political institutions on human affects. Spinoza’s careful study of the affects and his theory of imagination provide the tools for developing criteria with which to critique social institutions and practices which disempower people.

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<sup>2</sup> TP 1.1



Spinoza's naturalism further allows us the opportunity to connect social and political theories of the individual to natural science, to call upon the best in contemporary neuroscience and psychology for example, to answer questions of motivation and sticky questions of how and why individuals join together in the first place. For Spinoza, freedom and empowerment were impossible without first understanding what we are, as human individuals, and understanding what we are a part of, Nature. Freedom and empowerment, which amount to the same thing in Spinoza's philosophy, are the aims of his work. But we cannot begin to become free until we understand our true nature, and until we see that those elements of ourselves which are most derided by moral philosophers, namely, our affects. The 'rocky road to reason' and freedom which Spinoza maps in the *Ethics* requires understanding that there are no ends or purposes in nature,<sup>3</sup> neither for us, nor for any other creature. The path to empowerment requires understanding that our affects and desires are caused,<sup>4</sup> and that our actions are determined by forces outside of our control. These forces may be natural, social, or both, for example: the impacts of other human individuals. To the extent that we understand them we are free. So, for Spinoza, the path to empowerment and to freedom is the same; it is gained first through joy and finally through understanding of the forces that impinge upon us.

### **Coming to Spinoza**

I came to Spinoza seeking a theoretical model which could serve as the foundation for a project of human empowerment, with my own interests in contemporary problems of oppression and exclusion. I was concerned with trends in democracy theory which seemed to discount the role of individual empowerment and maximally inclusive political participation in a lively and powerful democratic state. Feeling sure that there was some way to talk about power and the importance of democratic participation, I found in Spinoza a set of principles and way of understanding human power that was extremely fruitful. Spinoza's theory of the affects and the

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<sup>3</sup> EIV, Preface

<sup>4</sup> E3P2S[ii]; E2P35S

imagination also seemed to build a bridge between political theoretical discussions of human power and empowerment and the empirical research being done in neuroscience and psychology labs, where the affects were finally being taken seriously as the foundation not only of human reason, but also of human sociality.<sup>5</sup>

While developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spinoza's political theory seemed to speak somewhat uncannily to the problems of the present, at least to those problems that concerned me, namely the problems of human empowerment and the role of communication and participation in democracy theory. So, Chapters Two and Three, I have tried to translate Spinoza's metaphysics, his conception of human nature, and his political theory, from their context in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, into an idiom that is more recognizable in the 21<sup>st</sup>. I have done this because Spinoza's political theory, though developed in and for his time, can be used to solve problems in contemporary political theory.

Empowerment, although it is a goal of many different theoretical and practical programs, is under-theorized. In part, I argue this is because of the reluctance of political theorists to propose a 'thick' conception of human nature. In order to fill in the meaning of empowerment we need to understand what actually increases the power of individuals, alone and as part of social groups and political communities. We need to have a good understanding also of those things which inhibit their power. Spinoza, by providing a model of the human individual, and a conception of the state and political institutions which can increase the power of the individuals within them while increasing their own stability and power, stands as a model for contemporary theorizing. Spinoza, however, is not just a model, and his work and conception of human nature, although carried out in a different idiom, are useful today, particularly as we try to understand what empowers individuals and how we can reform political and social institutions to make sure that the power of individuals is maximized.

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<sup>5</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza* (Mariner Books, 2003); *Descartes Error* (Harper Perennial, 1995); Lakoff and Johnson *Philosophy in the Flesh* (Basic Books, 1999); Drew Weston, *The Political Mind* (Public Affairs, 2007).

In Chapters Two and Three I will set out the main elements of Spinoza's conception of the human individual, outline how Spinoza's conception of the human individual is superior to the much-maligned liberal conception of the subject, and draw out principles from Spinoza's political writings that can guide contemporary political theory.

### **Individual Empowerment and Political Stability**

Spinoza, Nussbaum and Young's projects concern the question of how to ensure empowerment of individuals while recognizing that there is a great diversity of desires among individuals, and that power matters. For Nussbaum and Young, the matter of power arises out of frustrations with the framework of liberalism. Nussbaum and Young both recognize that the distribution of power can negatively affect the possibilities of an individual, even in conditions of formal equality. Nussbaum blames the contract tradition and not liberalism itself. She argues that because the social contract theorists assumed equality of power (and reason) among the participants of the social contract, they excluded the disabled, and any others who were 'unequal'.<sup>6</sup> As the contract stands as the instrument of collective legitimacy, their exclusion therefore becomes justified. For Young, the assumption of equality among persons in social and political conditions where there are great disparities of power between individuals on the basis of status and group membership, covers up injustice.<sup>7</sup> Assuming equality among persons when some individual's status or power is less because of their affiliations or social group identification further disempowers those individuals. In these ways the liberal/contract tradition, because of its insistence on the equality of individuals, is unable to account for differentials in power which affect individual's life possibilities.

In the next chapter, I will bring out the details of Young and Nussbaum's critiques of liberalism and the liberal conception of human nature. I will argue that Spinoza's metaphysical investigations provide a positive conception of human individuals which can support their own

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<sup>6</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*. (Belknap Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. (Princeton University Press, 1990).

work and which answers their criticisms of the liberal conception of human nature. Although Nussbaum and Young propose important theories which address aspects of human empowerment, their analyses stop short of where they could go to solve the problems they identify since they refuse to engage in ontological investigations or do anything which might appear to be related to proposing a conception of human nature. Thus, their approaches converge not only on their common critique of aspects of the liberal conception of human nature, but also on a shared refusal of metaphysics. Young argues that metaphysical speculation, of which positing a thick conception of human nature is one instance, necessarily excludes what exists but does not conform to models of human nature or to metaphysicians categories. Nussbaum splits metaphysics and ontology, the investigations into what there is, from human nature. She argues that human nature explorations can be legitimate, and more than speculative metaphysics, they can be the basis of an overlapping consensus. As a liberal, Nussbaum refuses metaphysics, and as post-modernist critical theorist Young does the same, revealing a commonality between these two contemporary styles of philosophy which are often thought opposed.

Spinoza's metaphysical investigations into human nature, through understanding humans as part of the natural world, allowed him to critique the 'contract tradition,' specifically Hobbes, on the basis of his theory of power. Every contract, Hobbes' included, involves a transfer of power, or authority, and in the case of Hobbes this transfer is supposed to be total, where each individual transfers all his or her power and will to the sovereign. The power of the sovereign is thus measured by the power that has been transferred by the subjects.

Spinoza argued that this transfer of power and will was illusory, impossible, a trick of words.<sup>8</sup> No individual could give up all of his or her power of acting or willing to another individual. The power of the sovereign could not be so easily understood as the sum of his or her subjects, since the complete transfer of power from subjects to sovereign is impossible. Rather, the power of the sovereign is something that is continually tested and constructed, as the

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<sup>8</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

sovereign is able to use the power of the citizens (which will be referred to as the power of the multitude, multitude being an alternative to ‘people’, where ‘people’ may suggest some sort of organic unity, ‘multitude’ was used by Spinoza and Hobbes and other political theorists of that time to suggest a group of individuals who are not necessarily unified). At each moment, the power of the sovereign is a function of the power of the multitude, insofar as the sovereign can persuade this multitude to do what it commands.<sup>9</sup>

In contemporary terms we can think of Spinoza’s contention that, ‘the power of the sovereign is a function of the power of the multitude’ as something akin to a presidential approval rating. Presidential approval ratings are indices of the level of popular agreement with the president. Those dissatisfied with the president are not necessarily armed and ready for rebellion, nor are those who support the president necessarily willing to take a bullet for whatever policies are in the offering. However, these numbers indicate to a certain extent the willingness of the people to support the President’s policies. In a system like that of the U.S., these approval numbers are important for coalition building in the legislative branch. If the people seem to approve of the President, then if there is a bill based on one of the President’s policies, more legislators will be willing to support it. However, popular support of the President may wane if the President’s policies shift, or if the President’s policies have negative consequences their unpopularity may diminish the President’s popularity. Legislative support for the President’s supported initiatives may decline. Thus, the power of the ‘government’ is a function of the power of the multitude, insofar as their support empowers the executive and legislative, while their resistance can impede the progress of their agendas.

For Spinoza, the power of any commonwealth, whether monarchy, aristocracy or democracy, required that the approval of the multitude be won and sustained if the government or the sovereign were to retain power. The power of the rulers always depends on the organization

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<sup>9</sup> The sovereign can be a single individual, ‘he’ or ‘she’, or a group of individuals, ‘they’. Since ‘sovereign’ is an office, I have used ‘it’ here as my pronoun of choice.

of the power of the multitude. Questions of the location of sovereignty in mixed constitutional democracies notwithstanding, the power of the multitude matters for political stability and the strength of a commonwealth, no matter whether it is ruled by one, many, or all. In my third chapter I will show how Spinoza's understanding of human nature, and the power of individuals, provides the foundation for his democratic theory and his understanding of political institutions.

Spinoza does not shy away from either ontology or human nature (although as we will see his conception of human nature is that of an individual essence rather than a set of necessary and sufficient properties of a species). He presents a model of human empowerment and the connection between individuals, social groups, and political states. His integrated account shows us the connection between individual affects, social roles and customs, and the strength or stability of a state. By doing so, Spinoza provides the kind of account that is needed for a contemporary political theory that seeks maximal human empowerment and emancipation. In my fourth and fifth chapters, I will show how Spinoza's positive contribution to political ontology, including his conception of the human individual, his understanding of social wholes, and his understanding of the relation between individual empowerment and institutional stability can provide new foundations for Nussbaum and Young's positive contributions to political theory.

Through his metaphysical-ethical-political investigations, Spinoza provides us with an alternative conception of the human individual and political community, one focused on the aim of empowering individuals and constructing those political institutions which will most promote human empowerment. Because of his specifically metaphysical investigations, he is able to answer questions that have proved difficult for those skeptical of metaphysics, namely, how we can make sense of differences in power, and how individuals can increase their power, and how this power works in the context of social and political institutions. Spinoza provides us with a framework that can help us understand and solve contemporary queries of how to empower individuals.

## Empowerment Today

Iris Young and Martha Nussbaum offer some of the best principles for a comprehensive theory of political inclusion and human empowerment on offer today in American political theory. Nussbaum and Young each begin with a set of political problems which they seek to find theoretical frameworks to respond to, seeing other theories as badly conceiving these problems and therefore unable to solve them. Iris Young begins with the problem of those excluded from social and political life, the marginalized, the excluded, and argues that political democracy cannot be strong unless the excluded are included.

I will argue that their solutions and theories leave off at precisely the point where they should offer comprehensive ontological theories. Instead, each refuses ontology and conceptions of human nature, arguing that the many misuses of metaphysics and conceptions of human nature condemn the pursuit (which we don't need anyway). Yet, each continues to make ontological claims and to propose elements of a model of human nature.

In the centuries intervening between Young, Nussbaum and Spinoza, metaphysics has gone out of style. Attacked from all sides, foundationalist metaphysical and anthropological projects have been left to the side. In Chapter One, I argue that it is not so much that metaphysics and human nature investigations are *bad* in themselves, but rather that a few bad theories spoiled the bunch, and made the pursuit seem distasteful. I will suggest that the problem with 'theories of human nature' like the liberal conception of human nature is that these theories are too 'thin'. They aim to avoid the question of human nature rather than answer it, and so they do not dig deep enough to understand the nature of human individuals. By doing so, and by doing so particularly well, Spinoza provides answers where other theorists cannot. I should emphasize that not just any metaphysics or investigation into human nature is good, but rather that Spinoza's investigations are worthwhile and important precisely because he answered what he took to be foundational questions.

Young's argument for the principle of inclusion is greatly enhanced by Spinoza's understanding of how 'inclusion' or participation in political institutions, particularly democratic institutions, empowers individuals through transforming their affects. Young's insistence on the importance of social groups is supported and clarified by Spinoza's conception of social wholes and the role of affects in keeping individuals together who may not share properties.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach can also benefit from the kind of metaphysical/anthropological investigation that Spinoza provides. With her list of the core human capabilities, Nussbaum moves in the right direction toward coming up with a better understanding of the core needs of human flourishing. However, by refusing to metaphysics and simply speculating that these capabilities are 'multiply realizable' and need only be included in constitutions in order for them to be eventually accepted seems to ignore the important ways in which conceptions of human flourishing develop and become accepted, the role of power and imagination in the oppressive and enabling aspects of communal customs. Because she has no institutional theory, Nussbaum seems unable to take seriously the difficulty in reforming customs through top-down constitutional changes.

Nussbaum seems to recognize these important aspects of empowerment, especially in her discussions of adaptive/deformed preferences, where she argues that preferences of oppressed people cannot be taken at face value, since they are the product of reduced life choices and chances. Nussbaum skirts back and forth between delving into psychology and the role of attachment and affect in determining people's life choices, then retreating behind liberal lines, arguing that humans are separate and separable, and that their capabilities need not be tied to their functioning.

Nussbaum and Young appeal to conceptions of human nature and ontological questions, questions such as the nature of individual and group power, questions of inter-individual meaning and how social categories and social norms have force that matters for political institutions. However, dissatisfied with extant attempts to provide theories of human nature and accounts of



relations between individuals and groups which tend to naturalize social norms, Nussbaum and Young refuse to present their positive accounts as having a metaphysical basis or as supplying a full theory of human nature. Nussbaum's and Young's justifiable hesitations about exploring metaphysics and proposing a new account of human nature provide excellent criteria against which we can test any thicker account of human nature or ontology which we develop.

In Chapter 4, I will take up Young's critique of deliberative democracy, and her fear, based on her critique of the liberal subject, that deliberative democracy theorists' requirement that individuals be rational excludes those who are not in privileged social positions. Further, Young's critique of deliberative democracy theory presents a challenge to Spinoza's notion that 'agreement' should be the outcome of democratic communication. I will argue that rather than falling prey to the error of requiring unity among individuals, Spinoza's conception of democracy is communicative, like Young's. I will further argue that adding Spinoza's conception of the individual to Young's sketch of communicative democracy yields a more powerful democratic theory than either presents alone.

In Chapter Five, I will take up Martha Nussbaum's proposal for an alternative view of human nature, what she calls the capabilities approach. Although Nussbaum's capabilities are in many ways aligned with Spinoza's understanding of what empowers individuals, I will argue that by retaining the liberal principle that individuals are separate Nussbaum does not take seriously enough the resistance to her ideal of human being. The harmful customs and norms which persist in many societies today cannot be overcome by an appeal to a universal model of what humans ought to be able to do and to be. Rather, a Spinozistic approach suggests that while recognizing what actually or objectively empowers individuals is an important step, actually achieving the outcome of empowerment requires recognizing the affective forces which support even the most harmful practices and make them difficult to change.

In concluding, I will argue that Spinoza's conception of human power and the political theory which he derives from it can offer new directions for engaging and solving contemporary

political problems. His work offers new directions for research to expand our understanding of human empowerment through political, sociological and psychological investigations. I will argue that Spinoza's work offers the promise of reuniting the human sciences with the natural sciences, by arguing that humans are unquestionably part of nature. His non-reductive manner of doing so, however, offers escape from the unsatisfying alternatives of contemporary metaphysics – dualism or eliminative materialism. His work opens the door to necessary conversations between political theorists, ethicists, and psychologists which centuries of dualism have closed. His work encourages understanding human motivations and affects as 'transindividual'<sup>10</sup> and as more complex than self-interest, creating a bridge beyond rational choice theories.

By offering an alternative to the liberal conception of the human individual, Spinoza builds the foundations of a new sort of political theory. In my first chapter, I will outline the feminist critique of the subject and what parts of it figure in the work of Young and Nussbaum, in order to identify just what is objectionable about this account of human individuals, and what an alternative conception must avoid. In the second part of Chapter One, I will try to bring out where this liberal conception of human nature came from, why it was developed, and why, despite constant critique, it remains mostly intact as the foundation of seemingly disparate political theories.

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<sup>10</sup> This term comes from Etienne Balibar's lecture, "Spinoza: from individuality to transindividuality," Delivered at Rijnsburg, May 15, 1993. (Eburon Delft, 1997). Henceforth, "Transindividuality".

## Chapter 1, Part 1:

### The Liberal Subject, Its Origin and Its Critics

- I. The Liberal Conception of Human Nature and its Critics
- II. Liberal Subject, a Skeptical Solution
- III. What's Wrong with the Liberal Subject
  - a. Iris Young: The Liberal Individual and Justice
  - b. Nussbaum: An Internal Critique
- IV. Spinozan Alternative

#### I. The Liberal Conception of Human Nature and its Critics

Contemporary feminist theory is still haunted by the specter of the liberal subject. Feminism is haunted not just the liberal subject itself, but also by the theoretical attempts feminist theorists have made to destroy it, to move beyond it, to identify its flaws, and its exclusions. I will begin by sketching a picture of the liberal conception of the human nature:

Without any ties to others, the liberal individual is free even from his or her own body; s/he is not determined by its needs or limited by its contingent social meaning. The liberal subject is essentially a rational individual. Insofar as each individual is rational or has a faculty of practical reason, individuals are equal. Individuals cannot be assumed to have similar interests or desires. Using reason the liberal individual is able to calculate the best course of action, given her desires and interests, to which she has privileged access and about which she cannot err. Wellbeing can be determined based on preference satisfaction. Using a criterion of well-being external to the individual's preferences may even be paternalistic. Rational individuals are able to disengage from their particular desires in order to impartially judge important matters. Thus, the liberal individual can be understood to be split into a public self and a private self. Although living in a world with others, each individual is essentially independent. His or her conduct is to be judged by universal principles, and s/he cannot be taken to be the dependent of another for moral or ethical judgments.

This picture of the liberal conception of human nature has been painted, for the most part, by its critics. It is taken up here, because they have painted this picture over and over again. Critics of liberalism both internal and external, have found this conception of human nature inadequate and in some cases positively harmful for arguing for policies which are not supported by conceiving of humans as separate, independent, free from determination, and ideally rational. Even staunch supporters of liberalism like Martha Nussbaum argue that elements of this picture need to be revised. Nussbaum targets the assumption that individuals are all rational and that their desires are transparent and infeasible. This aspect of the liberal or 'social contract' view of the human individual, she argues, yields harmful political policies based on a misunderstanding of human nature and what is necessary for human flourishing.

Critiques of this picture of the liberal subject in feminist theory, in critical studies of economic and development theory and in contemporary psychology and neuroscience reject all or parts of the 'picture' outlined above. These critics argue that we are not rational or atomically separate individuals as the liberal model of human nature suggests. Impartiality is impossible, they argue, because social hierarchies determine whose interests are identified as the interests of all, namely those in the dominant group; the public self is just that ability to internalize and speak for the values of the dominant group. Reason and higher-order decision making rest on the bedrock of emotional and affective processing systems which are thoroughly embodied. Following our interests and desires does not always yield the 'best' outcome; the preferences of the poor and oppressed are deformed by their circumstances, expecting less because of their experience of receiving less. Measurements of wellbeing based solely on preference satisfaction therefore serve to justify poverty. The liberal conception of the human individual is attacked as false, misleading, and as poorly serving the tasks it was meant to perform as a model of human nature suitable for universal theorizing in political philosophy.

Yet, just at this moment where it seems a consensus is building about what we are *not*, the pursuit of what we are or what we may be is refused. Political theorists and philosophers,

even those who are most vociferous in their condemnation of the liberal conception of human nature, are loath to propose a new one, or to engage at all in philosophical anthropology. The persistent critiques of faulty attempts of developing a model of human nature, it seems, did not spare the project itself. Yet this failure to construct an alternative model of the human subject, of human nature, may contribute to the extended lifespan of the liberal conception of human nature. Because no new subject is or 'can be' proposed, theories which rely on the liberal conception of human nature remain.

Arguing that all pursuits after finding a human nature or a human essence are essentially interested, or hegemonically exclusionary, the idea of seeking a singular unchanging nature for humans is characterized as outdated at best and fascistic at worst. Such a project is fraught with danger, argues Iris Young.<sup>11</sup> Postmodernists, like Young, argue persistently against the project of identifying a 'human nature'. Such a model of human nature functions only cover up and exclude actual persons who diverge from this norm. Even Martha Nussbaum, who comes closest to supporting a conception of human nature with her model of the core human capabilities, refuses to insist on human functioning,<sup>12</sup> refuses ontology, and continues herself to insist on human separateness as the foundation of liberal theory and politics. Metaphysical investigations, writes Nussbaum, cannot be the subject of a cross-cultural overlapping consensus.<sup>13</sup> The rejection of

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<sup>11</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 35-37.

<sup>12</sup> The distinction between functioning and capability is a key issue and problem for Nussbaum. Liberalism requires that any constitutional guideline provide for the capability; that is, there can be nothing preventing actual functioning and those institutions or provisions necessary for functioning must be provided. However, when assessing 'how individuals are doing', since 'functioning' (that is, people actually having not only the capability, but also exercising that capability) is not required, it is hard to tell how people are doing, that is assessment is nearly impossible, since all that's required is capability, not functioning. Requiring functioning, she argues, is illiberal.

<sup>13</sup> Nussbaum's refusal of ontology ties her to contemporary 'skeptical' or pluralistic conceptions of liberalism just as strongly as her insistence on the separateness of all individuals, and the need to insist on this separateness for political justice. Nussbaum, in *Frontiers of Justice*, argues that metaphysics cannot be the subject of overlapping consensus. There may be a hidden dualism in this idea that we can agree on values but can 'multiply realize' them. Again, Nussbaum's refusal of metaphysics has no counterpart in Spinoza, for whom metaphysics includes ontology. Spinoza has an individualistic ontology; he argues that only individuals exist in Nature. Thus, in his political theory, he finds it necessary to explain the relations between social wholes, states, and the things that make them up, individuals. This is something which can enrich an account like Nussbaum's, which is also committed to an ontology of individuals. Again,

essentialism is the major component of the argument that no positive conception of the human individual can be developed, since any account of the essential characteristics of human beings will necessarily have to pick and choose among all the traits that an individual has. Any choice among the infinity of human traits will pick ones that characterize some individuals better than others, and thus will create a model of human nature from which some individuals will diverge. Divergence from a norm of what humans are will exclude those who do not conform.

However difficult and fraught with danger, the project of identifying a positive conception of the human individual is necessary for political philosophy. How can we tell what institutional arrangements are good for humans if we do not have any idea of what humans are or what they can be? An example of where such a positive conception is needed is the problem of developing a metric for ‘wellbeing’ to assess development and other sorts of political and economic projects and policies.<sup>14</sup> How can we tell whether various political institutions and practices are good for people? How do we change the ones that are bad, and how do we know if our changes are effective? To answer these questions, we need to have some idea of what people are, how they increase their power, and how various institutions can help them do so. In seeking attempts at constructing a positive model of human nature, we encounter no positive theory but rather countless critiques of the liberal model of individuals.

In this chapter I will show why Spinoza’s model is the answer to persistent problems that arise for contemporary theorists who are interested in human empowerment and maximally inclusive participatory democracy.

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<sup>14</sup> Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender. “Measuring Women’s Empowerment as a Variable in Development.” Background Paper Prepared for the World Bank Workshop on Poverty and Gender. (New Perspectives, 2002); Martinez and Glenzer, ‘Proposed Global Research Framework for CARE’s Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women’s Empowerment’, (CARE USA, 2005); Sen, *Development as Freedom*. (Knopf, 1999).

In Part 1, I will first set out the major features of this problematic liberal conception of human nature, and take up the critiques of this conception by Young and Nussbaum. I will address the need to come up with a better conception of the human individual based on these critiques. I will address the resistance on the parts of Yong and Nussbaum to constructing an alternative conception of human nature and to engaging in the kind of psychological and metaphysical investigations that would make such a conception realistic.

In Part 2, I will analyze the liberal conception of human nature into its constituent problematic parts. I will argue that Spinoza's conception of the subject does not have the failings of the liberal conception, and I will show how Spinoza's positive conception of the subject is derived from his critique of the dualism of Descartes and his revision of Hobbes conception of self-preservation, conatus. I will argue that Spinoza's engagements in metaphysical investigations and his engagements in human nature theorizing do not fail in the ways that Nussbaum and Young fear. By first identifying the negative and problematic aspects of the liberal conception of human nature, I will argue, we can construct a positive and better conception of human nature, as Spinoza did in response to Descartes and Hobbes.

## **II. The Liberal Subject, a Skeptical Solution**

Feminist theorists have been the most persistent critics of the liberal conception of human nature. The classic account of the feminist critique of the liberal conception of human nature and its relation to liberal political theory is Alison Jaggar's *Feminism and Human Nature*. In this work, Jaggar presents liberal political theory as having a fully developed and positive theory of human nature. In the section to follow, I will suggest that this characterization is somewhat misleading, and not quite fair to the role of 'human nature' in liberal theories. Jaggar's account, like many critiques of liberal conceptions of human nature, lacks an important historical dimension and recognition of the skeptical origins of the liberal conception of human nature.

Jaggar begins her genealogy of the liberal conception of human nature in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on the battle between capitalism and feudalism. This seems a good place to begin, since the major theoretical accounts emerge at this time. However, starting here ignores what preceded this ‘battle’, namely the wars of religion, peasants’ wars and the social and political upheavals of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. If she had begun with these earlier events, Jaggar would have recognized that the liberal conception of human nature was not meant to be comprehensive, to cover all aspects of human motivation or behavior. The liberal conception of human nature is rather a skeptical solution to the conflicts and division of the wars of religion.

The liberal theory of human nature is not really a theory at all. Rather, it is a skeptical solution to a political problem.<sup>15</sup> Created in response to the recognition of the variety of human differences in beliefs and values, the liberal conception of the human is sometimes referred to as a ‘thin’ conception of human nature. A ‘thicker’ conception of human nature might involve assuming that individuals shared specific desires, a specific system of value, or specific virtues. The liberal subject is ‘thin’ because it aims to discern from human variety a core of commonality which can be used to determine, for example, what would be just for any person, what any individual would agree to, or what any individuals motivations could be taken to be, regardless of their actual circumstances.

One major aspect of the liberal conception of human nature is the idea that ‘self-interest’, or rather self-preservation as the sole motivator for human behavior, arose as a skeptical solution to the problem of understanding human nature in the wake of the destruction and uncertainty of the wars of religion. With traditional hierarchies in some cases destabilized, but in many corners questioned, a new understanding of order, human and social, was needed. Grotius, in *The Laws of War and Peace*, argued that whatever else one may believe, “All men would agree that everyone has a fundamental right to preserve themselves, and that wanton or unnecessary injury to another

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<sup>15</sup> Jaggar notes that taking the liberal conception of human nature seriously leads to skeptical results, however this misidentifies the role of skepticism, which is not just a result of the liberal theories but rather was the impetus for them in the first place.



person is unjustifiable. No social life was possible if the members of a society denied either one of these two propositions, but no other principles were necessary for a social existence.”<sup>16</sup>

Hobbes, armed with Grotius’ principle of the priority of self preservation, but adding to it the additional premise that all individuals are equal judges of the means of their preservation,<sup>17</sup> attempted to build a theory of political community which could derive legitimate absolute political power from the basis of a multitude of equal individuals seeking only self-preservation. Hobbes sought to bolster Grotius’ ‘post-skeptical moral science’<sup>18</sup> with an account of human psychology. By understanding what makes humans act the way they do, we can then begin to develop principles to maneuver human actions to the ends of stability and peace. In addition to seeking their own self-preservation, Hobbes understands individuals to be affected by fear and desire. Desire, for those things that yield self-preservation, he called ‘conatus’. Fear characterized each individual’s experience of the world and created a barrier to the natural socializing among humans proposed by Aristotelians.

For Hobbes there was nothing naturally social about humans, and he saw the bloody wars of religion as proof of this natural unsociability. This ‘natural’ sociality of humans, at least those affects and desires that lead us to society cut both ways; desire creates and destroys the foundations of political stability. However, by properly understanding human nature, even at its worst, Hobbes believed that firm foundations for political community could be built. Hobbes sought to show how through fear and desire for self-preservation individuals could in fact join together in a pact that would allow for their security within the bounds of a civil state.

### **III. What’s wrong with this conception of the subject?**

Whatever its provenance, whatever its history, the liberal conception of human nature is taken by many, including Iris Young and Martha Nussbaum, to be a comprehensive account,

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572-1651* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Philosophy and Government*, p. 304; Hobbes, *Elements of Law* Chapter 16 §8; *De Cive* I.i.9; *Leviathan*, Chapter XIV.

<sup>18</sup> *Philosophy and Government*, p. 154.

purporting to tell us something about what humans are, how they behave, and what is most important to them and about them. Even as a thin conception, the liberal conception of human nature shapes expectations of human behavior and guides the development of political principles. It has shaped theories of justice and theories of democracy.

Iris Young agrees with Jagger's assessment that the liberal conception of human nature is inadequate for political theory and for projects of empowerment, since it poorly describes individual behavior, it is normatively inadequate and misleading; thus, it hampers our social imagination. Young argues that both aggregative theories of democracy as well as deliberative theories of democracy which rely on this liberal conception of the subject are inadequate since they are based on a false picture of human needs. Martha Nussbaum argues that certain aspects of the liberal conception of human nature need to be revised to expand the understanding of individuals' capacities and the circumstances of justice. In the sections to follow, I will present Young and Nussbaum's critiques of the liberal subject and their arguments that theories of justice based on this bad conception of human nature need to be revised.

### **IIIA. Iris Young: The Liberal Individual and Justice**

Iris Marion Young has provided one of the most promising accounts of the importance of social inclusion and participation in democracy theory today. Her understanding of the importance of recognizing social group difference, and her analysis of what that difference amounts to, stand as remarkably original and strong foundations for reform of social policy to eradicate oppression and social exclusion. Inspired by the social movements of the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Young theorized in an era after the first generation of liberal rights no longer seemed to be enough to ensure justice for marginalized and oppressed groups. Young sought to explore how the liberal framework, principles and conceptions of human needs and life could be reworked to provide for justice and inclusion for those who had been overlooked by liberal theorists. What she found was that the liberal conception of human nature and conceptions of democracy developed

with this conception in mind, tended to take humans as primarily consumers and ‘havers’ of goods, services, and rights.

Young argues that the liberal conception of human nature leads to misrecognition of the main problems of justice, which in turn leads to inadequate solutions to the problems of injustice. Theorists of distributive justice, taking up this liberal conception of human nature understood humans as primarily consumers, with their ‘good’ determined by their share of goods. This view of human beings tended to exclude from the province of justice all those wrongs which are not a matter of distribution. Young argues that liberal theorists, like John Rawls, who theorize justice solely in terms of distribution fail to answer the plight or understand the disempowerment of people based on group affiliation. Liberal theorists, Young argues, cannot accept groups as a part of their social ontology, and so ignore injustice based on group difference.<sup>19</sup>

Young consistently challenges distributive solutions to problems of injustice, arguing that distributive inequalities are caused by inequities arising from social group affiliation. Distributive inequality does not cause racial, gender, and ethnic inequalities – rather, such distributive inequalities are caused by social, cultural, and gender-based hierarchies. Distributive-justice theorists suppose all problems of justice can be reduced to problems of distribution of resources, and thus that all solutions to problems of justice can be solved by redistributing resources. However, Young argues that problems of injustice go beyond problems of distribution. Young identifies injustice in systematically unequal access to political decision-making by members of different groups, through cultural factors which exclude and marginalize individuals of certain social groups, through exclusions related to group affiliation which bar access to decision making bodies for members of marginalized groups, and through a division of labor which consistently puts members of certain groups at competitive disadvantages.<sup>20</sup> She argues that since distributive inequality is an effect of systematic inequalities based on group affiliation and access to power,

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<sup>19</sup> Young argues that “Liberal social ontology has no place for a conception of social groups.” *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 228.

<sup>20</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 15-38.

‘fixing’ injustice through distribution of resources merely addresses a symptom of a problem whose cause lies elsewhere.

Rather than a theory of distributive justice, Young proposes one that recognizes injustices can be related not only to distribution of goods, but also to culture, decision making and the division of labor. She argues further that recognizing the injustices bound up with culture, access to power and division of labor requires understanding the nature and importance of social group differences, hierarchies, and exclusions. She proposes democracy, specifically her own conception of ‘communicative democracy’ as a general solution to problems of injustice.

Young argues that liberal or aggregative democracy theorists misunderstand the nature of the social world. Young argues that ‘bad’ social ontology, particularly social atomism and methodological individualism as practiced by distributive (sometimes identified as aggregative) democratic theorists, masks the importance of social group and other social relations which impinge upon individuals in ways that are important and relevant for claims of justice. Young writes, “The social ontology underlying many contemporary theories of justice is methodologically individualist or atomist. It presumes that the individual is ontologically prior to the social. This individualist social ontology usually goes together with a normative conception of the self as independent. The authentic self is autonomous, unified, free, and self-made, standing apart from history and affiliation, choosing its life plan for itself.”<sup>21</sup> Liberal theorists, according to Young, are in the grip of a false picture of social life, where individuals are seen as separate, rational, and with a certain share of goods. This liberal conception of the human individual as separate, independent, ideally rational (and consequently impartial), motivated by the self-interested accumulation of goods underwrites aggregative democracy theorists methodological individualism and exclusive focus on distribution of goods as matters of justice. Because of their narrow conception of human nature, liberal theorists then cannot accept social groups in their

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<sup>21</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p.45.

ontology and cannot countenance the important effects of social norms on individual behavior.<sup>22</sup>

Further, those aggregative democracy theorists who understand the social as a collection of individuals with different ends competing over goods, rather than seeing the social world as one filled with social groups at various levels of class and group stratification miss the issues of justice and injustice which Young wanted to capture. Democracy, for Young, is more than a set of procedures for aggregating preferences; it is a means of fighting injustice.

Young develops her theory of democratic inclusion, her conception of social groups, and her analyses of oppression in order to develop tools to recognize forms of disempowerment and exclusion that are not captured by distributive theories of justice or aggregative theories of democracy. For Young, the social is marked by group difference and stratification, by institutions and systemic interactions among groups that leave members of some groups structurally

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<sup>22</sup> Young is not alone in identifying elements of the liberal subject as problematic. In "Rational Fools", Amartya Sen takes on one of the main tenets of this conception of human nature, which he argues is ubiquitous and authoritative in economic theory, the idea that humans are self-seeking egoists and argues that the only problem with this model is that it's false, it doesn't work. The model does not adequately capture human economic behavior. The theory is not only false, some argue, but pernicious, leading to a mistaken conception of who humans are and how we act. This conception of human nature supports what Sen suggests is the faith-based theory that all individuals acting on their own self-interest yield a better outcome than any other arrangement. Sen writes that the idea that a decentralized economy populated by individuals seeking their own interest could yield the best distribution of economic resources has been assumed true for a long time, even though it is not clear whether it is or even if it could be true. Sen argues that the utility maximizing, egoist model of economic theory poorly captures human behavior, even in the more limited realm of consumer behavior, because it oversimplifies human nature. Further, Sen argues that social norms and practices operate in individual choice in important ways which cannot be captured when we understand individuals purely as utility maximizers. This 'homo economicus assumption' ignores the fact that there are social norms and rules which affect individuals' behavior. Sen concludes that if people really did act as the rational choice or economic utility model suggested they do, their behavior would seem crazy or foolish. He writes, "A person thus described may be 'rational' in the limited sense of revealing no inconsistencies in his choice behavior, but if he has no use for these distinctions between quite different concepts, he must be a bit of a fool. The purely economic man is indeed close to being a social moron." (p. 336) This understanding of rationality is too limited. Sen writes, "The exclusion of any consideration other than self-interest seems to impose a wholly arbitrary limitation on the notion of rationality." (p. 342) Human rationality is not keyed exclusively to self-interest, and the social component of reason is an important one to consider when trying to explain or understand economic behavior. Sen proposes, rather than taking an abstract individualist approach or appealing to universal approach, that understanding how social norms direct human choices is a more fruitful site of inquiry. So, for Sen, to understand human behavior, we need to know something about social life and the social groups that influence the behavior and motivation of individuals. Thus, the conclusion Sen's critique of homo economicus dovetails with feminist critiques of this and other aspects of the liberal conception of human nature and reiterates the conclusion that to understand individual behavior and human nature we need to understand groups and norms. Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 4. (Summer, 1977), pp. 317-344.

disadvantaged. However, it is not just aggregative democracy theorists who misunderstand the social world through this liberal individual.

Deliberative democracy theorists and participatory democracy theorists, to the extent that they propose a conception of the civic public in which rational agents come together to deliberate on and solve social problems, recapitulate troubling aspects of the liberal conception of the subject. In doing so, Young warns, they miss the extent to which individuals are socialized as members of groups, and how those group affiliations empower or disempower them in already-existing social structures. To be a member of a disempowered group might mean appearing in a way that is perceived as ‘irrational’ by members of another group. Thus, deliberative democracy theorists who require rationality from participants in democratic publics risk excluding those who are already marginalized by being associated with less powerful social groups.

Young argues that the idea of a united public ominously covers up the real differences in the social, and seems to require homogeneity and consensus. Requiring consensus where there is real difference, neo-republican theorists exclude those who are less powerful, and whose characteristics or views are seen as ‘differences’ from the norm (the more powerful group), and thus as differences which threaten civic peace and harmony. Communitarians also require social unity and the submersion of difference as necessary requirements for social and political harmony. Young insists that a modern political theory cannot require harmony, nor can it deny the reality of social group difference.<sup>23</sup> While taking social group differentiation as a given and politics as a realm of social struggle, Young argues that we must also recognize the reality of social groups. Neither liberals, nor communitarians, nor those democracy theorists who linger in

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<sup>23</sup> Young writes, “Liberal individualism denies difference by positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by anything or anyone other than itself. Its formalistic ethic of rights also denies difference by bringing all such separated individuals under a common measure of rights.” *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 229. Communitarians deny difference: “Proponents of community deny difference by positing fusion rather than separation as the social ideal. They conceive the social subject as a relation of unity or mutuality composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality.” *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 229.

the middle of these two accounts have been able to adequately address this modern dilemma.<sup>24</sup>

Both either deny or submerge difference, Young argues, and thus perpetuate injustice based on social group difference.

In her positive program, which she calls ‘a politics of difference’, Young provides an account of social group difference which is important for political life, which does not understand social group differences as essential properties of individuals, but rather as the result of historical and social forces. Being associated with these groups has important outcomes related to justice and oppression, such that these differences need to be recognized. Not recognizing these differences means ignoring important injustices based on group difference. With a working model of the social as characterized by group difference, Young’s analysis of justice allows her to show that justice is not just a matter of distribution, but includes decision making, division of labor and culture. On the basis of social location and group identification, individuals are disempowered (and suffer injustice) through domination and oppression.

Once we see that issues of justice extend beyond issues of distribution, we can see that redistribution of goods alone will not counter injustice. Rather, Young argues, inclusive and participatory democratic institutions are needed to counter the kinds of injustices cause by culture, division of labor and exclusion from decision making structures.<sup>25</sup>

Young’s attention to the problem of understanding groups in social theory is a response to a set of political problems, cultural and religious tensions magnified by increasing

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<sup>24</sup>Young shares many of the communitarian critiques of liberalism without endorsing their positive project, fostering the ideal of community. For example, communitarians, Young argues, “Reject the image of persons as separate and self-contained atoms, each with the same formal rights, rights to keep others out, separate.” (*Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p.227.) However, arguing that the ideal of community recapitulates the problems of the liberal ‘public sphere’, Young shows how both liberalism and communitarianism fall into what she has called the logic of identity. The communitarian goal of unity can only be reached by ignoring or repressing difference. Young writes, “The ideal of community denies and represses social difference, the fact that the polity cannot be thought of as a unity in which all participant share a common experience and common values. In its privileging of face-to-face relations, moreover, the ideal of community denies difference in the form of the temporal and spatial distancing that characterizes social process.” (*Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 227). Democratic politics must be: “A politics that takes account of and provides voice for the different groups that dwell together in the city without forming community.” (*Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 227).

<sup>25</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 126-7 and pp. 233-6.

globalization, increasing interactions between people of different backgrounds, with different norms, practices and values. Multiculturalism and toleration mark a moment in the theoretical discussion of a political issue that touches nearly every corner of the world, each country with its own version of social groups clashing sometimes in outbreaks of devastating violence. Social theories which require unity, for Young, will not solve contemporary problems of multicultural societies and global interactions. Neither, she argues, will individualist theories. Neither attends to the reality of social differences based on groups.

Young's positive program includes her proposal for understanding social group ontology in a way that is 'non essentialist'; that is, in a way that doesn't understand differences as fixed, nor as one which ignores that often social groups overlap, so one individual might have ties and connections to more than one (while not having two sets of 'essential' properties, necessary for group membership in each, as an essentialist theory of groups would have it).<sup>26</sup> Accounts of groups must be non-essentialist and non-determinist. There can be no assertion of a common nature. Thus, Young gives us a source for critique as well as provides parameters for any positive account. The idea of social groups must attend to their importance while recognizing that they are fluid. For Young, social justice does not require the melting away of differences, but rather the creation of institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression.

Young proposes an ideal of city life as an alternative to ideal of community and liberal individualism, what Young understands as the being together with strangers. In cities, clusters of people with certain affinities interact with others, without the aim of melting their differences. Young writes, "In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness."<sup>27</sup> Thus, through living together in a shared social space, individuals as members

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<sup>26</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 237.

<sup>27</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 237.



of sometimes multiple groups interact with one another without any presupposition that they will share any or all norms or characteristics. For Young, the city operates as an ideal of common life without shared culture or values, or the need for agreement or harmony.<sup>28</sup> As members of this shared social space, part of a larger whole affected by similar forces because of their shared location, however, city dwellers must negotiate their life in this common space, and so must come to develop institutions for problem solving.

Young accepts the liberal idea that the social world is characterized by difference, but proposes that social group difference is the relevant political difference. Young, unlike some communitarians, understands group difference as fluid and based on structural factors not primarily on shared characteristics. Young is suspicious of attempts to define social group identity or human nature too substantially. As a critical theorist, Young refused systematization and foundational projects, leaving her insights to stand as powerful correctives in many different political theory debates. However, in working on Spinoza and in developing his arguments for political inclusion and the importance of political participation for both individual empowerment and for the stability of the state, I began to see strong connections between the two. Spinoza's theory of the affects and imagination can work as explanatory bedrock for Young's critique of deliberative democracy. Young's analyses of oppression and domination flesh out the dangers of social and political exclusion, which can bolster Spinoza's conception of how these excluded become 'enemies of the state'. Young's persistent critique of the liberal conception of the subject, a subject who is separate from others, is potentially impartial and primarily rational, a subject whose desires can be taken as given, and her call for a new conception of the subject is answered

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<sup>28</sup> "Because city life is a being together with strangers, diverse and overlapping neighbors, social justice cannot issue from the institution of an enlightenment universal public. On the contrary, social justice in the city requires the realization of a politics of difference. This politics lays down institutional and ideological means for recognizing and affirming diverse social groups by giving political representation to these groups, and celebrating their distinctive characteristics and cultures. In the unoppressive city people [are] open to unassimilated otherness. We all have our familiar relations and affinities, the people to whom we feel close and with whom we share daily life. These familial and social groups open onto a public in which all participate, and that public must be open and accessible to all. Contrary to the communitarian tradition, however, that public cannot be conceived as a unity transcending group differences, nor as entailing complete mutual understanding." *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 241.

by Spinoza's model of the human.<sup>29</sup> The major obstacles to merging Young and Spinoza's accounts of democracy and the importance of maximal political participation and inclusion are the remnants in her theory of the poststructuralist/critical theoretical refusal of ontology and human nature.

### **Against Human Nature**

Young devotes a great deal of her writing to critiquing the harmful political and theoretical outcomes of the liberal conception of human nature. However, when it comes to providing a positive conception of the human subject, Young hesitates, arguing along post-structuralist lines that any attempt to define humans reduces in them some differential aspect which cannot be captured by the definition. Any thick conception of human nature would be guilty of the 'logic of identity', that is, it would seek to reduce to unity what is really a plurality, and thus would exclude some important elements of being human.

Young wants a reformed idea of human being, which will include the way individuals are shaped by social forces and by membership in stratified social groups. She also argues that the desire for unity, both in the state and in the individual is a desire to subsume the difference. However, she refuses to call this new theory a theory, rather, she prefers to call it an 'image', refusing the call to thicker account of human psychology or human nature which might exclude or normalize.<sup>30</sup> Such human nature projects are necessarily exclusionary, since they can be seen as always abstracting from a favored set of actual humans, and projecting the qualities that those

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<sup>29</sup> To find a new model of the subject to replace that of the atomistic liberal consumer, Young appeals to Anthony Giddens's Bourdieuan conception of subject, of the individual as an active doer rather than just a consumer (a result of the liberal conception of human nature) caught in a web of *habitus*, taking up meaningful sides in a pre-signified and stratified world. She also appeals to what she calls a 'poststructuralist' vision of a non-unified subject. I believe that Spinoza's recognition of the non-unified and complex nature of the human individual answers Young's call, but at the same time, provides the psychological and naturalistic account of human subjects which a post-structuralist account of subjectivity resists.

<sup>30</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 35-37.

individual share as the most human characteristics. Anyone who does not fit this deceptively abstract picture would not count as a human.

Is such a project always fraught with danger? Can we have a non-essentialist conception of human nature? Feminist and post-structuralist fears suggest that we cannot, but I will argue that Spinoza offers such a theory of human nature. Through his recognition of the multiplicity of human desires and identifications, and through his explicit theory of how individuals are pulled in different directions by their affects, Spinoza presents a difference-affirming conception of human nature that makes sense of multiple and sometimes divergent human affective attachments and thus provides a theory of social group membership that accounts for both their force and their fluidity.

### **Martha Nussbaum: Liberal Theorist, Internal Critic of Liberalism**

Unlike Iris Young, Martha Nussbaum does not present her political theory as an alternative to 'liberal' theories, but rather as a development of central liberal values. Although Nussbaum critiques many of the same aspects of the liberal conception of the subject as Young, Nussbaum presents her work as continuing a long tradition of trying to come up with institutions and principles which embody liberal values. She strongly rejects the self-understanding of feminist critiques of liberalism as somehow abandoning liberal values whole cloth; Nussbaum argues, rather that where these critiques are trenchant they are internal.<sup>31</sup> For Nussbaum, the argument that liberal principles exclude a certain class of people exposes a need for more emphasis on liberal values, not less. When individuals are excluded and treated unjustly, this is a sign for Nussbaum that liberal values need to be implemented in a more comprehensive fashion.

Nussbaum argues that the central value of liberalism is the Kantian idea that each person must be treated as an end.<sup>32</sup> Feminist arguments against exclusion of women from just treatment

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<sup>31</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 50; *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 62; Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 60.

base their critiques, Nussbaum argues, on the implicit assumption that women are people worthy of just treatment, and that when they are not being treated as such, as ends, then this is a problem of injustice. For Nussbaum, these critiques of liberalism can only be understood as internal, since feminists who argue along these lines support the basic liberal value of treating each person as an end.

This does not mean that Nussbaum accepts the liberal conception of human nature in its entirety. Liberal presumptions of equality among persons and liberal social contract theories that presume universal egoism are mistaken and problematic on Nussbaum's view. Nussbaum strongly rejects the idea of universal egoism.<sup>33</sup> She argues that it is not a key liberal value, but rather was added to liberal accounts through the social contract tradition.<sup>34</sup> Nussbaum argues forcefully that liberal theorists' ignoring of the private sphere as a sphere of justice (and importantly, injustice) has allowed liberalism to ignore issues of justice related to those who are, for the most part, located in that private sphere.<sup>35</sup> Nussbaum does not see these as reasons to reject liberalism, but rather as opportunities for reforming it from within, based on the core values of liberalism, rather than the prejudices of any particular liberal theorist. For Nussbaum, the most important aspect of liberalism is its commitment to treating each individual as an end, based on the recognition that each person is a site of reason, or moral judgment. Nussbaum writes of liberalism, "At the heart of this tradition is a two-fold intuition about human beings: namely, that all, just by being human, are of equal dignity and worth no matter where they are situated in society, and that the primary source of their worth is a power of moral choice within them, a power that consists in the ability to plan a life in accordance with one's own evaluation of

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<sup>33</sup> *Frontiers of Justice*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>34</sup> *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 78.

ends.”<sup>36</sup> Liberals add the further point that: “The moral quality of persons gives them a fair claim to certain types of treatment at the hands of society and politics.”<sup>37</sup>

Nussbaum argues that while liberal principles have been argued to ignore socially relevant differences, like race or sex, the positive reading of this is that, “Liberalism is opposed to any approach to politics that turns morally irrelevant differences into systematic sources of social hierarchy.”<sup>38</sup> So, by failing to recognize the reasons given for social exclusion and oppression as good reasons or justifiable reasons, Nussbaum argues liberal values and principles stand as a foundation for critiquing the practices of taking morally irrelevant (though socially potent) categories. In the section on social norms, I will suggest that this distinction between morally irrelevant and socially relevant becomes important when we want to make Nussbaum’s capabilities effective. When we want to implement and judge whether or not individuals are actually ‘empowered’ we will need to take up this tension between the social relevance of differences versus their moral irrelevance.

Focusing on the individual as an end means that certain forms of political life and certain forms of evaluation of how a populace is faring will not be seen as just. Nussbaum writes, “[Liberalism] is opposed to forms of political organization that are corporatist or organically organized – that seek a good for the group as a whole without focusing above all on the wellbeing and agency of individual group members.”<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum extends this critique to certain forms of utilitarianism, which by summing the happiness or welfare of all do not pay adequate attention to each individual’s welfare. In the final section of this chapter, I will take up this challenge for Spinoza’s political theory and see whether Spinoza’s theory of the power of the state fails in this way. Although I hope to have shown that Spinoza’s notion of ‘agreement’ does not have the illiberal overtones which Young worried about, Nussbaum’s liberal critique of accounts which

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<sup>36</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 57.

<sup>37</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 57.

<sup>38</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 58.

take into consideration the good of the whole raises possible questions about whether Spinoza's concern with the power of the state, and how the power of the multitude is determined yield another sort of illiberalism.

Finally, Nussbaum argues that no liberal theory may impose one form of value as a 'mandatory standard'. Nussbaum argues on the basis of this principle that we cannot, as liberal political theorists, engage in metaphysical speculation or theorizing, since by doing so we will be imposing a mandatory standard. Nussbaum argues that her own criteria for the capabilities necessary for living a true human life she believes are unproblematic, since they can be the subject of an overlapping consensus.<sup>40</sup> That is, people with different values in different cultures can take up her criteria for what counts as a human life and interpret them differently, so that many different sorts of institutions and practices could support what Nussbaum argues are the core capabilities necessary for making a life count as human.

### **Empowerment as a Multiply Realizable End**

Nussbaum and Young, I have argued, share a motive, a reason for their critique of liberal thinkers and a reason for their move beyond (or internal critique of) liberal principles of justice. This shared motive is the concern with empowerment, and specifically with the empowerment of women and others who seem to have been excluded from a share in political life, even in countries which have institutions based on universal principles, which should include them as human beings. Young's work showing the ways in which people are 'oppressed' in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, aimed to provide an account of just what goes wrong in conditions of formal equality for those identified with lower status groups, or for those people who are identified with their bodies, and whose bodies do not fit a norm of healthy and able. Nussbaum picks up this strand, in *Frontiers of Justice*, arguing that because of the social contract theorists' presumption of equality, those who are not equal, who are weaker or whose mental or physical

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<sup>40</sup> Overlapping consensus is a Rawlsian term that Nussbaum takes up in *Women and Human Development*.

capacities are seen as below a certain threshold are put beyond the scope of justice. Thus, their treatment in societies which might be thought just on social contract lines, can be fraught with danger, and they may have no principled recourse to just treatment. They are both concerned not just with showing how formal equality excludes and puts the already-vulnerable at further risk, but also with developing principles through which the excluded can be included.

Both Nussbaum and Young focus on the liberal presumption of equality as a source of unwitting oppression and exclusion. Nussbaum writes, “Liberalism’s disregard of differences between persons that are a product of history and social setting make it adopt an unacceptably formal conception of equality, one that cannot in the end treat individuals as equals given the reality of social hierarchy and unequal power.”<sup>41</sup> For Nussbaum, this is not a reason to reject liberalism, but rather a call to reform liberal conceptions of human nature. If liberal theorists have too formal a conception of equality, then we need to fill in this conception, and we need to fill in this conception of equality with a comprehensive conception of human nature.<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum’s liberal inclusion principle requires not just that we include people in political life, through political participation, but that we count them, and that we count the *right* things about them. When we try to see how, for example, an individual is faring in a particular community, we need some set of criteria to look at to determine their wellbeing. For Nussbaum, the measures currently used by economists and others to determine wellbeing are inadequate, and mis-measure and sometimes even avoid counting the wellbeing of many people, especially women.

Nussbaum follows Young in her belief that distribution of goods is not the only or best measure of how people are doing, and that culture, the division of labor and access to political participation are sites of injustice and are important for measuring how each individual is doing. Nussbaum does not reject distribution talk entirely, since she still thinks that proper evaluation of human capabilities can be done through discussion of distribution of resources and opportunities.

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<sup>41</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 67.

<sup>42</sup> “Feminism needs to operate with a general notion of a human core, without forgetting that this core has been differently situated and also shaped in different times and places.” *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 73.

Nussbaum explains that her liberal principle of inclusion, “Just asks us to concern ourselves with the distribution of resources and opportunities in a certain way, namely, with concern to see how well each and every one of them is doing, seeing each and every one as an end, worthy of concern.”<sup>43</sup> This principle is one that Nussbaum thinks all feminists should adopt, since women have too often been seen as just part of the family, to be represented by the genuine individual, the head of household.<sup>44</sup> Thus, liberalism can be improved by better enforcement of a notion of individualism, rather than by its rejection. However, the focus on distribution of material and immaterial things like opportunities or rights does not need to change.

Nussbaum also rejects the common practice of distributive justice theorists of counting the resources of ‘families’. Nussbaum argues that the family is ‘precious’ but not ‘private’,<sup>45</sup> and that measuring the financial wellbeing of the family ignores the positions of those within the family. Measuring the distribution of goods by household violates the central liberal principle that each individual ought to be treated as an end. This is one key way in which Nussbaum argues the wellbeing of women is ignored by theorists not being liberal enough.

### **Resistance to a Positive Model of the Individual**

We need a positive conception of the human individual, preferably one that does not have the same failings of the liberal conception of human nature. These two anti-foundationalist trends, the reluctance to talk about human nature and the refusal of metaphysics, hamper political theorists from properly understanding their subject matter – human individuals and their political and social relations. I will show how Spinoza’s approach to questions of human nature and questions of ontology as they relate to political theory can be fruitful for understanding the causes of contemporary political instability and proposing solutions for empowering states and political communities through empowering the individuals within them.

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<sup>43</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 63.

<sup>45</sup> Nussbaum, “Beyond the Social Contract: Capabilities and Global Justice,” *Oxford Development Studies*, 32(1), 2004, p. 23.



Liberalism has a great history as an ideological foundation for emancipatory struggles. Often this gets lost in the critiques of liberalism and of the liberal conception of the human individual. However, the liberal conception of the human individual, as separate, atomistic, primarily rational with a will that is unbounded and free of the strictures of nature is limited in its attempt to understand the concrete obstacles to human empowerment. These obstacles and contemporary struggles for emancipation are located in communities, are tied to reform of customs, are related the ways people are interrelated and interconnected.

Postmodern and poststructuralist theories were developed in opposition to some of the more hubristic projects of human knowledge, structuralism and its cousins, behaviorism and positivism. In opposition to these attempts to show how human life was determined by structures outside of history, taking the inner-workings of the human mind as a black box, poststructuralist took up these structures, language, customs, institutions, and read their histories back into them, showed how the narratives which covered over their discontinuities could be exposed. The very pursuit of knowledge within universities and research groups was revealed as another technology of control like prisons, schools, and medical diagnoses.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to their structuralist roots, postmodern and poststructuralist reacted against individualist-subjectivist projects, the various phenomenologies and existentialism. As such, their 'anti-humanism' sought to break structures and show the contingencies of structures without attributing these changes to human effort. Humans were to be understood themselves as caught up within structures by which they could be nearly completely determined. There is no freedom for postmodernists, only incomplete and indeterminate determinations: e.g., technological failures making room for resistance.

The postmodern insistence on indeterminacy to explode the self-certainty of the sciences is expressed by Spinoza in his own insistence that we do not yet know what we are capable of;<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Most studies of this sort identify their methods as inspired by Michel Foucault.

<sup>47</sup> E3P2S

that is, we do not yet know what the body is capable of because we constantly try to separate ourselves from it in idealisms. The liberal insistence on guaranteeing the space for human empowerment and freedom in the form of self-determination is taken up in Spinoza's political works, where he shows how maximal freedom is compatible with stability in the state.

Young argues that even though we must critique this liberal abstract conception of human nature, we cannot come up with an alternative; we cannot come up with a more filled-in conception of the individual, lest we paint too specific a picture, thereby excluding those who do not fit. Young gives us hints of what her subject might be, but does not fill it in fully, does not provide us with a descriptive or normative account of human nature. We know that participation and inclusion are important for Young's subjects. We know that they have emotional and physical needs that must be recognized even in the political sphere.

It is not an oversight on Young's part not to have given us a filled in picture of the political subject or a full conception of human nature. She argues that providing a fuller account of subjectivity would inevitably create a model which excluded some individuals. Creating a model of human nature entails making choices among all the characteristics that people have, and identifying some of those characteristics as more basic or more essential than others. This becomes problematic, since what is most important about human individuals seems to be relative to either individual or group metrics. If we argue that humans are essentially embodied, then we risk diminishing the importance of human intellect (given a view that mind and body are separate and somehow competing for importance). However we do it, coming up with a model of human beings inevitably means picking and choosing among the millions of singular properties that each individual has, and choosing a select few which are supposed to stand as the only ones which are important for determining human behavior and how individuals are acted upon and act in the world.

Spinoza is sympathetic to this view. For Spinoza, there are no real 'types' in nature. All attempts to create these general pictures of 'humans' or anything else are a kind of mental

shorthand which lead us to misunderstand the real nature of the world more than understand it.

There is no ‘man’, for Spinoza, there are just individual humans.<sup>48</sup> The skeptical view that we do not know which properties of individual humans will affect their behavior and their lives is compelling for Spinoza. He understood that the networks of causes in which each individual is caught up are so thick that it may be impossible in any situation to know by which forces we are affected.

By giving more detail of the human individual Spinoza does not exclude but rather provides us with a good general model of human desire and affect that is scalable in the sense that it shows us what are the relevant aspects of individuals and their communities and the institutions in which they are bound when we are interested in: 1. increasing the power of the individuals and, 2. increasing the power of the community of which they form a part. Through working with Spinoza’s conception of the human individual I have come to understand that it depends entirely on *how* we fill in our picture and the uses to which we put this still abstract model.

Spinoza’s conception of the individual fills in basic psychological aspects of the human individual through his theory of the affects. Spinoza’s conception of the individual also allows us to see the social aspects of individuals, and to see how individual actions are affected by those around them and by the norms and customs of their community. Spinoza’s conception of the individual also allows us to see how individuals can increase their power through coming to understand themselves and the forces which impinge upon them.

Nussbaum insists that whatever conception of the human we have must recognize the principle that each individual is an end and must be counted. Spinoza gives us thinking, feeling, and embodied individuals who are affected by both the natural forces around them and those natural forces which work through other humans and the human community to which individuals are tied by their affects and desires. Though he fleshes out the picture of the individual, Spinoza’s picture of the human individual is still general enough to be man or woman, rich or poor, high or

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<sup>48</sup> TIE[34], E1Appendix.

low status. While not succumbing to essentialism, through recognizing individual difference by taking essences to be individual,<sup>49</sup> and critiquing any conception which takes there to be some common essence that all humans share, Spinoza retains an important aspect of liberalism, the notion that each individual matters.

However, Spinoza can do much more than sustain the positive moments of these two approaches. In what follows I will develop Spinoza's theory of the human individual and his larger ethical and political theory as an alternative to both postmodernist approaches as expressed by Iris Young and liberal approaches as expressed by Martha Nussbaum. Although these two currents in contemporary political theory are not always well defined, each has what I will call characteristic worries. Postmodernists worry about the too-determinate use of categories, of the attempt to lock down what human being is through definitions. They worry about how humans are discursively defined as consumers, 'havers', rather than active creators or doers.<sup>50 51</sup>

As I develop and defend Spinoza's ethical and political theory, I will test it against these skeptical liberal and poststructuralist feminist worries. I believe that Spinoza's views will hold up against these reservations and moreover will expose the interconnectedness of the worries of postmodernists and liberal theorists, and will show how they are the results of the naturalistic road not taken in political theory. Finally, I will show how much further we can get with Spinoza than with these two alternatives. With Spinoza's naturalism, we can appeal to insights in psychology, contemporary neuroscience and political science to understand how we work, and how we can better work together. We need to better understand the conception of human individuals and human power that Spinoza gives us and where it came from. In Chapter Two, I will set out the basic details of Spinoza's conception of the individual, his theory of the affects, and his understanding of how individuals increase their power. In the next part of Chapter One, I

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<sup>49</sup> E3P9S

<sup>50</sup> Young, following MacPherson, wants to understand humans as 'doers', not 'havers'. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 37.

<sup>51</sup> Nussbaum also wants an account of what people are able to 'do and be', which she argues is not possible using this social contract model. *Frontiers of Justice*, pp. 74-5.

will show how Spinoza's positive account of the human individual developed from his critiques of Descartes' dualism and Hobbes' conception of self-preservation.

## Chapter 1, Part 2:

### Beyond the Liberal Subject: the need for a positive model of human individuals

- I. Dualism and Universal Egoism
- II. Spinoza, Hobbes and Descartes
- III. The Spinozan Alternative

If the aim of our political theorizing is to discern what can empower individuals, we need to have some conception of what those individuals are, what they need, and how together and separately they can increase their power. A positive model is needed to understand what makes people more powerful, what empowers them. We need a new conception of the subject, and it is the aim of the first half of my dissertation to argue that Spinoza's conception of the human individual is a good one. I will argue that Spinoza's conception of human nature is promising for contemporary democratic theory both because it avoids the pitfalls of the liberal conception of human nature and because it does not fall into the skeptical trap which paralyzes so many who encounter the problematic of this liberal conception.

After setting out the main problems feminist political theorists have identified with the liberal conception of human nature I will argue that Spinoza's conception of individuals does not suffer from the problems identified with the liberal conception of human nature. Spinoza, I will argue, critiqued the key elements of the liberal conception of the subject before there even were liberals running around talking about reasonable pluralism and the incommensurability of individuals preference-schemes. I will present a picture of what Spinoza's individual *is not* in order to make way for the positive conception of Spinoza's individual, which will have to wait for Chapter Two for its full exposition. In bringing out the elements of what Spinoza's subject isn't I will also tell a story of how it got that way, that is, why Spinoza's subject is so useful, even

though it was formulated so many years ago. Telling this story requires setting Spinoza in the context of his main philosophical interlocutors, Descartes and Hobbes.

Discussions of the ‘liberal conception of human nature’ are seemingly complex, as critics see in this conception a dizzying array of properties. I will argue that the main elements of the liberal conception of human nature are derived from (and can be reduced to) two major aspects, dualism and universal egoism. I will further argue that these aspects can be identified with the work of Descartes and Hobbes, respectively. I will go on to show that through his critiques of Descartes and Hobbes, Spinoza provides a critique of the liberal conception of human nature. Spinoza developed his own positive conception of human nature as rather a critique of and development of these key ideas of Descartes and Hobbes: dualism and self-preservation. From these, Spinoza develops his view that all individuals are part of nature, and that thought and extension are two aspects of all Nature; and his conception of conatus and his novel understanding of human power.<sup>52</sup>

Further, derived from his critical work, Spinoza develops a conception of the individual in contrast to this nascent liberal conception, and that rather than an independent, separate, rational, disembodied individual for whom preference or desire satisfaction is their sole motivational aim, Spinoza provides an account of human individuals in which they are characterized as embodied, primarily affective, essentially interconnected with other individuals, and as able to increase their power through adequate knowledge of themselves and the natural world by which their beliefs and behaviors are caused.

## **I. Dualism and Universal Egoism**

In *Feminism and Human Nature*, a feminist classic which Young cites extensively in her critiques of liberalism, Alison Jaggar identifies dualism, equality, atomism and universal egoism as the key elements of the liberal conception of human nature. She argues that the liberal

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<sup>52</sup> Matheron, “The Theoretical Function of Democracy in Spinoza and Hobbes” in Stolze and Montag (Eds.) *The New Spinoza*. (University of Minnesota, 2008).

conception of human nature is philosophically and politically problematic because of these characteristics and because of the political principles which follow from them. Liberalism's substantive political principles and recommendations are based on this false picture of human nature and have effects which, Jaggar argues, are positively harmful to human welfare. She argues that the liberal model of the human yields false expectations of individual behaviors from people and leads us to ignore relevant characteristics of individuals and their situations which can make the difference between increasing their power or not. Requiring (or just assuming) political participants to be of equal capacity, rationality and independence excludes from the start those who already are disempowered in a society.

Jaggar understands liberalism itself to be founded upon this conception of human nature, not merely justified by it. Her condemnation of its political effects is foreshadowed in her analysis of their cause, the liberal conception of human nature. Jaggar argues that the liberal conception of human nature has four problematic aspects: it presumes a. dualism, b. equality, c. atomism and d. universal egoism.

#### **a) Dualism**

The liberal conception of human nature is characterized by dualism, whereby the essence of humans is associated with the mind rather than body. The mind is understood as the seat of reason, and thus the essence of humans is understood to be rationality. Jaggar writes:

“Liberal theory is grounded on the conception of human beings as essentially rational agents...Liberals assume that rationality is a ‘mental’ capacity. The classical liberal theorists were metaphysical dualists; that is to say, they believed that the human mind and the human body represented two quite different kinds of beings, each irreducible to and connected only contingently with the other. Contemporary liberal theorists are not committed explicitly to metaphysical dualism, but their political theory rests on a kind of dualism that I call ‘normative dualism’. Normative dualism is the belief that that what is especially valuable about human beings is a particular ‘mental’ capacity, the capacity for rationality. Liberals assume that the physical basis of this capacity is irrelevant to political theory.”<sup>53</sup>

The problems with dualism, for Jaggar, include the fact that dualism discounts properties which are based on bodily markers or differences as politically irrelevant even when unjust relations of

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<sup>53</sup> Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. (Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), p. 28.



social, political, and physical power may be related in a particular society to these characteristics. Dualism splits reason from embodied experience, and thus mischaracterizes the basis of human knowledge, which for Jaggar is essentially social and embodied.<sup>54</sup> Exclusion of recognition of the political relevance of bodily properties to particular societies can and has yielded exclusion of those characterized more by their bodies than by their minds, which for many centuries included women, leaving this liberal conception of human nature with what Jaggar argues is a male bias.<sup>55</sup>

### **b) Equality**

In the liberal conception of human nature, each individual is taken to be equal in essence, which, for liberals (from (a)) means equal in rational power.<sup>56</sup> All human individuals are understood as having equal capacities for reason.<sup>57</sup> Reason, in the liberal view, is taken to mean instrumental reason. From this, follows the corollary, that, as Jaggar puts it, “Liberals view each individual as expert in identifying her or his own interest.”<sup>58</sup>

What could be the problem with equality? The trick, with equality, is that everything depends on how it is reckoned. If individuals are understood as equal in rational capacity, then other differences or properties such as sex, race, class, etc. are considered ‘accidental’, and thereby not important or relevant when it comes to deriving or implementing political principles. However, Jaggar argues, in societies which are stratified by class, race, gender, etc., such properties are relevant. Not recognizing these characteristics as important can lead to further disempowering those already in lower status groups. Requiring (or just assuming) political participants to be of equal capacity, rationality and independence excludes from the start those who already are disempowered in a society. Martha Nussbaum adds the additional worry that

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<sup>54</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 355.

<sup>55</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 46.

<sup>56</sup> For some philosophers, like Kant, this meant equality of practical reason.

<sup>57</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 29.

<sup>58</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 30.

those who are mentally disabled, animals and children are automatically excluded from ‘the human’, as independent political individuals, as their reason is demonstrably unequal.<sup>59</sup>

### c) Atomism

Jaggar refers to this as ‘abstract individualism’. This is the basis for the claim that liberals understand individuals as ontologically prior to society and as ‘separate’, at least, that their essence cannot be determined by their social context. Jaggar writes, for liberals:

Logically, if not empirically, human individuals could exist outside a social context. Their essential characteristics, their needs and interests, their capacities and desires, are given independently of their social context and are not created or even fundamentally altered by that context. This metaphysical assumption is sometimes called abstract individualism because it conceives of human individuals in abstraction from any social circumstances.<sup>60</sup>

Atomism, argues Jaggar, leads to political solipsism, the view that individuals, “Are essentially solitary, with needs and interests that are essentially separate from if not in opposition to those of other individuals.”<sup>61</sup> This also misunderstands humans as ‘self-sufficient’.<sup>62</sup> More problematically, this conception of individuals does not recognize the reality of human interdependence. Jaggar argues that, “Human interdependence is necessitated by human biology, and the assumption of individual self-sufficiency is only plausible if one ignores human biology.”<sup>63</sup> Normative dualism, of course, the identification of human essence with mind and reason rather than with the body does exactly this: it ignores human biology, or rather, argues that reason is ‘multiply realizable.’

### d) Universal Egoism

Universal egoism is understood as the principle that no matter what else we know about individuals, we know that they will be motivated by their desire to preserve themselves.

Somewhere along the line ‘self-preservation’ became ‘self-interest’, which then became rational

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<sup>59</sup> *Frontiers of Justice*.

<sup>60</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 29.

<sup>61</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 40.

<sup>62</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 40.

<sup>63</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 41.

self-interest.<sup>64</sup> Jaggar presents universal egoism as the idea that, “No matter where or when they live, human beings are seen as tending naturally toward egoism or the maximization of their own individual utility”<sup>65</sup> Universal egoism is the result of the skeptical principle that we cannot assume that individuals share beliefs or purposes. But no matter how great human diversity, we can assume that individuals preserve themselves. This skeptical principle yields liberal skepticism about shared ends, suggests that ‘ends’ could not be the basis for uncoerced agreement. Contemporary versions of this are Rawls’ notion of reasonable pluralism. Since the only justifiable ‘good’, under these conditions, which is justifiable in terms of self-preservation is the object of an individual’s desire, about which they are not wrong, the only ‘common good’ is that which is reached by each individual pursuing his or her own desires. Jaggar suggests that this liberal faith in universal egoism yielding the ‘common good’ for all is misplaced. Jaggar believes that individual desires are caused by social context and interactions with others, and that to expect the common good to be created by each individual following his or her own interest is irresponsible.

The good society, from a liberal point of view, would be one in which each individual is free to follow his own desires and ends, which is guaranteed by maximal liberty, meaning that the state should be limited, so that the individual would have as much space as possible to realize their rational desires.

Rather than Jaggar’s four basic aspects of the liberal conception of human nature, I believe that we can identify two as the main culprits and that the other problematic characteristics can be derived from these two. The assumptions of universal egoism and the dualistic association of human essence with mind rather than body are at the root of the problematic atomism and egoism of the liberal subject. Without a body, humans can be understood as separate, independent, rational. The idea the humans are essentially separate from one another dependent

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<sup>64</sup> I cannot follow this particular historical story, though it would probably be interesting to do so.

<sup>65</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 32 .

on the idea that they have a non-physical essence which can be separate and independent from others; so, from dualism and the identification of human essence with reason flows atomism.

What Jaggar calls normative dualism<sup>66</sup> selectively identifies what is essentially human with ‘mind’ rather than ‘body’. The mind is then free, while the body is determined. The mind, further, by being separated from the body is no longer characterized by the affects, since those belong to the body.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the mind becomes identified essentially with reason. With affects relegated to the body, humans’ affective attachments to others can be relegated to the contingent bodily sphere, while their essential *ratio* can be understood as free, undetermined by physical laws and by affective connections. Because reason, in this conception, is ideally unfettered, each individual should have privileged access to their mental states as well as to knowledge of their interests.

Self-interest, or universal egoism, cannot be derived from dualism alone. Normative dualism, however, plays a role in justifying the presumption of universal egoism. Beginning with the idea that individuals are reasonable and adding to this idea that they are separate and separable lays the beginning of a good argument that individual interests need not overlap. Given a choice of which interests to fulfill (mine or somebody else’s) it makes most sense for an individual to follow their own interests. Thus, dualism and self-interest lay the foundation for the most criticized aspects of the liberal conception of human nature.

In the following section, I will identify the sources of these two problematic aspects, dualism and egoism with Renee Descartes and Thomas Hobbes, respectively. Spinoza developed his positive conception of the human individual in the context of his philosophical interactions with Hobbes and Descartes. Before presenting Spinoza’s positive conception of the human

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<sup>66</sup> *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> In *Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy* (Routledge, 1994) Genevieve Lloyd argues that with Descartes there was a fundamental change in the understanding of the relation between the mind and the body. In Descartes, the mind was no longer identified with passion. The struggle between passion and reason in Descartes becomes a struggle between body and mind it is no longer an intra-mental struggle, as it was for the Ancients.

individual, I will show how his critiques of Descartes dualism and his development of Hobbes notion of conatus yielded his positive view.

## II. Spinoza, Hobbes, and Descartes

Although there was dualism of a sort before Descartes, he is the *locus classicus* for contemporary critiques of dualism and the role that it plays in conceptions like the liberal conception of human nature. Although not a liberal theorist himself, Descartes separation of mind from body, with mind free and body determined, set the focus for political and ethical theory, focused as they are on freedom of action on the mind rather than on the body.

Hobbes likewise is no liberal, but his psychological principle of self-preservation, conatus, identifies natural right with the ability to use whatever one judges necessary to fulfill one's desire for self-preservation.<sup>68</sup> Hobbes' principle of self-preservation allows one to identify a foundation for political order even when there is maximal disagreement on 'ends'. For Hobbes, even in such a dire condition, the state of nature, individuals could be led to institute a compact among one another for political order by following only their desire to preserve themselves. Self-preservation being the only reliable motivation of human action one can expect in the state of nature, in a genuine way, Hobbes political doctrine is build on the principle of universal egoism.

Spinoza takes on Descartes and Hobbes precisely on these two problematic points: he attacks Cartesian dualism and redefines Hobbes conception of self-preservation to make sense of the importance of the power of individuals as well as the role of imagination in the move from the state of nature to the political state. Spinoza also critiqued Descartes' separation of mind from body, and his understanding of the will as a part of the mind that could have complete control over the body. Spinoza does not take issue with self-preservation and in fact takes up Hobbes conception of conatus, though I will argue that he expands what counts towards one's self-pres). Rather, Spinoza critiques Hobbes conception of power and his account of human psychology.

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<sup>68</sup> *De Cive* I.i.7; *De Homine* VI.7; *Leviathan*, I.xiv.

The will and power which each individual has cannot, as Hobbes argues in his political works, be given over or transferred entirely to anyone, counters Spinoza. Descartes and Hobbes however, were not Spinoza's enemies, but rather fellow travelers who had mistaken the nature of human being and human power.

If Hobbes pessimistic vision of human psychology and Descartes dualism are the foundations of what is objectionable about the 'liberal subject' then Spinoza's critique of Hobbes and Descartes furnishes us with yet another set of arguments against this model of human nature. However, nearly alone among the critics of the liberal subject, Spinoza constructs a positive model of the human individual derived from these critiques of Hobbes and Descartes. Spinoza's theory, developed alongside and in some aspects critical of Hobbes and Descartes conceptions of the human individual, is critical of both, and thus, answers feminists' reservations about the tradition. Spinoza's conception of the individual is tied to his metaphysical view of nature which rather than impede his theory, or make it less valuable, instead allows us to pursue research programs in psychology to forward projects of human empowerment, provides a foundation for arguing for global justice, and provides the basis for new arguments for maximally inclusive and participatory deliberative democratic institutions.

In the next chapter, I will explore in detail Spinoza's conception of the human individual. But before we get to what Spinoza's positive conception of the individual *is*, we will spend a moment talking about what Spinoza's conception of the individual *is not*. Specifically, I will take a moment to argue that Spinoza's conception of the individual is different and opposed to those major characteristics feminists have identified with the liberal subject: dualism, universal egoism, atomism, denial of the body or emotions, and the identification of human essence with reason.

Spinoza's conception of the individual does not have any of the major flaws which feminists have associated with the liberal conception of human nature. Spinoza's account of the subject is not dualistic; the individual is not primarily identified with mind or reason, rather than body. Spinoza's individual is primarily 'affective', Spinoza's technical term for affected by what

are generally called in his time the 'passions'. We might use the term emotions. Affects, for Spinoza, are embodied, but have a mental aspect as well. Individuals are affected by external forces, which create in them bodily affects and ideas of these bodily affects. Our ideas and our feelings are the result of our bodies being part of the natural world, and being affected by natural forces and other individuals in Nature. For Spinoza, our reason and our actions are completely part of Nature.

Further, Spinoza does not subscribe to universal egoism in the sense that he thinks egoism is justified or that by following their desires individuals can preserve themselves. Rather, Spinoza recognizes the ways in which human appetites are caused and further the ways that appetites can lead individuals astray. Contemporary theorists who rely on principles of universal egoism generally take individual preferences at face value, and argue that we cannot legitimately propose alternative standards or values for individual action. Spinoza disagreed. It was clear to him that some preferences, following some desires disempowered individuals and so were clearly bad for them, from a standpoint of assessing their power. If individuals' appetites lead them to actions which decreased their power, then these appetites cannot be the stopping point or even a starting point for determining the good, or what's best for humans.

Spinoza rejects both foundations of the liberal conception of human nature. In the sections to follow, I will argue that Spinoza's critique of Descartes and Hobbes allowed him to construct this conception of the human individual which does not suffer the pitfalls of the liberal conception of the human nature. I will argue that through his critiques of Cartesian dualism and through his reformulation of Hobbes conception of conatus, Spinoza gives us a conception of the human individual which is neither dualistic nor one which supports universal egoism.

## Spinoza's Critique of Descartes

We are all familiar with Descartes as the founder of the modern mind-body problem. We are no strangers, today, to critiques of Descartes. From all quarters, Descartes error,<sup>69</sup> his separation of mind from body, is condemned as misunderstanding the nature of human being, of human psychology. Descartes is seen as creating a rift between the mental and physical that has contributed to the oppression of those groups associated with the body and elevated those associated with the mind.<sup>70</sup> Spinoza saw the perniciousness of this view earlier than most. In this section I will analyze Descartes understanding of the separation between mind and body, his understanding of the affects, and Spinoza's critique and alternative conception of each aspect of Descartes account. Spinoza's account of human nature is derived from his critique of Descartes. Those problematic elements of the liberal conception of human nature that derive from understanding humans as 'dualistic' and primarily identified with the mind or reason not only are not 'in' Spinoza, but Spinoza provides a positive alternative non-dualistic conception of human nature.

Although this is not really the place for a thorough investigation of Cartesian metaphysics, it is worth providing a reminder of Descartes' understanding of the relation between body and mind. First, his picture of the body, from the Sixth Meditation:

I might consider the body of a man as a kind of machine equipped with and made up of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin in such a way that, even if there were no mind in it, it

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<sup>69</sup>*Descartes Error* is the title of Antonio Damasio's book, in which he argues that Descartes separation of mind from body was the beginning of the modern refusal to take emotions and affects seriously, and to focus on the mind as the seat of reason and the will. Damasio writes *Descartes Error* in an attempt to correct this failure of emphasis on 'reason' by showing how affects are part of body-mind systems which control decision making. Damasio argues that even the paragon of reason--rational choice--would not be possible without the affective and emotional systems of the body. Tellingly, when he moves from critiquing Descartes to presenting a positive conception of how affective systems effectively guide human behavior, conceptions of the world and ability to make choices, he writes a book called *Searching for Spinoza*. In this book, Damasio argues that key elements of Spinoza's affect theory are the closest philosophically to the findings of contemporary affective neuroscientists.

<sup>70</sup> *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.



would still perform all the same movements as it does now in those cases where movement is not under the control of the will, or, consequently, of the mind.<sup>71</sup>

Descartes understood mind and body as separate substances,<sup>72</sup> the soul is the seat of reason and will, while the body is opposed to reason.<sup>73</sup> Body and soul are united in human beings through ‘a little gland’,<sup>74</sup> as he argues in the *Passions of the Soul*, the wiggings of which allow the will to control the movements of the body. For this section, I will focus on Descartes *Passions*, since in that work in particular we can see what both draws Spinoza to him and turns him finally away from Descartes.

In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes presents a deliciously physical conception of the passions, so we can see Descartes the scientist exploring the nature of the body. Yet, the moral of the *Passions* is that whatever the pathways of the animal spirits, the will can control them, and humans are essentially free. So, Descartes, the savior of religious dogma saves free will at the expense of scientific understanding. Spinoza writes that Descartes began his investigations of the passions trying to understand their causes, but ended with the fiction that mind has complete dominion over the body.<sup>75</sup>

For Descartes, the mind and the body were two separate substances. He begins the *Passions* by investigating the properties of bodies, the way the muscles work, how blood is circulated and how the senses are impacted by the external world. He understands the body to be crisscrossed by nerve fibers and small bodies which he refers to as animal spirits, which communicate motion throughout the body. He defines the will as having termini in the soul and the body, such as when we will to think of some immaterial object, or will to walk. Perceptions and imaginations likewise are related to body and soul. The passions in general are those things

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<sup>71</sup> Descartes, *Sixth Meditation*, from *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, John Cottingham (ed.)(Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.119.

<sup>72</sup> Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, §52, §53.

<sup>73</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, §47.

<sup>74</sup> Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, §31, §32, §44.

<sup>75</sup> EIII, Preface

which move and dispose the body to move in various ways, for example, fleeing from fear and approaching with desire.<sup>76</sup> There are passions of the body and passions of the soul. While the body is complex, the soul is unified.<sup>77</sup> The soul is united to all parts of the body<sup>78</sup> through the pineal gland,<sup>79</sup> which is where the soul ‘directly exercises its functions’.<sup>80</sup> This gland is pickled in animal spirits, and by its slight movement, motion is communicated from the gland through the body.<sup>81</sup>

Each volition, Descartes writes, is joined to some movement of the pineal gland. So, when it wiggles one way, we feel or act in a particular manner. This correspondence of wiggling to acting or feeling can, Descartes writes, be reorganized.<sup>82</sup> Through habit we can train ourselves to react differently. Descartes writes, “Although the movements which represent certain objects to the soul are naturally joined to the movements which produce certain passions in it, yet through habit the former can be separated from the latter and joined to others that are very different.”<sup>83</sup> Through this process of reassigning representations to movements, the soul is able to freely reorganize the passions. Thus the will has complete freedom and control over the body.

There are circumstances, of course, where reorganizing the passions and controlling the body so is not easy, for example in cases of great fear or anger, it may be impossible to change our desires to act in certain ways. For such occasions, Descartes suggests: “The most the will can do while this disturbance is at its full strength is not to yield to its effects and to inhibit many of the movements to which it disposes the body.”<sup>84</sup> Yet, even though there seem to be limits to the control the soul has over completely reorganizing the passions, especially in these highly affective moments, Descartes insists, that “Even those who have the weakest souls could acquire

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<sup>76</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §40.

<sup>77</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §47.

<sup>78</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §30.

<sup>79</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §31.

<sup>80</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §32.

<sup>81</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §34.

<sup>82</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §44.

<sup>83</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §50.

<sup>84</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §46.

absolute mastery over all their passions if we employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them.”<sup>85</sup> One achieves this, Descartes suggests, through the aforementioned passion-pineal reordering, but also through the increase in determinate true judgments, or reason.<sup>86</sup> True opinion strengthens the soul, allowing it to better reorganize the passions.<sup>87</sup>

So, to recap, **a)** Descartes understands the body and the soul as two separate substances, which are united in the human body. **b)** The pineal gland, controlled (and completely controllable) by the soul or will, controls the motions of the body through slight movements which transmit animal spirits through the body, causing its actions. **c)** For Descartes, the soul is the seat of reason and the will, and the body is opposed to reason. **d)** The soul is united, and there is no real conflict possible in a unified will.<sup>88</sup> **e)** Thus, the soul, through the pineal gland has complete freedom in controlling the passions, although this may take some practice, and **f)** reason or true judgments can strengthen the will or soul.

Spinoza takes up Descartes’ account and answers it point for point, as I will show below.

### **a’) Descartes’ Dualism**

Spinoza rejects Descartes’ dualism. For Spinoza, ‘extension’ and ‘thought’ are not separate substances but are attributes of the one single substance.<sup>89</sup> Spinoza argues in the 1<sup>st</sup> book of the *Ethics* that there could not be two different substances.<sup>90</sup> There is one substance, God (or Nature) with infinite attributes, two of which, extension and thought are comprehensible by us. Human bodies and other individuals are modes of this substance, and can be characterized through reference to thought, or through reference to matter and extension. There is one substance, which can be described in terms of thought-talk, ideas, representations, and which can be described in terms of matter and motion; human individuals are bits of that one thing. Spinoza

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<sup>85</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §50.

<sup>86</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §49.

<sup>87</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §49.

<sup>88</sup> *Passions of the Soul*, §47.

<sup>89</sup> E1P1-14

<sup>90</sup> E1P14

argued that the mind and body were just two ways of looking at and understanding affections of the same thing, *substance*. On Spinoza's view there can be only one substance, which has the dual attributes of 'thought' and 'extension'. For Spinoza, thought is about extension; the mind is the idea of the body.

**b') Descartes' idea that the will, through the mechanism of the pineal gland, controls the actions of the body**

Spinoza's doctrine that 'the mind is the idea of the body' means that body and soul are coextensive, and not just through the wriggling of the pineal gland. Body and mind describe in two different ways, a mode of substance. To express this, Spinoza writes that the mind is the idea of the body. The mind, as the idea of the body, does not control the body, but is rather affected simultaneously as the body with the forces of thought that accompany the forces of the material world. Ideas as well as bodily motions are caused. With this conception, Descartes idea that the mind can control the body disappears. The mind is swept up by causal forces in the same way as the body.<sup>91</sup>

**c') Descartes idea that the mind is associated with reason, and the body is opposed to reason**

In Spinoza body is not opposed to reason. For Spinoza, all knowledge comes through bodily experience in the world. Body and mind are not separate, but are, again, two ways of understanding the same mode of substance. For Spinoza, the affects are bodily as well as mental. We understand the world through the affects, this is how we gain all our basic knowledge, and further how we improve our knowledge and thus strengthen our reason.

**d') Descartes contention that there is a single, unified will**

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<sup>91</sup> For Spinoza, these two modes of characterization of the one substance are complete in themselves. One must explain ideas in terms of ideas and physical actions in terms of physical causes. Moving between the two modes of explanation, for Spinoza, was forbidden. So, one cannot invoke a physical cause to explain the idea of something, and one cannot invoke the pineal gland to unite the physical explanation with an explanation in terms of thought.

Spinoza recognizes that the body is complex, and so the mind is complex.<sup>92</sup> Different images and desires draw the body and the mind in different directions. The body, made up of complex parts, is drawn toward those things which satisfy local desires, which may lead to conflicts within the body. Vacillation of mind is when the mind is drawn towards incompatible desires.<sup>93</sup> The mind is not unified, but is rather drawn in different directions by different objects and images. Through the process of becoming more powerful, a process I will describe in greater detail in Chapter Two, the individual can develop a mechanism to unify these disparate desires. The process of unifying the self is a process of understanding these desires, which we can only do through understanding the affects, through understanding our bodies and how we are complex. It is imperative for the individual to ‘organize’ his or her desires to make the disparate parts and desires ‘agree’. The self, thus, is a kind of unifying fiction. However, this constructed agreement is not the same as a unified will or soul. For Spinoza, there is no unified will, there are just individual desires.<sup>94</sup>

**e’) That the will can completely control the passions, with practice**

For Spinoza, since the mind is not in control of the body, since they are separate modes of explanation of substance, and further there is no unified will, there is no way that the mind could control the body and have complete control over bodily passions in the way that Descartes describes. Again, Spinoza desires to show in the *Ethics* to what extent humans may have power over the external forces that cause their affect, but he does not think that anyone has so far done this,<sup>95</sup> since most, like Descartes, focus on the power of the will to control the affects. Free will is an illusion, and a harmful one, since it encourages ignorance.

Most people, Spinoza writes, are aware of their individual desires, and further, they are aware of making attempts to fulfill these desires. So, though they sometimes fail, they think

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<sup>92</sup> E3P51

<sup>93</sup> E3P17S

<sup>94</sup> E2P49D2

<sup>95</sup> E3Pref

themselves free because they are able to make the attempt. However, what they ignore is the fact that their desires too are *caused*. By thinking themselves free and their thoughts and desires original to themselves, they ignore the causes of their desires and ideas.

**f') That truth can strengthen the will**

Finally, Descartes argues that true judgments or reason can help the will control the passions. For Spinoza, the passions are more powerful than the affects; those desires based on reason, on true knowledge of good and evil, are less powerful than those based on emotion.<sup>96</sup>

In cases of intense emotion reason may have little chance of overcoming passion. Instead, Spinoza argues, we must fight fire with fire, affect with affect. Although I'm not completely sure whether fire can be fought using fire, rather than water or some kind of chemical compound found in fire extinguishers, I am fairly convinced of Spinoza's method of using passions to bolster one's ability to fight disturbing passions. Although Spinoza thought Descartes misunderstood the nature of the will and the ability of the will to control the passions, he took up some of Descartes' ideas about the role of images and the idea of reorganizing the images and passions they were connected to, an early sort of cognitive therapy, but not in the least cold-cognitive, given the central role of the passions. In the next chapter, I will examine this process of increasing one's 'active' or 'good' affects as a way to both understand oneself and the forces that impinge on one, and the consequent enhancement of one's ability to resist previously overwhelming bad passions. Spinoza argues that individuals increase their power; this increased power can allow them to re-associate images with different objects, changing the impact that these objects have on them.<sup>97</sup>

In order to save free will, Descartes betrayed science and ended up with a false conception of human passions and of the role of the human body in resisting the bad or

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<sup>96</sup> EIVP16-17

<sup>97</sup> Those familiar with Descartes *Passions* will recognize this concept of 'reassociation'; however, for Spinoza, such reassociation of images with new objects in order to transform the passions and desires is only possible with an increase in power provided by joy, no 'true idea' is enough, as it is for Descartes.

destructive passions. Throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza castigates moral philosophers for separating mind from body and praising the will for commanding the passions; he is not just gunning for Descartes. Spinoza's primary target were those moral philosophers who praised 'free will' while condemning the passions and the body. Both freedom and body hating led to misunderstanding the nature of human life. Descartes attempts to describe the physical nature of the passions started off on the right road, but stopped short of a full naturalistic description of the passions in order to allow for 'free will', a product of mental substance separate and more powerful than the physical body to control its actions. Thus, Cartesian dualism must be rejected. It leads to misunderstanding human nature, the affects, and the extent to which human actions, affects and ideas are caused by external forces. From his critique of Descartes, Spinoza develops his own conception of the passions, which he calls affects, in order to distinguish within the larger category of the affects 'passive and active', 'good and bad' affects. His engagement with Descartes led Spinoza to focus on the importance of the body and of the role of the imagination in creating and controlling affective associations with other individuals and with the objects of our affects.

### **Spinoza's Critique of Hobbes**

Most of the troublesome elements of the liberal conception of human nature derive from its presumption of dualism, ontological and normative. From dualism are derived the notions that individuals are essentially identified with their mental functions, their reason, rather than their affects; that individuals are separate from one another, and that individuals can be taken as logically independent from their human and natural surroundings, including their own bodies. Irreducible to dualism, however, is what I have identified above as the *other* problematic aspect of the liberal conception of human nature, namely universal egoism. Universal egoism is the idea that whatever else one seeks and motivates one's actions, human individuals can be reliably counted on to be motivated by self-interest and will always act to preserve themselves. Even once

we have dispatched Descartes, universal egoism remains as a problem which we cannot blame on him or dualism.

As many feminist theorists point out, liberal and non-liberal alike, the presumption that individuals seek only their own interest provides a very shaky foundation for collective life, and cannot explain many of the actions people do perform on behalf of others, or in service to their communities and families. Further, the social means by which human desires and interests are formed are ignored, and thus the motivations for individual behavior are oversimplified and badly understood, making only the most pragmatic social arrangements, where everyone benefits equally, reasonable.

Why not assume benevolence, rather than egoism asks Martha Nussbaum, in her interrogation of the presumptions of the social contract theorists?<sup>98</sup> Why not create the foundations of social life on our better characteristics, and so create institutions which bring out the best in individuals? Why not? Because, for Hobbes and Spinoza, such feelings as benevolence and other expressions of human goodness could not be trusted to persist, or in the midst of war, like in the wars of religion, such feelings could not be engaged. To understand this presumption of egoism and Hobbes, who used it to found his conception of civil society, we need to remember the context in which it was written.

Aristotelian conceptions of humans as naturally social and as ordered by nature into separate orders, the same conception which underwrites Nussbaum's suggestion of benevolence, were challenged by the more radical political upheavals of the wars of religion and the humanist skeptics.<sup>99</sup> The reliance on a common set of values or virtues and a common institution of

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<sup>98</sup> *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 44.

<sup>99</sup> Why do we need justice if we can count on benevolence? Hobbes and Spinoza thought it important to argue that mutual advantage is served by society, even from the perspective of the passionate self preservation seeking individual, to answer the skeptical challenge, without presuming too much, that is the inherent sociality of humans (which was called into question by the humanist skeptics) to somehow skim over the tough parts. Hobbes and Spinoza simply could not, knowing the violence and horror of their time, assume the general and universal sociality of individuals as the basis of political life. Inherent sociality could not and did not ensure peace. For them, only strong political states could ensure social peace and



enforcement, the Catholic Church and others, were upset by the wars themselves and their aftermath. From this chaos, the idea of a ‘thin’ conception of human nature, not yet identified with liberalism,<sup>100</sup> was born. This model consisted of separate, ‘atomistic’, equal individuals, motivated by desire for self-preservation. As I have argued above, the liberal ‘thin’ conception of the subject was created as a solution to a skeptical problem, the need for political order and the absence of agreement, never mind love or benevolence.<sup>101</sup> If humans were naturally benevolent and sociable, there would be no need for laws.<sup>102</sup>

Spinoza and Hobbes agreed that any state based on the natural goodness or rationality of humans was bound to fail, and that therefore Aristotelian accounts of natural sociality were inadequate for political science.<sup>103</sup> Order, they argued, though necessary, could not be built from

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prepare the possibility for human social life and possible flourishing. Appealing to inherent sociality for them was a bit of a cheat, argument wise. The humanist skeptics had convincingly shown that such affects were rather unreliable in large scale polities when significant differences arose. So, Spinoza constantly reiterates that we cannot expect people to be on their best behavior, or act based on their other-directed affects. We certainly cannot build this expectation into our political foundations. Influenced by the century of war and violence preceding their writing, and the ongoing conflicts in their own times, Hobbes and Spinoza were less sanguine than Nussbaum about the possibility of relying on natural sociality to get past serious political conflict. Surely, Nussbaum has plenty of reasons to worry about violence, so, again, it’s not clear whether or not her faith in benevolence is really justified. Spinoza and Hobbes provide psychological arguments for why self-preservation is basic and indefeasible. Since Nussbaum conflates self-preservation and egoism (like so many), she cannot and does not answer their arguments.

<sup>100</sup> There are strong reasons against taking Hobbes to be a liberal, but there are just as strong reasons for taking his ‘thin’ conception of human nature, which takes humans as self-preservatory, in potentially hostile relations with others, and competitive as the basis of the liberal conception of the subject. MacPherson, in his critique of liberalism, has famously identified Hobbes as the first to propose a false conception of humans as ‘possessive individualists’. C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, (Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>101</sup> Nussbaum will bring back this Aristotelian conception of the natural sociality of humans, despite the continuing existence of pluralism and the need for political order. Her Aristotle-inspired account will remain a fruitful counter to Spinoza’s Hobbes-inspired theory which aims to create the conditions for stability and to build stability even from conditions of humans’ not always ‘other-regarding’ impassioned nature. *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 182.

<sup>102</sup> Spinoza writes, “Now, if men were so constituted by nature as to desire nothing but what is prescribed by true reason, society would stand in no need of any laws. Nothing would be required but to teach men true moral doctrine, and they would then act to their true advantage of their own accord, whole-heartedly and freely. But human nature is far differently constituted. All men do indeed seek their own advantage, but by no means from the dictates of sound reason.” *TTP*, Chapter 5.

<sup>103</sup> Hobbes writes, “The greatest part of those men who have written ought concerning Commonwealths, either suppose, or require us, or beg of us to believe, That Man is a Creature born fit for Society: The Greeks call him Zoon politikon, and on this foundation they so build up the Doctrine of Civil Society, as if for the preservation of Peace, and the Government of Man-kind there were nothing else necessary, then that Men should agree to make certain Covenants and Conditions together, which themselves should then call laws. Which Axiom, though received by most, is yet certainly False, and an Error proceeding from our too

benevolence. If you can't count on natural sociability or the natural respect for hierarchy, then how can you build social order? The great achievement of Hobbes was to show that in order to reach civil peace, benevolence was *unnecessary*. The quite amazing feat of Hobbes political works is to show that by only assuming the most base human conditions and motivations, namely fear and desire to preserve oneself, one could build the most stable political state. From this meager foundation, the fear derived from human equality<sup>104</sup> and in particular the ability of each to kill and to be killed, and the desire to preserve oneself from the violence of others emerged 'reason', which gave the imperative to leave the state of nature.

So, what is it that leads us to contract society if it is not a natural desire or love for other humans? Hobbes writes: "All society is therefore either for gain or for glory; that is, not so much for love of our fellows, as for the love of ourselves."<sup>105</sup> But the glory based state cannot last. It is fear which creates and sustains society, and were this fear to be lifted, Hobbes argues, humans would be led to obtain dominion or power over others more readily than they would seek society. He writes, "We must therefore resolve, that the original of all great and lasting societies consisted not in the mutual good will men had towards each other, but in the mutual fear they had of each other."<sup>106</sup>

Individuals in the Hobbesian state of nature have good reason to join together, namely to avoid being killed, and to diminish their constant fear of being killed. But, for Hobbes, not just any collective organization could be secured. Hobbes distinguishes between the 'mutual association' and the civil state. Simply contracting among one another, for shared purposes and

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slight contemplation of Humane Nature; for they who shall more narrowly look into the Causes for which Men come together, and delight in each others company, shall easily find that this happens not because naturally it could happen no otherwise, but by Accident: For if by nature one Man should Love another (that is) as Man, there could no reason be returned why every Man should not equally Love every Man, as being equally Man, or why he should rather frequent those whose Society affords him Honor or Profit. We do not therefore by nature seek Society for its own sake, but that we may receive some Honor or Profit from it." *De Cive*, I.i.2.

<sup>104</sup> *De Cive*, I.i.3.

<sup>105</sup> Hobbes writes: "All society is therefore either for gain or for glory; that is, not so much for love of our fellows, as for the love of ourselves." *De Cive*, I.i.2.

<sup>106</sup> *De Cive*, I.i.2.

collective interests, was not enough for individuals to emerge from the state of fear. Hobbes argues, there is nothing binding this association of individuals other than their contingently aligned interests. As soon as one member of the association (or better, several together), decides that more can be gained by cheating the rest, the association is broken. Mutual associations of this kind then were very precarious, and could not dissipate the fear of the state of nature, which was caused, after all by the freedom and equality of each individual. Since the mutual assistance association or natural democracy left each individual free and equal, the possibility of war and violence was always present, and so fear remained.

To genuinely leave the state of nature, the state of fear, Hobbes argued, humans had to agree to give up all their power to a sovereign, to a sole authority (which could be made up of one person or an assembly). In doing so, they were to transfer their ‘natural right’<sup>107</sup> which meant their power, their ability to use any means necessary in their own judgment to preserve themselves to the sovereign, authorizing the sovereign to act and judge on their behalf. So, the transfer of power to the sovereign involves both a transfer of will and transfer of power.<sup>108</sup> The sovereign then can be taken to have the whole power of the multitude, which contract among themselves to invest the sovereign with all their power and will and retains the authorization to act on their behalf and to take over their power of judgment as to the best means of their preservation.

So, when the dust clears, and the contract has been made, the sovereign controls all the power of the subjects, the state of nature is abolished, and the sovereign’s will stands for the will of all. Thus, there can be no quibbling that the sovereign has gone against the will of the people, since there is no such will. After the contract is made, there is only the will of the sovereign,

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<sup>107</sup> Grotius counted as among his two basic principles the idea that humans had the right to preserve themselves. Hobbes takes up this right and transforms it into a natural imperative. Hobbes writes, “Neither by the word Right is any thing else signified, then that liberty which every man hath to make use of his natural faculties according to right reason: Therefore the first foundation of natural Right is this, That every man as much as in him lies endeavor to protect his life and members.” *De Cive* I.i.7. Hobbes takes up this right and makes it into a principle of human psychology, part of human nature.

<sup>108</sup> *De Cive*, II.v.11.

which cannot disagree with itself.<sup>109</sup> The ‘people’ has also disappeared, since when they gave their power and will to the sovereign they lost their power to contract among one another for future concerns. So, with his theoretical wand, Hobbes dispatches the arguments of the troublesome tyrannicides or Calvinist Resistance Theorists who insisted that ‘the people’ had a contract with their monarch, and could demand redress for their grievances on the basis of this contract.<sup>110</sup> By arguing that the contract which created the state was between the individuals among one another and that once the sovereign was created their power disappeared completely, Hobbes removes the basis of their claims. Thus, Hobbes eliminated the basis for a set of seditions which he thought the cause of violent unrest in England and elsewhere.

### **Spinoza and Hobbes on Self-Preservation**

Spinoza and Hobbes share much, in terms of their naturalistic approach and their interest in promoting strong and stable states. Their major differences are well known. Spinoza was a ‘democrat’, arguing that democracy was the best form of government. Hobbes, though his account of sovereignty holds that the position of sovereign was one that can be held by one or many, thought that one would be better. However, for my purposes here, I will focus on a more subtle difference between the two, one which speaks to the issue of Hobbes’ notion of self-preservation being taken as yielding universal egoism. I have shown above the place of self-preservation in Hobbes’ political arguments, and hopefully shown that for Hobbes universal egoism was the most parsimonious posit possible. However, Hobbes definition of self-preservation tied as it is to this posit of universal egoism for the purposes of creating a civil state, lends itself better to the stronger universal egoism position than Spinoza’s adoption of the principle of self-preservation ever could. Spinoza redefines ‘self-preservation’ in the *Ethics*, and

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<sup>109</sup> *De Cive*, II.vi.1 [Note on the Multitude]

<sup>110</sup> Junius Brutus, “Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos, A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants,” from: <http://www.constitution.org/vct/vindiciae.htm>

forecloses the possibility of taking ‘self-preservation’ as a synonym for ‘self-interest’, as I will show.

Spinoza agreed with Hobbes that all individuals strive to preserve themselves. He disagreed with Hobbes’ conception of power, especially the notion of the transfer of power and will of the contracting multitude to the sovereign. I will go into this in greater detail in Chapter 3, but the basics are as follows: Hobbes argued that upon entering the contract individuals give up their will and power to the sovereign. Spinoza thought this theoretical account of power and will transfer made sense in theory, but not in practice.<sup>111</sup> According to Spinoza, individuals cannot transfer completely their power and cannot give up their power of judgment to another. Even if the multitude of individuals could give up their power, that power would not accrue to the sovereign individual in the way that Hobbes imagines the sovereign’s power to increase. At the end of the day, for Spinoza, a monarch is still a single individual, and thus this single individual can never be as powerful as the multitude. Sovereigns do not become more powerful by obtaining the will and power of their subjects, in some sort of vampiric life-force transfer. Rather, their obedience has to be won. At every moment, individuals obey, ignore or disobey the requests of the sovereign.

From this difference in his conceptions of the possibility of the transfer of power and will derives Spinoza’s rejection of the contract, of the stable or absolute nature of monarchy, and his understanding of the way that *conatus* and affects are transindividual in that they can be and are molded through social interaction. So much for the larger context of Spinoza’s redefinition of Hobbes conception of self-preservation, let’s get down to details. I will set out the elements here, but will of course go into the details of Spinoza’s view and explain them further in the next chapter.

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<sup>111</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

In Proposition 6 of the *Ethics* Book 3, Spinoza writes, “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.”<sup>112</sup> Spinoza goes on to say that the essence of each singular thing is in fact this striving for self-preservation, which in the Latin he called (following Hobbes), *conatus*. One short phrase inserted into propositions 6 and 7 distinguishes Spinoza’s principle of self-preservation from that of Hobbes – short but significant. For Spinoza, the *power* to preserve oneself is key. As he goes on to explain in E3P7, the next proposition, the power or the striving of an individual is its essence. Spinoza writes, “The power of each thing, or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything – that is (by P6), the power *or* the striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing by the given or actual essence of the thing itself.”<sup>113</sup> Spinoza then goes on to explain the elements of *conatus*, which go into self-preservation, and into maintaining one’s power:

- ❖ Appetite (E3P9S)
- ❖ Image of oneself (E3P9D)
- ❖ How one imagines those things which increase the power of the body (E3P11)

An individual’s *conatus*, power or essence, for Spinoza, is not simple, but is rather a complex of 1) one’s desires or appetites, 2) one’s image of oneself, and 3) one’s image of those things around one which increase one’s power.

Spinoza takes up Hobbes’ notion of this striving for self-preservation, *conatus*, identifies it with power, and then shows how bringing the body’s divergent appetites and desires into alignment requires the imaginative construction of a self.<sup>114</sup> Spinoza’s conception of self-

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<sup>112</sup> EIIIIP6 followed by E3P6 Dem: “For singular things are modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way (IP25C), that is (IP34), things that express in a certain and determinate way, God’s power, by which God is and acts.

<sup>113</sup> E3P7D

<sup>114</sup> Spinoza’s understanding of self-preservation also has a social component. Spinoza believes that we want other people to strive to bring about those things we want to bring about. “Each of us strives, so far as he

preservation, tied as it is to an understanding of human power and imaginative self-conception, cannot be reduced to or translated as ‘self-interest’, and so cannot serve as a foundation for universal egoism. Universal egoism supposes that individuals follow their interests and that their interests can be taken as whatever preserves them. For Spinoza, individuals are often wrong about what will lead to their preservation; their appetites often lead them astray.<sup>115</sup> Through improving their understanding of what actually preserves them, individuals increase their power. It is rather more difficult to reduce Spinoza’s conception of conatus, with its elements of appetite, self-conception and worldview, to self-interest. Even though Hobbes did not talk explicitly in terms of self-interest, it is not hard to see how universal egoism is derived from his discussion of human motivation, as argued above. Spinoza, in his investigation of what goes into making up an individual’s power exposes the hidden complexity of this phrase ‘self-interest’.

Self-interest requires a self. Let’s say for Spinoza this self is an imaginative fiction of oneself, one’s power and one’s affections, one’s differentiation (in characteristic motion from E2) from one’s surroundings. This is already quite an imaginative/intellectual feat for Spinoza, for whom the body and mind are complex<sup>116</sup> and pulled in different directions. Because of Spinoza’s conception of the complexity of the body and mind and its desires, desires and appetites are not unified, thus, from E3P17S, the ‘interest’ in self-interest is also not simple. The body’s complex desires suggest neither a unified self nor a clear set of interests. Coming up with a mode of integrating these desires is the project of developing a conception of the self. Developing an integrated conception of a self is not really an individual project, but rather the effect of interaction with the environment and with other humans. In Chapter Two, I will explore the details of Spinoza’s conception of conatus, and his understanding of the process through which

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can, that everyone should love what he loves and hate what he hates.”(E3P31Cor) We will strive to bring about what we imagine *they* want to bring about. Spinoza writes, “We shall strive to do also whatever we imagine men to look on with joy, and on the other hand, we shall be averse to doing what we imagine men are averse to.” E3P29.

<sup>115</sup> *TTP* Chapter 16, E3P25S[ii].

<sup>116</sup> E3P17S, E3P51, E4AppXXVII.

individuals come to have a conception of themselves and the world around them, and more importantly for Spinoza, how individuals come to share a conception of the world. In his redefinition of Hobbes' 'self-preservation' principle Spinoza provides his conception of individual power and the germs of his larger theory of how individual power relates to imagination and to social life. It is here, with his conception of individual power, that Spinoza's critique of Hobbes' conception of power, which will later lead to the rejection of the contract, and Spinoza's contribution to political theory begins.

This is not to understate Spinoza's debt to Hobbes. Spinoza's conception of the human individual is rightly understood as a development of Hobbes' view. Spinoza developed Hobbes' account of the affects and the imagination, to show that entering the social, the move from the state of nature to the social state, was as much a matter of joining together the power of the individuals involved as it was a matter of coordinating affects and developing a social imaginary. Spinoza writes, "The main difference between the two conditions is this, that in the civil order all men fear the same things, and all have the same ground of security, the same way of life. But this does not deprive the individual of his faculty of judgment, for he who has resolved to obey all the commands of the commonwealth, whether through fear of its power or love of tranquility, is surely providing for his own security and his own advantage in his own way."<sup>117</sup> The decision to obey the sovereign is one that each individual makes according to his or her own judgment, which may be based on fear, love, or through reason. This decision is not made once and for all at the inauguration of the commonwealth, but is constantly remade each time the individual is called upon to obey the law or to support the policies of the sovereign. What unites the individuals in the civil state is that they all fear or love the same thing.

For Spinoza, then, the civil state is somewhat precarious – one does not leave the state of nature once and for all. Likewise, the power of the sovereign is not guaranteed by a one-time total transfer of power from all the individuals in the multitude. Rather, the civil state and the power of

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<sup>117</sup> TP 3.3



the sovereign is rather remade every day or even at each moment by the renewed consensus of each individual choosing to support and obey the sovereign power. So, for Spinoza, the real problems of politics and civil order were figuring out how to make sure this ‘agreement’ and support of the sovereign could be best achieved so that the multitude would support its government. Doing so requires understanding in detail what makes people obey, which requires an in-depth understanding of human motivations, desires, and affects, both how these work in an individual and how the affects of a multitude of individuals work together. How Spinoza transforms the question of the state into a problem of developing institutions to organize human affects will be considered in Chapter Three.

### **III. The Spinozan Alternative**

Spinoza’s model of the human individual, as forged from the same turbulent times as the liberal conception, takes seriously the idea of human differentiation and the idea of diversity in human values, ends, and practices. Relativism of value and the skepticism about human community and knowledge were not obstacles, but rather the starting points for Spinoza. However, Spinoza also recognizes the interconnection and interdependence of humans. His theory of the human individual counters the liberal conception of human nature point for point. Where the liberal individual is taken to be primarily rational, Spinoza’s individual is primarily affective or passionate. Where the liberal individual is understood as motivated by self-interest, Spinoza calls the whole idea of an individual-originating motivation into question once we recognize the extent to which individuals are determined in their desires by those around them.

In contrast to this liberal model of human nature, Spinoza’s human individual is primarily affective, connected to Nature and not ‘free’ in the sense that human action is outside of the laws of Nature. Spinoza’s individuals are interdependent and moved by forces outside their control and awareness. Humans are not, however, helpless. They have power which can be joined with others

to increase their knowledge of the forces that move them and so enable themselves to become free.

For Spinoza, individuals are moved by their conatus, their desire for self-preservation, and so one might argue that his conception of conatus was just that of Hobbes, and thus tied to the subjective theory of value and self-interest. However, these desires are themselves caused and shaped by forces external to individuals and often outside of their awareness. Understanding humans as moved by interests and desires that originate within the individual alone ignores the extent to which humans are part of nature.

For Spinoza, the forces which affect individuals often involve other human individuals. Ignorant of the causes of their affects and desires, human individuals are conscious of trying to satisfy their desires, and so think themselves to be free in pursuing what are assumed to be self-caused desires, when they are in fact most determined. Becoming free for Spinoza means coming to understand how one is affected by the natural world and by other individuals. Acting on the basis of this social and natural knowledge means increasing one's power and one's reason. Reason, rather than controlling the affects, becomes stronger the more one understands one's affects.

Spinoza is perhaps most famous for his rejection of mind-body dualism, and his theory that there is one substance, God or Nature, which is known to us through two of its attributes, extension (body) and thought (mind). Humans are thus understood as being described through the attributes of thought and extension; they are understood as both bodies and minds. However, for Spinoza, the human mind and the human body were really one thing, described in two irreducible vocabularies. For Spinoza, the human mind is the idea of the body, and expresses the degree to and the manner in which the body is affected by external forces. I will leave off going into greater detail for the next chapter, having said enough to show that Spinoza does not support dualism.

Finally, Spinoza does not understand humans as separate, independent or autonomous, either as a descriptive truth or as a normative goal. For Spinoza, human power is not strong

enough so that an individual could live alone, and human community is based on the usefulness of humans to one another. He views the state of nature, where humans are understood as separate and disorganized, as the weakest possibility of human life. Whether humans recognize it or not, they are all part of Nature, and in close company are shaped by the affects of others. Recognizing this interdependence and interrelation among humans is for Spinoza a major step toward human empowerment, the final stage of which involves individuals joining their power together.

Spinoza's conception of the human individual does not suffer the faults of the liberal individual and it does not add up to an essentialized conception of human nature. Rather, it is a model which aims to construct the best for humans in a world indifferent to their ends. It is a model based on the idea that as humans increase their power and their ability to agree with others and work together to develop a collective life. As they do this, they become more 'reasonable'; but this just means that they are better able to understand what is best for them. This is not just instrumental rationality, since it recognizes that as they become more powerful and increase their positive affects, their desires can change. The more experience you have of the world the more you recognize some of your desires may be harmful. Thus, an increase in reason for Spinoza involves increased knowledge of the individual and his or her environment, and an increasingly improved understanding of what is best for them. So, leaving aside these meta-theoretical concerns for a moment, let's begin delving into the meat of Spinoza's conception of the human individual, its relation to others, its connection to nature, and how it can increase its power.

Spinoza has been understood as 'the road not taken' in the history of political theory. Although his theory of human empowerment and democracy was taken up only clandestinely or transformed into something unrecognizable, he is no anomaly. Any effort to portray his thinking as somehow outside of history reinforces the dualism that Spinoza spent the bulk of his life arguing against. Spinoza was as influenced by the political problems and philosophical issues of his time as any other philosopher. His work on and his critiques of Descartes and Hobbes form

key touchstones for this work and for understanding Spinoza's place in the history of political theory and philosophy.

The reason why Spinoza's theory of the human individual answers the liberal conception of human nature point for point is because Spinoza's account of human nature was developed as a response to and corrective of two originators of this account, Descartes and Hobbes. The major elements of the liberal theory of the individual (as criticized by feminists, postmodernists, and others) I argue come from Descartes dualism and Hobbes development of Grotius' principle of self-preservation.

Spinoza was a critic of the liberal theory of the individual as this theory was being developed. That is, Spinoza objected to the rational disembodied separate subject before it became entrenched in bad economic and social policy, before it was used to exclude women and African-Americans from positions of power on account of their association with the body. In this sense, Spinoza is the road not taken.<sup>118</sup> However, insofar as Spinoza's conception of the individual was developed in opposition to what he conceived as failings in specifically Descartes conception of the subject and what he added to fill out Hobbes conception of the human being, he presents a genuine alternative to accounts of human nature, social groups, and the state which are built upon this faulty liberal subject. Spinoza is a road we may now take, at least in some sense. So far, I have principally talked about what Spinoza's subject isn't. In the following chapter, I will talk about what Spinoza's subject *is*.

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<sup>118</sup> Genevieve Lloyd in her influential book, *The Man of Reason* (Routledge, 1993), argues that had she included Spinoza in this work, which shows the various ways that affect and reason have been separated in the history of political thought, with affect identified with women and reason with men, she would have been able to show that there are alternatives to Cartesian dualism. Lloyd writes, "Spinoza's rapprochement between reason and passion can thus be seen as a point where the grip of male-female symbolism might have been broken... Spinoza rejects Descartes' ideal of a relation of dominance between reason, belonging to the mind, and the passions, conceived as alien intruders from the realm of the body. He offers instead a picture of passion transformed into rational emotion through the replacement of inadequate ideas by more adequate ones." p. xiii, Preface to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

## Chapter 2: Spinoza's Individual

- I. 'The Best for Man'
- II. Individuals
- III. Imagination
  - a. Hobbes and Spinoza
- IV. Spinoza's Social Theory

### Introduction

I will begin with a word about metaphysics. Spinoza begins the *Ethics* discussing the nature of God and substance, but he does not end there, and his purpose in the *Ethics* is not exclusively metaphysical. Although the bulk of philosophical commentary on Spinoza in the Anglo-American world focuses on questions of metaphysics, for Spinoza, metaphysics was significant because of its ethical and political import. To answer ethical questions about what is best for humans we need first to understand what humans are and what is possible for them as natural beings. Descartes' dualism led him to misunderstand the nature of human affects, human power, and thus led to his support of the idea of 'free will', which for Spinoza was not only harmful for humans really trying to understand themselves and gain power, but also bad for science, since this free will was invoked instead of exploring real causal explanations.

Spinoza seeks 'the best for man' in a world which he believed to be indifferent to human pursuits and human desires. Although humans tend to anthropomorphize God, Spinoza insisted that God, or Nature,<sup>119</sup> was not looking out for our best, did not answer our prayers or get angry at us when we disobeyed. God, for Spinoza, was not a creator, like a human craftsman who had a purpose in mind when creating something. For Spinoza, God, or Nature, is rather like an infinite immanent cause, endlessly following its inner-logic through the creation of every flower and each raging storm -- a simple continuity of an infinity of causal forces. However, Spinoza does not abandon humans to this indifferent Nature. His purpose in the *Ethics* is to determine the best for

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<sup>119</sup> Spinoza writes 'God, or Nature' in EIVPref.

human beings within the flux of Nature and to show how even the limited power of each individual human can be maximized so that this ‘best for humans’ can be achieved. To do so, he supposed, we need to understand what humans are, what sorts of forces affect them, what of these forces they can know, and to what extent they can act in the world.

In this chapter I will outline Spinoza’s understanding of human individuals, from metaphysical aspects to the question of what makes humans more powerful, and what is ‘best’ for them. I have suggested in the previous chapter that Spinoza’s conception of human individuals is uncommonly useful to us today, because of the many ways in which it counters the dualistic aspects of the liberal conception of human nature. Rather than understand the physical and mental as opposed, Spinoza’s account combines a strong sense of the importance of the material physical existence of humans with an integrated understanding of the power of the affects and the imagination in shaping human social life. The body is the source of affects, which are the result of the impinging of the external world as well as the impetus for the images which guide further behavior and shape human understanding of the world. On the basis of his theory of the affects, Spinoza constructs his social and political theory.

In his discussion of human individuals and in his political writings, Spinoza is focused on the question of human power. From all directions in political and social theory there are calls for renewed attention to the question of power when positing political principles or arguing for human rights. Power matters; through an account like Spinoza’s, which is focused on individual human power as a function of human affective life and self-knowledge, we can show how power works through human individuals to institutions and through the imagination, that creator and sustainer of customs and norms, the (normative) force of which has remained so mysterious to ethical theorists. So, in addition to providing a critique of the liberal conception of human nature, Spinoza’s robust account of human power as it relates to norms and to political institutions is of great use to us today.

## I. 'The Best for Man'<sup>120</sup>

Spinoza came to the question of the passions through his quest to find the 'best for man'.<sup>121</sup> Spinoza begins this search as a personal project in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, where he explains how he came to try to investigate this question. Spinoza writes, "I realized that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good and evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good."<sup>122</sup> When he looked to moral philosophers for their judgments on these matters, he found only a litany of how 'man' failed, how humans were weak and depraved, with little hope of living up to the standards set by the God of the moral philosophers. Spinoza came to believe that the 'utopian' morals that these philosophers constructed were meant to be out of human reach, yielding further denigration of the passions, and providing no incentive or guidance as to how to truly understand human motivations or affects.

When he looked into the world to see those things that humans called good, Spinoza found that there were as many 'bests' as there were minds to judge.<sup>123</sup> Many of the ends and goals which humans pursue seemed to be positively destructive,<sup>124</sup> and could not really be described even as 'good'. However, Spinoza came to understand that 'good' and 'bad' were relative to an individual's judgment; there was no 'best' for humans when viewed from the point

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<sup>120</sup> Spinoza uses the phrase 'best for man', taking 'man' to be a general term for humans. When I invoke this idea from Spinoza, I use the phrase, 'best for humans'.

<sup>121</sup> I will, in this chapter, continue to use the traditional 'passions' until Spinoza's conception of the affects has been presented.

<sup>122</sup> TIE [1].

<sup>123</sup> "Because each one judges from his own affect what is good and what is bad, what is better and what worse (E3P39S) it follows that men can vary as much in judgment as in affect," E3P51S; "Each one, from his own affects, judges or evaluates, what is good, and what is bad, what is better and worse and finally what is best and what is worst," E3P39S; Difference in judgment leads to difference in actions: "Because of this inconstancy of man's nature and judgment, and also because he often judges things only from an affect, because the things which he believes will make for joy or sadness, and which he therefore strives to promote or prevent, are often only imaginary," E3P51S; Each person has a different model of the 'best'. EIVPref

<sup>124</sup> "All those objectives that are commonly pursued not only contribute nothing to the preservation of our being but even hinder it, being frequently the cause of the destruction of those who gain possession of them, and invariably the cause of the destruction of those who are possessed by them." TIE [7].

of view of Nature.<sup>125</sup> From the point of view of God, or Nature, there are causes and effects, chains of things happening and transforming from one state to another, without one being more or less perfect than the last. Yet human beings look upon the natural world as if it were made by someone no doubt very like themselves, someone who is caught up in projects with desires and appetites, which the world was created to satisfy.

However, viewing God, or Nature as having created the world in accordance with models, like the house builder might use a blueprint, led to the idea that God could misread this blueprint and make imperfect or bad things and attributed to God human failings which were inconsistent with the fixity of natural laws. God is not a largish human making imperfect creatures. Spinoza writes, “The reason, or cause why God or Nature acts, and the reason why he exists are one and the same. As he exists for the sake of no end, he also acts for the sake of no end. Rather, as he has no principle or end of existing, so he has none of acting. What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered a principle or primary cause of some thing.”<sup>126</sup> So, Spinoza argues that what are called final causes are really hypostasized human appetites. Human appetites yield ‘ends’ or ‘purposes’, which are aims that individual humans have. By not understanding themselves, humans do not recognize the extent to which these appetites are caused and thereby cause their desires, plans and actions.<sup>127</sup>

Because there are no ‘ends’ or purposes in Nature, because nature was not looking out for human projects, the responsibility for achieving human purposes was left entirely to humans. Such responsibility required a mature understanding of what and who we are, of what our power actually is to achieve our ends, individually and collectively. Spinoza, in his political works, takes up the task of trying to discover how we can join our power together as individuals, and how we

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<sup>125</sup> E3P9S, E4Pref

<sup>126</sup> E4Pref

<sup>127</sup> Final causes, insofar as they relate to human plans to build a house, for example, Spinoza writes, are “Really an efficient cause, which is considered a first cause, because men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites. For, as I have often said before, they are conscious of their actions and appetites, but not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want something.” E4Preface.



can negotiate our disparate ends within the kind of political communities that would make the achievement of our human projects possible.<sup>128</sup>

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza tries to understand the nature of individual human power, how it can be increased to allow humans to understand themselves properly and to begin to act in the world, effectively and freely in Spinoza's sense, where they are the causes of their actions. This investigation sends Spinoza searching for an understanding of the nature of human power, how it can be increased, and the media through which the world is known and experienced by human individuals. In the next section, I will explore Spinoza's conception of individuals, individual power, and Spinoza's theory of the affects.

Good and evil, perfection and imperfection are relative terms.<sup>129</sup> Spinoza argues that they, "Indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning and neither good nor bad for one who is deaf."<sup>130</sup> Good and evil, though they are relative terms, Spinoza argues, should still be retained, though with a proper understanding of their meaning. We must redefine good and bad with the understanding that our 'ends', what we define as good and bad, are human constructions and human responsibilities. God is not looking after our projects. Further, we must define this 'best' and our projects in such a way that they are achievable, given the nature of Nature. If we decide our 'best' involves human-powered flight, we will be disappointed. So, we

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<sup>128</sup> The democracy theorist will already be curious as to how Spinoza proposes to construct the collective ends of human communities, whether or not his democratic theory will be more technocratic than deliberative, scientific or participatory. I can only say now, wait until chapters 3 and 4. The aim of this chapter is to outline Spinoza's understanding of the best for individual humans. The best for individuals is tied to the question of what is the best for groups of humans, as the final sections of this chapter will show, but to begin, it makes sense to try to separate the elements of this question into 'individual/state', with the next sections taking up the question of what is the best for individuals, which is roughly the problem of the *Ethics*.

<sup>129</sup> E3P9S, E4Pref

<sup>130</sup> E4Pref

need to understand ourselves and the world, Nature, better in order come up with this model of the best for humans. Spinoza writes that we must retain the words ‘good’ and ‘evil’:

For, because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words...In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near the model. For the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence or form to another. ...Rather, we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished.<sup>131</sup>

Spinoza goes on to define good and evil:

Good: “By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us.”<sup>132</sup>

Evil: “By evil, however, I shall understand what we certainly know prevents us from being masters of some good.”<sup>133</sup>

We will not form a false model of human beings, a dualistic being who can perfectly control their affects and has a freedom from its body. Rather, Spinoza will create a naturalistic model of a human individual, one who is affected by the external world, but one who can come to increase his or her power through understanding the ways he or she is affected. Power, its increase and decrease, we shall see, will become the gauge of good or evil with respect to humans. What increases one’s power is good, what decreases one’s power, bad. But this is already getting ahead of ourselves; first, we need to know where this human power comes from and how it is augmented and diminished.

## II. Individuals

In this section, I will outline Spinoza’s conception of individuals, power, desire and the affects. This discussion may get a bit technical, but I will endeavor to the best of my ability to

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<sup>131</sup> E4Pref

<sup>132</sup> E4Def1

<sup>133</sup> E4Def1,E4Def2

bring out the importance of the technical bits, and direct the reader to the upshot, most of which will emerge in the final sections of this chapter.

## Individuals and Power

*Man's power is part of God's infinite power.*<sup>134</sup>

Individual humans have a certain amount of power, through which they express the power of God, or Nature, of which they are part.<sup>135</sup> The ways that human bodies grow and change, the way ideas come and go, expresses the power of God. God, for Spinoza, is Nature, the immanent cause of the growth and decay, transformation and generation of the universe, and each individual thing in it. God's power is expressed through singular things, and the collection of singular things and their transformations is 'Nature', which is infinite.<sup>136</sup> Human bodies are expressions of God's power insofar as God is considered as an extended thing.<sup>137</sup>

The mind, Spinoza writes, is the idea of the body.<sup>138</sup> For Spinoza, the extended and the thinking are coextensive, "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."<sup>139</sup> God's power of acting is, Spinoza argues, equal to his power of thinking. As small bits of Nature, or God, our power of acting is equal to our power of thinking. As our power of thinking increases, so too will our power of acting increase. Spinoza puts an explanatory firewall between explanations in terms of thought and explanations in terms of

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<sup>134</sup> E4P4D, E1P34

<sup>135</sup> "Whatever exists expresses the nature, or essence, of God in a certain and determinate way, that is, whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God which is the cause of all things." E1P36D.

<sup>136</sup> Nature should be understood as a collection of connections, rather than say a 'law-like' connection of events, which presumes types of events reoccurring, where Spinoza is committed to an ontology of individuals. (TIE [99]). Laws are type-type, requiring generalizations, understanding events as types which require *mis*understanding them as individual or singular events created by unique and unrepeatable connections of causal forces. Spinoza distinguishes in the *TTP* between laws, which have exceptions and are based on 'types' of events as properly speaking, only human laws. There are places where Spinoza talks about the laws of Nature, and some of these he does to follow the phrasing of his interlocutors, real (as in those he is corresponding with) or imagined (those who are his imagined objectors), and sometimes he seems to use them in a genuine sense. See Spinoza's critique of the idea that Nature is 'ordered' and thus can be well and badly ordered in E1Appendix.

<sup>137</sup> E2Def1

<sup>138</sup> E2P21

<sup>139</sup> E2P7

extension. Spinoza writes, “So long as things are considered as modes of thinking, we must explain the order of the whole of Nature, or the connection of causes, through that attribute alone. And insofar as they are considered as modes of extension, the order of the whole of Nature must be explained through the attribute of extension alone.”<sup>140</sup> Spinoza consistently characterizes the relation between mind and body as follows: the object of our mind is our body, and as the body is affected, the mind contains ideas of these affections. The power of the mind is related to the power of the body. As the body has more experiences and increases its power, so does the mind.<sup>141</sup> The mind, Spinoza writes, knows itself even only through the affections of the body.<sup>142</sup>

Human bodies and human minds are complex.<sup>143</sup> They are made up of smaller bodies and of complex parts, all of which are acted upon by external forces. Spinoza writes, “The human body is composed of a great many individuals of different natures and so it can be affected in a great many ways by one and the same body.”<sup>144</sup> The mind, as well, is made up of ideas, which

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<sup>140</sup> E2P7. Spinoza erects this wall between them in order to foreclose too-easy explanations in terms of mind or thought. He observed that when people did not understand how some physical phenomena was caused, they tended to identify mind as the cause of it, just as easily and in the same manner that they identified God as the cause of unexplained phenomena. However, in both cases, such people merely expressed their ignorance. Spinoza is careful to try to present an alternate understanding of the relation between mind and body which will not resolve all puzzling physical phenomena to mental miracles. The mind and the body, for Spinoza, are one individual, considered under the attribute of thought or under the attribute of extension. These are not two substances interacting, but rather two ways of understanding the same individual mode of Nature, or God. (E3P21) Spinoza writes, “No one has yet determined what the body can do, that is, experience has not taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone, insofar as Nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the mind. For no one has yet come to know the structure of the body so accurately that he could explain all its function...” (E3P2S) However the mind may move the body, no one yet knows, and so when one says that the body is moved by the mind, people are just expressing their ignorance. Spinoza writes, “No one knows how, or by what means, the mind moves the body, nor how many degrees of motion it can give the body nor with what speed it can move. So it follows that when men say that this or that action of the body arises from the mind, which has dominion over the body, they do not know what they are saying, and they do nothing but confess, in fine-sounding words, that they are ignorant of the true cause of that action, and that they do not wonder at it.”(E3P2S) Spinoza’s work is taken up by materialists from his time to ours in order to take up this challenge, to try to understand what the body is, and what it can do, without appealing to the ‘mind’ as if its interaction with the body were something we understood.

<sup>141</sup> E2P14

<sup>142</sup> E2P23

<sup>143</sup> E3P51, E2P13L7S[Postulate I-VI].

<sup>144</sup> E3P17S

can be confused. There is no unified stage of consciousness,<sup>145</sup> for Spinoza, but rather, for him, “the human mind is not simple, but composed of a great many ideas.”<sup>146</sup> As I argued in the section on Descartes in Chapter One, for Spinoza there is no unified soul, or within this soul a unified will or intellect, rather there are many different ideas in the mind, which represent the interaction of the body in the world.<sup>147</sup> Spinoza understands the human body and mind as made up of parts, which are then acted upon separately by external forces. This opens up the possibility of conflict within the individual, both mental and physical, and the need to find a way to coordinate these parts, so that the individual will not be torn by opposing forces. This will be a major subject of the next section, on the affects and empowerment, but it is foreshadowed in Spinoza’s understanding of the complexities of minds and bodies.

What makes one individual different from another is the characteristic way in which this complex of parts moves about in the world. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd call this the body’s characteristic mode of ‘synchronization’.<sup>148</sup> This term is useful because it retains the understanding that there are conglomerations of parts that need to be synchronized, which are differently affected by external forces, which are pulled in different direction, and which move at different speeds. Bodies, Spinoza writes, are distinguished from one another by means of motion and rest, by speed and slowness.<sup>149</sup> An individual is formed when individual bodies come together and “communicate their motions to each other in a fixed manner.” When this happens,

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<sup>145</sup> For Spinoza, there is no intellect, there are just ideas. Spinoza writes, “Will and understanding are nothing beyond the individual volitions and ideas.” E2P49D[2].

<sup>146</sup> E2P15

<sup>147</sup> E2P16, E2P17

<sup>148</sup> “Bodies, Spinoza says there, communicate motion to one another; and their synchronization – the union of bodies – is what constitutes their individuality. The simplest bodies are distinguished from one another by motion and rest, speed and slowness. These simple bodies come together as synchronized centers of the communication of motion; and the nested orderings of these composite individuals reach up to the ‘whole of nature’, conceived as one individual whose parts may vary in infinite ways without any change in the whole. The human body is one such composite individual – a union of parts acting as a center of communicating and communicated motion. Each individual body exerts a causal force on others, and each is in turn constantly impinged on by others.” Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza Past and Present*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), p.13.

<sup>149</sup> E2P13L1

we can say, “Those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from others by this union of bodies.”<sup>150</sup>

Spinoza recognizes that the parts of an individual may change in various ways. Thus, he identifies a further principle of individuation: “If the parts composing an individual become greater or less, but in such a proportion that they all keep the same ratio of motion and rest to each other as before, the individual will likewise retain its nature, as before, without any change of form.”<sup>151</sup> As long as the parts of an individual retain their ability to communicate their motions to one another in the same proportion it will retain its nature. So, Spinoza shows how even a composite individual can retain its characteristic nature, even through changes.

Composite individuals include not just human individuals, but individuals of larger scope going all the way up to the whole of nature. In Chapter Three, I will discuss in further detail how, for Spinoza, something as complex as a state could be taken to be an individual, and what might count as a characteristic form of communication of motion in a political community. The ‘state’ as an individual lies mid-spectrum between the organization of bodies that make up the parts of a human individual to the largest and most inclusive individual, that of the whole of Nature. Spinoza writes, “The whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies vary in infinite ways, without any change in the whole individual.”<sup>152</sup> So, any complex being made up of parts which communicate their motions to one another in a characteristic way can be taken to be an individual.

Essences in Spinoza are individual, rather than universal, because of the conatus, which can be understood as a ratio of motion and rest unique to an individual. That is, for Spinoza, an individual nature or essence is not what that individual has in common with all other things of its type (the necessary and sufficient conditions for being an F, for example), but rather what distinguishes it, and makes it an individual. In Book 2 of the Ethics, Spinoza discusses this in

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<sup>150</sup> E2P13L4

<sup>151</sup> E2P13L5

<sup>152</sup> E2P13L7S

terms of motion and rest and the characteristic motion which the parts of an organism communicate among themselves. However, Spinoza also talks about this in terms of *conatus*, or the striving and power with which an individual attempts to preserve itself in its characteristic form.

### **Conatus**

Spinoza's conception of conatus comes from Hobbes' use of the term. As I presented in Chapter One, conatus plays an important role in Hobbes political theory. In the state of Nature, Hobbes argues, each individual, following only his or her *conatus*, that is, his or her desire for self-preservation, will eventually give up their natural equality and right to everything for a more stable guarantee of their safety in the civil state. Reason, which for Hobbes was the ability to reckon the best means to achieve ones ends or desires given one's desire to preserve oneself would lead eventually to the solution of the state.<sup>153</sup> In this way, Hobbes was able to show that in order for political community to arise voluntarily, we do not need to presume a natural human sociability or the original unity of nations or peoples. All we need is the parsimonious posit of human individuals who desire to preserve themselves and who act upon those desires. Self-preservation alone and the (eventual) recognition of a stable way to achieve actual preservation of oneself were enough to explain the existence and to justify the existence of a civil state.

For Spinoza, appetites and desires rarely led humans to reasonable courses of action.<sup>154</sup>

Spinoza writes,

The natural right of every man is determined not by sound reason, but by his desire and his power. For not all men are naturally determined to act in accordance with the rules and laws of reason. On the contrary, all men are born in a state of complete ignorance, and before they can learn the true way of life and acquire a virtuous disposition, even if they have been well brought up, a great part of their life has gone by. Yet in the meantime they have to live and preserve themselves as far as in them lies, namely, by the urging of appetite alone, for Nature has given them nothing else and has denied them the actualized power to live according to sound reason.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> *De Cive*, I.ii.1

<sup>154</sup> E3P25S[ii]

<sup>155</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16

Reason, rather than reckoning the best means for one's ends, was an achievement of actually coming to a point where one could really see what was best for one. Human appetites alone could only accidentally yield positive results for humans. So, Spinoza sought to separate the notion of reason and human empowerment from the idea which he shared with Hobbes that humans seek their own preservation by following their desires.<sup>156</sup> Spinoza wanted to make conceptual room for the fact that following one's desires does not necessarily lead one to self-preservation. Actually increasing one's power involved understanding one's affects, the world around one, and what things actually increase one's power. Reason, for Spinoza, was the ability to recognize those things that actually increase one's power, and was an achievement, not a basic ability.

Spinoza recognizes the role of appetite and human motivation to seek what they think is best for them, but wanted to reserve 'conatus' for a notion of genuine self-preservation and 'actualized power' which can increase as humans come to understand themselves, the world, and what actually increases their power. Spinoza changes Hobbes' conception of conatus, as I argued in Chapter One Part Two, by defining conatus in terms of an individual's power, which consists in:

- a) that individual's appetite,
- b) their image of themselves and
- c) their understanding of those things which increase the body's power.<sup>157</sup>

Once we understand the role of the appetites and affects in increasing an individual's power, we will see how the conatus of an individual, its essence, can be strengthened and its power increased. If one, for example, were to come to a better understanding of what things increase the power of the body, then one would be better able to encounter those things and thus to further increase the power of the body. If one were to learn more about one's body and the way

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<sup>156</sup> TP 3.18

<sup>157</sup> E3P9S, E3P9D, E3P11, respectively.



different sorts of food or environmental factors affected it, one could change one's image of oneself in such a way that one's power could be increased.

Crucially, for Spinoza, conatus does not always mean that one strives in the best possible way to preserve oneself, since it was obvious to him that people usually made terrible miscalculations about what was good or bad for them in terms of their self preservation. As buffeted and torn by external forces yielding contradictory affects, individuals were constantly in a position where to a certain extent they could see a better option for their behavior, but could only do the worse.<sup>158</sup> As Spinoza writes, "We are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that, like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate."<sup>159</sup> Spinoza thus distinguishes self-preservation as urge or motivation from self-preservation as outcome. There are ways of doing things that happen to keep us alive or work to some extent, and then there are those ways of doing things that are best.<sup>160</sup>

In the next section, I will show how, for Spinoza, human striving tended to end not with the 'best' for that individual, but rather in a sort of increasingly pleasant affective state, where human individuals seek to move always to a state where they feel, for lack of a better term, 'good'. This affective state they can achieve fairly well, although this feeling is only short term, and the larger goal of the 'best' or actual self-preservation and empowerment cannot be achieved by simply imagining slightly more pleasing stimuli. Passion driven individuals in most situations can be understood as trying to choose the affectively more satisfying option in any situation, whether or not this currently affectively-satisfying choice is really what is 'best' for them. Spinoza argues that by imagining those things which increase happiness or increasing individual power can in fact increase an individual's power.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> E3P2S[ii]

<sup>159</sup> E3P59S

<sup>160</sup> TP 5.1

<sup>161</sup> E3P54, E3P11S

Spinoza writes that the mind, insofar as it can, endeavors to imagine those things which increase the body's power of action.<sup>162</sup> Further, when it happens to come across an image of something which is unpleasant, or which decreases the body's power of action, the mind endeavors to imagine something else, something which increases the body's power. This process of imagining those things which empower us and imagining away those things which disempower us, actually seems to work. Spinoza writes, "So long as the mind imagines those things that aid or increase our body's power of acting, the body is affected with modes that increase or aid its power of acting, and consequently, the mind's power of thinking is increased or aided."<sup>163</sup> Remember, the mind's power of thinking is increased along with the body's power of acting.<sup>164</sup> So, through this process the mind endeavors to increase the body's power.

The affects, for Spinoza, are the expressions of the transitions that increase or decrease the body's power. Thus, to maximize an individual's power, he or she must seek those experiences that yield those affects which increase the body and mind's power and to avoid those experiences that decrease the mind and body's power of action and yield passive affects. Thus, increasing one's power, empowerment, requires understanding. Specifically, empowerment requires understanding of the affects themselves, and trying to maximize one's active affects, that is, those affects which signal an increase of our power.

### **Affect Theory and Empowerment**

*"Man is necessarily always subject to the passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires."<sup>165</sup>*

For Spinoza, humans are part of nature; their knowledge of themselves and the objects that surround them in the world comes through their being affected by these objects. Thus the affects, Spinoza writes, are the sole conduits to knowledge of our bodies, our minds and the

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<sup>162</sup> E3P12

<sup>163</sup> E3P12D

<sup>164</sup> E3P11

<sup>165</sup> E4P4C

external world. They tell us that we exist and that there is a world outside our bodies which affects us. We may not have completely adequate knowledge of this world, but its existence is beyond doubt.<sup>166</sup> We have already seen that the affects are expressions of human interactions with the world, and, from the quotation above, that human beings are always to a certain extent subject to the affects. To be immune to the affects would be to not be in the world as a natural being. It would mean that one could not be affected by external causes. Once seen in this Spinozistic way, this naturalistic way, the project of moral philosophers and Descartes to completely control or overcome the affects seems somewhat bizarre. Such wishing bespeaks a hatred of the body, of the natural world, and of life, which for Spinoza meant the rejection of Nature, or God. So, instead of rejecting Nature, and the expressions of natural forces, the affects, Spinoza will try to understand them.

Spinoza defines the affects as follows: “By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.”<sup>167</sup> The affect is caused by the external object and we have an idea or image of that affect of our body through that external object. The body is affected by external objects, which either increase or decrease the power of the individual. The individual experiences these increases or decreases in power as affects: as joy or sadness or guilt or anger.

Spinoza argues that there are three basic affects: joy, sadness and desire.<sup>168</sup> From these basic affects, all the other affects, shame, pride, ambition, greed, etc. can be derived. For example, humility is defined as follows: “Humility is sadness born of the fact that a man considers his own lack of power.”<sup>169</sup> Joy increases our power, while sadness decreases our

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<sup>166</sup> Another outcome of Spinoza’s rejection of dualism is the foreclosure of the possibility that we can think and not be in the world and embodied. Take that! Descartes.

<sup>167</sup> E3D3. Spinoza continues: “Therefore, if we can be the adequate cause of any of these affections, I understand by the affect an action, otherwise a passion.” E3D3

<sup>168</sup> E3P11S

<sup>169</sup> E3DefAffXXVI

power.<sup>170</sup> So, an affect based on sadness, like humility, expresses our decrease in power, whereas an affect based on joy expresses an increase in our power. Love, for Spinoza, is defined as joy accompanied by the idea of an external cause.<sup>171</sup> Spinoza defines ‘shame’ as, “Sadness, accompanied by the idea of ourselves as the cause of some action which we imagine that others blame.”<sup>172</sup> Desires differ by their objects and also their relation to affects of sadness or joy. Greed is the immoderate desire for wealth,<sup>173</sup> while anger is defined as, “A desire by which we are spurred, from hate, to do evil to one we hate.”<sup>174</sup> So, hatred is sadness accompanied by the idea of another as the cause of our sadness,<sup>175</sup> and anger is the desire to do evil to the cause of our sadness. Joy, sadness, desire and the ideas of causes of these combine to create the whole range of named and as yet unnamed affects.

Affects can be both active and passive. The active affects, like joy, express an increase in our power, and thus an increase in our power of acting and knowing. An increase in our power allows us to understand ourselves and the world around us, thus preparing us to reach a higher state of perfection and increase our power further.<sup>176</sup> Spinoza defines joy as the passage to a state of greater perfection.<sup>177</sup> Increasing power allows the individual to resist the negative or passive affects which would otherwise decrease the individual’s power. Joy is an expression of an increase in power, which acts as a kind of shield against the bad or passive affects, which express a decrease in our power. There are no active affects, no affects that increase our power, which are not related to joy or desire,<sup>178</sup> whereas all of the sad passions are passive affects.

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<sup>170</sup> E3P11S

<sup>171</sup> E3DefAffVI

<sup>172</sup> E3DefAffXXXI

<sup>173</sup> E3DefAffXLVII

<sup>174</sup> E3DefAffXXXVI

<sup>175</sup> E3DefAffVII

<sup>176</sup> E4Pref

<sup>177</sup> E3DefAffII

<sup>178</sup> E3P59

The passive affects, sadness, and its derivatives express a decrease in our power, making us less likely to be in a position to investigate the causes of our being so affected and thus removing ourselves from situations and forces that make us sad. Spinoza explains this:

“Sadness diminishes or restrains man’s power of acting, that is, diminishes or restrains the striving by which a man strives to persevere in his being; so, it is contrary to this striving, and all a man affected by sadness strives for is to remove sadness. But (by definition of sadness) the greater the sadness, the greater is the part of the man’s power to which it is necessarily opposed. Therefore, the greater the sadness, the greater the power of acting with which the man will strive to remove the sadness, that is, the greater the desire or appetite with which he will strive to remove the sadness. Next, since joy increases or aids man’s power of acting, it is easily demonstrated in the same way that the man affected with joy desires nothing but to preserve it, and does so with the greater desire, as the joy is greater.”<sup>179</sup>

When we are sad, and our power weakened, we use all of our force to remove ourselves from this state. This is a dangerous position for humans.<sup>180</sup> When humans are weakened by sadness and fear, they tend to latch on to anything which seems like it might palliate their temporary sadness. When one is sad, that is no time to investigate causes, just as one escaping a mine collapse has little inclination to search for precious metals.

We have active and passive affects because our mind and body can be active or passive. The mind is active insofar as it has adequate ideas and passive insofar as it has inadequate ideas. Inadequate ideas are partial and confused. All our knowledge of ourselves and the world comes from the affects, from how we are affected by external forces. However, our ideas and our perceptions are mediated by our affects and our imaginative conceptions of ourselves and the world. So long as we are ignorant of the way we perceive, and the functioning of the affects and the imagination we can have only inadequate knowledge of the world.<sup>181</sup> The mind knows itself and the body only through the ideas of the affections of the body.<sup>182</sup> This yields a very inadequate

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<sup>179</sup> E3P37D

<sup>180</sup> *TTP*, Preface

<sup>181</sup> Imaginations and confused ideas are not in themselves problematic. We cannot help the way we see the world and how we imagine things, for example, which are no longer present. However, if we are aware of these tendencies and know more about the imagination and the passion and how they affect us, how they shape our knowledge of the world for the better or worse, then we can gain knowledge from them. E2P35S; E2P17S

<sup>182</sup> E2P19

knowledge of the mind, the body and the external objects by which the body is affected.<sup>183</sup>

Spinoza writes,

“The mind has, not adequate, but only a confused knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of nature, that is, so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences and oppositions. For so often as it is disposed internally, in this or another way, then it regards things clearly and distinctly.”<sup>184</sup>

The more inadequate ideas it has the more the mind is buffeted by affects, those things which diminish the individual’s power. For Spinoza, the difference between ‘activity’ and ‘passivity’ is the difference between understanding the forces impinging upon one and not understanding.

When we have adequate ideas of our affects, then we are active, and can be understood as the adequate cause of our being affected. When we are passive, then we have some confused or inadequate idea, and so cannot be considered the adequate cause of what is happening to us.

When we act in the world, this means that we are the complete cause of our action; it follows from our nature.<sup>185</sup> When our behavior cannot be understood through our nature alone, then the action is said to be passive.<sup>186</sup>

Joy increases our power, and makes us better able to understand the forces which affect us, thus making our ideas more adequate. Sadness diminishes our power, making it more difficult to resist the forces which buffet us. Through understanding the forces that affect us, we turn our passive affects into actions. Coming to understand the forces that affect us means we become the adequate causes of our actions. Having adequate ideas yields acts; through having adequate ideas we become the cause of our actions. That is, through understanding our affects we can be understood as the causes of our actions, and thus to be acting rather than being acted upon.

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<sup>183</sup> E2P28, E2P29, E2P29S

<sup>184</sup> E2P29S

<sup>185</sup> E3D2

<sup>186</sup> E3D2

The affections provide us with much information about the world and ourselves;<sup>187</sup> our task is to understand this information. First, we need to understand that our imagination takes *interested* pictures of the world; that is, the understanding of the world we get from our imagination is not quite adequate, and in fact can be very confused. We picture the world according to our own interests and preoccupations. We think of the world as made for us and are disappointed and hurt when things don't go our way. To really understand the world we need to understand that the forces that affect us are not personal, that they are not about us and our plans and goals. However, to actually achieve our goals, we need to understand the world adequately, to really understand the larger picture, and not just from our perspective. Inadequate or confused views are individual-centered views, which understand the world as just a set of things to annoy or to reward person X. The world is not created for the benefit of me, you, or person X. Rather, our activities take place in the world, without any assurance of success. The more we know about the world and ourselves *as* part of the world, the better able we are to achieve our goals. If we trust that Nature takes care of *us* in particular, we may be often disappointed, and will only by chance get anything done at all.

Happiness, or joy, increases our power and gives us the opportunity to learn about the world, while we are spared being crushed by it, however momentarily. Increasing our active affects like joy is a step on the road to empowerment, perfection and reason. Our power of thinking increased through joyful active affects, the better we can continue to understand ourselves and the world around us, thereby further increasing our power. The road to empowerment involves maximizing one's active affects, like joy, and minimizing one's passive affects, like sadness. Doing so enables one to increase one's power and to minimize those passive affects that decrease one's power. Human life is not static, and joy, once achieved needs to be maintained. In the following section, I will outline Spinoza's conception of the imagination, and show the role that it plays in empowerment and in Spinoza's theory of the affects more generally.

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<sup>187</sup> E2P19

### III. Imagination

#### Imagination and the Road to Reason

Achieving reason, the best for 'man', is one of the goals of the path the individual takes in the *Ethics*. What is this standard, 'reason'? Is it objective, is it external to human pursuits, or is it rather constructed?

Reason, for Spinoza, is nothing more than what is best for humans, what is best for 'us' as individuals. Achieving reason means coming to understand what is best for an individual, whether that individual is a human or a political state. Individual practices and community customs may strive for what is best for them, but they do not necessarily succeed in preserving themselves in the *best* way. When an individual follows reason, or when a state has laws which conform to reason, then they are in fact preserving themselves in the best way.

A certain threshold of understanding, both of the individual itself and of the forces which affect that individual, is necessary for reason to be achieved. This is why, for Spinoza, the road to reason leads *through* the affects. To achieve what is best for us, we need to understand how we are affected by the world. We can, of course, accidentally act in a way that is best for us, but really understanding the forces by which we are affected, we are more likely to be able to tell what increases our power and what decreases our power, and thus what is actually best for us.

Spinoza's distinction between the passive and active affects is important for understanding his 'road to reason'. The passive affects or what we might understand as the negative affects, sadness, etc., signal a decrease in our power and thus signal that whatever just happened might not be such a great thing for us. The active affects, joy, and its relatives signal an increase in power, providing us with the understanding that something that just happened yielded some good for us. Seeking joyful experiences increases our power. With this increased power we have the resources to understand even our passive affects, even those things which cause us pain. This step of understanding our passive affects makes them active, turns our passive experiences



into active ones. Even when we suffer, if we understand why we felt pain, with this increased knowledge we can avoid these experiences which diminish our power and happiness. Individuals, Spinoza writes, who are affected by joy desire to preserve this joy.<sup>188</sup> Individuals preserve their joy by imagining and surrounding themselves with those things they love, and excluding from their minds things that they hate.<sup>189</sup> Individuals maintain and improve their affective state through their imagination.

Imagination, however, is a very imperfect way of understanding the world and ourselves, and is not finally adequate for the highest levels of empowerment. The best state for humans is a state of maximizing their individual power and knowledge of the world, which requires becoming the adequate cause of their actions which requires understanding themselves and the world adequately, that is, understanding the causes of their own affects and the phenomena they experience. Understanding Nature as a whole, however, is beyond the province of an individual human. To increase their knowledge and their power, individuals must join with others. The imagination is the primary mode through which humans interact and join their power. At the risk of losing the current thread, then, I will postpone a complete discussion of Spinoza's conception of reason to Chapter 4 and will continue on explaining the power of the imagination and its role in social life. For Spinoza, the affects and the reform of the imagination yield increased human power, though not the maximal level of empowerment, which could only be provided by reason.

### **Reform of the Imagination through the Social**

The individual road to empowerment requires a reform of the imagination: we can reconnect images and reshape our affects. However, this reconfiguration of the imagination is not just part of the road to reason on the individual's path to self-improvement, but is also an important part of social life. In social life the goal may not be increased empowerment in every

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<sup>188</sup> E3P37

<sup>189</sup> E3P25

case, but the mechanism of reform of the imagination and the affects operates throughout the process of socialization.

We understand the world through the images of ourselves, of our bodies and the external bodies with which we interact. These images and our imaginations may not be adequate, that is it might not provide an accurate and complete picture, but we do use this picture to operate in the world, to get around if you will. Our imaginative view of ourselves and the world functions, for us, just as a schematic map allows us to get from place to place even though it is not an entirely accurate portrayal of the terrain we need to navigate. Our view of ourselves is an important part of this map, our images of the things we want and need, of those that are like us and opposed to us, orients not only our understanding but our actions in the world. We move towards those things we want, using the images we recollect of positive interaction in the past, and our hopeful vision of satisfaction in the future. When we interact with others, we can begin to see that there may be other ways of imagining the world, and of seeing ourselves.

We are not indifferent to the human individuals around us because they are like us.<sup>190</sup>  
When we see something like us is affected in a certain way, we will take on their affection.<sup>191</sup>

Spinoza explains:

“The images of things are affections of the human body whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us (by EIIP17S), that is (EIIP16), whose ideas involve the nature of our body and at the same time the present nature of the external body. So, if the nature of the external body is like the nature of our body, then the idea of the external body we imagine will involve an affection of our body similar to the affection of the external body. Consequently, if we imagine *someone like us* to be affected with some affect, this imagination will express an affection of our body like this affect. And so, from the fact that we imagine a thing like us to be affected with an affect, we are affected with a like affect.”<sup>192</sup>

We emulate the affects of those things which are like us, namely, other humans. Spinoza writes, “This imitation of the affects, when it is related to sadness it is called pity; but related to desire it is called emulation, which therefore is nothing but the desire for a thing which is generated in us

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<sup>190</sup> E3P27

<sup>191</sup> E3P27

<sup>192</sup> E3P27D

from the fact that we imagine others like us to have the same desire.”<sup>193</sup> The image of others like us desiring something is enough to make us desire it. Our desires, in part, are caused by our imagining that others have the same desires.<sup>194</sup> Our desires are formed by our conception of others and what we imagine they desire. This last point is important, for our understanding of other individuals and their desires are all derived from our own imaginative view of them.<sup>195</sup> We see them not necessarily how they are, but as they appear to us.

Our affects and actions are shaped by our imaginative understanding of what other people like and dislike. Spinoza writes, “From the fact that we imagine men to love or hate something, we shall love or hate it; that is, we shall thereby rejoice in or be saddened by the thing’s presence.”<sup>196</sup> Our likes and dislikes are thus shaped by our understandings of what others like us prefer. “This striving to do something (and also to omit something) solely to please men is called ambition, especially when we strive so hard to please the people that we do certain things to our own injury, or to another’s. In other cases it is usually called human kindness. Next, the joy with which we imagine the action of another by which he has striven to please us I call praise. On the other hand, the sadness with which we are averse to his actions I call blame.”<sup>197</sup> Praise and blame are the origin of normativity, and the practice of conforming to norms and the imagined expectations of others. This explains both the idiolectic quality of norm conformity (individual uptake of norms is not necessarily identical) and the reality of norms as ‘social’, shared by people in virtue of their living together.

For Spinoza, the imagination is the field on which these expectations and norms play out. Individual actions are shaped by their affects, which are shaped by the praise and blame, likes and dislikes of those around them. If we want to know why people act the way they do, we need to understand the imaginative terrain they inhabit. We need to know what they like and dislike and

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<sup>193</sup> E3P27S

<sup>194</sup> E3P27D

<sup>195</sup> E3P30, E3P35

<sup>196</sup> E3P29D

<sup>197</sup> E3P29S

how they imagine those around them to be affected by their behavior. We need to understand whose praise and blame they seek. The imagined preferences of their social audience shapes individuals' behavior in characteristic ways.

This process is most pronounced in childhood. Spinoza writes:

If we wish to consult experience, we shall find that it teaches all these things, especially if we attend to the first years of our lives. For we find from experience that children, because their bodies are continually, as it were, in a state of equilibrium, laugh or cry simply because they see others laugh or cry. Moreover, whatever they see others do, they immediately desire to imitate it. And finally, they desire for themselves all those things by which they imagine others are pleased – because, as we have said, the images of things are the very affections of the human body, or modes by which the human body is affected by external causes, and disposed to do this or that.<sup>198</sup>

Individuals, from their earliest years, seek love and approval.<sup>199</sup> They learn from their parents what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, by what they praise and blame.<sup>200</sup>

Childrens' desire for esteem and acceptance causes them to internalize these values and make them their own principles for living. Spinoza cautions, however, that we ought not to understand 'that which is praised' and 'that which is blamed' as 'good' and 'evil'. He has already argued that in Nature, there is no right and wrong, no good and evil *simpliciter*, and he insists that what a particular group values and calls 'good' might not mean 'what is best for us' or what empowers individuals, which is how Spinoza redefines 'good' and 'bad'. He writes:

“But we ought to note here that it is no wonder sadness follows absolutely all those acts which from custom are called **wrong**, and joy those that are called **right**. From what has been said above we can easily understand that this depends chiefly on education. Parents, by blaming former acts and often scolding their children on account of them, and on the other hand, by recommending and praising the latter acts,-- have brought it about that the emotions of sadness were joined to one kind of act, and those of joy to the other. Experience itself confirms this. For not everyone has the same custom and religion. On the contrary, what is holy to some among others is unholy; and what among some is honorable, among others is dishonorable. Hence, according as each has been educated, so he either repents of a deed or exults at being esteemed for it.”<sup>201</sup>

Spinoza insists that what is praised and what is blamed, though it is called right or wrong, good and evil, could really be based on anything. This does not mean that social practices are

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<sup>198</sup> E3P32S

<sup>199</sup> E3P33, E3P34

<sup>200</sup> E3P29

<sup>201</sup> E3DefAffXXVII

arbitrary, but not all can be or are justified according to reason or to the objective needs of the individuals who practice them. So, those practices which integrate a community and tie its members together through affect and imagination may not in fact be ‘best’ for them. Cultural practices which unify the community may in fact be destructive to some or all of the community, making their revision or change fraught with danger for all and thus making the reform or critique of customs extremely affectively charged. I will discuss this at tiresome length in Chapter 5, when I compare Spinoza’s conception of the ‘best’ for humans and his understanding of the affects and imagination with Martha Nussbaum’s understanding of universal norms and human capabilities. Now, I will move on to explaining the further role of imagination in the development of the social self of the individual. Praise and blame are not only the foundation of social integration, but help yield the individual’s conception of him or herself.

### **Imagination and the Self**

Empowerment requires understanding ourselves, as part of Nature, and thus, as affected by external forces beyond our control. This social process of determining and shaping the affects to yield a somewhat common social world also yields the individuals’ conceptions of themselves.

The process of negotiating with individuals outside ourselves makes our imaginative self-conception and our conception of the world more adequate. We come to see the world as it is, not just as it appears to us, or as our interested views make it seem. Spinoza suggests that the imagination is distorted or confused because it, “Is an idea which indicates the present condition of the human body more than the nature of the external body.”<sup>202</sup> Mediated by the ‘present condition of the body,’ the imagination gives us a picture of ‘how we feel about the world’ at a particular moment, which may not give us an accurate picture of how the world is. For Spinoza, this particular imaginative distortion means that we ought to understand how our affects affect our perceptions, but it also has effects in his social theory.

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<sup>202</sup> E4P15S

Having to negotiate our feelings about the world with others' feelings is a first step to reforming this confused picture of the world and ourselves presented by the imagination. So, interacting with others may give us a more adequate imaginative understanding of the world, overlapping and replacing the confused and ego-centric pictures we develop on our own. Other individual humans do not just ignore our confused pictures of ourselves and the world, they challenge them. Other people tell us that we are wrong, if they see things differently. And because we are generally so constituted that we prefer praise over blame, we interact with them, we defer or sometimes argue. More often when we are young we simply accept another's explanation for phenomena, we replace our own nascent and confused pictures of how the world works for theirs, becoming in the process part of a family and/or a society.

Our conceptions of ourselves are derived from our affects, most notably our joy at being esteemed by others. We desire praise and want to avoid blame, and mould our characters and actions in such a way as to maximize praise and the feeling of joy that comes with it. The individual's self-conception is strengthened with external praise and with the idea of him or herself as the cause of things which others approve.<sup>203</sup> Praise increases power, self-esteem and creates a more powerful self-conception. We organize our 'selves' our actions and self-conceptions in response to social stimuli, praise and blame, founded on norms, practices, and customs, which are shared by a social group and in response to which individuals organize their actions. As we already know, the mind tries to imagine those things which increase the body's power of acting.<sup>204</sup> Joy increases an individual's power,<sup>205</sup> so, "the man affected by joy desires nothing but to preserve it, and does so with the greater desire, as the joy is greater."<sup>206</sup> Spinoza writes: "Man is conscious of himself through the affections by which he is determined to act"<sup>207</sup> Self-consciousness arises from affections, which are the expression of natural forces impinging

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<sup>203</sup> E3P30D

<sup>204</sup> E3P12

<sup>205</sup> E3P11S

<sup>206</sup> E3P37D

<sup>207</sup> E3P30

upon the individual. Spinoza writes, “He who imagines that he affects others with joy or sadness will thereby be affected with joy or sadness. But since man is conscious of himself through the affections by which he is determined to act, then he who has done something which he imagines affects others with joy will be affected with joy, together with a consciousness of himself as the cause, *or* he will regard himself with joy, and the converse.”<sup>208</sup> The idea of oneself as cause plus praise yields increased joy through the self-esteem provided by praise.

We strive to increase our joy by bringing about what we imagine others to desire and what we ourselves desire thereby strengthening our self-conception and joining with others. The desires of the *self* move outward toward others if they are like us; we take up their desires as desirable. This, for Spinoza, is the foundation of all social life.

### **Hobbes and Spinoza**<sup>209</sup>

Spinoza redefines Hobbes conception of conatus as the power of an individual striving to satisfy its appetites, which are formed through its imaginative view of itself and of the world, that is, those things which increase the power of the body. The imagination helps organize the different parts of the individual into a characteristic shape or set of movements and desires. The imagination also helps the individual organize his or her affects with those around them. This process of the social affects is not guaranteed to produce peace, since the social affects cut both ways,<sup>210</sup> but the imagination is the foundation of social life, for Spinoza.

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<sup>208</sup> E3P30D

<sup>209</sup> In order to bring out what is special about Spinoza’s conception of individuals, in the next section I will compare it to Hobbes’ conception. In many ways it is derived from Hobbes, but Spinoza’s conception of the individual adds crucially important elements which allow us to see the beginning of Spinoza’s innovative political theory. Spinoza, like Hobbes, wants to provide a model to understand human behavior and power, which ranges over individuals who are no doubt different in all sorts of ways. However, to do so, Spinoza thought that more was necessary to add to his model of human behavior and motivation. Diagrams, particularly those created by those with no artistic talent, are always in danger of being too simplistic, but in my teaching I have found the following set of diagrams to be helpful in explaining what Spinoza ‘adds’ to Hobbes model of the human individual in order to understand the foundations of human political society.

<sup>210</sup> When others seem to love what we hate or hate what we love, we undergo vacillation of mind, which we need to resolve: “Each of us strives, so far as he can, that everyone should love what he loves and hate what he hates.”(E3P31C) Spinoza describes this as vacillation, he writes: “Each, by his nature, wants the others

One way to bring out what this social conception of the imagination and the individual means or how it leads to Spinoza's conception of political society is through a comparison with Hobbes. Hobbes and Spinoza's shared method and approach, by attempting to show that one could understand political society through the elements which make it up, those natural individual humans, provides an excellent comparison of the two which will bring out what is new and important about Spinoza's conception. By changing the model of the individual, Spinoza is able to reconceive the political, providing a very different set of principles for political life than that provided by Hobbes. Although extended discussion of political principles will have to wait until the next chapter, I will show below how the differences in Spinoza's and Hobbes conceptions of individuals yield their divergent pictures of the state of nature and the nature of the contract through which individuals enter the civil state.

### **Individuals**

Spinoza's affect theory may very well have been inspired by his reading of Hobbes; however, developing his own theory leads him away from Hobbes' focus on the negative affects, such as fear as the building blocks for political society. Spinoza and Hobbes place different emphases on the positive and negative aspects of human nature, and the affects, though both recognize both aspects, the extent to which 'man is a god' or 'man is a wolf' to man.<sup>211</sup> Hobbes focuses on the negative affects, fear, suspicion, and the murderous capacity of all, while Spinoza argues that the affects can be molded.

To become social, for Spinoza, is to have one's affects molded in concert with those around one. Spinoza shows how the imagination works in concert with the affects to help an

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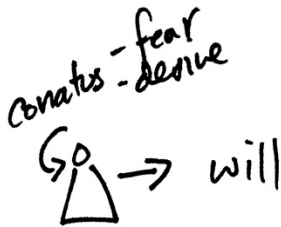
to live according to his temperament; when all alike want this, they are alike an obstacle to one another, and when all wish to be praised or loved by all, they hate one another." (E3P31S) So, this basic social impulse which can hold people together can also be destructive. Spinoza will argue that strong institutions are needed to get these impulses that are part of human nature working for the end of order rather than chaos. Hence, a multitude on its own is not the ideal form of government, since the social passions are not self-regulating.

<sup>211</sup> Hobbes, *De Cive*, Preface.



individual create not only a picture of themselves to get around in the world, but a picture of the world itself, marked by affect. Spinoza's imagination is social in essence: one becomes a member of a social whole or community by coming to see the world as they do, by developing a similar regime of affect which allows one to successfully engage in common practices and customs. In this section, I will try to bring out this innovation on Spinoza's part through a comparison with Hobbes' conception of the human individual, which he provides in *De Homine* and in *Leviathan*.

We begin, with Hobbes, in the state of Nature. Human individuals are alone, but among others. They are motivated by fear and desire, which culminate in the will, which for Hobbes is the last appetite before action.<sup>212</sup> Affects and desire culminate in individual action. The arrows in the picture below denote the 'conatus to will' movement, where an individuals conatus or desire for self-preservation motivate their actions.



**Figure 1: Hobbes Individual**

These affective beings are motivated by fear and desire to preserve themselves; each fears the intrusion of the other. Each individual in this state of nature has a right to any and every thing which could preserve them but unable because of their weakness and fear of others to obtain or hold onto these things for long.<sup>213</sup> In the state of nature, a collection of these individuals can be symbolized as follows:

<sup>212</sup> Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, I.Xii.2; *De Homine*, XI.2.

<sup>213</sup> State of Nature: *De Cive*, I.i; State of War: *De Cive*, I.i.12.



**Figure 2: State of Nature**

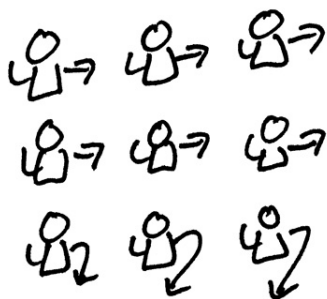
Their arrows pointing in different directions shows how their desires and individual motivations, as totally self-directed, do not lead to coordinated action. For Hobbes, the state of nature is chaotic, and lacks the rules and coordinating forces needed even to assure the shared use of language.<sup>214</sup> So, working together would be a challenge for these individuals. Nevertheless, Hobbes proposes a scenario that he calls the mutual assistance pact as a possibility for these free and equal creatures. Even without giving up their right to all, individuals may be able to coordinate themselves for shared goals from time to time.



**Figure 3: Mutual Assistance Pact**

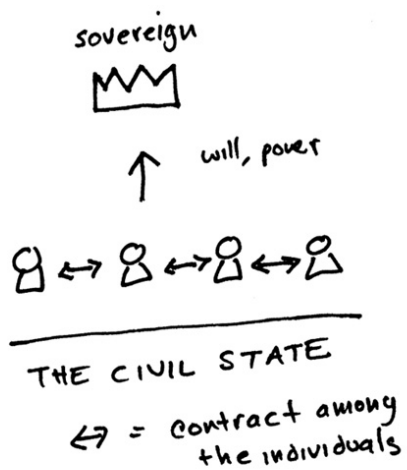
<sup>214</sup> *De Homine*, X.2; *De Cive*, III.xvii.12, III.xv.16.

However, this coordination has no guarantee – there is nothing stopping one or more of the ‘compacters’ from betraying the rest of the group the moment it suits them. Hobbes is sure of this eventuality.



*Figure 4: Broken Pact*

The only sure way to coordinate individual actions and desires, Hobbes writes, is through the creation of a sovereign, who will ensure the mutual assistance pact which the individuals make among one another. So, in Hobbes contract scenario, the free and equal individuals agree among themselves to give up their power, judgment and will to a sovereign, which they create.



*Figure 5: Contract*

Spinoza takes up this Hobbesian picture of the political individual, agreeing with Hobbes that this individual is characterized by being moved by its affects and by its conatus. Spinoza, however, redefines conatus as the power or striving of an individual.<sup>215</sup> So, Spinoza adds to this model of the political particular an index of power, which can decrease or increase, but with upper and lower limits on this power derived from the minimum amount of power one needed to stay alive, and the upper limit or maximum, which Spinoza leads us to believe is unknown (since, as he writes, we do not know the capacity of the human body, and by extension the human being). The individual's power, as we know from the beginning of this chapter, is derived from the power of God. But let us focus for a moment on this minimum amount of power, which the individual cannot do without, and thus, Spinoza argues, the individual retains this power, even after the contract scenario.

Spinoza also redefines the elements that go into making up an individual's conatus,<sup>216</sup> as we argued in Chapter One and previously in this chapter, an individual's conatus is made up of three elements: a) appetite or desire, b) an image of themselves, c) an image of those things which are good for the body. So, in addition to an index of power, the individual also has a conception of itself and the world which it uses to get around. The Spinozan individual is characterized by its imagination, which can be more or less adequate.

The degree of adequacy of the imagination of the individual is a mark of its level of understanding or reason, where reason is the level of operational understanding of the world that an individual possesses. Reason, for Spinoza, is a complicated faculty, which is identified at points as that which yields 'the best for man', in contrast to, for example, the order or laws of Nature, which do not respect persons or species. We can take reason, for the moment, to be a threshold level of understanding which increases power.

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<sup>215</sup> E3P6, E3P7

<sup>216</sup> E3P6, E3P7

Understanding alone, for example, does not help one make better decisions, if for example one knows a whole lot about butterflies but little about sailing and one finds oneself in a boat. Reason is that faculty that allows one to find out more about seafaring given the knowledge that one will soon be traveling by water. Reason, in general, is the ability to see the better option for action and choose it, and thus is dependent on a great deal of understanding of the world and oneself, and an already activated set of affects. But enough about reason, for a moment, let's get back to the pictures.



I = the individual's  
imaginative picture of  
themselves and the world

***Figure 6: Spinoza's revision of Hobbes' individual***

Spinoza adds imagination (which we can understand as a more or less adequate representation of the individual and its environment) and an index of power to Hobbes model of the individual. The imaginative view includes a picture of the individual, or a 'self image' which we argued earlier was necessary in order to coordinate the parts of the body with their separate desires into a more unified individual. The conatus is shaped by the individual's appetites, but is also shaped by the individual's imaginative view of themselves and the world, insofar as the world is that which increases the power of the body.

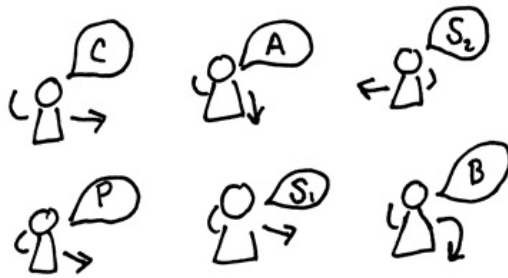
How does Spinoza's revised picture of the individual change the contract scenario? Well, according to Spinoza, it changes the picture quite a bit. Spinoza writes in Chapter 17 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that Hobbes picture of the contract scenario, which he had reproduced in Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, is just a theory, that in practice, in reality, no individual could give up either all his or her power or all his or her judgment.

No one's judgment can ever be completely controlled, Spinoza argues, although he is aware that in large measure people can be influenced by the ideas of others. This does not mean that you can make someone will something that they do not will, believe something they do not believe in every circumstance. Further, no one can give up all their power to the sovereign; they always retain that portion of it that they require for living. This may not seem like much, since they are small and relatively weak. But for Spinoza, right is coextensive with power and desire, so that to the extent these weak individuals retain some of their power; to that extent they always retain some right against the sovereign.

Where this leads is not to Spinoza articulating a right to resistance or any such thing. He, like Hobbes, is interested in creating a strong civil state. Rather, this model changes, for Spinoza, the problem of government. Individuals retain some of their power, and the problem of government becomes how to manage this power of the multitude, how to create institutions which will wrangle the power of the individuals in the multitude to be used for the power of the state. Enter: the imagination.

Again, Spinoza's model of the imagination can be simply understood as a picture of the world and themselves that humans use to get around in the world. In the state of nature, individuals probably have wildly different pictures, each based on very self-interested models of the world. Let's imagine an imagination based on the food I like and the place I sleep and a variety of explanatory mechanisms for the things I fear. Or better, an imagination with content like 'good food' or 'bad fruit', perhaps without an 'I' at all. Anyway, imagination in the state of nature should be understood as pretty limited and individual, so that the imaginative conceptions of the world of diverse individuals will be diverse, as diverse as their individual affects.

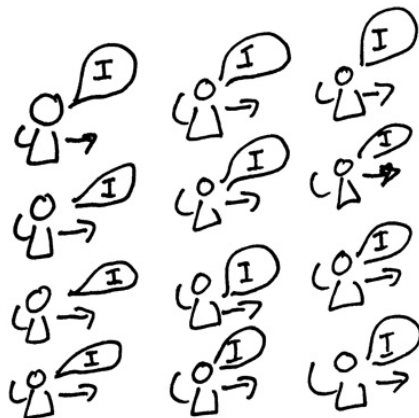
Entering the civil state, for Spinoza, means that individuals coordinate their behavior and their ends in some sense. They can do this through aligning their affects through coordinating their 'imaginative' views of the world and themselves, and through the social or the community.



*Figure 7: Spinoza's individual in the state of nature*

How one imagines oneself and those things which increase the power of the body shape one's picture of the world, which one uses to get around in the world. We can strengthen or perfect our essence, or conatus, we strive to increase our joy, by bringing about what we imagine others to desire and what we ourselves desire, strengthening our self-conception and joining with others. The conatus is shaped socially. One's image of oneself is a product of interaction with others. The desires of the *self* move outward toward others if they are like us; we take up their desires as desirable.

These individuals in the state of nature each retain their own idiolectic picture of the world. However, in joining together for common purpose, their pictures begin to merge – they begin to see the world and themselves differently because of this interaction with others.



**Figure 8: Spinoza and the Civitas<sup>217</sup>**

Entering political society requires some unifying principles, religion, common symbols and laws which motivate individuals' affects, for example through fear or hope. The problem of the state is transformed in Spinoza into a problem of how to unify the individuals in a state through the organizing of the affects and the agreement of the imagination. A social imaginary must be created, and the affects of the multitude organized so that the state can use the power of the multitude for common ends.

This 'collective imaginary'<sup>218</sup> will never be totally coordinated or identical. Each individual thinks and experiences the world separately from the others, but through their affective interactions, they begin to share similar views of the world, through acting in ways which are meant to please the others. Through collective life, their images of themselves become coordinated with others' views of them, in a process which I will explain in much greater detail in the next section.

**Beyond the State of Nature**

We are no longer in the state of nature, if we ever were. Humans are not born alone, they seek society, and society can be helpful. Nothing is so helpful to humans as other humans. Being together with people they agree with, whose natures agree, makes them all more powerful. However, people differ to the extent that their desires differ. For Spinoza, the project of understanding human desires and finding ways to unite people just is the project of building political community. The aim of the *Ethics* is to construct a model of human being which will

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<sup>217</sup> This picture may look a bit frightening, with everyone thinking the same 'I', but all that is required is that their imaginative pictures of the world have some overlap in key areas. Overlapping consensus is not a bad description of what their affective-imaginative pictures of the world ought to be to live together in a community.

<sup>218</sup> Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd write, "Emotions cluster around images – traces of previous bodily modifications. The power of these images is strengthened or diminished by the dynamic social-collectivities formed or disrupted by the associations our bodies form with others. In civil society the understanding of these processes is represented in laws, religious rituals and wide-ranging social fictions which give a unity to those clustering of images and affects through which we understand – however inadequately, ourselves, others and the social wholes we form with them." *Collective Imaginings*, p.40.



yield the most power for individual humans. For Spinoza, maximal human power can only be reached through cooperation with others. However, cooperation with others requires ‘agreement’, and humans naturally differ to the extent their desires differ.

Their different desires and experiences make them understand the world differently. Our imagination, that faculty which takes over in our lack of knowledge, gives us a picture of the world. However, this picture is confused and limited. To the extent that we share a picture we can live together. Part of the project of the state is to get people to imagine the same world. All of this is to say that people can come together to join in a state and to sustain a state both through reason, and through affect.<sup>219</sup> Spinoza explains that of these two forces that bring people together, one is more stable than the other, namely reason, but affect is more likely to be in play, since political states are mostly made up of regular people who are not seeking reason.

In the next section, I will show what I think to be the upshot of Spinoza’s extension of the conception of conatus, and his understanding of the role of the imagination in the social world.

#### **IV. Spinoza’s Social Theory**

One of the most powerful forces affecting human life is also one of the least understood. Normative force, while operative in ethics, is not generally thought of as a physical force. But how, then, can we explain the effect of norms and customs on individuals? How else can we explain how we can move from the idea that I ‘ought’ to perform some action my feeling that I ought to do something, to my actually performing the action? Kantians argue that actions, even those most socially determined actions, are freely chosen, and that at each moment we can choose from among the plethora of physical possibilities and choose the right one. The social world, the norms and practices which we have internalized and on the basis of which constructed our identity, for these theorists does not determine our choice, nor should it. In making extremely important decisions, for example the decision to choose whether or not to enter the state of nature,

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<sup>219</sup> E4P37S1,S2

such Kantian theorists argue we can and should try to forget our social and cultural background, since it is irrelevant to whether or not the new civil state is just or unjust. Such theorists see our social background as irrelevant for our moral and ethical decisions. For Spinoza, there is no freedom of the will, and any use of freedom in an explanation of human action is just a fancy short-hand for 'I have no idea how this works'. That I have free will, or that I choose freely does not explain the force of norms and my expectations of the reaction of my social world on my behavior.

Through the medium of the affects, Spinoza seeks to show how normative force works, as both a physical force and as a mental force, in shaping human behavior and in creating the human social world. The mental and the physical aspects are not causally related, for Spinoza, but they are two aspects of the same forces, one a feature of our physical being and the other a feature of our mental life, involving the imagination and intellect. Normative force is the force of the affects and the imagination of each individual working individually but affecting one another.

Affects and images are communicated among individuals, tying them together into social groups but also burdening them in the ways that only norms can, seemingly from the outside and from the inside at once. Because we live in the community and we know what is expected, we feel the weight of this expectation, the force of what we are supposed to do, even when we feel we can no longer do this. So, we expect with apprehension the condemnation of the community for flouting its norms. Our power is decreased as others think poorly of us, so we flout the community's norms only at the risk of losing power.

Norms, we have said, are the accrued practices of our community. They are things we all do and have done and think we should do and make sure our children do or know about, and they are smothered in affect. We feel they are the right things to do, that we are bad if we don't do them, and that others are bad if they don't follow them. Since affects can be based on anything, good or bad for us, sometimes norms are based on harmful practices that weaken individual members of our community or the community as a whole. Uprooting 'bad norms', like learning to

change a ‘bad affect’, is difficult. It is not just a matter of telling people that the practice is bad. Reason and truth, just knowing something is bad for us is not enough to overcome the power of the affect and the experience that we have.<sup>220</sup> What makes political and social movement so challenging is that they often seek to challenge long-held and affectively well-rooted norms.

Spinoza’s theory of the affects gives us a powerful tool to use in understanding ‘social’ or normative force, the extent to which our desires and feelings are shaped by those around us, and the way that we shape our behavior to please them, and thus to feel good about ourselves.

Spinoza’s theory shows us that reason, rather than opposed to the affects, develops from the strength of the affects. Reason has no power unless our joyful affects are well developed and strong. So, those theorists who would understand reason as opposed to the affects and as the only force needed to make decisions in the social world will find in Spinoza a strong opponent. Those who seek real answers about the nature of social life and individual human development will find a strong ally in Spinoza, who insists that we need to know how decision making works, even if it is not free; who seeks to find out how decisions can be ‘best for us’ even when they are caused.<sup>221</sup>

The individual empowerment that Spinoza speaks of in the *Ethics*, the path to reason, is not possible for an isolated individual. The path to reason has both social prerequisites and social implications. The social is useful: Humans are not born alone, they seek society, and society can be helpful. Nothing is so helpful to humans as other humans. Being together with people they agree with, whose natures agree, makes them all more powerful. However, individuals differ to

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<sup>220</sup> Spinoza, *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, Chapter XXI. We can gain power over the emotions through understanding them (E5P6), but the affects may still be operative, causing us to see the better and do the worse. E3P25S[ii]; Limits of desires arising from reason: E4P15-17.

<sup>221</sup> How can we have a model of the best for humans when we can see that there are as many human goals and desires as there are individuals? Spinoza solves this problem of how to identify a model of the best for humans given the reality of a diversity of human desires by understanding conatus, or the striving for self-preservation to also involve the power with which individuals strive. Power, and increasing one’s power, is important, no matter what one’s individual ends (although individual ends matter, since if you want to become more ignorant, for example, your efforts to increase your power through understanding may undermine your idiotic goal). In short, power, like money is something everyone can use. Since joy increases individuals’ power, and anything which increases an individuals’ power is good, so, all things which bring joy are good. E3P11S; EIVAppXXX.

the extent that their desires differ. For Spinoza, the project of understanding human desires and finding ways to unite people just is the project of building political community.

### **Carrots, Squirrels and Pumpkins: the ‘Spindividual’ becomes Social**

In this section I will try to bring out the ‘upshot’, if you will, of Spinoza’s understanding of the affects, power and imagination of individuals as yielding a social theory of the affects. This social theory operates in the background of Spinoza’s political theory, and so I would like to get out a picture of Spinoza’s conception of the social as a product of affective and imaginative relations between individuals. For much of this section I will eschew Spinozan language, but I will be employing many of the ideas expressed above in more technical terms.

The Spinozan individual, or the Spindividual for short, is a complex being, pulled in different directions by wayward affects and images by external forces, including other human individuals.<sup>222</sup> Each individual has an imaginary view of him or herself and the world in which he or she lives in order to get around in that world, and crucially, to satisfy his or her desires. This operative picture of the world, or the individuals’ imaginary view of the world (since it is incomplete and confused), begins as a very narrowly self-interested picture. The inhabitants of my very limited beginning world are those things I like and want to find more of. For Spinoza, we might have these kinds of narrowly self-interested pictures as children, but we can also posit what these kinds of pictures might look like in the state of nature, as a kind of block-slab example.

An individual in the state of nature who liked carrots and squirrels would no doubt have an imaginary view of the world dominated by green shoots coming out of the ground and fallen acorns. Those kinds of phenomena, utterly meaningful for the carrot-squirrel enthusiast, would dominate let’s say ‘her’ world picture, allowing her to discover as many carrots and squirrels as possible. Now say Ms. Carrot-Squirrel runs into another set of humans also seeking carrots. She may well join up with them to discover more carrots, but along the way begin to shift her

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<sup>222</sup> E3P51

perceptions through living with this new group, let's say the Carrot-Bean-Pumpkin enthusiasts. These folks interest themselves in the bean plant, and Ms. Carrot-Squirrel may very well herself start paying attention to these bean plants which she previously ignored, their not being meaningfully correlated with carrots or squirrels, though Carrot-Squirrel may begin to associate beans, as well as pumpkins with the previous inhabitants of her mental world.

We may need to speed this process up for the sake of the overall point: as Carrot-Squirrel becomes more and more connected with this Carrot-Bean-Pumpkin group, her affects get tied up with theirs, she comes to see what they see in the natural world, to look for the signs of pumpkins and beans along with squirrels. She can share her love of squirrels with them and it may catch on, given perhaps their affection for Ms. Carrot-Squirrel. However, should Ms. C.S. become unpopular, squirrels may become verboten, associated with cheating and lying, or whatever led to Ms. C.S.'s downfall.

Becoming a member of a social group means valuing those things the group values. This 'common valuing' starts at a stage too early to resist consciously. How we act in the world, how we do things and how we understand the world are influenced by common customs and practices first of a family then of a social group and later of the world in which the human individual will live. Our affects as well as our imaginary picture of the world derived from our affects are shaped by this process through the communication of affects with those around us.

We love what those we love love, we hate what they hate, and further we want them to love what we love and we become genuinely disturbed if they do not love what we love.<sup>223</sup> Spinoza gives us this affective explanation of social norms, rather than Wittgenstein's picture of the student hungry for the approval of the teacher trying again and again to go on in the mathematical example in the right way, but the principles remain the same. Our affects lead us to become followers of social practices, internalizers of values and sharers of worldviews. We imitate others, and learn from those we wish to please how to act in the world, what is right and

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<sup>223</sup> E3P17S, E3P31

wrong, respectable and shameful. We learn how to obtain praise which feeds our self-esteem.<sup>224</sup>

Norms and practices and the system of values and affective responses which sustain them are *idioletic* to a certain extent.

Normative uptake is an individual process, and there is no guarantee that each member of a community will think value love or hate in an identical manner; however, there should be enough reinforcement that they will have widely overlapping systems of valuations, which will allow them to persuade the others in circumstances of disagreement, etc. Normative force, the force of laws and customs, works through the physical forces of the affects and the imagination, not to mention the more ordinary modes of physical enforcement of deviance from community norms. Individual experience may experience these forces as stronger or weaker depending on their background and temper and the degree of policing of the norms of a particular community.

If there were no negative affective consequences for questioning community norms, then only the most reasonable would persist. Even when we have reached the age when we question the ‘rightness’ or reasonability of a certain practice, we may still be emotionally affected by the norm or practice itself, or just the loss of praise which comes from following the norms of one’s community without questioning them. We may feel guilty, betraying our previous affective training. We may feel like outsiders, deviants, unnatural. This is why Spinoza’s road to freedom includes the necessary reform of the affects. This is not an easy process. Just knowing, for example, that something, something very delicious, for example, is bad for you does not make it any less delicious.<sup>225</sup>

Spinoza does not assume that all community norms or human practices are good for people, or that they are best for human individuals. That we follow what is praised and avoid what is blamed can be explained by reference to human psychology. However, there are no good explanations for why one group praises one thing and another praises another. Spinoza recognizes

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<sup>224</sup> E3P17S, E3P29, E3P31C, E3P32S, E3P33, E3P34

<sup>225</sup> Spinoza’s own examples were less ‘Little Debbie’ focused and more about what he considered harmful sites of norm creation, namely religious institutions. We will revisit this topic in detail in Chapter 5.

the seeming arbitrariness and potential harmfulness of norms, since they, like affects, can be based on anything. Anything can be the object of love or hate,<sup>226</sup> for an individual or for a community. So, norms and practices which are powerful may not necessarily be best for humans. Their being ‘bad’ or ‘destructive’ however, does not make them any *less* powerful. So, if we want, for example to critique a particular norm or overcome a harmful practice, critiquing it may not be enough. Simply arguing that a practice is bad is not enough to make it disappear. Critique appeals to people’s reason. Norms appeal to, are built upon and are central in the process of building individual affects. I will cite Spinoza once more on this:

But we ought to note here that it is no wonder sadness follows absolutely all those acts which from custom are called wrong, and joy those that are called right. From what has been said above we can easily understand that this depends chiefly on education. Parents, by blaming former acts and often scolding their children on account of them, and on the other hand, by recommending and praising the latter acts,-- have brought it about that the emotions of sadness were joined to one kind of act, and those of joy to the other. Experience itself confirms this. For not everyone has the same custom and religion. On the contrary, what is holy to some among others is unholy; and what among some is honorable, among others is dishonorable. Hence, according as each has been educated, so he either repents of a deed or exults at being esteemed for it.<sup>227</sup>

Reason, or true ideas, for most people have only the smallest power over the affects. We can only overcome an affect with an equal and opposite affect.<sup>228</sup> Love of something bad can only be overcome through associating this loved object with something we hate. A friend who cheats and lies may still be one we love and care about. To shield ourselves from the effects of such a person, we may have to think the worst of them, forgetting the ‘good times’ in order to focus on self-preservation. We may love smoking or other unsuitable past times and find we need to carry around a small reminder card with pictures of bloody lungs or the like. This is not an easy process, and requires both knowledge of what is best for us and what causes us to gain power, and an understanding of which affects will allow us to avoid those things which weaken us and seek those things which really bring us joy.

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<sup>226</sup> E3P50

<sup>227</sup> E3Def Affects, XXVII

<sup>228</sup> E4Appendix, E4P7

For Spinoza, seeking the best mode of self-preservation is not an automatic human skill. Rather, we follow our feelings from one moment to the next, trying to feel good. What feels good momentarily, however, as we all know, is not necessarily what leads to happiness or self-preservation. Society is useful, but it is also not automatic or naturally cohesive. The same affects which bind us to others also are the sources of the dissolution of social bonds.<sup>229</sup> So, we cannot take humans ‘natural sociability’<sup>230</sup> for granted. Political science requires understanding the nature of the affects which determine the shape of that sociability, learning how to organize and reform the affects so that the best form of political community can be forged. In Chapter Five, the question of harmful cultural practices and norms will be raised once again, and I will argue that according to Spinoza we can identify and critique harmful cultural practices in ways that are objective; that is, we can identify whether or not a practice increases the power of an individual or group or whether it diminishes their power. However, going further and changing harmful practices in favor of practices which are more reasonable is not easy. Individuals raised in a particular community are caught up in affective webs which support the community practices, good or bad. Changing harmful practices requires more than just critique or exposing the fact that certain practices are bad for a certain group; it requires reform of the affects and the imagination.

### **Norms, Self-Preservation and Reason**

Norms, for Spinoza, are not necessarily arbitrary, nor are they necessarily reasonable. To be reasonable, for Spinoza, is to be in the best interest of human preservation. Customs, practices, institutions are created to solve immanent human dilemmas, to solve problems. These solutions are not always the best, although they may do for a time. However, they are not, for Spinoza, untouchable or sacred. As human conditions change, so the solutions to human dilemmas may

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<sup>229</sup> E3P31C; E3P32S

<sup>230</sup> As discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, Spinoza and Hobbes wrote specifically against those neo-Aristotelians whose emphasis on humans as ‘political animals’ misunderstood the actual problems of politics and ignored the negative aspects of the causal forces of human social life, the affects.



change, and often ought to change. To best preserve human individuals and the communities which they create, the practices which hold those communities together can and ought to be investigated where they appear to hamper human progress.

Spinoza's is fundamentally a critical project of normative reform. However, what separates Spinoza from other reformers is his insistence on the need to understand the power of norms and practices in order to effectively change them. Spinoza understood religious institutions to be institutions of this kind. Although he clearly understood their historical import in unifying communities and in keeping order within them, he thought that their usefulness in his own time was diminished by the negative effects of dogmatic prohibitions on investigating the natural world. So, for Spinoza, religious institutions and their limitations on scientific investigations were harmful and needed to be changed. However, the power of religion and prohibitions on knowledge had to be recognized and understood before the harmful effects of these institutions could be minimized.

Individuals can be wrong about what increases their power and what leads to self-preservation. Many people, Spinoza argues, are buffeted by forces that they do not understand and over which they have no control. Since they often do not understand these forces, they have no idea what really increases their power, and what decreases their power. As such, they can have no basis for preserving themselves or their power. Only through understanding the forces that impinge upon them can human individuals come to understand what is best for preserving themselves. So, for Spinoza, acting in accordance with self preservation, just like (and in fact coextensive with) the road to reason, is an achievement, and not an automatic part of being alive. Individuals may strive to preserve themselves, but they can only achieve self-preservation if they understand what is best for them and in what way they are affected by the forces around them.

Similarly, communities can be wrong about what practices best preserve the community. Most norms and practices are not completely arbitrary. They came about and were instituted at different times in order to preserve the community, to keep the individuals in a community

together, to preserve the security in a community, to deal with inter-group conflict and to maintain life. Spinoza was (and I am) open to the reality of universal human needs, and indeed open to an evolutionary account. This is the core of his conception of reason, his idea of what is best for human individuals. However, it is not clear that all cultural practices actually preserve human life in the best way and increase the power of the members of the community in the best way.

In particular, Spinoza thought that religious institutions and religious laws, which may have had preservatory roles in earlier times had outlived their usefulness and were positively harmful, impeding individual and community empowerment in his own time.<sup>231</sup> Spinoza found religious prohibitions on scientific investigations in favor of insistence on the truth of the physics and astronomical explanations in the Bible odious in his own time. There is no reason to think, Spinoza argued, that the prophets were also good natural philosophers.<sup>232</sup> However, Spinoza understood that the explanations of the natural world in the Bible were in the service of providing moral lessons and that even if they were meant as explanations of the natural world, there is no reason to suppose that they are definitive. The explanations of natural phenomena provided in the Bible may have been better than nothing at the time, and while they may have taught important moral lessons, there is no reason to insist on their truth when better explanations are available.

Spinoza also rejected the comprehensive laws for living of the Jews in Amsterdam, his disrespect for which may have led to his expulsion from the Jewish community in Amsterdam. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza argued that when Moses first brought the Jews out of slavery, such comprehensive laws made sense. They helped structure and organize the lives of the newly formed community and gave their lives an underlying unity and identity as members of the Hebrew State. However, Spinoza sees these laws as out of place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>231</sup> *TTP*, Chapter XX.

<sup>232</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 2

## Conclusion: Social and Individual Power

Spinoza writes that there is nothing humans have less control over than their appetites.<sup>233</sup> Those moral philosophers who have sought to show how free will can totally control desires and affects if properly trained have done a disservice to humans, leading them to misunderstand themselves, and thus have less chance to act in the world to the extent that they can. In the Preface to Book 4 of the *Ethics*, after explaining the nature of the affects, Spinoza begins to show us to what extent we can control our affects, particularly our passive affects, not by pretending we can control them completely, but by trying to understand them.

As we will see in the next chapter, when individuals enter the social state, they can do so through following reason or through commonality of affect, through loving or fearing the same things as their fellow citizen-subjects. We have seen above that the power of the social and the power of the individual are mediated through the affects. However, this social power and individual power can be at odds. An individual gains power through understanding and reforming his or her passive affects; however, if the state he or she is part of is joined together through common fear, a passive affect, then the individual's journey to reason and empowerment may be seen as conflicting with the interests of the state.

For Spinoza, religious institutions operating in *his* state played such a role. By forbidding both actual empowerment through the enforcement of antiquated practices and through the enforcement of ignorance through dogma and forbidding the scientific investigations which would lead individuals to understand themselves as part of the natural world, the social power of institutionalized religion, which once was a strong and important force in bringing people together into the first communities, was now a disempowering force standing in the way of an institution which could unite people on other grounds.

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<sup>233</sup> E3Pref

The problem of politics is a problem of the power and the affects of the multitude. This is the key aspect of Spinoza's political philosophy. The affects of the multitude are a function of the affects of individuals. So, for Spinoza, the affects of individuals are worthy topics of investigation for political theory. In this chapter, I have shown how Spinoza understands individuals, their affects, their power, and how their conceptions of the world are mediated by their affects. In the next chapter, I will show how Spinoza's conception of the individual human relates to his political vision.

## Chapter 3: Spinoza's Political Vision

- I. Affect and Reason
- II. Natural Right and the Contract
- III. Power of the State
  - a. Absolute
  - b. Institutional Means of Organizing Affects
    - i. Monarchy
    - ii. Aristocracy
- IV. Stability and Freedom
- V. The Best State
- VI. Principles
- VII. Spinozan Democracy

### I. Affect and Reason

Just as Spinoza's human individual has an index of power related to that individual's ability to organize his or her affects and through the individual's self-conception and understanding of what increases their power, so the state has a similar index of power. The state, for Spinoza, is a complex individual of a higher order than the human individual,<sup>234</sup> but with similar problems of organization. Just as the human body is complex and pulled in different directions by the forces acting upon it, so the state is made up of parts, human individuals, who are themselves pulled in different directions by external and internal forces. To unify the state, to make it into an individual, the affects of those component individuals must be organized somehow. Now, just as for the individual, one cannot make a leap directly to reason, so most states begin as political communities which are organized affectively. Through common love or fear, individuals join together for common purpose and to increase their power.<sup>235</sup> Just as the individual can increase their power through active affects, so a state can become more powerful, and from its initial principles for living, shared social or economic exchange, share goals or laws based on shared customs, it can develop laws which are based on reason, that are, in other words, the best for those individuals living in that state. So the state can follow the path of empowerment

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<sup>234</sup> E2P13L7S

<sup>235</sup> E4P37S, TP2.13; Love is preferable; E4App.XI, TP 2. 15.

just as individuals can, by: 1. organizing its affects and coordinating the individuals within it, and 2. by making those affects active, through understanding them and through focusing on the active affects, which increase its power, 3. finally, the state can come to organize itself maximally well, that is, according to reason. In the rest of this chapter, I will bring out more of the details of this conception of how a state can increase its power following the model of the individual's road to empowerment, set out in Chapter Two.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza presents an example of a leader who successfully organized the affects of his people to create a stable state. Moses, shepherd of the Jews out of Egypt, had a tough bunch on his hands. After years of slavery, his charges had very little experience organizing their own lives and living together as equal citizens. They were not the best candidates for a desert democracy. So, Moses offered the next best thing, a theocracy, in which all were equal and subordinate only to God, who was to be understood as their political leader.

Moses introduced a state religion in order to get people to do their duty willingly through hope rather than through fear.<sup>236</sup> Fear, as we know from Chapter Two, is a passive affect which diminishes the power of individuals.<sup>237</sup> Moses, Spinoza writes, taught the Israelites, who had become degraded in their time of slavery, a moral code, such as parents teach their children.<sup>238</sup> This code was comprehensive, covering all parts of life. In addition to a comprehensive code which sought to order all aspects of life, Moses created and encouraged ceremonial rights and symbols which strengthened the Hebrew Kingdom.<sup>239</sup> The aim of the symbols and ceremonies, again, was to remind people of their duties, and to create a set of shared practices and norms around which the individual members of the community could organize their affects. As slaves, dominated by fear, the individuals would have been divided; Moses' code aimed to unify them as

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<sup>236</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 5.

<sup>237</sup> E3P11S

<sup>238</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 2.

<sup>239</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 4.

a community through love of God, love of their neighbor, love of their religion and shared ceremonies and laws which would simultaneously unify and empower them, since positive affects like love and joy increase individuals' power.<sup>240</sup> Spinoza argues that these symbols were a way of binding a society together.<sup>241</sup> Moses thus united his people through shared love, through their shared awe and devotion of their religion and shared fear of disobeying God, and of the punishment of exile from the community of God's chosen people. The community was thus united through shared practices and shared affects, which yielded a shared view of the world and a shared conception of themselves. This shared view reinforced their community's laws and yielded a measure of stability in the state. The Hebrew kingdom, at least the first one, as described above, is an example of a stable state, although one ruled primarily through shared affect and shared imaginative self-understanding, with an emphasis on the active affects like love and joy, and to a certain extent hope.<sup>242</sup>

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that the best state is one organized not primarily through shared affect, but through reason.<sup>243</sup> We know from Chapter Two what it means for an individual to become reasonable through increasing their power. In this chapter, I will explore what it is for a state to become more powerful. Stability alone for Spinoza is not enough to guarantee the power of a state. If it were, then we should be satisfied with a state like that Moses created, one which is stable, if united through religious affects. Stability is the first necessary component of any state, but it is not sufficient to yield the best state. We have already seen, in the conclusion of Chapter Two, that Spinoza questions the value of unity achieved by religious dogma, particularly

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<sup>240</sup> E3P11S

<sup>241</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 5; I should point out that Spinoza says this in the context of an argument that those who are not part of the community, do not need to live by these laws and symbols, and that the external forms of religion are about unifying a community, not about God or salvation. Spinoza adds, "He who lives in solitude is by no means bound by them." (Chapter 5, *TTP*) This meant that people like him, who are not part of a community, are not bound by these symbols/ceremonies, external observances.

<sup>242</sup> Though it is *stable*, it is not an example of the most powerful state, since it is based on imagination, shared affect, and not on the firmer foundation of reason. Hope, for Spinoza, is a volatile emotion, since it is joy based on the expectation of some future good. If this future good does not come to pass, the individual will decrease their power in pain and disappointment. E3DefAffXII.

<sup>243</sup> E4P37S1,S2

where it tends to reinforce superstition, and seems to think that although there was once a time when the unity provided by religious institutions was necessary, that time is past, and the attempts of various religious authorities in his time to stem the investigations of scientists and to hold on to their power works against the strength both of individuals and of the political communities of which these individuals are part. In Chapter Five, I will revisit Spinoza's critique of religion and those customs and practices which disempower individuals. In this chapter I will try to bring out the elements of Spinoza's political vision so that we can answer the questions: what makes a state most powerful, what does this have to do with the affects of individuals, and explore whether or not these are realistic goals for the state.

For Spinoza, the problems of politics are problems of affect. From the affects of the individuals who make up the state, a great multitude feeling, believing, and acting, come the problems of instability, violence, faction, yielding a chaos in which life is devoid the possibility of peace and therefore empowerment. 'Stability' although it is usually associated with conservative thinkers, is in reality a necessity for all life and for all flourishing, and for any sort of empowerment. In seeking the political conditions for freedom and stability, Spinoza continued his research into the conditions of the possibility of human empowerment. If humans could rule ourselves and rule our affects completely, there would be no need for government. Spinoza believed this, but continued that we, as natural beings, can never completely control our affects, and so humans will always need government, because they will always have the problem of the affects to solve. Political community is necessary and useful for human beings living together. Spinoza argues that social life is always good for humans.<sup>244</sup> Living together is always better than living alone, since as individuals we have very little power in the natural world.<sup>245</sup> We join together for survival, for comfort and increased possibilities to live better lives. As we join together, our imaginative pictures of the world come to converge and we are joined by

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<sup>244</sup> TP 2.15

<sup>245</sup> TP 2.15



imaginative-affective bonds as well as by need for survival to those around us.<sup>246</sup> Such is Spinoza's picture of the move from the state of nature to the state of society.

There are no guarantees, for Spinoza, that human sociability will yield social stability, as there was for the neo-Aristotelians in his own time; nor does a supposed complete transfer of power to an all-powerful sovereign solve the problem of human affect, as it did for Hobbes. Spinoza saw that the problem of governance could not be solved once and for all with a complete transfer of power from one set of humans to a sovereign power, but was rather a continuous project of winning over the hearts and minds of the multitude, so that they might follow the law willingly and see their own ends and purposes as tied up with the success of the state. At every moment, the state must contend with the affects of the multitude of individuals which make it up. The problem and aim of political institutions, for Spinoza, is to organize these affects, to get them to work for rather against social order.

The ideal here would be that everyone willingly acts in the way that is best for all. However, such reason and such knowledge of what is best for all is rarely held by actual human individuals. To assume reason or self control on the part of our leaders or fellow citizens would be disastrous for political institutions.<sup>247</sup> Spinoza argues we cannot assume that humans will be rational, since we know that for the most part they are not. As we design political institutions with the aim of organizing the affects of the multitude, we must not assume that individuals will be particularly reasonable, or benevolent. This does not mean going in the other direction to the Hobbesian extreme, of seeing each individual as a potential murderer. Rather than assuming total control of the affects or complete lack of control of the most destructive affects, as the designers of political institutions, we need to understand human affects. Through understanding the normal affects of human beings (and the ways that human affects are developed and organized through

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<sup>246</sup> We live together in a physical and imaginative-affective environment, neither aspect of which we control. The ideological elements of our world are just as determined as the physical aspects, so when we come to try to understand the problem of reforming customs based on affects. We will see that changing them is no easier than changing the physical world.

<sup>247</sup> TP1.5, TP 7.2

customs and norms), we can create institutions and laws which can organize the affects of these individuals in such a way to increase the power of the community of which they are a part.

For Spinoza, human empowerment could not be achieved alone – that is, the highest state of perfection for human individuals, which it was his aim to explore in the *Ethics*, could not be achieved by individuals living alone in the state of nature. The state has an important role to play in individual empowerment, and though it cannot make every individual into a sage, it provides the conditions of the possibility of human empowerment. So, as I explore the details of Spinoza's conception of the power of the state, as a function of the power and relations between the individuals within that state, I will come back to this point about the role of the state in human empowerment. A state, to be considered a genuine individual, has to organize its parts in some way so that they will be a stable whole. However, the best state, is one in which the parts of the state, the individuals are not only organized, but organized in such a way that they can increase their power, and by doing so increase the power of the state.

## II. Natural Right<sup>248</sup> and the Contract

In the first book of the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that the power of individuals is an expression of the power of God. Individuals obtain their power of acting and thinking from God, but they have to endure being acted upon by others because they are finite. In the political works, Spinoza expands on this conception of individual power and argues that an individual's power is coextensive with that individual's right.

Natural right and indeed right in general has nothing to do with reason. Thus, we will not find a normative conception of natural right of the usual kind in Spinoza. An individual's right is coextensive with that individual's desire and power.<sup>249</sup> Spinoza writes, "Nature's bounds are not set by the laws of human reason which aim only at man's true interest and his preservation, but

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<sup>248</sup> TP 2.5

<sup>249</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16; TP2.4; See also: Alexandre Matheron, "Le Droit du plus fort; Hobbes contre Spinoza." *Revue Philosophique*, Paris, n°2 (Avril-Juin 1985), p. 149-176.

by infinite other laws which have regard to the eternal order of the whole of nature, of which man is but a particle.”<sup>250</sup> Rather, just as God’s right is limited only by his power, so an individual humans ‘right’ is limited only by his power and desire. Spinoza writes, “The natural right of every man is determined not by sound reason but by his desire and power.”<sup>251</sup> What individuals desire and have the power to do is often not what is ‘best’ for them, or for those around them. So, what is in one’s ‘right’, what one has the power and desire to do is not necessarily what is best for that individual.

Nature does not seek the best for humans.<sup>252</sup> Nature, Spinoza writes, “Forbids only those things that no one desires and no one can do; it does not frown on strife, or hatred, or anger, or on anything at all urged by appetite. This is not surprising, for Nature’s bounds are not set by the laws of human reason which aim only at man’s true interest and his preservation, but by infinite other laws which have regard to the eternal order of the whole of Nature of which man is but a particle.”<sup>253</sup> Now, being a particle is not all bad. One still expresses part of the power of nature, and this power is inalienable, it cannot be transferred. This naturalistic understanding of right, we will see, has some interesting consequences for the classic conception of the social contract.

### **Spinoza and the Social Contract**

In Chapter Two, I presented Spinoza’s rejection of the contract in the context of explicating Spinoza’s conception of conatus and individual power. I will revisit it here in order to explain its importance for Spinoza’s political philosophy.

In Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza appears to set out a view of the contract scenario and the state of nature very similar to that of Hobbes. In the state of nature, all have a right to whatever is in their power to obtain and they are the sole judges of what is good

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<sup>250</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.

<sup>251</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.

<sup>252</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16; E4Pref.

<sup>253</sup> Chapter 16, *TTP*.

and bad for them.<sup>254</sup> Yet in this state they are very weak and hardly independent,<sup>255</sup> so they can easily be persuaded to join with others. They contract together, give up their power and therefore their right to the sovereign power whose is tasked with keeping them safe. Spinoza writes,

Therefore, without any infringement of natural right, a community can be formed and a contract be always preserved in its entirety in absolute good faith on these terms, that everyone transfers all the power that he possesses to the community, which will therefore alone retain the sovereign natural right over everything, that is, the supreme rule which everyone will have to obey either of free choice or through fear of the ultimate penalty. Such a community's right is called democracy, which can therefore be defined as a united body of men which corporately possess sovereign right over everything within its power.<sup>256</sup>

So far, Spinoza has not traveled any farther or in a different direction than Hobbes.<sup>257</sup>

As we know, for Hobbes, ensuring the contract requires that the sovereign retain supreme power over the contractors. Spinoza retains this element of Hobbes contract, explaining that, “Sovereign right over all men is held by him who holds the supreme power whereby he can compel all by force and coerce them by threat of the supreme penalty, universally feared by all. This right he will retain only as long as he has this power of carrying into execution whatever he wills; otherwise his rule will be precarious, and nobody who is stronger than he will need to obey him unless he so wishes.”<sup>258</sup> So far, Spinoza's justification for obedience to the sovereign and the reasons for such obedience do not stray at all from the ideas of Hobbes. The individuals in the state of nature have as much right as they have power. In the state of nature, their power is very small, so they join together with others, join their power, and then transfer this power to one who will ensure their safety.

However, in Chapter 17, Spinoza revisits this conception of the transfer of power (and will) to the sovereign by the contracting individuals in the multitude. In reevaluating this understanding of the contract and in particular the idea that individuals can transfer their power and will to another, Spinoza hesitates. Such a picture of unified sovereignty as presented by

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<sup>254</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16; *De Cive*, I.i.

<sup>255</sup> TP 2.15

<sup>256</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.

<sup>257</sup> At least the Hobbes of *De Cive* who also begins the contract in the form of a primitive democracy.

<sup>258</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.

Hobbes certainly seems good in theory. There would only be one location of sovereignty, unity of decision making, etc., with none of the problems of faction that one might get were the power of the commonwealth not so completely located in the person of the sovereign. However, the sovereign, even if it were made up of a group of individuals, is still a group of individuals, human individuals. And the multitude of individuals which contracts among one another to create the sovereign still remain human individuals after the contract. As long as they remain human individuals they retain their power of action and judgment, which they naturally are unable to physically give up to another. Thus, natural right, in so far as it is an individual's power of acting and judging what is best for it (conatus = power of striving + idea of oneself + idea of what increases one's power), remains active even after the contract.

The contract, then, is not a change in the location of power, only a change in the location of sovereignty. Yet the sovereign's right only extends as far as its power.<sup>259</sup> Since the power of the multitude (given their greater numbers) must always dwarf the power of the sovereign, the sovereign's retention of power requires its careful organization and relations with the multitude. This is why we can say that the power of the sovereign is a function of the power of the multitude.<sup>260</sup>

The power of individuals, in the state of nature, for example, is very small. Each individual has as much right as they have power, but as weak and separate, they can have little hope of accomplishing anything. To use their power to achieve the basic ends of human life, Spinoza argues, we must join with others. Spinoza writes, without mutual help humans can hardly support life and cultivate the mind.<sup>261</sup> They can never really increase their power without joining with others. So, the path to empowerment for the individual outlined by Spinoza in the *Ethics*, is

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<sup>259</sup> Spinoza writes, "Sovereign powers possess the right of commanding whatever they will only for as long as they do in fact hold supreme power. If they lose this power, with it they also lose the right of complete command." *TTP*, Chapter 16.

<sup>260</sup> Power of the sovereign is a function of the power of the multitude. The multitude, in 17<sup>th</sup> C political thought, particularly the thought of Hobbes and Spinoza is meant to distinguish the notion of a collection of individuals from the notion of a people, which may be understood as organically unified.

<sup>261</sup> TP 2.15

here understood as made possible through the individuals joining with others. Alone, the individual cannot possibly become fully empowered.<sup>262</sup> By joining forces with others, we increase our collective power and thus, by Spinoza's definition of natural right, we increase our collective right.<sup>263</sup> By joining with others, as I showed in Chapter Two, the individuals' conceptions of themselves and the world may change, and will be influenced by those with whom their power is joined. We come to follow the same judgments in matters of law and communal practice, and thus learn to praise and blame the same things as those around us. This coordination of affects and images is part of the transition from the state of nature to the social state, for Spinoza.

Individuals come together into a social body, for Spinoza, because it is useful to do so. They contract or join together and give up their natural right to do whatever they want because it's the lesser of two evils and allows them to get more done with the help of others. As soon as it becomes inconvenient, individuals are free to leave the community. However, once a stable community is in place, the power of the rest of the community exists as a force keeping the community together. As a community unites, the freedom of individuals to go against the community decreases, as their power is measured against the power of the organized multitude.<sup>264</sup>

For Spinoza, the contract remains in place and valid just so long as it is useful for the parties involved. He argues that those who work together are bound only so long as mutual advantage persists: "For nobody makes a contract, or is bound to abide by an agreement, except through hope of some good or apprehension of some evil. If the basis is removed, the agreement becomes void of itself, a fact abundantly illustrated by experience."<sup>265</sup> This is a far cry from Hobbes' irreversible contract among the multitude in the *Leviathan* and in *De Cive*.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> TP 2.15-16

<sup>263</sup> TP 2.13

<sup>264</sup> TP 2.15-17

<sup>265</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.

<sup>266</sup> *De Cive*, II.v.4; *Leviathan*, II.xvii.[4].

So, in Chapter 17 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza explains that the contract picture (that he provided in Chapter 16 and which resembles Hobbes's conception) of transference of all right to the sovereign is just a theory, just a picture, which does not take into account the reality of power of individuals or of the sovereign. Spinoza writes, "Nobody can so completely transfer to another all his right, and consequently his power, as to cease to be a human being, nor will there ever be a sovereign power that can do all it pleases."<sup>267</sup> Firstly, individuals never give up their power, and secondly, they never give up their power of judgment. No matter how powerful, rulers can't make people love or hate what they do not love or hate. Spinoza writes, "The individual reserves to himself a considerable part of his right which therefore depends on nobody's decision but his own."<sup>268</sup>

The sovereign, then, cannot be so total or absolute as Hobbes envisioned. Spinoza explains that, "There can never be any government so mighty that those in command would have unlimited power to do anything they wished."<sup>269</sup> The source of the sovereign's power, then, cannot simply be the assumption that they have the total control over the populace. Spinoza writes, "From the fact then that a man acts from his own decision, we should not forthwith conclude that his action proceeds from his own right, and not from the right of the government."<sup>270</sup> Whenever one acts in accordance with sovereign commands, no matter why, no matter what his intention, he acts from the ruler's right and not from his own. Spinoza further explains that rulers do not need to rely solely on fear or coercive power to influence the multitude. Obedience a matter of internal rather than external act, and thus, "He who reigns over

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<sup>267</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

<sup>268</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

<sup>269</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

<sup>270</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

his subjects minds holds the most powerful dominion.”<sup>271</sup> The mind, of course, is not totally controllable by the sovereign, but the sovereign can try to make the people love or fear it.

So, after showing that the Hobbesian contract scenario is untenable, given the impossibility of the complete transfer of power and right, Spinoza presents his own naturalistic model of the basis of political institutions. The problem of politics for Spinoza becomes the problem of organizing the affects of the individuals in the multitude. The dangers of chaos and instability remain, but Spinoza presents new tools for alleviating them. We cannot simply rely on individuals to see the utility of working together, and indeed need measures to ensure that people follow the laws. Spinoza writes, “To guard against all these dangers, to organize a state in such a way as leaves no place for wrongdoing or better still, to frame such a constitution that every man, whatever his character, will set public right before private advantage, this is the task, this is the toil.”<sup>272</sup> Spinoza’s political principles and suggestions for institutions will be based on a naturalistic understanding of human power and the basis of human community (based on the affect theory expounded in Chapter Two), and a naturalistic understanding of the power of the state and the institutions needed for organizing the power and affects of the multitude of individuals in the state.

### **The Power of the State**<sup>273</sup>

The right of a state, like the right of an individual, is limited by its power. How can we measure or understand the power of a state? The state is made up of its citizens, the multitude of humans within its boundaries. The power of a state is a function of the power of the multitude.<sup>274</sup> The power of the multitude is function of the affects of the individuals that make it up, both their

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<sup>271</sup> Spinoza writes, “To guard against all these dangers, to organize a state in such a way as leaves no place for wrong doing, or better still, to frame such a constitution that every man, whatever his character, will set public right before private advantage, this is the task, this is the toil.” *TTP* Chapter 17

<sup>272</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17

<sup>273</sup> TP 2.15-16; TP 3.2

<sup>274</sup> TP 2.15-16; TP 3.2

16. TP 2.15-16; TP 3.2



individual affects and their ability to join with one another on the basis of their individual affects. Spinoza writes, “If two come together and unite their strength, they have jointly more power, and consequently more right over nature than both of them separately, and the more there are that have so joined in alliance, the more right they all collectively possess.”<sup>275</sup> Depending on the affects of individuals, there are different possibilities for their relations among one another. If they are dominated by passive affects, or affects, individuals are less likely to work together and to join together in productive ways.<sup>276</sup> However, if they maximize their active affects, and thus are characterized by joyful affects, eventually leading closer toward reason, then they are more likely to work together. The passive affects, Spinoza writes, divide humans while reason and the active affects bring humans closer together and allow them to join their power.<sup>277</sup> This would suggest the best means to unify a people would be through active rather than passive affects, that is, unifying the multitude through shared hope rather than fear or hatred.

### **Absolute**

The best commonwealth for Spinoza, as he argues in the *Political Treatise*, is the commonwealth which is most absolute. Since absolute is so often associated with ‘monarchy’, many will be surprised to learn that for Spinoza, as we will see below, thought of monarchy as the least absolute form of commonwealth. Instead, he argued that democracy was the most perfectly absolute form of state.<sup>278</sup> Whereas previously the idea of absolute power, absolute monarchy meant that there were no constitutional limits on the power of a monarch, Spinoza used the term absolute to describe democracy, as the most powerful form of state. Whereas in absolute monarchy, the will of the sovereign, an individual monarch’s will stood for the law, in a democracy the judgments and power of the people together yielded the most powerful form of agreement.

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<sup>275</sup> TP 2.13

<sup>276</sup> TP 2.13-17

<sup>277</sup> TP 2.14; TP 2.13

<sup>278</sup> TP 11.1

For Spinoza, individual monarchs were weak, not strong. Their rule, based on their individual will alone was even weaker. For Spinoza, supreme authorities or sovereigns had as much right as they had power,<sup>279</sup> and individual humans alone were weak. Although a student of Hobbes, particularly (as we have seen) of Hobbes understanding of the political role of the affects, Spinoza differed from Hobbes on a crucial point. Whereas for Hobbes, the will of the individuals and their power could be transferred to the sovereign, creating a one-man Leviathan, for Spinoza, such a transfer was a mystification. No one can give up all of their power, and no one can give up their power of judgment.<sup>280</sup> Thus shrinking the head of the monarchical government to a mere pin, Spinoza went on to investigate the true source of power in government, the multitude. A disorganized multitude, however, was not a source of power.<sup>281</sup> Only an organized multitude, organized through political institutions built to manage and organize their affects, bringing them together to discuss and to collectively decide the principles according to which they were to live. Only such a multitude, that is, a multitude organized into a democracy of a highly deliberative, maximally inclusive and participatory sort could be the most absolute, the strongest form of state.

This new definition of agreement recast the problems of political philosophy: How should the multitude be organized, that is, how can institutions be formed to organize their affects? How can institutions be built to guarantee the best possible decision without requiring that human individuals be reasonable, or virtuous, or other-regarding, or altruistic? Adding to this picture Spinoza's skepticism about ends suggests a further query: how can we find a basis for common political ends in a world where the only reality seems to be that of individuals seeking satisfaction in a world indifferent to human happiness?

For Spinoza, the most absolute government, the best government, is a democracy in which the power of the multitude is organized by institutions in such a way that the power of the

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<sup>279</sup> TP 2.15; TP 3.2

<sup>280</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 20, *TTP*, Chapter 7, TP 3.8

<sup>281</sup> TP 3.2

individuals in the multitude is maximized and used for the power of the commonwealth.<sup>282</sup>

Participation by individuals in the multitude increases the power of the state. So, for Spinoza, the most absolute dominion was also the freest.

### Organizing Affects

For Spinoza, since the power of the state is a function of the power of the multitude, understanding the basis of the power of the multitude is important for determining the best way to govern them. The basis of the power of individuals, as we know from Chapter Two is based on the adequacy of the individuals' self-conception and their understanding of what increases their power. Most individuals are ruled by their affects. Organizing the affects of the multitude involves not only laws, since laws are not obeyed in the heat or confusion of the affects.<sup>283</sup>

Spinoza's political theory requires that laws be *effective*, which means they need to be based on the affective responses of the multitude. Every law, every state, exists at a particular place and time, and must attend to the beliefs, affects and character of their time and place. The aim of organizing the affects is to attempt to unify the multitude, to align their affects and to get them to act in ways which agree. Spinoza writes, "In laying foundations, it is very necessary to study the human passion: and it is not enough to have shown, what ought to be done, but ought above all to show how it can be effected, that men, whether led by passion or reason, should yet keep the laws unbroken. For if the constitution of the dominion, or the public liberty depends only on the weak assistance of laws, not only will the citizens have no security for its maintenance, but it will even turn to their ruin."<sup>284</sup>

Moses, as explained above, introduced a religion, so that people would follow the law out of religious devotion. In this way, Moses was able to meet the people where they were, so to speak. Having just emerged from slavery, the Hebrew people were superstitious, and unused to

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<sup>282</sup> TP 5

<sup>283</sup> *TTP*, Preface.

<sup>284</sup> TP 7.2

organizing their own lives. Rather than institute the renewed slavery of despotism, Moses “Made laws and ordained them for the people, taking greatest care that they should be obeyed willingly and not through fear...Moses therefore introduced a religion, so that people might do their duty from devotion rather than fear. Further, he bound them over by benefits and prophesied many advantages in the future.”<sup>285</sup>

Without understanding how and whether a law can be effective, one cannot call a law good or bad. A good law is one that increases the power of the commonwealth through organizing the affects of the individuals in the multitude such that they orient their actions for the state and follow the law. A bad law is one that is not effective, that individuals do not follow, and thus leads to the ruin of the state. So, good and bad continue, for Spinoza, to refer to those things which strengthen the individual or the state. Whether or not a law is effective depends on the current organization of the affects of those in the multitude it is meant to rule. For Spinoza, ‘nations’ were made up of individuals, and as such were not themselves created or natural. However, history and customs shape the character of ‘nations’ or multitudes of individuals in a given political community. Spinoza writes, “surely nature creates individuals, not nations, and it is only difference of language, of laws, and of established customs that divides individuals into nations...only the last two, laws and customs, can be the source of a particular character, the particular mode of life, the particular set of attitudes that signalize each nation.”<sup>286</sup>

Customs organize the affects of the multitude, and as such play an important role in determining whether or not a law will be effective. This does not mean that all laws have to be based on custom, or that custom itself has an inherent claim to justice. Rather, Spinoza recognizes the power of custom in shaping people’s perceptions of the social world and of their own behavior and the behavior of their fellow citizens. Customs and norms provide the basis for interpretation of the significance of the behaviors of others. Laws which contravene established

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<sup>285</sup> TP, Chapter 5.

<sup>286</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

customs are less likely to be followed than laws which are based on current customs. Further, laws which contravene customs are liable to make the people rise up in ‘indignation’ against any authority which attempts to impose them.<sup>287</sup>

Uniting people using religious symbols and fear may be necessary at certain moments in the development of a particular group of people, but they were not, for Spinoza, the ideal instruments of the state. These instruments, particularly religious dogma, insofar as they barred scientific reasoning and investigation into Nature were positively harmful for human empowerment. As such, once society is stable enough that we have the ability to investigate Nature, we should not allow religious institutions to block the way to human empowerment. So, religious law might have been a good idea for the basis of the civil state in Moses’ time, but it was not the right solution for the 17<sup>th</sup> Century United Provinces.<sup>288</sup>

For those seeking to create effective laws and stable commonwealths in his own time, Spinoza in the *Political Treatise* suggested a series of measures for organizing the affects of the multitudes in three different kinds of state: monarchies, aristocracies, and democracies. What does it mean for institutions to organize the affects of the multitude? The answer to this question depends on the form of dominion, since each form of dominion has a different power ‘function’, that is, since the power of the state is a function of the power of the multitude, depending on the role of the multitude in the state, how one organizes their affects will differ.

## Monarchy

In a monarchy, one person rules, and the multitude are generally excluded from governing. In such a state, since the individuals in the multitude do not govern themselves, there must be social customs and laws which tie the multitude to the state and make them organize their affects in such a way that they will defend it. Spinoza suggests that for a monarchy to become

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<sup>287</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 5; TP 3.9; See also: Alexandre Matheron “L’indignation et le conatus de l’etat spinoziste.” *Spinoza: puissance et ontology*. (Kime, 1994).

<sup>288</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 18.

more powerful, more absolute, it should consider enacting incentives for the multitude. To ‘fortify’ the foundations of monarchy, the multitude must all have equal right in the state,<sup>289</sup> the militia must be made of only citizens,<sup>290</sup> and all land should be held the property of the monarch, with rent used for the states defense and for the king, in lieu of peacetime taxation.<sup>291</sup> To strengthen monarchies, the multitude must be divided into ‘clans’, or extended familial groups with different symbols to distinguish them and within which they can hold rank and enact hierarchies, and from which the monarch can be chosen.<sup>292</sup> Spinoza believes that this arrangement will allow the multitude some degree of organization and power but not in such a way that their power would compete with that of the monarch. All the individuals must see themselves as part of the state, and identify the interests of themselves and their clans with the power of the state. Spinoza argued that all monarchies are in reality hidden aristocracies – no individual rules alone.<sup>293</sup> So, king’s chosen from among the clans will be supported by their clan. The other clans will not necessarily resist, since their chance to provide a ruler may be around the corner.

To solve the problem of limited social knowledge on the part of individual-rulers, and to guard the laws from being solely based on the inconstant will of the king,<sup>294</sup> Spinoza suggests the creation of information gathering counsels drawn from these noble families.<sup>295</sup> Spinoza writes that supposing there are 600 families, 3-5 should be chosen as counselors from every family group and each of these to serve 3-5 years as counselors.<sup>296</sup> Spinoza creates a rather massive counsel of representatives from hierarchically organized families to inform the king of the concerns of the multitude. The main responsibilities of these counselors, Spinoza writes, are to:

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<sup>289</sup> TP 6.9

<sup>290</sup> TP 6.10

<sup>291</sup> TP 6.12

<sup>292</sup> TP 6.11

<sup>293</sup> TP 6.5

<sup>294</sup> TP 7.1

<sup>295</sup> TP 6.17

<sup>296</sup> TP 7.3

“Defend the fundamental laws of the dominion, and to give advice about administration, that the king may know, what for the public good ought to be decreed.”<sup>297</sup> The monarchy can become more powerful by increasing its knowledge of the multitude and their lives. Because the monarch is just one human individual, his or her knowledge is necessarily limited.

Spinoza writes that the relationship between the council and the king should be understood in a sense as the relation between the mind and the body. He writes, “And in general the king is to be accounted as the mind of the commonwealth, but the council as the senses outside the mind, or the commonwealth’s body, through whose intervention the mind understands the state of the commonwealth, and acts as it judges best for itself.”<sup>298</sup> The king, to secure the state, and to make good laws which will not incur the anger or indignation of the multitude of subjects, needs to always understand the current state of his state. This knowledge allows the supreme power, “To watch over the common welfare of all, and to execute whatever is to the interest of the majority of subjects.” Since the king is just one person, this knowledge of the commonwealth has to be provided by the king’s council, which Spinoza argues must be large, representative of family groups of all classes,<sup>299</sup> with the interests of each member of the council tied to the interest of the state (which Spinoza achieves through common property).<sup>300</sup> Thus, Spinoza shores up the foundations of the monarchy through social and political institutions.

Spinoza, despite the time he spends writing on how to increase the power and absolute quality of a monarchy is none too fond of this sort of commonwealth. Monarchies are dangerous, since they are ruled by single individuals, with inconstant wills and limited power.<sup>301</sup> Spinoza warns that the relation between the monarch and the people must always be one of suspicion, since the ruler is weak in comparison to the strength of the multitude. Thus, the monarch, “Must be in daily fear of plots, and so is forced to chiefly look after his own interest, and, as for the

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<sup>297</sup> TP 7

<sup>298</sup> TP 6.19

<sup>299</sup> TP 7.4

<sup>300</sup> TP 7.8

<sup>301</sup> TP 7.1

multitude, rather to plot against it than consult its good.”<sup>302</sup> A single monarch is too weak to restrain all the people effectively through fear.<sup>303</sup> So, if a monarch wants to increase the power of his dominion, Spinoza argues, he must create incentives for the multitude to identify their interests with that of the state, through institutions like the council, on which a large number of individuals can hope to serve as members, given the council’s large number and short terms.<sup>304</sup> In a monarchy, by creating institutions like familial groups and the council, the affects of the multitude can be organized in such a way that the multitude sees its best interest as aligned with the state. Because of their potential impact on the king, through the council, individuals in such a state have a stake in the continued survival and strength of the state. Spinoza writes that we must understand humans even in the civil state as individuals in the state of nature. They still retain their power, and they still are interested mainly in their own concerns.<sup>305</sup> If we can organize institutions such that ‘the concerns of the multitude’ match up with and support ‘the concerns of the state’ in such a way that by working for their own goals they support the state, then we have successfully created a strong foundation for any form of government.

### **Aristocracy**

Aristocracies, for Spinoza, conforming to the classic definition, is rule by the few, though it is probable best to say that aristocracies are ruled by the more-than-one, since Spinoza’s ruling councils in aristocracies, like in monarchies, are extremely large, given the current standards for representative assemblies. Aristocracies, more so than monarchies, completely exclude the multitude from governance. Aristocracies require the social institution of classes, and Spinoza separates the multitude from the patrician or ruling class.<sup>306</sup> Because they exclude the multitude, the patricians must fear the power of the multitude, since their power and freedom remain given

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<sup>302</sup> TP 5.7

<sup>303</sup> TP 7.12

<sup>304</sup> TP 7.13

<sup>305</sup> TP 7.22

<sup>306</sup> TP 8.1



their superior numbers.<sup>307</sup> However, they are able to sustain this power over the multitude, since the patrician-composed council is large, and this large council has more power than that of a single monarch.<sup>308</sup> Further, though a king may die, a council can continue forever, avoiding troublesome times of succession.<sup>309</sup>

To shore up the foundations of the aristocracy, Spinoza writes, the power of the multitude must be diminished and the power of the patricians increased, so that the rulers have little to fear from the multitude.<sup>310</sup> For the patricians and the multitude alike, no clans are needed. Patricians must identify strongly with their class and not with their specific family in order to unify the ruling class. Spinoza thus argues that there should be special symbols to identify the patricians. Shared symbols serve to create a unified class identity. Clan or family identification is unwanted for the multitude, since strong family groups would allow them to organize around symbols, and could potentially provide a problem for the patrician leaders. Since they are totally excluded from government, however, the multitude must be given something to tie them to the state. Spinoza suggests that private property would keep the multitude both tied to the state and preoccupied with their own economic interests.<sup>311</sup>

The aim of the shared symbols is to unify the patrician class. Since they have inferior numbers, they must exceed the multitude in superior organization and agreement. Enforcing order and the law on the patricians and on the supreme council should be taken care of by another council, whose sole job is to enforce the constitution, and to make sure that neither individual patricians nor the supreme council oversteps its bounds. Spinoza calls these constitutional enforcers the ‘syndics’ and argues that they should be appointed to lifetime terms.<sup>312</sup> Spinoza also suggests that a series of smaller councils be created to ensure various aspects of the law remain

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<sup>307</sup> TP 8.4

<sup>308</sup> TP 8.3

<sup>309</sup> TP 8.3

<sup>310</sup> TP 8.4

<sup>311</sup> TP 8.10

<sup>312</sup> TP 8.21

unbroken. Members of each of these smaller councils are to be selected from the patrician class, but are offered various incentives and disincentives to carry out their offices well. The aim of these councils is to balance out the power of the supreme council, which is very large. The supreme council needs to be large to counter the power of the multitude, yet the smaller councils must check its power so that it does not become uncontrolled and a problem for the stability of the state.

The large size of the council is important, since Spinoza believed that the more people on a council the stronger it was, not just because of the combined natural right of its unified members. Each individual has a limited amount of knowledge. Spinoza writes, “Men’s natural abilities are too dull to see through everything at once; but by consulting, listening and debating, they grow more acute, and while they are trying all means of they at last discover those which they want, which all approve, but which no one would have thought of in the first instance.”<sup>313</sup> Councils provide increased numbers of perspectives, just like the councils in a monarchy. Unlike councils in a monarchy, the supreme council in an aristocracy is supreme; it must make decisions, and so its debates must yield, at the end, a decision. This raises the stakes for debate and discussion, and yields a more reasonable decision than any particular member of the council would have thought of alone. Discussion, deliberation and debate among a large group of people yields the most reasonable and best decision. Spinoza argues the power of the large council-run aristocracy can approach near-absolute status, since its laws are most reasonable and best, since they are decided on by a large number of individuals.

Aristocracy’s exclusion of the greater part of the multitude would suggest that this form of dominion would suffer from the same problems as a monarchy, with the constant worry on the part of the patricians that the excluded multitude would overrun them if they were not disempowered and repressed. Yet Spinoza argues that aristocracy, especially in one of its forms

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<sup>313</sup> TP 9.14

(the multi-city aristocracy<sup>314</sup>) can be a nearly absolute form of government.<sup>315</sup> Again, the trick for Spinoza is creating incentives, affective incentives for the multitude through the creation of social and political institutions, which encourage the individuals in the multitude to see that their continued prosperity and safety is guaranteed only by the continued existence and further strength of the state in which they live. In a multi-city aristocracy, the individuals in the multitude are offered one more important incentive than in a single-city aristocracy, and that is the ability to emigrate from one city to another. This creates an incentive mainly for the patrician governments of each city to keep conditions pleasant enough so that their population will not leave. This also provides an incentive for the government to learn more about what makes the multitude happy, and so to consult them in some way. In such a commonwealth, the multitude can, as it were, vote with its feet. Losing population is ruinous to any state, due to the productive power that is lost with those leaving as well as the tax base.

By creating incentives which ensure that the multitude have some stake in the survival and flourishing of the state, Spinoza demonstrates that even in that least inclusive type of government, aristocracy, where the greater part of the multitude are completely excluded from participation in political life, these excluded individuals can be encouraged to align their interests with the wellbeing of the state.

## **Democracy**

Spinoza writes that democracy is the most absolute form of state,<sup>316</sup> and this is because the main problem of making a state more stable, that is, organizing the affects of the individuals in the multitude, such that by working to achieve their interests and goals they work for the increased power of the state, is made easier since the multitude are, by definition, the rulers in a democracy. This does not mean that special incentives in the form of social and political

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<sup>314</sup> TP 9.1-3, 9.15

<sup>315</sup> TP 8.3

<sup>316</sup> TP 11.1

institutions are unnecessary in a democracy, however. Democracy, as the best form of government also has the farthest to fall.<sup>317</sup> Spinoza's section on democracy in the *Political Treatise* remains unfinished, so he was unable to tell us the details of what institutions he thought necessary for ensuring the permanent safety of the freest state.<sup>318</sup>

We know that he thought of a democracy as like an aristocracy, with its council and series of checks on the power of councils with sub councils and judges, etc. However, whereas in an aristocracy, the principle of selection for the large council was based on election through some good quality, in a democracy, the principle of selection was based on birth or citizenship, or based on some base level of property or money.<sup>319</sup> In a democracy, Spinoza writes, "All who are born of citizen parents, or on the soil of the country, or who have deserved well of the republic, or have accomplished any other conditions upon which law grants to a man the right of citizenship; they all, I say, have the right to demand a vote in the supreme council and to fill public offices, nor can they be refused, but for crime or infamy."<sup>320</sup> Law, rather than some special quality and election by the council, determines who can be a citizen and have a vote in the council in a democracy.

Although we lack a section on what social and political institutions are necessary for a strong democracy, we retain Spinoza's programmatic statements about democracy being the best and most absolute form of commonwealth as well as his general principles of what makes a state more stable. From these we can develop the principles for the best and freest state, which was what Spinoza thought democracy could be. I will revisit Spinoza's conception of democracy in the section below on 'The Best State' and on Spinoza's political principles. But first, I would like to address an issue which underlies Spinoza's argument for democracy as both the freest and most absolute government.

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<sup>317</sup> TP 7.2

<sup>318</sup> With the one exception that Spinoza argued that only those who are independent can be involved in the state. TP 11.

<sup>319</sup> TP 8.1

<sup>320</sup> TP 11.1

#### IV. Stability and Freedom

There is a tension between the ideas of stability and freedom, brought out in an extreme form in Spinoza's recasting of the most 'absolute' state as democracy, rather than the usual conception of the absolute government as a monarchy where there are no popular checks on the power of the king. Spinoza thought not only that stability and freedom were essential for any state to flourish, but that stability and freedom properly understood were not really in tension at all. In this section I will explore Spinoza's views on stability and freedom to see what he could have meant by this and whether or not we can accept his understanding of stability and freedom as compatible.

##### Spinozan Stability

For Spinoza, human empowerment on a large scale could not develop without a stable political community. Even in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, where Spinoza's project of empowerment seems most focused on the individual, Spinoza writes that the goal of empowerment is one that involves the community. Spinoza writes, that one of the aims of philosophers interested in empowerment must be, "To establish such a social order as will enable as many as possible to reach this goal with the greatest possible ease and assurance."<sup>321</sup> Like Hobbes, Spinoza recognized the value of stability, and understood that the end of the civil state was the peace and security of life,<sup>322</sup> but unlike Hobbes, he was not willing to take 'stability' at all costs.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza argues that maximal freedom of the individuals in a state is not only compatible with the stability of the state, but that if such freedom were not allowed, the stability of the state was in jeopardy. The subtitle of the *Theological-*

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<sup>321</sup> TIE [14]; Spinoza goes on to outline the details of this 'social order', he writes that attention must be paid to the education of children, to the sciences of medicine and mechanics which can improve people's lives. Spinoza speaks here of attaining the 'highest human perfection', but we know from the Ethics that perfection is a measure of individual power, so the use of 'human empowerment' here is licensed.

<sup>322</sup> TP 5.2

*Political Treatise* reads: “Wherein it is shown that the freedom to philosophize can not only be granted without injury to Piety and the Peace of the Commonwealth, but that the Peace of the Commonwealth and Piety are endangered by the suppression of this Freedom.”<sup>323</sup> In the *Political Treatise* Spinoza adds that peace “Consists not in the absence of war, but in the union or harmony of minds.”<sup>324</sup> Human life, Spinoza writes, is, “Bound by reason not just by the bare minimum of existence”<sup>325</sup> Agreement, the harmony of minds, is the highest goal of the state, not slavish obedience through coercion.

Agreement cannot be forced, or coerced. As we know from the discussion of Spinoza’s rejection of the contract, above, for Spinoza, the minds and judgments of the individuals in the multitude cannot be totally controlled by the government.<sup>326</sup> People can be coerced and manipulated from time to time, they can be kept in ignorance, but they cannot be reliably controlled all the time. So, the government must always gain the assent (or at least not the dissent) of the individuals in the multitude by appealing to their judgment. The power of judgment, as well as the power of acting, and maintaining oneself are powers which the individual retains in the civil state. Spinoza writes, “Nobody can be absolutely deprived of his natural right, and that by a quasi-natural right subjects do retain some rights which cannot be taken from them without imperiling the state, and which therefore are either tacitly conceded or explicitly agreed on by the rulers.”<sup>327</sup> They remain human beings with the power to judge and exist, and these powers must be recognized by their rulers, since the judgments and the power of the multitude are the means of the ruler’s strength and weakness.

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<sup>323</sup> Thus, for Spinoza, “The sovereign right to free opinion belongs to every man even in matters of religion, and it is inconceivable that any man can surrender this right, there also belongs to every man the sovereign right and supreme authority to judge freely with regard to religion, and consequently to explain it and interpret it for himself. The supreme authority to interpret laws and the supreme judgment on affairs of state is vested in magistrates for this reason only, that these belong to the sphere of public right. Thus for the same reason the supreme authority to explain religion and to make judgment concerning it is vested in each individual, because it belongs to the sphere of individual right.” *TTP*, Chapter 7.

<sup>324</sup> TP 5.4

<sup>325</sup> TP 5.5

<sup>326</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

<sup>327</sup> *TTP*, Preface.

By winning over the multitude, the sovereign can count on the multitude using its strength to support the state. If the sovereign power alienates this multitude, leads them to a state of indignation, then the state can fall. By prohibiting what cannot be stopped, for example, by prohibiting the freedom of expression, the sovereign alienates the multitude, including its best citizens, and thereby diminishes its (the sovereign's) power. If the sovereign power in a commonwealth does not recognize and grant such liberties to the citizens (which they retain), the government cannot preserve the state in safety. Spinoza argues that rulers can, "Preserve the state in safety only by granting to the individual citizen the right to have his own opinions and to say what he thinks."<sup>328</sup>

Different people have different ways of thinking, and so Spinoza writes, "Everyone should be allowed freedom of judgment and the right to interpret the basic tenets of faith as he thinks fit, and that the moral value of a man's creed should be judged only from his works. In this way all men would be able to obey God whole-heartedly and freely, and only justice and charity would be held in universal esteem."<sup>329</sup> A state which denies people the freedom to express themselves, and enforces a dogmatic set of beliefs, carries the seeds of its own destruction, since laws prohibiting freedom of expression cannot be enforced.<sup>330</sup> I have written above that for Spinoza, an ineffective law is ruinous to the commonwealth, since it bespeaks a lack of respect for the government. Spinoza argues that freedom of expression must be given in the state, for without it, the utter ruin of the state will ensue:

If no man, then, can give up his freedom to judge and think as he pleases, and everyone is by absolute natural right the master of his own thoughts, it follows that utter failure will attend any attempt in a commonwealth to force men to speak only as prescribed the sovereign despite their different and opposing opinions...Therefore the most tyrannical government will be one where the individual is denied the freedom to express and to communicate to others what he thinks..."<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> *TTP*, Preface.

<sup>329</sup> *TTP*, Preface.

<sup>330</sup> "[Governments] can best retain this right and preserve the state in safety only by granting to the individual citizen the right to have his own opinions and to say what he thinks." *TTP*, Preface.

<sup>331</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 20.

You cannot, Spinoza argues, make a table eat grass<sup>332</sup> and you cannot make people think and judge differently than they are will to do, or to hold their tongues.<sup>333</sup> Any attempt to criminalize those things which are natural or to control those things which cannot be controlled, will only lead to the demise of the state. The law, since it cannot be enforced, will be weak and those who promulgate such a law will be treated with mockery or indignation by the people. Indignation, anger on another's behalf, is the affective source of righteousness and faction, for Spinoza, and it is the emotion that rulers should seek to avoid causing above all others, since it can unify the multitude against its rulers.<sup>334</sup>

### **Stability without Freedom**

Spinoza understands that the virtue of a political society is its ability to encourage obedience to the laws and to provide a stable and peaceful setting for the individuals in it to live their lives and increase their power. Spinoza distinguishes between the absence of war, which was enough for Hobbes civil state, and true peace, which involves the willing obedience of the multitude along with their freedom.

Peace, Spinoza writes, is not just the absence of war.<sup>335</sup> The Turks, he writes, are able to have a stable and powerful dominion, but only through reducing their population to near complete slavery.<sup>336</sup> Slaves, for Spinoza, were much more dangerous than citizens and contributed nothing to the power of the state. The weak, since those who live in fear are weak, are more dangerous than the strong, since their actions are unpredictable.<sup>337</sup> They take no account of the

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<sup>332</sup> TP 4.4

<sup>333</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 20.

<sup>334</sup> TP 3.9

<sup>335</sup> Peace, for Spinoza is not just the absence of war. TP 5.4. Spinoza continues: "When, then, we call a commonwealth best where men pass their lives in unity, I understand a human life, defined not merely by the circulation of blood, and other qualities common to all animals, but above all by reason, the true excellence and life of the mind." TP 5.5.

<sup>336</sup> Apologies to the Turks! It's not clear what knowledge Spinoza had of the Turks, but this was his example of despotic government. TP 6.4; *TTP*, Preface.

<sup>337</sup> TP 3.8



consequences of their actions<sup>338</sup> Driven to extremes and without regard for their own best interest the weak can always be a problem. Those excluded from participation in social and political life, with nothing to hope or fear from the state, are enemies of the state. Even though they may be weak, these individuals still have some power, which they could use against the state. So, every time a commonwealth excludes or oppresses a particular group of individuals, it creates for itself a set of internal enemies. Further, the state's potential power is diminished, given the dominion's opportunity costs of not working to increase their power. Since all individuals in a state are potential sites of increased power which can yield the increased power of the state, excluding or removing some from the positive column to the negative column reduces the total power a commonwealth could expect. I will discuss this at length in the section on Spinoza's principle of inclusion.

A bad commonwealth, where all live in fear, Spinoza writes, is no better than the state of nature.<sup>339</sup> Fear is a tool of those governments or forms of dominion which are weak and thus have reason to fear the power of the multitude. A bad commonwealth, in this sense, is a weak commonwealth. Governments that fear their own people are constantly plotting against them,<sup>340</sup> wasting their energies and resources fighting and repressing their own people. They also waste the energies of their own people, who could be working for the interest of the state if properly channeled. Monarchies, for Spinoza, were the prime example of dominions which had to rely on fear and the repression of the multitude more than other forms of government, and therefore were bad forms of dominion.

Monarchies were weak, according to Spinoza, because the power of the ruler, since a monarch was usually one person (perhaps surrounded by supporters) was always weaker than the multitude, whose numbers ensured that they had more power than the monarch should they organize against the government. Most monarchs, understanding their precarious position, seek to

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<sup>338</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 5.

<sup>339</sup> TP 5.2

<sup>340</sup> TP 6.4

weaken the people, so that they do not have the power or ability to organize and fight against the government. Keeping the people in the multitude poor, for example, might be one method of ensuring that they are too busy working at a subsistence level and merely surviving than cooking up schemes to overthrow the government. However, such impoverishment deprives the government of valuable revenue that it might claim from more prosperous peasants and may send its inhabitants packing, moving on to a better state, or finally, may yield a population with nothing to lose, which is the most dangerous situation for a state.

The purpose of the state is not stability at any cost, although stability is important. However, for Spinoza, as he writes in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the purpose of the state is freedom. Spinoza writes of the state:

Its ultimate purpose is not to exercise dominion nor to restrain men by fear and deprive them of independence, but on the contrary to free every man from fear so that he may live in security as far as possible, that is, so that he may best preserve his own natural right to exist and to act, without harm to himself and to others. It is not, I repeat, the purpose of the state to transform men from rational beings into beasts or puppets, but rather to enable them to develop their mental and physical faculties in safety, to use their reason without restraint and to refrain from the strife and the vicious mutual abuse that are prompted by hatred, anger and deceit. Thus, the purpose of the state is in reality, freedom.<sup>341</sup>

We leave the state of nature, and enter into political community not to become enslaved by a tyrannical ruler, but rather to increase our power and leverage the power of the other members of the community for our individual and collective flourishing. With the power and help of more people in an organized state we can be more and do more. We obey the law and the sovereign because it is in our interest to do so, and not because we are forced to do so. Obedience to the law is rational and important; however, genuine obedience to the law is a matter of individual judgment, and coercion rather than enforcing obedience works against an individuals' attachment to and obedience to the law. Obedience is not slavery. Spinoza writes, "In a sovereign state where the welfare of the whole people, not the ruler, is the supreme law, he who obeys the sovereign power in all things should be called subject not a slave who does not serve his own

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<sup>341</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 20.

interest.”<sup>342</sup> Reason, as explained in Chapter Two, is that faculty that allows us to identify what is best for us, as humans, in a world which is indifferent to our aims. Thus, the difference between a free person and a slave, for Spinoza, was not whether that person obeyed the law, but whether that person followed the law because of reason.<sup>343</sup>

Even as Spinoza changes his emphasis in the later *Political Treatise* to focusing on ensuring the obedience of subjects and the strength and power of the state, freedom continues to be an important factor as an aim for the state. Tyranny carries the seed of its own destruction, by keeping the multitude weak and fearful, tyrants waste their most powerful natural resources. Absolute power, for Spinoza, is not synonymous with maximal coercive power. The best state, from the *Theological Political Treatise* to the *Political Treatise*, is one which is the strongest and most stable because it allows the greatest freedom and power for its people.

## V. The Best State

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza argues that not only is freedom compatible with the strength and stability of a state, but that a state which limits freedom carries the seed of its own destruction. In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza shows how we can make any of the three kinds of commonwealths, monarchy, democracy and aristocracy more absolute if we properly organize the institutions which will coordinate the affects of the multitude and the rulers. In both of these works, Spinoza writes that democracy is the freest, best and most absolute state. In this section I will outline what elements are necessary to be the best state, and I will show how democracy, rather than aristocracy and monarchy, achieves these.

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<sup>342</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.

<sup>343</sup> The difference between one led by affect and one led by reason is that, “The former, whether he will or no, does those things he is most ignorant of, whereas the latter complies with no one’s wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be the most important in life, and therefore desires greatly vary.” EIVP66S “A free man, that is, one who lives according to the dictates of reason alone, is not led by fear, but desires the good directly, that is, acts, lives and preserves his being from the foundation of seeking his own advantage. And so he thinks of nothing less than death. Instead, his wisdom is a meditation on life.” E4P67D

Since the power of the state is a function of the power of the multitude, the best and most absolute state is one in which:

- a. the power of each individual is maximized,
- b. the power of the rulers is maximized,
- c. the rulers, and the multitude are in agreement in such a way that their power can be accrued to the power of the state.

## Monarchy

The ruler in a monarchy may satisfy **c**, since it is just one person and although Spinoza recognizes that each individual is complex,<sup>344</sup> and that their affects draw them in conflicting directions, we can suppose a single individual to be able to agree with him or herself most of the time. However, we cannot say that in monarchy the power of the rulers is as strong as it could be, since the monarch is only one person, and too weak to oppose a multitude of any great size.<sup>345</sup> Since a monarch, though weaker comparatively, must still try to overpower the multitude, monarchs tend to employ strategies to weaken the multitude,<sup>346</sup> to ensure that they do not form factions and overthrow the government. These techniques to weaken the multitude, however, also weaken the commonwealth, since the power of the commonwealth is a function of the power of the multitude. A very weak multitude cannot contribute much to the power of the commonwealth of which it is a part. A weak and divided multitude may not be able to overthrow the government, but it can provide a chaotic and insecure commonwealth for that monarch to rule. A weak multitude is made of weak individuals, and as we know, weak individuals cause harm to themselves and others by being ignorant of the consequences of their actions and the causes of their desires. A repressed multitude, one that lives in fear, cannot yield a truly stable state.

So, monarchies fail of **a** and **b**. The agreement of the ruler does allow one to sum the power of that ruler, however, since that ruler is only one the power of the ruler is equal to the

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<sup>344</sup> E3P17S, E3P51, E4AppXXVII

<sup>345</sup> TP 6.4-5

<sup>346</sup> TP 6.4-6

power of the ruler. In the *Political Treatise*, as we saw above, Spinoza tried to shore up the institutions of the monarchy in order to increase the power of the monarch in positive ways, mainly through increasing institutions whereby the monarch could be counseled by more people, and thus could know more about the plight of the multitude of subjects. Understanding the position of the multitude could yield increased power for the monarch, since he or she could use this knowledge to make better decisions and enact better laws which would yield the support of the multitude and thus increase the power of the monarch. So, in order to increase the power of the monarchy, Spinoza introduces mechanisms that increase the monarch's social knowledge and information about the real conditions of the lives of the multitude.

These mechanisms, these information-gathering councils which seek to understand the lives of the people, can be understood as roughly democratic mechanisms. Better laws require better information about people's lives, and the best way to get information about people's lives is to ask them, to find out how they are managing. This is what Spinoza's counsels aim to achieve. By listening to the people and actively investigating what is best for them from talking to them, the monarch can increase the power of the commonwealth. So, by enacting good laws which support the lives of the multitude and increase its power but in such a way that the power of the multitude is oriented towards and in favor of the monarch, Spinoza shows how the monarchy can become more powerful, more absolute.

### **Aristocracy**

Aristocracies come close to being the most absolute, since by restricting their leadership to the 'best', they are most likely to have laws which conform to reason.<sup>347</sup> Reasonable laws allow the rulers to agree in the strongest possible way. So they satisfy **b**, and (on one reading) maximize **c**. However, aristocracies have a multitude problem. In order to ensure agreement among the patrician ruler class, aristocracies have to exclude the majority of the population, the

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<sup>347</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.

multitude. Because the excluded class must be prohibited from gaining power, the aristocratic rulers have to pursue disempowering techniques, just like the monarch. By disempowering part of its population, aristocracies weaken the whole commonwealth. First, they disempower the commonwealth by wasting the power of the multitude, which could be rallied as a force which could be used for the state, and secondly, because they thereby create a potential mass of enemies of the state which overwhelm the rulers in number and potential power.

## Democracy

Democracies score high on all three measures of what makes a state more absolute, or at least, according to Spinoza, they have the greatest possibility of scoring high on all three. In a democracy it is possible that **a.** the power of each individual is maximized; **b.** that the power of the rulers is maximized; and **c.** that the rulers and multitude are in agreement such that their power can be summed.

Since they are maximally inclusive, democracies open up the possibility of satisfying **a.** and maximizing the power of each individual through allowing them to freely explore and understand the world and themselves. The freest state, democracy, has the best chance for having the strongest or most powerful multitude. Democracies, by leaving open the path to self-understanding provide the greatest chance for the improvement of each individually. Not needing to fear the multitude, democracies have the potential for being the most absolute state.<sup>348</sup>

Since the opportunity of participating in the governing of the commonwealth is open to all citizens,<sup>349</sup> the government is seen as more closely identified with the multitude. Each individual can hope to gain something from the government, and to participate in it. This hope<sup>350</sup> leads individuals to identify their best interests with the best interests of the government. This identification and orientation of their goals and interests with that of the state allows for **c.** for the

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<sup>348</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.

<sup>349</sup> For Spinoza, the important aspect here is that the positions are not based on some factor like birth or rank, so that anyone, in principle, could take part in the governing of the state.

<sup>350</sup> TP 5.6; *TTP*, Chapter 17.

individual to ‘agree’ with those who similarly orient their affects toward the survival of the state. Such individuals can be said to ‘love the same thing’, and as we know from the discussion of the affects in Chapter Two, when individuals love something they try to destroy that which minimizes its power and support that which empowers that loved thing.<sup>351</sup> So, individuals in such a state use their power to support that which they love, state, and they do so in concert with all the other state-loving individuals around them. Thus, their actions, as a multitude, agree; they support the same thing.

Since the power of the rulers is equivalent to the power of the multitude, since the multitude in fact is responsible for governing the commonwealth, the extent to which the individuals’ powers can be maximized is the extent to which the ruler’s power can be increased. Appreciating the importance of this requires a contrast with the relation between the power of the rulers and the power of the multitude in aristocracies and monarchies. In aristocracies, the power of the rulers requires that the power of the multitude be minimized, so that the individuals in a multitude cannot increase their power through joining together and overcoming the minority patrician rulers.

The only path to empowerment is through increasing the power of individuals toward reason where they can join together in a genuine agreement based on reason which can maximize the power of the state. This is the normative goal in Spinoza. However, it is crucial to note that Spinoza did not think that you could count on the majority of the people following reason. He did not want to set up political principles that would require reason, wisdom or control of the affects.

We are, in Spinoza’s political writings just as in the *Ethics*, unchangeably natural beings affected by forces beyond our control. We cannot escape the reality of our nature even in a democracy. However, what the principles of democracy allow is that the power of the multitude can increase without limit, since the power of the rulers is coextensive with the power of the multitude, since the multitude governs *itself* in a democracy. The multitude governs itself, but not

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<sup>351</sup> E3P19, E3P25, E3P26

in some kind of anarchistic fashion, but rather through procedures and institutions like assemblies. These assemblies are crucial for their transformative power.

Deliberative institutions like assemblies and counsels allow individuals to increase their power through expressing themselves to others and through understanding and interacting with others and the concerns of others. Individuals are weak, according to Spinoza, because of their limited understanding of themselves and the world. Recognizing others who are like them, but who have different concerns, desires and problems, increases their social knowledge, and thus increases their power. Many people coming together and discussing to make a decision yields a more reasonable decision than individuals alone.<sup>352</sup> Through participation and deliberation, individuals maximize their social knowledge and understanding of themselves, and they can further strengthen the basis of their agreement. The freest state, the best state, is the one that increases the power of its citizens.<sup>353</sup>

We know from Spinoza's political writings that individuals can join together and agree based on shared affect as well as reason.<sup>354</sup> Individuals who love the state because they have a stake in its success, and see its failure as causing the destruction of their own aims, will work to preserve and to empower the state. Love gives way to reason, since as individuals strengthen the state, they strengthen their own abilities to affect their goals in the world. A powerful state allows one to achieve one's goals in a way that would be impossible were one alone and not part of a coordinated, organized multitude. So, it is rational, according to Spinoza, to support the state, especially one so easy to love (for the multitude) as democracy.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> TP 9.14; TP 8.6; *TTP*, Chapter 16.

<sup>353</sup> E5AppVII, XI

<sup>354</sup> E4P37S1,S2

<sup>355</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 16.



## VI. Principles

What principles can we discern from the discussions above? Giving pithy principle names to several of the elements drawn from Spinoza's philosophy will allow me to refer to them in the coming chapters more easily.

### Spinoza's Principle of Inclusion

For Spinoza, the problem of the political state is one of managing the affects of those within its boundaries, and those outside its boundaries who are potential enemies.

The combination of Spinoza's ethical and political theory that I have presented above can be understood as providing us with a principle of inclusion. This principle of inclusion has a negative and a positive aspect.

In its negative aspect, the principle suggests that when we have social or political problems, unrest, excessive crime, and lack of respect for the law, that it is most likely because of those we have excluded. Something in the policy of the state has created a class of what Spinoza terms 'enemies of the state',<sup>356</sup> that is, those who have nothing to hope or fear from the state. When we exclude people, as in an aristocratic state, we need to make sure that they have as little power as possible, so that if they turn against the state, they will not have enough power to overthrow it. For Spinoza, we need to worry about the excluded, and we need to do so in two ways. 1. we have to worry about their negative affects and whether or not they could cause harm to the state, and 2. from the standpoint of the best state, we need to worry about the opportunity costs of not including them in the state, that is, what power we waste by not including individuals whose increased power could benefit the state.

In its positive aspect, Spinoza's inclusion principle provides us with the normative model of the 'best' state, which in Spinoza's terms is also the most absolute state, the strongest and most effective state. An absolute state, on Spinoza's conception is one that is participatory and

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<sup>356</sup> TP 3.8

inclusive and one in which the power of those within it is maximized. This model provides us with a conception of what the state would be if all citizens were included and active participants in the state, with their affects maximally positive and active (that is, joyful and mimicking reason), we can judge the difference between this normative model and what we have.

Spinoza's individuals matter. Because the power of the state is a function of the power of the multitude which makes it up, the state must somehow care for or care about the power of individuals. Many states have not understood this properly, and have believed that they needed to limit the power of the people, not recognizing that the power of individuals, if maximized, if increased, could yield a more powerful state. For Spinoza, as we have discussed in the sections on his metaphysics, individuals derive their power from Nature. In an important sense, the individuals are all there is. If we connected them there would be no excess. Individuals here of course would mean not just human individuals. Following from this, there is no real social whole or state that stands above the individuals within it. There are institutions that organize affects, and the power of individuals.

An additional principle that I will discuss further in Chapter Four is Spinoza's principle of 'agreement'. For Spinoza, strong states require that the multitude of subjects and rulers identify their 'best' with the 'best' for the state, so that they will use their power to support it. People interact with the state, either through direct participation in deliberative bodies like the councils, or through identification with the symbols and ends of the state. States become strong when the individuals within them agree, and act, as Spinoza writes, 'as if of one mind'. This 'agreement' cannot be coerced, and is a result of participation and communication within and outside the deliberative councils created to govern the commonwealth. Spinoza writes that democracy is the most absolute form of dominion, and so in the democratic state, the possibility for maximally inclusive participation in governing bodies makes possible communication among the entire multitude. In the next chapter I will bring out the elements of this agreement principle as I explore the elements of Spinoza's communicative democracy, and see to what extent it overlaps

contemporary discussions of deliberative democracy. First, I will set out Spinoza's vision of democracy and in particular his account of agreement.

## VII. Spinozan Democracy

Although Spinoza recognized that agreement among people living in a commonwealth together was desirable, he understood that human individuals will always act on their own judgment, and it's impossible to control that judgment all the time. No sovereign is powerful to command people's agreement all the time. For Spinoza, the problem of government was the problem of organizing the passions and ideas of individuals. We need more than a common power above us, we need something to orient and coordinate all of our individual powers of judgment. Spinoza argued that the best way to do this was through a certain kind of political state – a democracy.

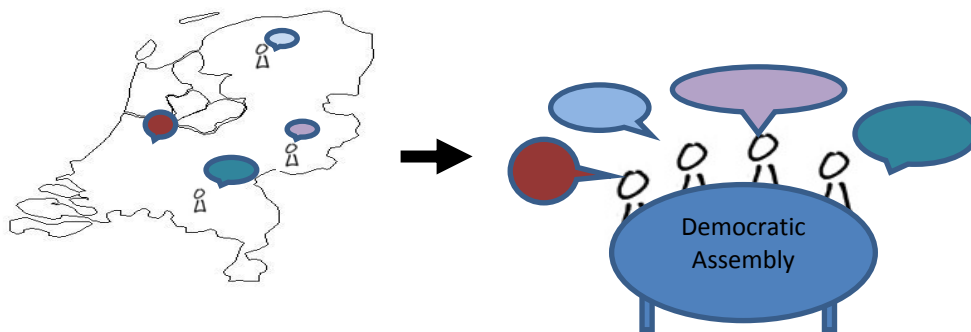
To work together for stability, we need to understand our collective goals. To decide these things, regular people need to understand something about the whole, what's best for the whole and what goals they should pursue.

Spinoza argues that a key feature of democracy is a deliberative body in which many citizens come together and discuss. Now, whether or not Spinoza's massive deliberative assemblies are possible, he thinks that something like this is important.



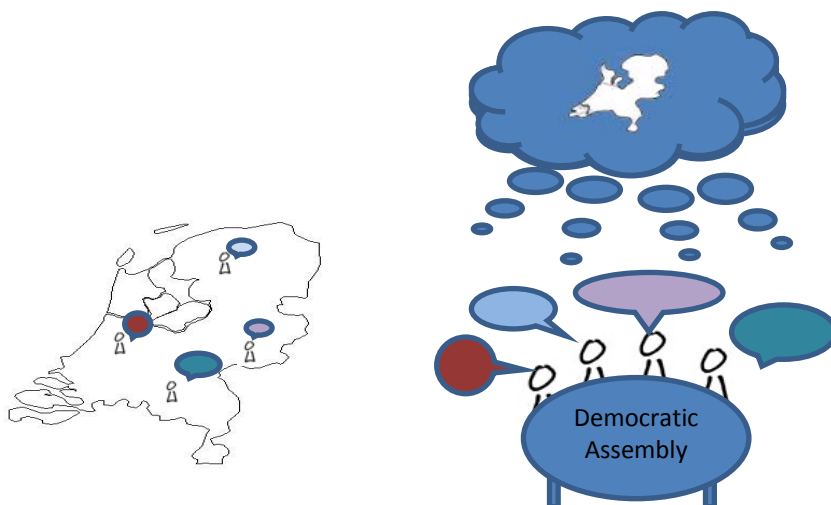
**Figure 9: Individual Perspectives in the State**

Individuals see things from their own points of view and in terms of their own situations and experiences, until that is, they are confronted by others. In an assembly, the idea is that people from throughout the state would come together and discuss the major issues facing them in particular and the state as a whole. They make decisions together which are binding on the whole, just as in the *Leviathan*, but their decisions are preceded by democratic deliberation. That is, people talk about them, they debate, they discuss. In those discussions, you get a chance for people to understand the positions of other people, and get a better idea of what is going on outside their particular area of interest and expertise, if you will. Through participating in democratic deliberations, individuals get a chance to see how their problems are connected, and to what extent they are not.



**Figure 10: Democratic Assembly**

This does not mean that agreements will be automatic, but just that this opportunity for learning about the condition of others, this opportunity to debate and to formulate the goals of the state together is important, and it is important because it is the best way of orienting the passions and the ideas of the individuals involved to work for the state and to maintain stability.



**Figure 11: Agreement**

Agreement from discussion in the democratic assembly can yield a commonwealth of the following sort:



In the assembly, the people can get a picture a better picture of the whole, from other people. Democratic communication creates a more unified picture and a more expanded picture of the world and of the things which affect the state. This expanded view of the whole can modify the individuals' understanding of the context in which their individual interests are related; it can make them more willing to coordinate their actions.

Stability cannot be ensured even by an all-powerful sovereign, since the people can still cause a problem for the stability of the state. For Spinoza, the state has more to gain by including

them through democratic assemblies in which the goals and the practices of the state are hashed out among the people. Hobbes apparent unity was just that, apparent, and could easily break down; whereas, through discussion and the creation of shared pictures of the world a democracy could better ensure stability and forestall rebellion.

Both Spinoza and Hobbes agreed that ensuring stability and coordination of action were the responsibility of a strong sovereign state. However, while Hobbes thought stability and coordination of action could be achieved through a strong absolute sovereign and little popular participation, Spinoza argued that it was only through political participation that stability and coordination of action could be guaranteed.

Spinoza's view shows that democratic participation is good for the state for the following reasons:

1. It leads to better knowledge of what is going on in the commonwealth
2. It leads to individuals in the commonwealth having a better understanding about what might be good, not only for their corner of the world, but also for the state as a whole. It thus provides a basis for individuals to understanding their particular situation as intertwined with others.
3. Because individuals make the decisions themselves, they take ownership for them, and identify with the decisions that the state makes. Since a participatory democratic state makes more people responsible for decision-making, it creates stakeholders in those decisions.
4. Thus, participatory democratic communication can lead to better coordination of action among the individuals, making the state stronger.

Spinoza also thinks that participation in democratic communication makes individuals stronger, because they know more and because they join their power with others in identifying as part of the state in identifying with the decisions made by the assembly. Since, for the most part, individuals are caught up in their particular concerns their general views are distorted by these particular interests. By coming to learn the concerns of others who are different from them, individuals participating in democratic assemblies get a better picture of the world outside

themselves. Getting a better picture of the world is one key ingredient to increasing ones' power, as we saw in Chapter Two. Further, coming to understand where one's particular concerns fit within this larger picture allows one to have a better and more adequate understanding of oneself, which is another major ingredient in increasing one's individual power, also seen in Chapter Two.

Conatus, an individual's striving, is made up of one's desires, one's conception of oneself and one's conception of those things which increase one's power, or, as I argued in Chapter Two, one's view of the world. If one has a better conception of oneself and a better or more adequate conception of those things that increase one's power, then one's conatus becomes stronger, and the individual becomes more powerful. More adequate conceptions of oneself may also yield a better set of desires, that is, desires that are based on a better understanding of who we are and the world around us.

Participation in democratic communication can affect all three elements of the conatus, and thus increase individual power. However, participation in democratic communication and the resultant empowerment does not happen to one individual alone, but to all of those who take part. Through participation in democratic communication, therefore, not only can individuals in the multitude become empowered, but they become empowered through a process of understanding one another better. The picture that emerges from such communication is not only more adequate than the previous individual-centered views, but is the product of individual communication and discussion, and so is to some extent a shared view. This is not to say that the picture of the whole that emerges from democratic discussion is completely adequate or that individuals share this common view entirely and without any difference. Again, like individual uptake of norms, what individuals 'get' out of communicating with others is difficult to predict and is rarely uniform.

### **Conclusion: Political Philosophy Naturalized**

In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza sets out to show how monarchy and aristocracy should be best ordered in order that they not turn into tyrannies, and so to preserve the freedom of their

citizens.<sup>357</sup> Spinoza reiterates his naturalistic method from the *Ethics* in the opening of the *Political Treatise*. He writes that his aim is, “To deduce from the very condition of human nature, not what is new and unheard of, but only such things as best agree with practice.”<sup>358</sup> That is, he will not mock or deride human affects, but rather will look upon them, “Not in the light of vices of human nature, but as properties, just as pertinent to it, as are heat, cold, storm, thunder, and the like to the nature of the atmosphere, which phenomena, though inconvenient, are yet necessary, and have fixed causes, by means of which we endeavor to understand their nature.”<sup>359</sup> Spinoza aims to understand the affects, how they operate in social life, and how they affect the stability of the state, and finally, what kind of institutions need to be created to ensure that humans, who are irreducibly affective creatures, can live in harmony without requiring that they become angels.<sup>360</sup> Understanding the affects does not mean glorifying them; providing a path to the improvement of the intellect or showing people how they might control their affects does not mean that Spinoza was counting on mass numbers of people to follow this road to reason. Spinoza writes that reason can do much to restrain the affects, but the road that reason points is steep.<sup>361</sup> Those that believe, “That the multitude or men distracted by politics can ever be induced to live according to the bare dictate of reason, must be dreaming of the poetic golden age, or of a stage play.”<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> TP, Introduction

<sup>358</sup> TP 1.4

<sup>359</sup> TP 1.4

<sup>360</sup> Spinoza writes, “It is not always possible for men to act according to their reason, to be perfectly free, yet he must act to preserve his existence, and whatever he does to do this is by natural right: “the law of nature, under which all men are born, and for the most part live, forbids nothing but what no one wishes or is able to do, and is not opposed...to anything that appetite suggests. For the bounds of nature are not the laws of human reason, which do but pursue the true interests and preservation of mankind, but other infinite laws, which regard the eternal order of universal nature whereof man is an atom; and according to the necessity of this order only are all individual beings determined in a fixed manner to exist and operate. Whenever, then, anything in nature seems to us ridiculous, absurd, or evil, it is because we have but a partial knowledge of things, and are in the main ignorant of the order and coherence of nature as a whole and because we want everything to be arranged according to the dictate of our own reason; although, in fact, what our reason pronounces bad, is not bad as regards the order and laws of universal nature, but only as regards the laws of our own nature taken separately.” TP 2.8.

<sup>361</sup> TP 1.5

<sup>362</sup> TP 1.5



The aim, then of a naturalized political philosophy, is to understand human affects, individually and as they affect collective social life. From this understanding, we can create institutions, which, when run by regular people with passive affects who cannot be counted on to always act in the interests of all, *force* them through affective incentives and disincentives to act in a way that in fact ensures the good of all.<sup>363</sup>

Individual humans cannot be counted on to act rationally all the time, that is, to act in their own best interest. As political administrators, they cannot be counted upon to act in the interest of the multitude they serve. So, well-designed laws and institutions play the role of reason in the state, playing affect against one another, providing affective incentives for citizens to follow the law, and affective incentives for rulers to keep and make good laws.<sup>364</sup> What this amounts to, of course, is all in the details. In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza shows how the main forms of sovereign dominion -- monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy -- can have institutions which make the governments more powerful, and which use and organize the affects of the multitude to preserve and strengthen the commonwealth.

The reader who hears an echo of here of the individual's path to empowerment through organizing the affects is not imagining things. For Spinoza, increasing the power of the state is analogous to increasing the power of the individual. Affects, which are natural, move individuals and cause their actions. To organize those actions one must organize their causes, affects. On the larger scale of the political community, made up of human individuals with their own affects, the aim is to organize these affective individuals through laws and institutions. A secondary aim, the aim of the 'best' state, is to create institutions which empower these individuals, in addition to

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<sup>363</sup> Spinoza writes: "If human nature were so constituted that men most desired what is most useful, no art would be needed to produce unity and confidence. But, as it is admittedly far otherwise with human nature, a dominion must of necessity be so ordered that all, governing and governed alike, whether they will or no, shall do what makes for the general welfare; that is, that all, whether of their own impulse, or by force or necessity, shall be compelled to live according to the dictate of reason. And this is the case if the affairs of the dominion be so managed that nothing which affects the general welfare is entirely trusted to the good faith of anyone." TP 6.3.

<sup>364</sup> TP 2.21

corralling their affective behavior through well thought out laws and institutions. Before discussing the best, I'd like to explain the rest: how Spinoza creates institutions to bolster the strength and power of monarchy and aristocracy both to increase the likelihood that they will survive and be stable, and to ensure that they do not tyrannize their subjects. Tyranny and oppression, for Spinoza were impotent political moves based on fear of the masses, which in the end only undermine the power of the state. So, even in the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza retains his motto from the *Theological-Political Treatise*: without freedom, the state cannot thrive or even persist. So, for Spinoza, all efforts which seek stability and the permanence of a dominion must preserve freedom, since freedom is an irreducible element of stability.

The best and most powerful state is one that is ruled by reason, just like the most powerful human individual is the one ruled by reason. Just as an individual led by reason is most powerful and independent so the commonwealth most founded on reason will be the most powerful and independent. Spinoza writes, "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 cannot be conceived, unless the commonwealth pursues chiefly the very end, which sound reason teaches us is to the interest of all men."<sup>365</sup> The human individual, to increase his or her power must unify their affects through understanding how they are complex and made up of parts that are pulled in different directions. From this understanding the individual must create a fiction of the self, a unified idea of his or herself which is then used to navigate the forces which affect one. Just as the individual must construct this unified self to face the onslaught of the world, so the state must unify its elements, human individuals, in such a way that they can become stronger as a collective entity. Spinoza talks about this unity in terms of agreement, and sometimes in terms of the 'mind

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<sup>365</sup> TP 3.7 Just as the individual who is led by reason is most powerful and independent; the commonwealth most founded on reason will be the most powerful and independent. Spinoza writes, "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 cannot be conceived; unless the commonwealth pursues chiefly the very end, which sound reason teaches us is to the interest of all men." TP 3.7.

of dominion’<sup>366</sup> I will explore Spinoza’s conception of agreement and reason in politics in more detail in the following chapter as we look into what this could mean in contemporary terms.

In the next chapters, I will further explore the relevant aspects of Spinoza’s political theory while introducing and examining the important issues and problems from contemporary political theory and practice highlighted by Young and Nussbaum. In Chapter Four I will consider Spinoza’s conception of reason and agreement as political ideas. Young’s critique of these notions as values for a just democratic society provides a critical background for us to see whether or not Spinoza succumbs to the romanticization of the public sphere and the notion of reason as *lingua franca*, or whether his notion of agreement is a mere idealization of human harmony, ignoring the differences between people and the real bases of human conflict, as Young would have us (justifiably) worry.

In Chapter Five, I will examine Spinoza’s conception of social norms and practices, and test the interpretation of them proposed in Chapter Two against the real-world problems presented by Martha Nussbaum in her work on development. I will seek to find whether or not Spinoza’s affect theory and its resultant social theory are better or worse than Nussbaum’s capabilities in creating a theoretical background for human development and empowerment projects. Using examples taken directly from development projects aimed at women’s empowerment, I will show that even the most practical problems of politics and empowerment can benefit from the theoretical principles based on Spinoza’s metaphysics.

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<sup>366</sup> TP 4.1

## Chapter 4:

# Agreement, Reason and Spinoza's Communicative Democracy

- I. Deliberation, Unity and Democracy
- II. Agreement
- III. Spinoza's Communicative Democracy

### Introduction: Iris Young and Spinoza

Separated by over 300 years, Young and Spinoza both argue that democratic participation serves to empower individuals and that it improves political institutions. For Young, making institutions more just involves making them more inclusive. For Spinoza improving political institutions involves making them more 'absolute' and more stable. This means allowing them to fulfill their function of empowering the individuals within them. For Spinoza, this means making the institutions more democratic, that is, more inclusive and participatory. Both Spinoza and Young propose inclusive and participatory democracy as the solution to the political problems of human exclusion and disempowerment or oppression that concerned them in their respective eras.

Spinoza lived in a time when injustice and inequality existed and were justified in a variety of ways, just like they are today. Spinoza was interested in cutting through rhetoric of justice and the powerful currents of normative political theorizing in his time, in order to argue for political inclusion and participatory democracy in a different way. Unlike the moral philosophers of his time who spent their time writing how things ought to be, but who paid scarce attention to how humans actually lived and acted and how institutions actually worked, Spinoza sought to understand humans and human behavior and to use this knowledge to create institutions which could empower individuals, and which could maximize their freedom. Spinoza argues that democracy is the best form of government because its institutions allow for the simultaneous empowerment of the individuals and the state.

Spinoza's theory of individual empowerment suggests that maximal inclusion, through joining with others, and political participation, which means actively communicating with others in the commonwealth, contributes to making the state more absolute. Democratic states are more absolute, more powerful and more stable than states with less participation, which exclude more of their citizens from active participation. Strong free democratic states were, for Spinoza, the 'best' kind of states, not just because they empowered their inhabitants, but because they were stronger and more likely to survive.

Young writes in an age of multiculturalism, and is skeptical of theories of democracy that seem to require unity or which aim to transcend the differences among individuals in the state. Young protests against any account which would presume to speak for all or which would assume that underlying the differences among people there was really a common human nature which all share. Young argues that accounts of democracy which require agreement or trade on even the possibility of the 'unity' of the people in a state are dangerous. They overlook excluded groups and they mistakenly value 'unity' which ought not be seen as a value of democratic governments. Further, she argues that those deliberative accounts of democracy which require individuals follow reason is an untenable requirement, causing the exclusion of those whose norms of conversation will not be counted as 'reasonable', and misunderstanding the reason that deliberation is important for democracy.

Spinoza's account of democracy as the 'best state' and his characterization of the 'best state' as one which, among other things, has laws which follow reason, along with his argument that the most absolute state is one in which the multitude are in agreement, where they act as if 'of one mind',<sup>367</sup> their interests harmonized with the state, would seem to fail on both of Young's criteria. I will argue in this chapter that, while Young's worries are important and while those theories that require 'commonality' among people to get democracy off the ground, as well as those that stipulate that the end of democracy is 'unity' misunderstand the nature and purpose of

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<sup>367</sup> TP 2.16; TP2.21; TP3.2; TP3.7; TP8.6; TP8.19; TP4.1; E4P18S

democratic communication. I will argue that rather than failing Young's test, Spinoza adds something to Young's conception of communicative democracy. Spinoza's system provides an explanatory background for why Young's proposals for increased inclusion and participation are sound. Through his theory of what empowers human individuals, Spinoza can show us what is really important about communication for democracy and thus, when we marry the Spinozan subject to Young's theory of communicative democracy we get a theory stronger than Young's alone.

First, I will use Young's critique of 'agreement' and 'unity' in democratic theories to bring out what exactly agreement means for Spinoza's theory. For Spinoza, agreement was not guaranteed, but rather was a normative ideal of the best state. However, this 'aim' or goal of the best state is not guaranteed. The road to non-coerced agreement, like the road to reason, is steep and success is not inevitable. For Spinoza we cannot count on people following their own best interests, we cannot count on them following reason, and we cannot count on their natural sociability to yield social harmony rather than violence and dissent. So, the question remains, if 'agreement' is the aim of Spinoza's 'best state', the end of his normative political theory, how do we achieve it?

### **I. Deliberation, Unity, and Democracy**

In Chapter One, I outlined Young's critique of the liberal conception of the subject and its use by aggregative or interest-based theories of democracy and by deliberative democracy theorists. Deliberative democracy theorists understand democracy as, "A process that creates a public, citizens coming together to talk about collective problems, goals, ideals and actions. Democratic processes are oriented around discussing this common good rather than competing for the promotion of the private good of each."<sup>368</sup> Although she prefers deliberative democracy theory to the interest-based theories that understand democracy as just a method of aggregating

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<sup>368</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 61.

the interests of separate individuals, Young takes issue with several aspects of deliberative democracy theory, namely: “Its tendency to restrict democratic discussion to argument carries implicit cultural biases that can lead to exclusions in practice. Its assumption that unity is either a starting point or goal of democratic discussion, moreover, may have exclusionary consequences.”<sup>369</sup> I will take these two objections to be 1. an objection to the restriction of democratic communication to ‘reasoned’ argument, and 2. a rejection of the idea of unity as the end of democratic communication, and a rejection of the notion that there is some good common to all in the state. Both of Young’s objections to these elements of deliberative democracy theories are important. If we really want to empower people, and we wish to do so through democratic institutions, then the way we organize and understand these political institutions matters. If requiring a certain style of speech or hoping for unity really will exclude and disempower those we are trying to include and to help, then we need to revise our democratic vision.

The deliberative democratic requirement that reasoned argument be the basis of democratic deliberation has innocuous enough origins; it is meant to restrict the kind of manipulative speech that can sway political discussions but which is without merit. The restriction to reasoned argument is meant to be egalitarian.<sup>370</sup> Since each has reason, they can each forward their own proposals and understand those of the others. They can reach a conclusion based on the merits of each position. The restriction to argument is meant to make deliberations fairer and to exclude coercion. However, Young argues that this view of reasoned argument imports cultural biases which work to exclude those who may not be as practiced in argument. Young writes, “Despite the claim of deliberative forms of orderly meetings to express pure universal reason, the norms of deliberation are culturally specific and often operate as forms of

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<sup>369</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 62.

<sup>370</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 62.

power that silence or devalue the speech of some people.”<sup>371</sup> Norms of impartiality, orderliness, and articulateness that are often associated with argument in deliberative democracy theories subtly exclude those who are unpracticed in argument or debate.<sup>372</sup> Devaluing their style of speech and insisting upon an unfamiliar way of discussing serves to disempower and exclude members of these groups. Young writes, “By restricting their concept of democratic discussion narrowly to critical argument, most theorists of deliberative democracy assume a culturally biased conception of discussion that tends to silence or devalue some people or groups.”<sup>373</sup> So, for Young, deliberative democracy theorists by insisting that argument is the only legitimate form of deliberation exclude and marginalize those who are already disempowered or who already diverge from the views of those in power.

Argument, Young argues, is not the only form of communication that is important in democratic discussions. Putting together a good argument and having something to say are two different things; Young insists it is the latter that is important for democratic deliberation. Young argues that much important deliberation comes from people who have no training in debate, and further that there are other modalities of discussion which are valuable for democratic discussions. Narrative, story telling, introductions which are welcoming are important parts of democratic communication.<sup>374</sup> Focusing on argument alone is not only exclusionary, but it presumes a level of understanding that might not be shared between groups with differing experiences. We ought to assume that democracies consist of individuals and groups who

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<sup>371</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 63.

<sup>372</sup> *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 56.

<sup>373</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 61. Democratic deliberation need not always be a debate, or an argument. Although in formal assemblies, formal speeches and arguments are given and countered, not all democratic discussion need be of this form. Requiring that democratic discussion be a formal debate means that only those with that sort of training will be able to take part, excluding important voices within the community. This means excluding those who do not know, for example, the Roberts Rules of Order. Not knowing these rules does not necessarily discount the importance of an individual’s contribution to the discussion.

<sup>374</sup> *Inclusion and Democracy*, pp. 52-80.



disagree on even the most basic ideas, and that what is required first, before argument, is understanding.<sup>375</sup>

Greeting, rhetoric, and narrative are forms of speech that serve important inclusive functions in political communication.<sup>376</sup> They serve to encourage understanding through the sharing of experiences and stories and they serve to encourage participation by showing those who are new or who are perhaps outsiders that they are welcome and that their contributions are important. Argument is important, Young insists, but it is not the only form of political communication. Before argument, a basis of understanding must be formed and the participants made to feel welcome. Without these measures, the egalitarianism of deliberative democracy is only apparent, and it recapitulates within the deliberative arena the inequalities of power found outside.

## Unity

Like her critique of reasoned argument as the sole mode of democratic deliberation, Young's critique of 'unity' or 'commonality' as either the beginning or the end point of democratic deliberation is rooted in her contention that both exclude those who are already disempowered. Those who are empowered by a particular social arrangement have an easy time making their case in public through reasoned argument and further find it easy to agree among one another. Those who are already disempowered by the status quo, however, may find it difficult to agree. If common agreement or unity is required as a precondition to take part in deliberation, then the 'difficult different' may be excluded at the beginning of deliberation. If common agreement is required as an end of deliberation, then those whose experiences clash with the norms will be pressured to agree with the rest for the sake of a common good.<sup>377</sup> Both are unacceptable to Young, but both are important aspects of deliberative democracy theories. These

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<sup>375</sup> *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 57.

<sup>376</sup> *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 53.

<sup>377</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 66.

troubling and exclusionary aspects of deliberative democracy theories require a revised conception of democratic communication.

Young disagrees with those theorists who argue that the aim of democratic deliberation is shedding one's particularity in an effort to achieve agreement or unity. Young worries that appeal to the 'common good' may silence the views of those who are too different, or whose experiences and demands challenge the status quo. Young writes, "When discussion participants aim at unity, the appeal to a common good in which they are all supposed to leave behind their particular experiences and interests, the perspectives of the privileged are likely to dominate the definition of that common good."<sup>378</sup> Those who are disadvantaged by the status quo, then, in a deliberative situation will speak about how they are disadvantaged. But their nay saying to the status quo can easily be interpreted as troublemaking, and Young worries that differences in power outside the discussion come into play within the deliberative sphere as well. If the goal of the discussion is to forge a common good by forgetting or putting aside differences, it is those who are *more* different and less powerful, those who are already marginalized and excluded who will have more to lose in agreeing with the others. Differences, for Young, are irreducible and ought not to be seen as things to overcome or transcend entirely. She worries about the ways that the goals of unity further exclude those whose values and experiences stray furthest from the mainstream, those who are already vulnerable.

### **Young's Communicative Democracy**

Young's positive program, her theory of communicative democracy, aims to recognize the importance of a variety of methods of communication, and is not limited to reasoned argument. The important features of Young's communicative democracy are its emphasis on the transformative power of democratic communication. Young wants to understand democratic

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<sup>378</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 66.

communication as dialogic,<sup>379</sup> where transformation comes not only from listening to the views and stories of others, but having to express one's own views and experience in ways that they will be comprehensible and accepted by others. When people come together to deliberate, they cannot just say what they want, without any appeal to the justice or rightness of their opinion, Young writes, "Instead, they must appeal to others by presenting proposals they claim are just or good or that others ought to accept. In this process, people's own initial preferences are transformed from subjective desires to objective claims, and the content of these preferences must also often change to make them publicly expressible, as claims of entitlement or what's right. People's ideas about the solution to collective problems are also sometimes transformed by listening to and learning about the point of view of others."<sup>380</sup>

Political communication, on Young's theory, is a way for differently situated individuals to tell their stories and experience. Although she does not believe the outcome of democratic communication must be agreement or yield unity,<sup>381</sup> Young believes that political communication plays an important role in transforming individual preferences. Young explains how preferences can be transformed through communication:

While not abandoning their own perspective, through listening across difference each position can come to understand something about the ways proposals and claims affect others differently situated. By internalizing this mediated understanding of plural positions to some extent, participants gain a wider picture of the social processes in which their own experience is embedded. This greater social objectivity increases their wisdom for arriving at just solutions to collective problems.<sup>382</sup>

Young makes this de-personalizing aspect of political communication a central aspect of her theory, which she refers to as 'self-transcendence.'<sup>383</sup> In coming to discuss with others, we need to listen to them and to understand what they are saying we need to take seriously the reality of outlooks different than our own. Deliberative theorists, when they require democratic deliberators to be unified or have something in common from the start, miss the important

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<sup>379</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 39.

<sup>380</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 68.

<sup>381</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 66.

<sup>382</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 69.

<sup>383</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 66.

transformative effect of being confronted with a conflicting view, the view of someone with different values and experience. The experience of having to take those with differing views seriously, for Young, is the engine or mechanism which leads to transforming preferences.

Spinoza sees political communication in a similar way. For Spinoza, the practice of coming to understand the position and difference of others is not only important to keep democracies strong, but is also a key step in individual empowerment. One of the consistent mistakes that humans make is to understand the world as somehow made entirely for them. However, thinking that nature is designed for one's own good not only distorts one's perceptions of the way the world and nature actually operate, but it can be cause for a rather rude awakening, when we expect an indifferent nature to take care of our needs. Coming to recognize not only that the world is indifferent to our needs and that we are impinged upon by myriad external forces outside our control is a first step to understanding the world.

Understanding our own view of the world as one among many, and as based in our very limited experience and projects in the world is an important part of leaving behind this mistaken ego-centric view of Nature. Democratic deliberations with others, for Spinoza offer excellent opportunities for individuals to be challenged by the different views and experiences of other individuals. These discussions empower individuals because of this potential they have for shaking up individuals egocentric conceptions of the world. Participation in communicative democratic spaces also empowers in the sense that it allows individuals to learn about the experiences of others and thus get a better picture of the world.

Participants in discussion may not adopt one another's views, but understating this other view and knowing that such different views exist increase the power of individuals. So, for Spinoza and for Young 'self-transcendence' plays an important role in individual empowerment through transforming individual preferences and through increasing their social knowledge.<sup>384</sup> Through coming to understand the different perspective of others, we come to learn more about

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<sup>384</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p. 66.

the social world in which we all exist, and by which our experiences and lives are affected. In strictly Spinozan terms, we do not transcend the self, through this process. Rather, through better understanding those around us, we come to have a better understanding both of the world we share and a better idea of ourselves.

For Young, as for Spinoza, individuals' experiences and situations are intertwined and interrelated. Structures which empower one group disempower another, so in coming together to discuss their situation and to make decisions together, they have the opportunity to gain a better picture of the whole in which they all are parts. This social knowledge yields better 'social objectivity', a better sense of how their individual problems are related and different. Being a part of a whole allows individuals to be different and yet to share a common situation – to be affected, albeit in different ways – by that relation of being a part in the same whole. Because our lives are affected by the same forces, we have reason to interact and discuss. Understanding that whole means understanding the condition of the parts and what forces affect the parts, especially when individuals are differentially affected.

## II. Agreement

Young's primary target in her critique of the requirement of harmony in the history of philosophy is Rousseau, and his notion of the 'general will' as a faculty to which those within the state can appeal. This notion of an impartial will galls Young, as it misunderstands the material basis of human cognition and the historical and social circumstances in which individuals develop their preferences and goals.<sup>385</sup> While Spinoza sees agreement as an important part of political life, and as an outcome of democratic communication, he emphatically does not rely on the pre-harmonization of wills inside each and every one of the citizens to yield the stability and

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<sup>385</sup> Young rejects what she calls the 'Rousseauist dream' of transparency, consensus, and harmony of all persons. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 230-236.

agreement necessary for the state to persist and to flourish.<sup>386</sup> Agreement in Spinoza is not akin to the general will, nor is it exactly comparable to the ‘common good’, at least the common good as discussed in Spinoza’s time by neo-Aristotelians.<sup>387</sup> Spinoza’s conception of agreement, and especially the kind of agreement which is more and more reasonable, that is yielded by the best state has institutional preconditions that neither of these other conceptions include. In this section I will show how Spinoza’s conception of ‘agreement’ does not succeed through exclusion and does not require a quasi-mystical agreement of minds.

Agreement plays an important role in Spinoza’s understanding of how a state or even a group of individuals can become more powerful. As we know from Chapter 3, the power of a state is a function of the power of the multitude. But what this function consists in remains to be determined. We cannot merely sum the power of the individuals in a multitude, even in a democracy, since we do not know yet what the relations are between the individuals. Spinoza expresses this by distinguishing between ‘the power of the multitude’ and the ‘power of all the individuals in the multitude’.<sup>388</sup> Spinoza explains:

The right of the supreme authorities is nothing else than simple natural right, limited, indeed, by the power, not of every individual, but of the multitude, which is guided, as it were, by one mind—that is, as each individual in the state of nature, so the body and mind of a dominion have as much right as they have power.<sup>389</sup>

Agreement, for Spinoza, is the extent to which individuals in the multitude can be said to be ‘guided by one mind’.<sup>390</sup> This notion sounds to the contemporary ear a rather frightening note, seeming to require complete of hegemony of viewpoints in the state. The idea that the people

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<sup>386</sup> There is no general will in Spinoza, because for Spinoza there is no will, there are only separate volitions. E2P49D2. For Spinoza, the will is a universal idea that we use to explain those individual volitions E2P49S[III.B.i].

<sup>387</sup> There is not enough time to go into this here, but an excellent book on the subject is Kempshall’s *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Under some definitions of the common good Spinoza’s account of agreement may count, but how it is reached, its connection to reason and to democratic institutions set it apart from most notions of the common good.

<sup>388</sup> Readers familiar with Rousseau’s distinction between the general will and the ‘will of all’ from *The Social Contract* will notice a parallel here.

<sup>389</sup> TP 3.2

<sup>390</sup> TP 2.16; TP 2.21; TP 3.2; TP 3.7; TP 8.6; TP 8.19; TP4.1; E4P18S

would be ‘of one mind’ suggests a degree of unity which in our multicultural world is unacceptable as a precondition for a stable society. However, Spinoza also lived in a multi-cultural, multi-confessional world in which disagreements over values and worldviews, not to mention sphere of influence, ended in violence more often than not. Spinoza did not seek to paper over these problems, but rather to try to find a way to organize the state such that disagreements of these sorts (like other affects) could be channeled through institutions that would yield a kind of harmony, or agreement.

Spinoza is not suggesting that to be stable our states must become Stepfords. We have seen that for Spinoza, stability in the state cannot be one enforced by tyranny. Nor does Spinoza assume a common human nature such that there is an independent ground on which individuals can agree.<sup>391</sup> Spinoza recognizes the reality of human diversity and yet believes humans can come to agree in the state in a way that is not superstitious, chauvinistic or coerced. In this chapter, I will investigate what this notion of agreement and the conception of reason in Spinoza mean, how they yield Spinoza’s unique conception of democracy and how it can be brought to bear on current discussions of communicative or deliberative democracy.

For Spinoza, understanding can bring agreement, which has a unity-effect through the recognition that individuals are affected by the same forces because they are part of the same whole. Parts of a whole can still disagree, they can work together poorly, and they can be at odds. The aim of democratic discussion is in an important way to bring them into alignment, to understand their interrelations and to coordinate their actions in a way that is better for all. This does not mean, however, that they will cease being ‘different’ or somehow merge together.

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<sup>391</sup> E3P9S, For Spinoza, the essence of an individual, the nature of an individual is the *conatus* of that individual, that is, the desire (and imaginative conception of him or herself and the world). Desires are individualized, based on individual experience and the affective attachments to different objects of the individual’s experience.

## Democracy and Agreement

Spinoza's individual is a political animal. Not in the sense that society is natural, but rather that individuals have desires that outstrip their power. In order to preserve themselves and more, they must join together. Working together for common ends and involved in common projects, individuals can increase their power, and get more done. For example, three people putting together a bridge across a river, all with the same end of actually building the bridge, collect wood, string the wood together, and make something that it would be nearly impossible for each to do individually. Agreement on a common end here just means that they are coordinating their actions toward the same product. Were each collecting wood for different purposes, one to build a house, one a boat and one a bridge, the power of each would not be joined with the others, each would labor individually on his or her own project. So, a coordinated end is required for the increase in power. Coordinated ends are an important ingredient in Spinoza's conception of agreement.

Of course, a large political society is more complicated than a triad of bridge builders. Spinoza was well aware of the complexities of his own society, the role of conflicting interests and the complexity of the divisions of labor, and he understood that coordinated ends were an achievement rather than a given. He recognized that coordination of ends was in fact a source of conflict, something over which people fought.

Spinoza's life was full of examples of political upheaval, religious disagreements and open conflict. In the Netherlands, where Spinoza lived, the factions of the Orangists fought with the support of the Calvinists, who wished to see a Geneva-like new Jerusalem set up in the Low Countries, against the faction of the emerging middling classes and their 'republican' representatives in the upper-burgher regents, the de Witts. The conflict between religious would-be authorities and their republican foes broke out into numerous skirmishes and riots in the street, culminating in the murder of the De Witts in the streets of The Hague by mobs of the poor incited



to violence by Calvinist ministers' speeches against the republican regents. This event in particular occurred just outside Spinoza's home. Spinoza's political works, written within and about these conflicts, did not seek agreement to paper over these wide rifts. Spinoza could not and did not in this context presuppose the unity or harmony of wills. Spinoza's recognition of political and religious conflict, the basis of the struggle for identity in the United Provinces, yielded his uniquely modern understanding of the difficulty of agreement in political society.

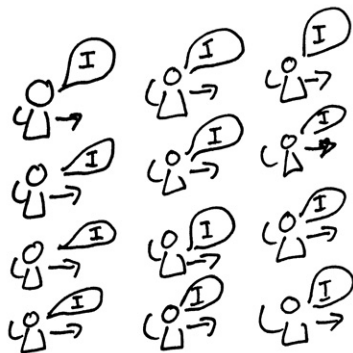
Spinoza did not see 'conflict' and 'agreement' as separated by the ideological gulf that some contemporary political theorists do. 'Politics' does not live on one side or the other. Agreement for Spinoza is not the precondition but rather the product of political struggle; it is something always up for revision and reform, or at least, it *ought* to be open to reform. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza argues that the basis of the strength of the state not only could not be threatened by freedom to philosophize, but rather could not stand strong without it. That is, only in a community where the self-understanding, the basis of agreement was open to challenge, was open to the freedom to philosophize, can this agreement be productive of the strongest form of government.

There is, we might say, 'myth of the metals' type agreement and genuine agreement. Both will be based on imaginative, inadequate understandings of the world and the community, but the latter at least is open to revision. Religious institutions, insofar as they were closed to investigation and reform and insofar as they prohibited thought and understanding represent for Spinoza a disempowering picture. Sure, these imaginative views of the world and themselves might provide unity, and for earlier generations it might have provided an effective set of customs and conceptions of the relations between humans and God, but with the advent of other ways to understand human beings and their relations to the natural world, the religious views no longer have priority. Thus, for Spinoza, critique of the power of religious pictures of the world was for him a precondition for human freedom and for the modern state.

For Spinoza, understanding is the basis of individual and group strength. Imaginative fictions, which are necessary given our limited knowledge of ourselves and the causes which impinge upon us, can be better or worse. They can leave us open or closed to new experience, which can cause revisions in the imaginative self-understanding of an individual or a community. Spinoza recognized what makes us members of a political community is an idea that we share of ourselves and our political community. What makes our communities democratic is that we have a stake in and the ability to participate in the reform of that shared idea, which includes the basis upon which we coordinate our actions. Building bridges, etc. So, participatory institutions and a shared political culture are enough to create the conditions of agreement; unity of the kind that Young fears is not required.

The state's 'self-conception' is at the level of imagination, the equivalent of the human individual's construction of a 'self' at the level of reason can be understood to be an ideally accurate picture of the state of the commonwealth. Through democratic communication, which can include argument, narrative, 'expressing one's views' however individuals choose to do so, a better picture is developed of the world that is shared.

Shared imaginative pictures do not come out of nowhere, but rather are the result of living in a shared world. Individuals 'share' a world, when they understand and are affected in the same ways. For Spinoza, again, the mind is the idea of the body, and perceptions and imaginations are caused by experience of the world, through the affections of the body. Individuals join states in order that they may more effectively be able to act in the world. This means that one of the functions of a state is to adapt to the forces of the natural world and to create ways in which the multitude in the state can best benefit from and least suffer from the external forces which determine it. By joining together individuals change the way that they are affected by the forces around them.



**Figure 12: Imaginative Agreement**

In Chapter Two, I showed that Spinoza identifies human nature, and human essence with desire, and thus seems to radically individualize human nature. There is no one general idea of ‘human’, no essence of ‘man’, but rather, there are individuals with different desires, imaginative conceptions of themselves and imaginative conceptions of the ‘world’, those external objects which increase the power of the body.<sup>392</sup>

Desire, which would appear to be the most individualized force possible, depends on one’s picture of the world and oneself, which can be changed and reordered based on one’s interactions with others. In fact, to flourish, Spinoza argues we had better join with others, since alone we are very weak, we can know very little of the world, given our weakness and limited experience.<sup>393</sup> Joining with others cannot help but expand our worldviews as we communicate our necessarily differing positions. Communicating with others increases our power, by increasing our understanding of the world, and expanding our knowledge of what increases the power of the body.

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<sup>392</sup> E3P6,E3P7

<sup>393</sup> TP2. 15. Spinoza writes that in the state of nature we are weak, not independent, and, “It is certain that the greater cause of fear every individual has, the less power, and consequently, the less right he possesses. To this must be added that without mutual help men can hardly support life and cultivate the mind. And so our conclusion is that that natural right, which is special to the human race, can hardly be conceived except where men have general rights, and combine to defend the possession of the lands they inhabit and cultivate, to protect themselves, to repel all violence, and to live according to the general judgment of all. For the more there are that combine together, the more right they collectively possess...why they call man a sociable animal...men in the state of nature can hardly be independent.” TP 2.15.

Spinoza understands that all human individuals wish others to live after their own minds, and so, they do not easily accept the advice or the rules of others. This makes individuals who are guided by their affects hard to govern, since they each want to live by their own law. However, in the state, each must follow the law of the state, and give up their individual right to choose their own way of living.<sup>394</sup> But again, Spinoza writes, we cannot magically make humans agree to follow the same law. Instead, we must encourage them either through threats of coercive power,<sup>395</sup> or through other kinds of encouragements.

Religion tries to persuade them to love their neighbors, and to defend another's right as much as his own, but this does not always restrain them.<sup>396</sup> If one actually wishes to ensure the permanence of a dominion, Spinoza argues: "Its public affairs should be so ordered, that those who administer them, whether guided by reason or passion, cannot be led to act treacherously or basely. Nor does it matter to the security of a dominion, in what spirit men are led to rightly administer its affairs. For liberality of spirit, or courage, is a private matter; but the virtue of a state is its security."<sup>397</sup> So, for Spinoza, since we are better off in a commonwealth than alone, the state is something important for all individuals. If they can be persuaded to follow one law, the law of the state, then in this measure they will be in agreement, and thus, the security of the state will be assured, and the power of the multitude in general will be increased, since for Spinoza, increased agreement yields increased power.

Spinoza understands the problem of agreement in the state as the problem of trying to make all individual agree enough so that the state can be stable enough, without relying on any group, citizens or rulers, to follow the rocky path of reason on their own. The aim of the political theorist is to devise institutional arrangements (social and political) based on an understanding of human nature which will channel human affects into a force which works for the security of the

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<sup>394</sup> TP 2.16; TP 3.3-5.

<sup>395</sup> TP 3.8

<sup>396</sup> TP 1.5

<sup>397</sup> TP 1.6

state. We must, he writes, not seek to base the foundation of dominion on reason, but rather, “derive them from the general nature or position of mankind.”<sup>398</sup> Institutional arrangements, therefore, make harmony and agreement out of the affects of the multitude and rulers of the state, through balancing and counterbalancing the affects of the individuals in the commonwealth so that subjects are motivated to obey the law, either through fear, or through some hope of reward.<sup>399</sup>

Agreement and acting as if of one mind, are, in the state, the result of institutional design, which aims to get individuals to follow the law. The law in a state organizes human behavior, and creates guidelines for a way of life. As long as individuals follow the law, they can be said to agree, and agree in nature. Insofar as they are following the law of the state, they are following reason, thus they are contributing to the power of the multitude (since if they all follow the law, they all agree in nature, and thus increase one another’s power), and therefore the power of the state (which is derived from the power of the multitude. Insofar as they follow the law, they are not following their affects to choose their course of life, and so are not being divided from others and are not coming into conflict with others on the basis of these affects. The aim in creating a firm foundation for any commonwealth consists in the following: “In laying foundations it is very necessary to study the human affects: and it is not enough to have shown, what ought to be done, but it ought, above all, to be shown how it can be effected, that is, men, whether led by passion or reason, should yet keep the laws unbroken.”<sup>400</sup> That is, one must not just say ‘people ought to follow the law’, but one must create ways that ensure that people will follow the law.

Political agreement, then, is an *achievement* of a good state. This agreement is the result of communication among the different elements and individuals in the state. Agreement in imaginative worldviews which characterizes the basis of the unity of most states is the result of the communication of affects from parents to children, yielding social norms and practices which

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<sup>398</sup> TP 1.6

<sup>399</sup> TP 3.8

<sup>400</sup> TP 7.2

most follow, and which creates a common social world for the individuals in the state to inhabit. States become more powerful, like individuals do, the more adequate their pictures of the world become. I argued in Chapter Two that for Spinoza, the more adequate one's picture of oneself and the world one inhabits (the world=the set of things that increase the power of the individual), the more the individuals desires actually empower them, the better and more effective one's actions become. In the same way, the self-conception of the state can become more adequate, and the modes of communication within the state can be improved to make the state stronger.

For Spinoza, not just democracy, but all forms of stable government must have some communicative mechanisms, by which the state of the dominion can be communicated to decision makers. For monarchies to become more absolute and powerful, the single sovereign needed help getting an accurate picture of the state of the dominion. This could be provided, Spinoza argued by a great council which would be maximally representative of the inhabitants of the dominion. Each council member could report on what was going on in their particular piece of the state pie (without question, this presentation was from their own particular point of view and expressed their own particular interests). Combining these views together allowed the monarch to make better decisions. So, the monarch could rule in a more reasonable way and make laws that were better given the information furnished by communicating with the council. Even though the council itself does not make a decision, there may still be opportunities in the monarch's purely advisory council for individuals to debate and discuss their particular interests. In democracies, this kind of communication is even more central to its basic functioning. Democratic deliberations will ideally include more individuals with a stake in the outcome of the decisions made by the democratic assembly.

Spinoza has no illusions that individuals will somehow appeal to their better-angels and propose laws or provisions that are good-for-everyone. Rather, he expects people to act normally, see things from their limited points of view, and argue for their own position. However, when this body, this council is sovereign, and needs to make binding decisions, something important

happens. Communication becomes not just single reports from individuals which are then sorted by the monarch, but the individuals themselves have to argue, debate, listen to others, and finally make a decision. Through this process of deliberation, Spinoza argues, a more reasonable decision is produced than any of the individuals could have come up with on their own. The deliberation of a large enough group of individuals, for Spinoza, produces reason.<sup>401</sup>

This understanding of the importance of democratic deliberation is derived from Spinoza's epistemology. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that partial self-interested knowledge is the basis of human error.<sup>402</sup> Of the errors that humans make in understanding the world, most come from the foundation of self-involvement. With an eye only toward their own ends and interests, humans experience the world only partially and thus inadequately.<sup>403</sup> The limits of our knowledge are expanded with the increased activity of our bodies. By perceiving or being affected by the world, we are able to gain better understandings of what is common to all things.<sup>404</sup>

Our experience is limited, and focused on our own ends and appetites, so these universal notions are often mistaken. For Spinoza, we perceive many things, and develop from these perceptions universal notions,<sup>405</sup> which order our perceptions and allow us to understand commonalities between the things that we perceive. Spinoza writes that the ideas that we have of things which are common to all are adequate, "Those things which are common to all things and are equally in the part and in the whole, can be conceived only adequately."<sup>406</sup> Experience of the world, being affected and affecting things, gives us a better understanding of how the world works, and our own power within the world. Spinoza writes that, "the power of the mind is

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<sup>401</sup> Spinoza writes, "In a democracy there is less danger of a government behaving unreasonably, for it is practically impossible for the majority of a single assembly, if it is of some size to agree on the same piece of folly." *TTP*, Chapter 16. This means that maximally large representative or governing body is able to take into account the view of the whole as much as possible, and not focus on the view of the part or partial, which appetitive wants always are. See also: TP 9.14; TP 8.6.

<sup>402</sup> E1Appendix

<sup>403</sup> E2Def(4)

<sup>404</sup> E2P14; E2P38

<sup>405</sup> E2P40S[2]

<sup>406</sup> E2P38

defined solely by knowledge, its weakness or passivity solely by the privation of knowledge; that is, it is measured by the extent to which its ideas are said to be inadequate.”<sup>407</sup>

Participation in public life allows the opportunity to if not take on, then at least to experience the idea of interests of others, and thus to open a window onto the possibility of seeing the world if not in objective than at least in inter-subjective terms. By experiencing and hearing the viewpoints of others we are able to identify what might be common, and of course, what differs in our worldviews and interests. Confronted with differences in worldviews and interests we can begin to reflect on our own values and worldviews as partial, as perspectives. Recognition of what is common helps us build stronger bridges with others and sets the stage for possible agreement. Sacksteder remarks on the importance of participation and communication in Spinoza: “engagement with political order, and sound participation in it is encouraged, in the *Ethics* under the heading of the dictates of reason.”<sup>408</sup>

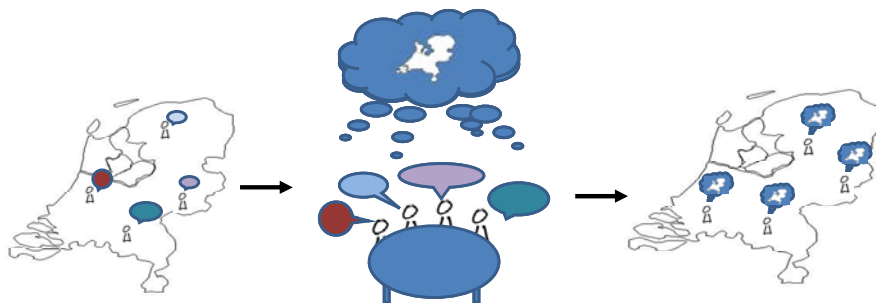
Political communication and participation in large democratic councils can make us understand ourselves better, our interests and affects, by being met with the interests and passions of others and being required to present our ideas in a public forum, to convince others. For Spinoza, collectively made decisions are better decisions; they are more likely to be in accordance with reason than individual decisions. Why? Because of the collective nature of the information, more information from different perspectives, different parts of the whole. In order to get a more adequate picture of the whole we need maximally inclusive or representative participation in these councils.

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<sup>407</sup> EVP20S

<sup>408</sup> William Sacksteder, “Communal Orders in Spinoza” pp 20-38 in Lloyd’s *Critical Assessments* (Routledge, 1999), p.28.





**Figure 13: The Results of Democratic Communication**

So, we could say that for Spinoza, the best state is the one which has the best forms of communication. Or rather, we can say that a commonwealth can become stronger through having good forms of communication. The best commonwealth, Spinozan democracy, is one whose decisions are based on the decision made by a large maximally inclusive council.

### Reason and Agreement

*Now, if men were so constituted by nature as to desire nothing but what is prescribed by true reason, society would stand in no need of any laws. Nothing would be required but to teach men true moral doctrine, and they would then act to their true advantage of their own accord, whole-heartedly and freely. But human nature is far differently constituted. All men do indeed seek their own advantage, but by no means from the dictates of sound reason.*<sup>409</sup>

Individuals, Spinoza writes, seek their own advantage. They seek with all of their power those things which they think will increase their power. However, we can fail in two ways to increase our power, first, with an inaccurate picture of ourselves and what actually empowers us, and second, with an inaccurate picture of the ‘world’, and those things in it which empower us. Even when individuals have a more adequate picture of themselves, and the things in the world which will increase their power, still individuals often see the better option and yet follow the worse.<sup>410</sup> Reason is overpowered by the affects, which even when we know better still can have power over us.

<sup>409</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 5.

<sup>410</sup> E3P2S[ii]

I have argued in Chapter Two, that according to Spinoza these pictures of ourselves and the world are developed through the social, through the play of affects that happens between human individuals. We do those things which are praised, avoid those things which are blamed, and from this meager foundation come to share an affectively marked world with the humans around us. We feel as they do (or as we think they do), and we come to see ourselves as (we think) they do. Thus, our pictures of ourselves and what makes us stronger (or weaker) are created through social interaction. Witness the recent frenzy of media attention and countless everyday discussions of the harms and benefits of ‘carbohydrates’, ‘transfat’ and ‘Airborne’.<sup>411</sup>

Etienne Balibar describes this as ‘transindividuality.’<sup>412</sup> He argues that for Spinoza’s ethics and politics, it is not so much the individual that matters for political agreement and stability, but the communication of affects. I take this to mean that it is the institutions of communication which are able to yield a powerful state, rather than requiring that each individual, or the leaders of a state be particularly wise. For Spinoza, this affective communication between individuals is organized and channeled through laws and institutions. In Chapter 3 I explained how Spinoza in the *Political Treatise*, showed how any form of government could become stable through the creation of certain social and political institutions, which included the development of private or communal property, the creation of classes, decision making and advisory councils, special symbols, etc. In the following section, I will show how and why for Spinoza the strongest and most absolute form of government is democracy, since it has the best and most natural ways of channeling the communication of the affects of the multitude.

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<sup>411</sup> Social meanings are not by any means fixed, as the diet fad examples and recent popular nutrition information are meant to show. Being a member of a community is not necessarily sharing all and only the views and pictures of the world that one’s community does, but rather being aware of the social meanings of things. Social meaning, and the array of affects that are related to social meanings, are internalized as children, but continue over a lifetime as we encounter new phenomena, objects and groups, as individuals and as ‘communities’. In teaching children and teaching outsiders what things ‘mean’ are two examples of when social meanings and their related affects and judgments are thematized. Often, the judgment precedes the meaning. One is told that something is ‘very bad’ before being told its associations or connotations, that is its social meaning.

<sup>412</sup> ‘Transindividuality’, p. 1.

## Reason and the Law

Since the state is so important and political society is necessary for human flourishing, following the law, *any law*, is generally better than going it alone. Spinoza writes that even the sage will follow a bad law rather than act in a way that will damage or undermine the state, since the sage knows that a bad state is generally better than no state.<sup>413</sup> For Spinoza, the strongest form of agreement is agreement based on reason. To follow the law in a state which is based on reason is easy for the rational individual, since all one has to do is follow one's own reason.<sup>414</sup> So, the best state is one whose laws follow reason. Easier said than done. Luckily for us, Spinoza spent some time in his political works discussing just how to get these best laws, that is, laws based on reason.

There are better and worse laws. The best laws are, unsurprisingly, those that are best for all the individuals in the state. This in itself says very little. However, the important piece here is in how we *know* what laws are better, and how we know what is *best* for all. Basically, we have to find out somehow. Whether we are running a monarchy, an aristocracy or a democracy, we need to know the condition of the state and the individuals and groups within it. Without information about the commonwealth, we cannot hope to have good laws.

The best state is that which has the best method of getting the most information, as well as the one which has methods of discerning from all the individual viewpoints and perspectives what is the best for all of them, then getting the individuals in the state to agree to what is best and follow the course that will lead them towards this best. How to discover this 'best' and how to get individuals to agree and to coordinate their actions in accordance with it become the central problems that the state needs to solve.

Let's think again of the state as a higher order individual, as a kind of body. What the body is and how it is composed affects what it can know. Thus, Spinoza's metaphysics yields a

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<sup>413</sup> E4P73

<sup>414</sup> TP, 6.3

characteristic epistemology. For Spinoza, the mind, being the idea of the body,<sup>415</sup> must have an idea of each of the simpler bodies that make up the individual. Spinoza writes, “The human mind must perceive everything which happens in the human body”<sup>416</sup>

Since the state more desires to be an individual than has to be an individual, we can reinterpret these necessities for human bodies as obligations of any state which wishes to be maximally powerful, or best. An individual human has a ratio of the motion of its parts that keep it, as an individual, together. This ratio of the motion of our parts is just that in virtue of which, as Leibniz once wrote, when the wind blows it is our hat that flies off and not our head.<sup>417</sup> A state must find a way to make the individuals within a dominion coordinate their action such that any wind that blows will not blow away a head or an arm for that matter, that is, carry off some group of citizens and lead them to work at cross purposes to the rest. Since the human individuals are not physically bound to one another in the same way as the particles of an individual human are, the rulers of a state must find ways to join them, to get them to coordinate their actions ‘as if’ they were one individual, or, in another vocabulary, to get them to obey. Since individual actions are affected by individual’s imaginative understanding of themselves and the world, the state must have an idea of its parts. To be powerful, the state must have an adequate understanding of everything which happens to these parts and between these parts. The state must have a ‘mind’ that is, which has an adequate idea of the parts that make it up.

In Chapter 3 we saw that for Spinoza the sovereign was the mind of a dominion, the monarch in a monarchy, the patricians’ supreme council in an aristocracy. For a democracy, the ‘mind’ was the entirety of the multitude, through the institution of the assembly. In a monarchy, Spinoza argued, the king was weak because his natural powers were weak, he was just one person, and so could not overpower the multitude. However, he was also weak because of his

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<sup>415</sup> EIIIP12

<sup>416</sup> EIIIP14D; EIIIP12.

<sup>417</sup> The Leibniz quotation “*cur ventus nobis capita non aufert instar pileorum?*” is from his letter to Henry Oldenburg, 28. September 1670, in: Akademy Edition, series II, vol. 1, N. 28, p. 63. I am indebted to Ursula Goldenbaum for her suggestion of this quotation and indeed for the citation.

limited knowledge of the state. Stronger monarchies are ensured with better laws, but for the monarch with such limited power, the possibility of creating good laws was limited, given the limited social knowledge of the sovereign. For aristocracies, the same follows, particularly with respect to their knowledge of the individuals in the multitude that are excluded from government. Because of the inclusive nature of a democracy, social knowledge is provided by the entirety of the multitude, making its 'mind' more powerful than that of an aristocracy or a monarchy.

Spinoza describes democracy as the most natural state, as the most absolute state, since its mode of knowledge acquisition is the most direct. Each individual knows its piece about its body and the external world directly, that is, through the individual's affects and can report as such.<sup>418</sup> Moreover, since democracies also have a great council, they benefit doubly from this better mode of acquiring knowledge, and from the rational capacities of councils.

For Spinoza, increased experience yields increased knowledge. The collective experience of the multitude that participates in the council yields better knowledge of the state of the dominion, which results in Spinoza's view, laws that are closer to reason. Because the councils are maximally inclusive, Spinoza's councils are made up of more citizens. I tried to represent this through this figure of the democratic assembly in Figure 12 above.

For Spinoza, councils allow individuals to debate and discuss and through this discussion they develop decisions which are better and closer to reason than decisions which they would have made individually.<sup>419</sup> Thus, more individuals in the democracy get to benefit from the empowerment provided by the councils' deliberation, the ability to learn about the condition of others which yields reflection on one's own position, leading to better knowledge of oneself and the world which yields empowerment. They also benefit from being more stable, by giving more of the multitude a stake in the state, which, in turn, provides the condition of the possibility for a strong and reasonable state.

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<sup>418</sup> Spinoza recognizes that 1<sup>st</sup> person reports are generally confused, but he does not therefore discount them as the basis of better knowledge. We begin our search for truth with error, and then refine.

<sup>419</sup> TP 9.14; TP 8.6; *TTP*, Chapter 16.

The aim of agreement and the aim of making the basis of agreement in the commonwealth closer to reason is to yield a stronger more absolute state. Spinoza explains: “The right of the supreme authorities is nothing else than simple natural right, limited, indeed, by the power, not of every individual, but of the multitude, which is guided, as it were, by one mind—that is, as each individual in the state of nature, so the body and mind of a dominion have as much right as they have power.”<sup>420</sup> So, the power of the government and the power of the state is a function of the power of the multitude. In a democracy, the power of the multitude, if they are in agreement, is the power of the state. That is, the state can use all of the power of a unified multitude to achieve its objectives. If they are in agreement, then they can be mobilized to fulfill the decisions of the state, since as participants in making those decisions, they are in a real sense (and not in the artificial sense in which the will of Hobbes sovereign included the will of the individual contractors since they had given up their judgment) responsible for making those decisions.

Democracies achieve unity in the multitude through the communicative decision-making councils. So, in democracies, more people participate in this decision making process, thus making the multitude stronger and making the laws better. Again, for Spinoza, participation makes the individuals in a multitude responsible for the decision that they discuss and make collectively. This participation makes it more likely that they will obey, that is, organize their own power to support this decision, since it is a decision they helped make.

### **III. Spinoza’s Communicative Democracy**

Spinoza’s conception of democracy agrees with Young and deliberative democracy theorists that individuals can change their preferences in the context of participating and communicating in decision making institutions. He further agrees with deliberative theorists that these transformed preferences can yield both genuine communal agreement, better decisions than

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<sup>420</sup> TP 3.2

might have been made by the individuals alone, and further, they reflect the increased power of the individuals whose preferences are transformed. I have argued that this aim of agreement does not have the worrisome aspects that Young fears from deliberative democracy theorists. The recognition that preferences are not given ‘once and for all’ and that self-interest, for example is without question that which is ‘good’ for an individual are hallmarks of deliberative democracy theory in the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century.

Young and Spinoza further recognize that preferences are transformed through recognizing that one is not the center of the world, and that one’s picture of the world may be based on limited experience. Communicating with others helps us get beyond our limited experience. Young calls this ‘self-transcendence’.<sup>421</sup> For Spinoza, this is an important aspect of coming to ‘reason’, that is, coming to understand the world and ourselves more adequately. For Spinoza, much of our thinking about the world is egotistically teleological; we believe that the world somehow has been shaped for our purposes.<sup>422</sup> This way of seeing things hampers our true wellbeing, since it is false. The world does not, in fact, spin for our pleasure. Coming into contact and communicating with other individuals with their own purposes and conceptions of the world helps us to see their perspectives, offering resistance to our own.

Spinoza’s theory of democracy is communicative, in Young’s sense, in that it does not require argument as the principle form of communication, and recognizes the role of social knowledge sharing in the actual practice of democratic communication. Spinoza does not require political actors to follow reason. Spinoza recognized that any political structure which required humans to be angels was doomed to failure.<sup>423</sup>

Spinoza does not require unity or that the individuals in a commonwealth agree before they come to the democratic assembly, since what is important about others’ accounts of the world and themselves is that they are different from one another’s. Each offers different,

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<sup>421</sup> *Intersecting Voices*, p.66.

<sup>422</sup> E1, Appendix

<sup>423</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 20.

importantly different perspectives on the world, which enhance the larger and ideally more adequate vision of the commonwealth that the assembly is able to construct through their deliberations. Through sharing their own perspective, participants in democratic communications help create a better picture of their shared situation. In coming to decisions as a body, they agree to coordinate their actions and to act as if of one mind, and in doing so they are helping to build the strength of the state as an individual. Again, there is nothing mysterious about this, and nothing inherently exclusionary. I have argued above, in Chapter Two, that this notion of Spinoza's that the power of individuals in a state matters forms the basis of his principle of inclusion. Individuals working together join their power, becoming more powerful than each individually.<sup>424</sup> They create a more powerful individual just so long as they agree to work together. The state is a larger version of this partnership. It is precarious, and there is a great motivation to keep all the individuals within the state cooperating.

For Spinoza, all the individuals in the state are simultaneously still in the state of nature.<sup>425</sup> There is always the possibility that they can go their own way, and leave the civil state. In doing so, however, they have much more to lose than they have to gain. The collective power that they have access to as a member of the state becomes a power not only that they can no longer appeal to, but becomes a power which they have positioned themselves against. Being a member of the state means they regain this power, the collective power of all the individuals in the state working together. Individuals alone and collectively face natural forces that are outside of their control. Individuals who work together to both understand these forces and to face them have a better chance of achieving their ends than individuals alone. This is not to say that all the individuals will share the same goals or that there is a common good or common goal for all of them in every aspect of their lives. However, insofar as they are able to agree upon certain

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<sup>424</sup> TP 2.13

<sup>425</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.



projects that do affect the whole, these projects are more likely to succeed when they work together.

Further, Spinoza's account adds something to the conception of communicative democracy that Young lacks, namely an understanding of the role of reason and role of affects. Whereas Young tells us that the affects must be engaged in deliberation through modes of address and discussion other than reasoned argument, Spinoza's account shows us *why* the affects must be so engaged. For Spinoza, reason is not a mode of argument. It is not just the province of the privileged. Reason is reserved for those laws and decisions that actually are best for individuals, where best means that which increases their power.

For Spinoza, reason is not the means of agreement or deliberation, but is hopefully the end of deliberation. The aim of the multitude of individuals coming together and discussing their particular experience for the purposes of making decisions that affect all of them, in a democratic council, is to make an informed decision that takes into account the position of all (which yields the state of the dominion), and to come up with a decision that would be better than each could make individually.

Despite their critique of instrumental reason, deliberative democracy theorists who require reason as an initial condition for engaging in collective deliberation use reason as a means. They create a barrier to deliberation on a mass scale since the initial conditions are too restrictive. For Spinoza, and for Young, reason or argument using reason is not the only or even the primary way in which people communicate. Further, the separation between right and power, for Spinoza, is nothing but a remnant of dualism which has no truth or utility, except for obfuscating the nature of human power.

### **Conclusion: Empowerment and Agreement**

Bringing together Young and Spinoza allows us to press questions which are essential for our own time; that is, what is the relation between projects of human empowerment and

agreement, or the project of harmonization of interests and views? Are they one and the same, or are they in irreducible tension?

Young argues that these cannot be one and the same. Difference is irreducible, so projects of harmonization of interests yield agreement only cover over disagreement and exclude those who might make trouble. Thus, the project of harmonization of interests serves to disempower dissenters, leaving the two projects as diametrically opposed, in Young's view. For Spinoza, the maximal level of empowerment of individuals is only possible in a strong state, which is only possible when the individuals in the multitude agree. How can we understand this seemingly impossible standard? Etienne Balibar argues that this tension between agreement and power, the seeming impossibility of yielding consensus in the democratic state was the reason Spinoza left the section on Democracy in the *Political Treatise* unfinished.<sup>426</sup>

Agreement, for Spinoza, is an achievement. The strongest type of agreement is that based on reason. Reason is that which seeks the best for humans. We do not know entirely, or even for the most part, what is best for us. Our reason is weak, and most people are ruled by their affects. Over time we have joined political communities with laws and customs meant to reign in our affects and to organize us as communities.

Spinoza's call for agreement, I have and will continue to argue, is a call for a consistent critique of all those practices which do not empower people, and a positive call to seek those practices, laws, and institutions which *do* empower individuals. Although distorted by his own conception of reason, Rousseau's call for the reform of social institutions which had accrued through time, the play of power and interest can be understood as a development of Spinoza's view of the need for critique of custom and institutions which kept people in bondage. Spinoza, however, provides a conception of reason which is not divorced from the affects, and does not have the negative associations of Rousseau's conception of reason.

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<sup>426</sup> Etienne Balibar, "Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses," *Rethinking Marxism*, III, 3, 1989.

Spinoza recognized the reality of differences in values, interests and worldviews. He recognized the relativity of what people called good and bad, noting that there were as many ‘bests’ as there were individuals with the ability to judge. However, he believed that some agreement was possible, and that it is easier to agree on those things which are actually good for us. There is nothing to say in Spinoza that this agreement would be spontaneous. Although he does not explain his views on education as extensively as his contemporary Van Den Ende did, Spinoza argues in several places that education and social institutions of such kinds are necessary to encourage agreement on the basis of reason.<sup>427</sup>

In a democracy, where individuals have the maximum of their natural right, they are the most likely to diverge, according to the Hobbesian model of the state of nature. For Spinoza, too, if these natural individuals were by themselves they would in fact diverge. However, once they enter society, they are joined through shared customs and worldviews, shared religion, etc. The political state, for Spinoza, is the next step of human development, where individuals do not have to rely on shared social customs and religious dogmas to be unified into communal groups. The hope of the state, for Spinoza, is that individuals, through sharing political community, through their shared participation in institutions which yield their identification of their own interests with the interests of the state, will become a strong political community. Spinoza acknowledges the power of symbols to unite people, both in religious states and in states like aristocracies where a strong social bond is necessary to divide the classes. However, and this may be because the democracy section of the *Political Treatise* is unfinished, Spinoza does not introduce such measures in a democracy. What Spinoza’s democracy does require is a large deliberative council.

In a democracy, the primary way agreement is achieved is not through shared religious dogma or symbols, but through maximal inclusion and participation in a deliberative assembly. Because of this institution, all individuals have something to hope from the state, and because of the nature of deliberation, in Spinoza’s view, such assemblies have the possibility of coming up

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<sup>427</sup> TIE, [12-17].

with better and more reasonable laws than any of the individuals on their own, for the reasons mentioned above. So, in Spinoza we can see foreshadowing of Rousseau and Hegel's conception of the state, the idea that the state is the highest development of reason. For Spinoza, there is nothing mysterious about this. The transformation from affect-driven individuals to a more reasonable collective decision happens through the transformation of each individual, through their recognition and opportunity for reevaluation of their own preferences and interests, and through their recognition that they are affected by forces outside themselves which affect other individuals.

Through deliberation in large councils human individuals come to understand that their own particular views may not be the only ones possible. This yields some modicum of reflection, if only to convince others of one's view. Both Young and Spinoza recognize this as one of the most important aspects of democratic discussion. Thus, for Spinoza, agreement is not guaranteed, but rather is the goal of the best state. To be strongest, agreement has to be based on reason. For agreement to be based on reason, the state must ensure the empowerment of its population, particularly if that state is a democracy. So, Spinoza's conception of agreement and reason aims at human empowerment rather than exclusion and oppression.

## Chapter 5:

### Power, Norms and Reform: Development Naturalized

- I. The Capabilities
- II. Nussbaum and Development
- III. Spinoza and Cultural Critique
- IV. Individuals and Nature

#### I. The Capabilities

Rather than critique liberalisms focus on individualism, Nussbaum argues that an expanded liberalism can be the basis of a project of human emancipation. Nussbaum, in her positive project, proposes a conception of liberalism which embraces the Aristotelian notion of natural sociability of humans and which could recognize inequality of power among individuals. Purged from her account are the principles of liberalism which were central to the early modern social contract – the idea that individuals were equal in power, the idea that justice required a civil compact, and the idea that human’s natural state was one of war or competition. In Chapter One, I outlined Nussbaum’s critique of liberalism from within, and her argument that liberalism’s principle that each individual must be treated as an end does not entail normative self-sufficiency and thus atomism, as feminist critics of liberalism suggest. Rather liberalism expresses a basic and important fact about human existence which should be protected by political institutions. Liberalism insists that each individual is separate and an end in themselves, which means, for Nussbaum that empowering people means first and foremost empowering individuals.

Using this principle of liberalism becomes a matter of great practical importance in the arena of international development, particularly in those projects which focus on how a group of individuals is faring either without aid in their home country or through the assessment of a particular development project. When we are trying to find out how a group of people is doing, we cannot just sum the happiness of all, we need to find out how each individual is doing. We

need criteria for this, but not just any criteria will do. The criteria used for such a trans-cultural project must be the object of an overlapping consensus, given the other important value of liberalism, for Nussbaum, that it does not impose one set of institutions or one set of comprehensive views on any group of individuals.

In order to furnish criteria for how each individual is doing in a society, without imposing a comprehensive view of the good life, Nussbaum produces what she calls the ‘capabilities approach’, the central component of which is a core set of human capabilities which any state should be able to ensure for each of its members.<sup>428</sup> This is a core set of ‘capabilities’ and not just resources, since Nussbaum thinks distribution of resources does not always get at the important questions of wellbeing and the conditions for wellbeing. She has created the capabilities to allow us to ascertain not what people have but more importantly for wellbeing, “What are the people of the group or country in question actually able to do and be?”<sup>429</sup>

Aggregate data, Nussbaum argues are inadequate to assess the state of a nation or community of individuals. Rather, she writes, “We need to know how each one is doing, considering each as a separate life.”<sup>430</sup> As such, we need new measures and new criteria which will allow us to judge how each individual is doing. For that, we need a model of human life, based on what makes a life ‘good’, or at least gives individuals the capacity for having a good and flourishing life. Nussbaum developed her list of the core capabilities with this in mind. Nussbaum describes the core capabilities as follows:

- 1. Life.** Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length.
- 2. Bodily health.** Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; being adequately nourished. Nussbaum also includes adequate shelter in bodily health.

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<sup>428</sup> In *Sex and Social Justice*, Nussbaum writes that her liberal principle requires the following: “It just asks us to concern ourselves with the distribution of resources and opportunities in a certain way, namely, with concern to see how well each and every one of them is doing, seeing each and every one as an end, worthy of concern.”(p. 63) This principle is one that Nussbaum thinks all feminists should adopt, since women have too often been seen as just part of the family, to be represented by the genuine individual, the head of household. (p. 63).

<sup>429</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 34.

<sup>430</sup> *Women and Human Development*, p. 60.

- 3. Bodily integrity.** Being able to move freely from place to place; being able to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction
- 4. Senses, imagination, thought.** Being able to use the senses; being able to imagine, to think, and to reason; adequate education; being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing, and producing expressive works and events of one's own choice; being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech and freedom of religious exercise; being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid non-beneficial pain.
- 5. Emotions.** Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves; being able to love those who love and care for us; being able to grieve at their absence, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger; not having one's emotional developing blighted by fear or anxiety.
- 6. Practical reason.** Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life.
- 7. Affiliation.** Being able to live for and in relation to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction. Being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.
- 8. Other species.** Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
- 9. Play.** Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
- 10. Control over one's environment.** (A) Political: being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the rights of political participation, free speech and freedom of association . . . (B) Material: being able to hold property (both land and movable goods); having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others.<sup>431</sup>

This core set of capabilities, Nussbaum argues, should supplant preference-based and household-based measures of individual wellbeing for economic and political theorists and policy purposes. Looking these over, it seems plausible that these are the kinds of resources, environmental, social and political supports that individuals need to have a good life. However, questions remain: how can we measure these, in a way that will be adequate for the purposes of

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<sup>431</sup> List taken from *Sex and Social Justice* pp. 41-2.

economic and political policy; do they include everyone; and finally, can they be implemented in the way that Nussbaum hopes, as constitutional guarantees. This last question brings up the problem of 'multiple realizability'. Nussbaum argues that her core capabilities are realizable in many different cultures, but a quick assessment of the capabilities suggest areas of capability and functioning which have been highly contested and continue to be contested in the United States and around the world. Access to reproductive health, sexual freedom, and the right of free movement are fraught issues for women as well as migrants, and it is not so clear that the capabilities that suggest that these are necessary for a good and human life will be so easily accepted by 'all' cultures, or that those groups that oppose them will be able to 'realize' them in a way that would be acceptable to Nussbaum.

Since there is much extant resistance to the norms that Nussbaum proposes, what provisions does Nussbaum make to deal with this resistance? How does she argue for the capabilities against those who deny their centrality? Nussbaum argues that her approach is outcome oriented. Since any cultural or political resistance to the capabilities would undermine their being instituted, how does Nussbaum propose to answer critics and to overcome this resistance? In the next section I will address these issues of implementation of the capabilities, to show how the question of effectiveness and cultural translation of the capabilities raises difficulties which I am not sure we can answer solely drawing on Nussbaum's liberal theory.

Despite arguing that her account is multiply realizable and that she is focused on outcomes, I will argue that Nussbaum fails to take seriously enough the way that existing customs and norms resist the implementation of the capabilities. Because she does not understand the force of customs and the ways that individual affects and individual empowerment are tied to these norms, she does not provide the most important mechanism for achieving successful outcomes of implementing the capabilities. To achieve Nussbaum's goals in many areas, cultural change is needed. Cultural change involves a reform of the affects, which is no simple process,



and one that cannot succeed without understanding even the most objectionable norms and practices.

## II. Nussbaum and Development

Nussbaum has argued that liberalism is still the best theory going for those interested in empowerment projects. Nussbaum argues that the values and concepts of the liberal Enlightenment, ‘personhood, autonomy, rights, dignity, and self-respect,’ are still important in emancipatory struggles, particularly those struggles of women in developing countries. These are still “the best terms in which to conduct a radical critique of society.”<sup>432</sup> Indeed, many involved in emancipatory struggles have taken up Nussbaum’s liberal values and her approach, including development practitioners engaged in the very work that we are interested in here, that of empowering people, and in the work which Nussbaum had in mind when creating her capabilities approach, those working on development projects aimed at empowering women.<sup>433</sup> In this section I will take up a study which attempts to use Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to serve as a way to evaluate women’s development programs, to see whether the capabilities can be used to solve the problem for which they were created.

Millions of dollars are spent each year on ‘development’. Development comes in many forms, and its justice or injustice has been debated for decades.<sup>434</sup> Whether or not ‘development’ in general is a good or bad thing, whether it achieves the global redistribution of wealth and expertise or is a new form of colonization will not be my concern here. Rather, I will focus on a very specific set of development projects, those which aim to empower women, and their characteristic problems, namely, how to tell whether women are empowered by their projects.<sup>435</sup> Nussbaum’s capabilities are meant to serve as a set of criteria against which we can judge how

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<sup>432</sup> *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 56.

<sup>433</sup> *Women and Human Development*.

<sup>434</sup> See: Edelman and Haugerud, *Anthology of Anthropology and Development and Globalization*. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

<sup>435</sup> See: Martinez and Glenzer, “Proposed Global Research Framework for CARE’s Strategic Impact Inquiry on Women’s Empowerment”, (CARE USA, 2005)

individuals are doing, and so should be able to be mobilized to see whether women are doing better, that is, as a set of tools for evaluating development projects to empower women.

Nussbaum developed her capabilities approach from that of Amartya Sen, who developed them as a tool to correct previous political-economic criteria and measures roughly of 'how people were doing'. Sen argued that we could not base our criteria on people's preferences, because people sometime had deformed preferences or what he called and what Nussbaum follows him in calling 'adaptive preferences.'<sup>436</sup> Certain groups of people, e.g. the poor, become used to having less and so their preferences adapt to their circumstances, they expect and want less than those who receive more. When a development agency or a government is trying to tell how its population is faring, if they rely on measures based on individual preference satisfaction, they might count these poor people as happy or contented even though on more objective measures such as life expectancy, infant mortality, etc., they may be doing far worse than the affluent population. So, taking people's preferences doesn't work in all situations and particularly in those situations where there are many poor or oppressed people. However, Sen is an economist, and he refused to ignore the question of how to better understand the state of the welfare of the population. So, instead of solely relying on preferences as a way to measure welfare, Sen proposed coming up with a set of core capabilities that governments would have to ensure for all their members as the bottom threshold for individual welfare. These 'capabilities' could serve as a set of criteria against which one could judge the welfare of individuals which could overcome their deformed or adaptive preferences. Thus, the capabilities could allow us to say 'these people are doing badly, even if they think they are ok', which Sen thinks is important in order to change entrenched poverty, or at least not to justify it through economic or political theories which through faulty measures judge the poor and oppressed as doing just fine.

Nussbaum extends this argument to women. Women living in oppressive cultures learn to internalize these views of women and of themselves. In a culture where women are devalued,

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<sup>436</sup> *Women and Human Development*, pp. 114-115, pp. 136-142.

women will expect less of the resources which they need to survive.<sup>437</sup> Their lowered expectations lead to lowered consumption, which leads to earlier ages of death for women in these countries. So, the capabilities approach seems a good alternative to preference counting, which could easily be distorted because of oppressed women's adaptive preferences.

### **Do the tools do the job?**

Do the capabilities serve as a better way to assess individual welfare? They may seem a better set of measures than using criteria based on adaptive preferences. The main problem with the capabilities is figuring out what they should be, and then trying get other people on board. To be good liberals, which Nussbaum and Sen seem to want to be, we cannot impose our view of the good life on anyone. This is why preferences were so neat a tool; you can use them to judge how people are doing based on their own criteria. Preferences provide a common measure based on individual standards. However, once we see that preferences give us a bad measure of how the poor and oppressed women are doing, we need some thing else, and the measures which I called 'objective' above, are population measures, rather than something you can apply to individuals. Infant mortality rates may tell us that a group of people is doing poorly, but we cannot necessarily take a single individual and tell how they are doing from this index. How can we tell an individual's level of power or welfare without imposing an external standard of the good life, which would violate a key principle of liberalism?

There is no way of getting around the fact that capabilities are not always designed or approved by those whose welfare is judged against them. They are norms of which those affected are not necessarily aware and with which they are not necessarily in agreement. This does not however mean that we are being 'dictatorial about the good', or violating the liberal principle that we should not impose our own standards of the good life on others. Nussbaum argues that since she does not require 'functioning' the capabilities do not impose external standards unjustly or

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<sup>437</sup> *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 73.

limit choices.<sup>438</sup> Nussbaum argues that because she does not insist on functioning but only insists that any government should provide the constitutional guarantees that these capabilities can be turned into functioning for any one who wishes. For example, Nussbaum does not insist that women go out unchaperoned, but only that a decent government provide the capability for her to do so, by not requiring her to have a chaperone to satisfy the minimum threshold of the capability of 'Bodily Integrity'. Nussbaum argues the capabilities do not require people to use birth control or to have sex, but just that they should not be prevented from access to these things. Thus, she argues, the capabilities protect choice, and are not dictatorial. Nussbaum argues that the capabilities approach is meant to be one that respects not cultures, but individuals. She writes:

We want an approach that is respectful of each person's struggles for flourishing, that treats each person as an end and as a source of agency and worth in her own right. Part of this respect will mean not being dictatorial about the good, at least for adults and at least in some areas of choice and meaningful affiliation. But this very respect means taking a stand on the conditions that permit them to follow their own lights free from tyrannies imposed by politics or traditions. This, in turn, requires both generality and particularity: both some overarching benchmarks and detailed knowledge of the variety of circumstances and cultures in which people are striving to do well. The shortcomings of both the utilitarian and the resource based approaches suggests that we will take a stand in the most appropriate way if we focus not on satisfaction or the mere presence of resources, but on what individuals are able to be and do. General benchmarks based on utility or on resources turn out to be insensitive to contextual variation, to the way circumstances shape preferences and the ability of individuals to convert resources into meaningful human activity. Only a broad concern for functioning and capability can do justice to the complex interrelationships between human striving and its material and social context.<sup>439</sup>

However, this separation of individuals from their cultures, from the set of meanings from which they make their choices and develop their identities -- although an axiom of liberalism -- is not necessarily an easy separation for most people. Individuals' choices are developed in reciprocal relationships with those around them, and through the set of cultural meanings given bodies, behaviors and interactions with which they have grown up with and through. So, where cultural customs are challenged, it is not so clear that individuals themselves will understand the difference between the challenges to the culture as separate from a personal challenge to the choices that they make.

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<sup>438</sup> *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 70 .

<sup>439</sup> *Women and Human Development*, pp. 69-70.

If Spinoza's conception of individuals, affects, identity and customs outlined now in Chapters 2 and 4 is correct, then individuals who are raised within a set of social meanings codified in custom, then their desires, imaginative conceptions of themselves, and conceptions of the world are in part formed by their interaction with these customs. So, if these customs are challenged, they will react to this affectively, and rather negatively. A challenge to something I love will arouse anger, the challenge to something I love and which I share with others will arouse indignation.<sup>440</sup> Indignation, for Spinoza, is the most corrosive affect in the state, and should be avoided by those who are in charge of organizing the affects of the multitude. Yet, normative critique of the kind Nussbaum suggests may be just of this indignation-arousing type. Thus, their introduction into cultures which they contradict or challenge may cause serious problems. This does not necessarily mean that for Spinoza, social critique is prohibited, far from it. Spinoza's own critique of institutionalized religion and enforced dogma can be seen as attempts at social critique. However, Spinoza's theory of the affects suggests that affects of individuals are caught up with community customs and practices, and that in challenging customs we need to take account of the affective response of the individuals in the multitude. In the next sections, we will see how this connection between affects, customs and critique becomes a problem for the capabilities approach, and other approaches based on and justified through universal principles.

### **Our Norms, Their Development**

Where the 'capabilities' are conceived, how to translate them into a local idiom, and whether or not the end result can be understood by those who conceived the standard: these are real concerns in development work. In the world of international development, as a general rule, goals and projects are designed by western aid organizations or international organizations dominated by the most powerful countries. Programs are implemented in less developed

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<sup>440</sup> E3P23, TP3.9

countries, with different norms, values and cultures. Assessing whether or not development programs ‘work’ then becomes a difficult and indeed fraught process of using a conceptual frame designed in one place, with a certain history and set of values, in another place where the values, customs and practices differ with a view to seeing whether programs based on the *first* set of values have been properly implemented. This predicament mirrors a well known problem from anthropology and from philosophy of the social sciences, namely, how can we use *our* concepts to understand *their* culture. But the problem is somewhat compounded in development theory and practice, since the end result is not *understanding*, but with the need to see whether money is being well spent and whether or not western organizations are doing what they aim to do.

## **II. Nussbaum and Development: the need for standards**

Development theorists and practitioners seeking a way to assess development ‘women’s empowerment’ programs have taken up Nussbaum’s capabilities as providing ‘universal’ standards which can serve as criteria for assessing not only the current condition of women, but also investigating whether or not development programs are improving the conditions of women. In this section I will outline the argument of one set of theorists, show how they came to use Nussbaum’s standards and bring out a central tension in their use of ‘universal’ standards to measure development of individuals in specific contexts.

In “Measuring Women’s Empowerment as a Variable in International Development,” development theorists Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender write that women’s empowerment, though widely accepted as a development goal, has been theorized differently by different agencies, researchers, and NGOs making the general assessment of such programs difficult. They provide a ‘state of the field’ of women’s empowerment literature and projects in order to show how women’s empowerment has been conceptualized and measured, and to analyze the effects of policies and interventions. Malhotra et al. argue that in order to properly measure the degree of empowerment achieved in a particular development project, one needs universal standards of

freedom, happiness and power. They write that, “Universal standards are necessary to identify empowerment.”<sup>441</sup> These universal standards arise from the same place that development goals arise out of – the universal context of the international agency. However they go on to say that empowerment is always contextual, and can only be made sense of and constructed/ created within local circumstances. They write, “It is clear from the literature on gender and empowerment that the role of gender in development cannot be understood without understanding the socio-cultural (as well as political and economic) contexts in which development takes place. The concept of empowerment only has meaning within these specific contexts.”<sup>442</sup> There appears to be a tension, then, between the need to have universal standards to evaluate the success of women’s empowerment programs and the necessity of interpreting whether or not women are actually empowered in local terms.

Echoes of this tension return in their discussion of the difficulty of measuring normative change within a society. The measurement difficulties and the problems of norm assessment get us right back into the problems of who defines the project and what counts as empowerment and for whom (individuals or groups). The problem of categories reemerges in the question of how to measure and evaluate women’s empowerment initiatives. Despite requiring universal standards, Malhotra et al. find that empowerment is context specific – empirical work, they write, “Unequivocally confirms the importance of context in both defining and measuring the impact of women’s empowerment on development outcomes.”<sup>443</sup> Contextual measures might not be such a problem, if we are able to generalize from them and translate them into the terms in which the universal criteria are framed. In her arguments for the multiple realizability of the capabilities Nussbaum suggests that different communities may implement the capabilities differently. This local implementation may involve translation of the universal principle into the local idiom of

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<sup>441</sup> Anju Malhotra, Sidney Schuler, and Carol Boender. “Measuring Women’s Empowerment as a Variable in Development.” (Background Paper Prepared for the World Bank Workshop on Poverty and Gender: New Perspectives, June 28, 2002), p.11.

<sup>442</sup> Malhotra, p.10.

<sup>443</sup> Malhotra, p.17.

practices and customs. However, Malhotra et al.'s article suggests that this local translation might not be so easy, since contextual measures may not be generalizable. They write, "While our analysis suggests that the community context is very important for the empowerment of individual women, it also makes clear that the community conditions which empower women tend to be idiosyncratic rather than universal."<sup>444</sup>

The tension between a 'need' for universal standards and the recognition that any genuine measurement of empowerment is wholly contextual is palpable in Malhotra's article. At the end of their discussion, they repeat the call for universal standards, but suggest that there is a middle ground available. They write, "The contextual nature of empowerment suggests that 'universal' measures may be impossible. However, further comparative research might reveal whether some empowerment indicators are 'more universal' than others."<sup>445</sup> This middle ground, "Require[s] a balancing act between the 'universalist' principles around which empowerment must be conceptualized, and the localization of context specific indicators. The underlying structure of gender inequality are often invisible to the actors in a particular social milieu; they are often experienced as natural and, as such, unalterable. And yet individuals find ways to exercise agency, and to control others even in contexts where they are comparatively powerless."<sup>446</sup>

Whether or not principles are fully universal, Malhotra et al. believe that standards for judging whether development projects really empower women ought to come from outside. They fear that local structures of disempowerment of women will undermine and co-opt any attempts to improve women's positions. They write, "Measures of empowerment must involve standards that lie outside localized gender systems and a recognition of universal elements of gender subordination."<sup>447</sup> They go on to explain how the naturalness of gender subordination may be internalized and accepted by women, seen as unchanging. Thus, one cannot totally rely on

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<sup>444</sup> Malhotra, p. 18.

<sup>445</sup> Malhotra, p.19.

<sup>446</sup> Malhotra, p. 18.

<sup>447</sup> Malhotra, p. 10.



women's self reports, since their sense of entitlement may be diminished, and their culturally specific gender roles may give them a false or limited sense of what they are capable of, of their potential, and thus of their power.

Malhotra et al. leave us with a tension between the need for universal standards and the reality that the implementation and success of a development project needs to be negotiated in local terms and through local systems of meaning and power. Their worry about the persistence of internal norms leads them to suggest that external normative interventions are better than those based on internal values. Yet, they seem not to worry about the effectiveness of externally imposed standards and interventions. They argue that development practitioners require universal standards in order to make sense of local projects to empower women, while they acknowledge that only local or contextual measures make sense. They contrast local or contextual measures always to 'universal' measures, rather than to other particular, but external measures. In other words, they presuppose the possibility of universal measures that are not simply other particulars. They choose Martha Nussbaum's capabilities as the set of universal standards which will allow them to judge internal standards based on universal criteria of what makes a good human life.

Nussbaum in *Women and Human Development* argues that in order to seek justice in a multicultural world, we need to appeal to universal human standards of human capacities. These capacities, she writes, must be 'multiply realizable', since they are universal, there must be some indigenous version of them in each society/culture, and further, how they are implemented or protected may be different in different cultures. While Nussbaum is relatively open about how capacities can be protected in different countries, she never makes the crucial investigation of her own assumptions that the twelve capacities she identifies as basic for human life are anything but a western 21<sup>st</sup> century standard. Thus, while she takes the context of those who are charged with implementing her standards into account, she never questions what Chandra Talpade Mohanty might call her 'imperial move', the suggestion that she has access to the basic human capacities and that these ought to be enforced. She never questions the power and position of her own

culture, and thus understands resistance to her capacities as ‘relativist’ positions which cannot possibly be used to improve the lives of women. There is no small amount of power involved in identifying oneself and one’s culture as universal, and one’s opponent as particular, and in fact it is just this strategy that seems to annoy non-western feminists. In contexts where western cultural imperialism is a concern, universalistic language coming from western theorists is counter-productive.

A stark example of the ineffectiveness of Western ‘universal’ standards as yielding a serious backlash were the FGM, female genital mutilation, debates of the 1980s. Starting at a global conference for women’s rights, a group of western feminists decided to take up the issue of FGM as a human rights issue, arguing that such torture should not be allowed, and that the international community should sanction those countries where it was practiced. Rather than eliminate FGM, these interventions caused massive backlash in many African countries where it was practiced, and led to a resurgence of the practice in places where it had died out as a result, some argue, of the attention of the western media and international community in what was seen as an inappropriate and culturally-imperialist intervention.<sup>448</sup>

One of the major critiques of western feminist intervention in the FGM debate was that western feminists set themselves and their values as the universal and the standard. From these universal heights, they judged African women and African cultures as ‘particular’ in relation to this universal, as a deviation, rather than how the African feminists understood this issue, as a cultural clash. Isabelle Gunning, in her article “Arrogant perception, world-traveling, and multicultural feminism: the case of genital surgeries.” argues that this disavowal of the Western feminist of the particularity of her culture is a common problem in such situations of cultural

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<sup>448</sup> I should be clear that I am not in the least supporting FGM as a practice. I think it’s horrifying and should be stopped, and further that it cannot be justified on any basis, cultural or otherwise. The point that I am trying to bring out here is that ‘universal’ criteria, such as the capabilities are meant to be, are not necessarily seen as universal, and that if we want to make them effective, we must recognize the power and affective pull of customs and community, and find a way within these structured webs of affective meaning and imagination to forge affectively-acceptable reform of these customs, which are genuinely harmful.

clash, where the Western theorist not only has the weight of history and power behind her theory, but also the ability to disavow this history and how the power was gained, thus speaking as a representative of the universal. Critics of the feminist FGM intervention do not argue that only internal critique is necessary or justified, since African feminists in particular, seem to have an understanding that the internal politics of their cultures are bound up with international norms and institutions and with histories of colonialism in such a way that the internal and external have always been interrelated. Rather, they suggest that external interventions should be cognizant of the internal cultural and political circumstances, and of the status of the external interveners' cultural context and its relation to the internal cultural context into which they are intervening before doing so. This understanding of cultural context on both sides is important so that the intervention can be effective, so that it might improve the lives of women (instead of making them more difficult).

Because of their disavowal of their own position as informed by a culture, with a tradition and a history, Western feminists were unwilling to recognize that the African women gained much of their power from their cultural location, and that any increase in power would have to be negotiated partially in the terms of that culture. Thus, they misunderstood the importance and the power of culture, and misrecognized their standards as universal rather than the product of a specific and powerful culture with its own history. Western feminists could not understand the practices they saw, and could not understand them as voluntary, so they misunderstood them, and presented African women as victims of their culture, a picture that African women did not recognize. By treating African women as pawns in a patriarchal system, or victims of torture, they disempowered the very women they were trying to help, and further misunderstand their situation. Recognizing the power of women in their context also recognizes that they are within a political context, which any campaign for social change will have to maneuver within to be effective, and as such, should understand this context.

The issue of self-definition versus external interpretation of one's culture, life and social practices became an issue in the FGM case where western feminists' theories of universal patriarchy both motivated an international intervention effort on the part of feminists, and alienated western feminists from the women they were trying to help. They offered an external interpretation of a set of practices that meant different things to different groups of women, and who did not recognize their cultures in the theories and interpretations of these outside interveners. In fact, this interpretation from outside was seen as imperialist – supplanting the local women's self-understanding for a western narrative of power and a universalist theory of women's oppression. This universal theory of patriarchy seemed to indict local men for a set of practices in which women and men took part, and which had a different set of meanings.

Feminists in the FGM campaign were insensitive to other cultures, and seemingly unconcerned about coordinating their eradication efforts with those internal to the communities that practiced FGM. Instead of coordinating with local groups, whose positions on FGM were more nuanced and included compromise measures, FGM campaigners continued to be absolute, and seemed unable to mould their strategies and rhetoric to become effective in the communities where FGM was practiced. Legal theorist Isabelle Gunning writes, "Because of the multicultural nature of the human rights system and the sensitivities of the issue, *how* the problem is presented and discussed increases in importance."<sup>449</sup> It seemed as if western feminists did not to 'dilute' their message by making it relevant to the local context, and acceptable to local people. By failing to do so, they risked irrelevance, and made their continued interventions and invocations of international intervention seem more like coercion than political persuasion. They sensationalized the practices for media attention and to gain political support, alienating themselves and the campaign from African women in practicing countries. The "arrogance" and "perceived

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<sup>449</sup> Isabelle Gunning. "Arrogant perception, world-traveling, and multicultural feminism: the case of genital surgeries." (*Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 23 (2) 1992), p. 233.

disrespect” of western feminists for African women, “impedes dialogue and effectiveness.”<sup>450</sup> When African women, at the 1980 Copenhagen conference, and later argued that FGM was a problem, but not a priority, Western feminists accused them of aiding the victimizers. By misunderstanding and then sensationalizing the issue of FGM without being sensitive to the backlash that this caused within African women’s communities, western feminists in the FGM project distanced themselves from African women, showing their lack of solidarity and a seemingly single minded crusade to eradicate the practice. As legal theorist Kristin Louise Savell writes, “Outsider criticism that is insensitive to local contexts may indeed be ultimately counter-productive by undermining the efforts of internal critics seeking to gain cultural legitimacy for their position.”<sup>451</sup> By failing to appreciate the role of culture and of political context, Western feminists’ political tactics in some ways backfired, undermining local resistance to the practice, and increasing resistance to reform. Because of their insensitivity to the importance of culture, and their ethnocentrism, their inability to understand their own culture as specific (i.e. not universal) they reinforced arguments that understood feminist as a form of cultural imperialism. Since feminists did not take the importance of culture into account their strategies for eradicating FGM were in some instances programs that would negatively impact African women, who one would assume they were trying to help. By resisting compromise proposals for symbolic ceremonies, or for less serious types of FGM, western feminists made it clear that they were less concerned with how their program affected African women, and more concerned about achieving their goal of eliminating the practices.

The same danger attaches to Nussbaum’s capabilities, if she insists on understanding them as universal norms and refuses to recognize the very real resistance to many of the capabilities she lists in actual cultures existing today. Nussbaum’s insistence on universalism and the idea that a human life can only be worth living if it conforms to the Western standard of the

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<sup>450</sup> Gunning, p. 230.

<sup>451</sup> Kristin Louise Savell, “Wrestling with Contradictions: Human Rights and Traditional Practices Affecting Women.” ((1996) 41 R.D. McGill 781), p. 817.

good life embodied in her capabilities makes her account a bad and essentializing conception of human nature. As long as Nussbaum refuses to understand the contextual nature of power and the role of the affects in forming individual identity within and as part of specific groups with norms and practices to which the individuals within them are tied by forces more powerful than universal moral intuitions, her capabilities cannot be used to empower actual individuals. Nussbaum's capabilities may have value as an ideal of what might be best for humans, but it cannot be used to actually empower real individuals.

What does it mean to be inside a culture, a member of a society, or part of a tradition, a history? At the very least it means being part of a tradition of interpretation. This means that being a member of a culture means coming to understand the world in terms of one's culture. One is a part of a history, and this history shapes how one understands what events mean, and what institutions mean. This cultural understanding does not have to be univocal; the strands of interpretation that are available within a culture may be rich. However, the arguments between different groups within a country themselves have a history. The meaning, efficacy, and weight of a set of reasons or justifications must deal with this historical, political, cultural context. Where one is located, the political and cultural context in which one lives and wages political battles, influences the kinds of things one can argue for and the kinds of reasons that one appeals to in order to justify one's position.

In the next section I will argue that Spinoza's recognition of ways the power of affect works through customs and practices that may be harmful allows him to be able to understand the ways that customs, though harmful and arbitrary, may be strong and difficult to dislodge. This recognition of the power of customs is the first step to developing strategies to effect real change. At the same time, Spinoza's recognizes the need to develop models of what is 'best for humans', even though, as he notes, Nature is indifferent to what we want. This 'best' for humans will have to be our own construction. Spinoza simultaneously recognizes the need for standards that bring

us beyond the status quo and the need for instruments to reach our ‘best’ that use effective means for realigning the affects and imaginative views that support these harmful practices.

### III. Spinoza and Cultural Critique

Nussbaum’s capabilities would find a sympathetic ear in Spinoza, for whom life, true human life was more than the mere circulation of blood,<sup>452</sup> and peace was more than the mere absence of war.<sup>453</sup> Rather, for Spinoza, the best state was one in which each individual’s power or potential was maximized through being allowed the freedom to understand themselves and to develop their capacities through participation in the common life of the commonwealth. For Spinoza, nothing is more helpful or useful to humans than other humans, and living in community means being able to create better ways of life than any could pursue individually. Entering political community and living with others, although it has benefits, also requires that individuals follow the will of the group, the laws. The law helps bind a community. In democracies, the law offers the possibility for reform through participatory deliberation in a large assembly. Thus, law improves upon custom. Where custom is understood as the earlier affective and imaginative measures of binding together a population, law offers the possibility of challenging these imaginative visions and sometimes harmful customs. However, the law, based as it is on reason, seeking the best for humans, is as weak as human reason is weak, and the affective basis of customs may surpass the strength of the law.

Thus, for Spinoza, the relation between law and custom was a tricky one. New sovereigns with new laws needed to tread lightly and follow customs, just as the individual following reason should, in Spinoza’s view, be careful to follow customs so not to enrage the multitude.<sup>454</sup> Customs are generally longstanding and the individuals in a community have organized their affects, their pictures of the world and themselves, their identities based on these customs.

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<sup>452</sup> TP 5.5

<sup>453</sup> TP 5.6

<sup>454</sup> TIE [17].

Challenges to custom can be seen as frightening changes which threaten their identities, ways of life, and in fact which challenge their entire world view. Any attempt to change or challenge custom, will then have to understand this volatile affective and imaginative terrain. Changes to affectively marked customs and practices, to be effective, will have to follow Spinoza's plan for any real change, that is, affects will have to be understood, affects will have to be realigned (fighting affect with affect), and the power of the multitude will have to be increased through positive affects.

Spinoza's theory of the affects and institutions suggests that real change comes through individual empowerment and gradual change of harmful customs. This gradual change of customs through affective realignment is what marks the greatest change from the way that people, particularly on the left, are used to understanding change. Critique, the power of reason to identify harmful practices, is often seen as the only tool necessary for social change. Once we show that the old ways are bad or stupid or ridiculous even, they will simply disappear. Or rather, those who uphold them must be made to disappear.

Once we have a good model for what 'ought' to be, people are usually in a hurry to just make it happen. Revolution brings us from the distressing present into the utopian future with just a trivial matter of a little bloodshed. Small price to pay for implementing our ideals in a hurry. However, the affective-imaginative practices that characterize the present, whether these are good or bad, have material and affective roots in each individual. They cannot be so easily destroyed, and so the old world taints the new. For Spinoza, the idea of jumping, for example, straight to reason is impractical. Reason can be weak as a human motivational force. Spinoza despairs that we can so often see the better path, but we follow the worse, pulled by a kind of affective inertia. Insofar as reason is weak, the ideals and practices based on reason are weak, and until the affect in customs is dealt with, there will be inevitable backsliding.

Affective realignment prevents backlash as well as backsliding. When we see religious extremism today, only the most knowledgeable commentators connect these trends to



colonialism, and see the resurgence of non-western power bases rise against those marks of Westernism: modern women, democratic institutions, media culture. These targets are not accidental. They are the affectively and imaginatively significant targets. They were the most visible signs of the change introduced by western occupations, and thus were the most powerful symbols for resistance, in this case backlash. However little we may like these facts, we cannot ignore them. Taking context into account is not just a simple matter of making one's critiques 'internal' to the norms of a particular culture, since many cultures are interpenetrated by influences and caught up in an international system. There are not just local histories and local politics, but these localities are connected and sometimes constituted by international configurations. Backlash and resistance to these localized phenomena exists both on a local and international level, and they are powerful obstacles to the change of norms and customs.

External critique, amplified by a western media blitz, is a hatchet; while real change requires a more delicate instrument. Changing practices to which individuals are affectively attached requires a great deal of understanding and collaboration with others to create new affective pathways, new practices and new values which can replace the old. Spinoza's own struggle to unchain his fellow humans from the yoke of the power of religious institutions which he thought enforced their ignorance was in his lifetime ultimately unsuccessful. He listened in horror as the mob in The Hague, swept up in a fury by the Calvinist clergy, killed the brothers de Witt, the representatives of republican government in the Netherlands. His own emotions nearly overcame him, as he tried to rush out into the crowd, he was held back by his landlord.

Commentators on Spinoza's political philosophy argue that between writing the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1668) and the *Political Treatise* (1677), this episode of the de Witt's murder (1672) changed Spinoza. They argue that it made him turn against the people and

lose hope that the masses could be reasonable.<sup>455</sup> I think, rather, this episode showed Spinoza that as a group those who had no power, those who were excluded from government, could not be expected to act in any other way than as a chaotic mob. He did not blame them, but rather blamed the institutions that had led to their degraded state. Spinoza blamed the religion which sought their blind compliance. He writes, “Of the old religion nothing is left but the outward form – wherein the people seem to engage in base flattery of God rather than his worship – and that faith has become identical with credulity and biased dogma. But what dogma! – degrading rational man to beast, completely inhibiting man’s free judgment and his capacity to distinguish true from false, and apparently devised with the set purpose of utterly extinguishing the light of reason.”<sup>456</sup>

Spinoza also blamed the government institutions which excluded them from participation and which enforced their ignorance and weakness. He writes, “As for the populace being devoid of truth and judgment, that is nothing to wonder at, since the chief business of the state is transacted behind its back, and it can but make conjectures from the little which cannot be hidden...So, it is a supreme folly to wish to transact everything behind the backs of the citizens, and to expect that they will not judge ill of the same, and will not give everything an unfavorable interpretation.”<sup>457</sup> So, Spinoza argues that by excluding the multitude from rule, those forms of dominion like monarchy or aristocracy set themselves up for a difficult time of implementing the laws. Since those who have to follow the laws had no part in creating them and so have no reason to trust or to follow them. The problem is not with the multitude, since, for Spinoza, people are everywhere the same.<sup>458</sup> They follow their affects. If a state were organized in a transparent and participatory manner, the trust of the multitude could be won as well as their support. Without participation and without transparency, there is no reason why the multitude should be expected

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<sup>455</sup> See: Alexandre Matheron “Le probleme de l’evolution de Spinoza du Traite theologico-politique au Traite politique,” in Edwin Curley and Pierre-Francois Moreau. *Spinoza : Issues and Directions* (Brill, 1990).

<sup>456</sup> *TTP*, Preface.

<sup>457</sup> TP 7.27

<sup>458</sup> TP 7.27

to follow the law. Thus, it is bad institutions that are to blame for the ignorance and the unruliness of a people. If individuals were strong enough and reasonable enough to follow the law without incentive, there would be no need for laws or government.<sup>459</sup>

In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza tried to show that rather than rely on individuals to follow reason and to increase their power spontaneously, we need to design good institutions which can raise the whole boat. That is, the affective realignment of a multitude could be achieved through institutions which would try to operate in such a way that the power of all the people in the multitude could be increased through good laws and through mechanisms like education and laws which encouraged freedom of expression. The power of the state, as a function of the power of the multitude, is strongest when it uses the power of the multitude and increases the power of the multitude in positive ways which increase the power of the state. The state must win hearts and minds, not waste its power trying to enforce laws which arouse the indignation of the multitude by disrespecting their strongly held customs.<sup>460</sup>

Critics in more powerful countries, with the UN and other organizations at their disposal, have some amount of power to enforce their new norms. However, they don't have power where it counts, in the hearts and minds of those who need to accept and affirm the new norms. They need power here, and beliefs and desires cannot be forced. This is a central tenet of Spinoza's political theory, against which he demolished Hobbes conception of the sovereign. One person cannot be physically more powerful than the entire multitude. Not automatically anyway. Only through obtaining the consistent agreement and obedience of the multitude can a sovereign claim the multitude's power. Further, no one can get the multitude to love and hate what they do not love and hate.<sup>461</sup> Not directly, anyway. Only from within, using those tried and true tools which form the basis of human normativity, praise, blame, desire to emulate. In short to rule, one must understand the affects of the multitude, which can only be known locally. Further, the affects of

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<sup>459</sup> TP 2.27

<sup>460</sup> TP 3.9

<sup>461</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

the multitude can only be realigned carefully and can be realigned best through increasing the joy of individuals, allowing them to see the new norms and practices as good for them. Buy-in on the ground to a new program, a new development program, for example, is essential for success, as development professionals everywhere know. Their best practices include communication strategies, participatory mechanisms, and instruments to encourage local leadership in order to strengthen their own programs.

Communication strategies allow development practitioners to tell people what they are doing, and to provide reasons for why what they are providing is good for people, and why they might want to get involved or how they might benefit. They show in local languages and through culturally appropriate means how this new program, whether it be about health, micro-loans, or a new community center, might be good for individuals in the community. Communication strategies create a politics of representation with regard to the new initiative, shaping how local people see and understand the project. Depending on the degree of knowledge of the politics and cultural norms of a particular community, these communication strategies can succeed or fail.

Participatory mechanisms can include using local people, particularly local leadership as partners and so using their already existing power base to communicate the new program. If the new program seeks to upset local power arrangements and reform well-entrenched customs, then these strategies have to be well-designed to handle this, and again, local knowledge as well as strategic savvy will come into play determining success or failure. Nussbaum's norms, the human capabilities, seem an adequate set of principles for what makes a life livable and what set the conditions for human flourishing. If we really think they are valuable, then we should try that much harder to see what will make them succeed.

## **Rights and Power**

Nussbaum's capabilities will require institutional force to implement them. Rights, like the capabilities, require some force to back them, since otherwise they are just unenforceable

'opinions'. Spinoza writes, "In the state of nature each is so long independent as he can guard against oppression by another, and it is in vain for one man alone to try and guard against all, it follows hence that so long as the natural right of man is determined by the power of every individual, and belongs to everyone, so long is it a nonentity, existing in opinion rather than in fact, as there is no assurance of making it good."<sup>462</sup> The commonwealth only has the right to implement those things which it has the power to enforce.<sup>463</sup> The commonwealth can use hope or fear, the affects of the multitude to enforce laws. Customs express the current state of the affects of the multitude, since these are generally rules for living which the people already assent to, and around which their affects are organized. This is why Spinoza suggests that conforming to customs may be the safest way for a government to proceed in developing laws. This does not mean, for Spinoza, that customs are always the best way to organize social life, but rather that they are an affective foundation from which a strong set of laws can be built. Also, their strength makes them difficult and sometimes dangerous to unseat. Since, although customs, like religious dogma, might be harmful, it still serves the function of organizing the affects of the multitude, which when disorganized can cause even more trouble.

Spinoza would not argue, then, that the capabilities, or any set of principles which challenge harmful customs, cannot be justly imposed, but rather that capabilities, like human rights, do not matter if they cannot be enforced. To be realizable, they need to be realized, and to be realized the power and force necessary to implement them must be understood and developed. Spinoza argued that right was coextensive with power, both for individuals and for governments, and for that matter, for organizations like NGOs. Individuals increase their right as they increase their power; they increase their power through joining together.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> TP 2.15

<sup>463</sup> TP 3.8

<sup>464</sup> TP 2.15

General rights are created through agreement among a group of individuals to live, as if guided by one mind, that is, by a set of rules for living, through common government.<sup>465</sup> Spinoza writes, “Where men have general rights and all are guided, as it were, by one mind, it is certain that every individual has the less right the more the rest collectively exceed him in power; that is, he has, in fact, no right over nature but that which the common law allows him. But wherever he may be ordered by the general consent, he is bound to execute, or may be rightfully compelled thereto.”<sup>466</sup> Once they form this government and agree to live together, their own individual power, say, if they wanted to go against the laws or the customs of the commonwealth, is opposed to the power of the multitude in the commonwealth which agrees with the laws and customs. They still retain some independent power and will. They can disagree and dissent, however, in order to effect change within their societies, they need to get other people on their side, to win over the multitude, or else they will have the power of this multitude against them. These are realities with which any project of reform will have to contend. Nussbaum’s capabilities are no different.

Does Nussbaum provide such a mechanism to win over multitudes with her conception of the capabilities? She argues that the capabilities are realizable in many cultural contexts, so she takes care of the initial point that her new norms do not necessarily contradict particular cultural norms. However, we need to look more closely at this, to see what evidence Nussbaum provides for the multiple realizability of the capabilities. There are many cultural practices, it would seem, which are directly challenged by Nussbaum’s capabilities and in fact which they were designed to challenge. Customs which prevent women from traveling freely and against reproductive control are directly challenged by Nussbaum’s capability of ‘Bodily Integrity’. How one might realize this capability in such a place is not at all clear. For example, some might argue that women’s bodily integrity was in fact protected by this norm to stay indoors in the evening or to have an

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<sup>465</sup> TP 2.16

<sup>466</sup> TP 2.16

escort when she needed to leave the home, just as college campuses in the U.S. suggest and sometimes offer services to accompany women students walking alone in the evening. How can we argue against this challenging interpretation of Nussbaum's core capability? This instance and others raise the question, that if the capabilities are 'realized' in a place where customs are different enough from ours, would they then be recognizable to us?

As we saw in the sections above on development and on the FGM interventions of the 1980s, the appeal to external standards, though in some sense necessary, can be dangerous at worse and ineffective at best. Spinoza's account of the way that we ought to understand the ways that affects and customs are intertwined in order to suggest strategic interventions to realize 'the best' for humans at home and abroad works better than Nussbaum's appeal to universal standards and intuitions. Spinoza and Nussbaum share the goals of human empowerment and the development of reason. Yet, Spinoza's recognition of the power of affect and imagination and the power of customs leads him to suggest more effective mechanisms of normative reform than Nussbaum's theory of normative individual separateness can allow.

#### **IV. The Individual and Nature**

The separateness of individuals, Nussbaum argues, is an important aspect of life and of our experience which liberalism protects by recognizing each individual as an end. Any political theory which does not recognize this separateness, she fears, threatens the individual, and threatens to ignore the important differences between individuals in particular the fact that their wellbeing is not always satisfied in the same ways. Liberal theories are committed to recognizing the fact of human separateness. Nussbaum explains:

“[Liberalism] says that the fundamental entity for politics is a living body that goes from here to there, from birth to death never fused with any other...In normative terms, this commitment to the recognition of individual separateness means, for the liberal, that the demands of a collectivity or a relation should not as such be made the basic goal of politics: collectivities, such as the state, and even the family are composed of individuals...Each of these is separate, and each of these is an end. Liberalism holds that the flourishing of human beings taken one by one is both analytically and normatively prior to the flourishing of the state or the nation or the religious group: analytically, because such unities do not really efface the separate reality of individual lives; normatively,

because the recognition of that separateness is held to be a fundamental fact for ethics. The central question for politics should not be, How is the organic whole doing?, but rather, How are X and Y and Z and Q doing?"<sup>467</sup>

Nussbaum supports the normative individual separateness of liberalism because it suggests that we need to take account of each and every individual, and not assume that because the whole or because the group as a whole is doing well that each individual can be taken to be doing well. Liberalism takes individuality seriously in a way that other metaphysical views cannot. She writes, "The separateness of persons is a basic fact of human life; in stressing it, liberalism stresses something experientially true and fundamentally important. In stressing this fact, the liberal takes her stand squarely in the camp of this worldly experience and rejects forms of revisionary metaphysics (e.g. forms of Buddhism or Platonism) that would deny the reality of our separateness and our substantially embodied character."<sup>468</sup> The question remains for us, is Spinoza's view a version of such a revisionary metaphysics?

Spinoza's well-known monism, and his arguments that we are all part of one big individual, God or Nature, from which our power derives suggest that he had some sympathies in this direction. In this section I will argue that Spinoza's metaphysics does not suggest that we can take individual wellbeing as a function of the wellbeing of the whole, Spinoza recognizes the danger to the individual from the multitude, but still believes that a strong state, a strong political community, can provide a better foundation for human flourishing than a lack of a strong political community. Humans are affected by other individuals, human and otherwise, both within and outside the state. Political organization makes it possible for human individuals to use their power collectively and to increase the power and capacity of each. For Spinoza, it was not better for individuals to be alone, even though it was sometimes difficult, for example, to become reasonable or to follow reason when living among those who followed their affects. However, for

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<sup>467</sup> *Women and Human Development*, p.62.

<sup>468</sup> *Women and Human Development*, p.62.



Spinoza, there was no real contest between solitude and solidarity – it was always better for a person to live with others.<sup>469</sup>

Spinoza's theory allows us to show both human singularity and human interconnectedness. We are connected and determined by the forces that impinge upon us, and the individuals who are around us. Yet we are different from those things around us, and we reach reason and increase our power, if we do so, on our own. I will argue that Spinoza's conception of individuals, while recognizing the importance of our interconnections with others in the world, still takes into account the importance of individuality. Spinoza's theory of the affects provides a good account of the power of communal norms on individuals, but does he go far enough in recognizing individuals as such, or individuals as ends, as Nussbaum would require?

Spinoza is committed to metaphysical individualism.<sup>470</sup> Nature makes individuals, not states or nations. He recognizes the way in which individual identities are shaped through group interactions and constantly affected by the bodies and images of others. This 'transindividuality' does not diminish the individuality of humans, but tells us more about how individuality is shaped through the interaction with others.

Spinoza is not a theorist of an organic state. For Spinoza, there is nothing natural about human sociality outside of the usefulness of humans to one another.<sup>471</sup> The state, to the extent it is strong, is so because of its level of organization. How it organizes the individuals within it makes it stronger or weaker. The individuals here matter; each individual is an irreducible site of power and judgment, for Spinoza. His critique of Hobbes' conception of the contract showed this. Whereas for Hobbes the power of the individuals in the multitude could be transferred to one person, for Spinoza no such transfer is possible. The judgment of an individual can never be given over to another; their power to exist and to preserve themselves always remains with them. Spinoza's individuals are therefore not reducible or consumable by some larger entity. They do

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<sup>469</sup> E4P73; E4P40; *TTP*, Chapter 5.

<sup>470</sup> E2P13; *TTP*, Chapter 17.

<sup>471</sup> TP 2.15

not disappear into the whole, but are rather active parts of it. For Spinoza, again, individuals are part of nature, but parts which cannot be subsumed by the whole. States, these intermediate individuals, to become powerful must win over each and every individuals, or else risk diminishing its own power.

The power of the state is diminished by those it excludes, first because it cannot count their power as adding to its own. Further, if these individuals use their power against the state, then the state's power is further diminished, since it must waste its power in the use of coercive force used against these enemies of the state. Furthermore, any state which is full of enemies must always be in fear of these enemies, which always diminishes its power.<sup>472</sup>

Spinoza's theory of individuals, to use Balibar's term, can be understood as 'transindividual'. He understands the extent to which human individuals are acted upon by a myriad of other individuals, human and otherwise. Yet Spinoza also recognizes the extent to which each individual is an irreducible site of power and desire, and each forms a conception of a self and a world from this interaction with others. Spinoza's view suggests that we should recognize the extent to which our individuality, and specifically the way our affects are organized and our self conceptions are influenced by others, by the forces which impinge upon us and our imaginative conceptions of those things and their effects on us. To truly understand ourselves is not to see ourselves as atoms in a void, but as parts of nature, intertwined with others. Our power is derived from Nature, and only through understanding our interconnections with Nature can we truly increase our power.

We increase our power through understanding ourselves and the world around us, such that we are able to act in a way which is really best for us. When we are able to do this, we are following reason, or knowledge of the second kind. The highest form of knowledge for Spinoza is 'scientia intuitiva', or intuition. Intuition involves understanding the interconnection of things, that is, how each genuine individual is part of the whole of nature. I emphasize 'individual' here

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<sup>472</sup> E3P11S

to differentiated individual in Spinoza from a kind of general knowledge of how the laws of nature work or how different sorts or types of phenomena work, or from some kind of mystical vision of wholeness. Spinoza's notion of intuition involves knowledge of individuals in their specificity and in their unique interrelations. It requires understanding the nexus of causes by which each individual is determined. Intuition allows us to overcome the egoism even of reason, which focuses on the best for us.

Ultimately, understanding ourselves as part of Nature will be better for us, since it will allow us to understand those forces which impinge upon us, which increases our power by making our conatus more adequate. However, there is a fundamental decentering of our own egoism by recognizing our place in the whole of nature, and as we come to recognize that the affects, our own feelings which seem so personal and particular are expressions of the interaction between our power and the power of external forces upon us. Finally understanding the affects involves really understanding these forces themselves, and recognizing ourselves as parts of a whole made up of other individuals, and of groups, societies and cultures which hold those individuals together. Whether we recognize it adequately or not, we are part of Nature. When we do recognize it, we can increase our power by joining with others and through understanding more adequately our own position. By understanding that we are in a variety of relations with all other individuals in Nature, we increase our understanding, and this, for Spinoza, is how we increase our individual power.

In this way, liberals misunderstand the interconnected nature of human life, and thus miss out on a major way individuals increase their power and the justification for social life in the first place. When Nussbaum rejects the reasoning of the social contract, she has to fall back upon the idea that society is natural and beneficial even if hierarchical and unjust. She adopts an Aristotelian line on the natural sociability of humans. However, Spinoza offers a third possibility as a justification for social life which makes sense not only as a justification for exiting the state

of nature, but also for social life today. Joining with others increases our power, or it can, depending on what kind of *societas* we join.

Spinoza has a much stronger notion of the self as social than Nussbaum. His attention to the way that individuals are shaped through their affective interactions with others, how their desires and imaginative views of themselves and the world are shaped through interaction with other individuals brings him further and further away from a liberal conception of free will. For Spinoza, the reason that individuals think that they are free is because they do not recognize the extent to which their affects and their desires are caused. Each individual has the experience of recognizing their appetites and attempting to satisfy them, but they rarely recognize the degree to which their desires and affects are caused.

We know ourselves only through the affections of the body and the concomitant images in the mind. Our knowledge of them is mediated by our affects, our expectations, our ideas of them, which may be better or worse, more or less adequate. Our collective life is shaped by these imaginative ideas by which to some we are bound, and from others we are separated. Shared communal life binds us through affects, imagination and identification to those in our community and makes our interactions with outsiders with different sets of norms and expectations strange and strained.

Nussbaum recognizes that desires, particularly 'adaptive' or deformed preferences can be caused, but at the same time she insists on a kind of liberation from adaptive desires through the creation of new possibilities. If there were alternatives provided which were better for women, women would follow them. This 'liberation' from adaptive desires, for Spinoza, is not easy. It is the path to reason, to that which is best for us. However, Spinoza writes that it is rocky and difficult and that the path to reason and away from harmful affects, desires and communal practices to something 'better' can only be effected by understanding these desires and engaging in some kind of reform of the affects and imagination.

For Spinoza, affects can only be fought with affects, imaginative views with similarly affectively bound imaginative views. However, as we know from his understanding of individual empowerment, affect-replacement therapy is best conducted by realigning affects tied to harmful practices to ones which are more positive, and which increase the power of individuals. More positive affects, like joy, increase individual's power. Increased power not only serves as its own reward and thus buoys attempts to change individual behavior. Who wouldn't rather do something that made one happy rather than sad? Habit, the inertia of everyday life, has a force of its own, but change comes more easily when it is more pleasant than our former habit. Change that brings pain is a harder sell.

When a practice or a custom is determined by some group or individuals within a group to be harmful, changing it becomes their goal. Now, taking up Spinoza's view, the best way to change this habit would be to understand in what ways it is bound up with individual affects and communal cohesiveness and power. Then some alternative practice might need to be set up which could allow for the removal of this harmful practice to happen painlessly in some sense. Spinoza's conception of the power of affects gives us strategic direction in this sense. Once we understand that customs and norms, even harmful ones, affect individuals in a number of ways and affectively bind them to their community. These affective links are not easily broken. To reform harmful practices, practices that disempower individuals, we need to understand them and understand how individuals' affects are bound up with them.

Understanding and explaining cultural norms or inequalities based on group affiliation does not mean justifying them. We must understand in order to begin to challenge them. This is the main Spinozan insight – that whether we love or hate the affects, we must understand them, or forever be in their grasp. It is only through honestly understanding the forces which rule our lives, internal and external, that we begin to increase our power. Changing harmful cultural practices follows the same procedure as changing harmful affects and bad desires within individuals; it requires a reform of the affects and the imagination. Spinoza suggests that this requires more than

just critique; it requires fighting affects with affects, imaginations with imaginations, so that a better and less harmful affective regime and social practices replace the old, harmful practices.

## **Conclusion**

Since we are all irreducibly affective beings, we can only come to reason through understanding ourselves, and the affects and external forces which determine us. In this chapter I hope to have shown that to bring *others* to reason, we need to understand them, their affects, desires and the imaginative view of the world in which they live. Customs and practices which may seem on their face destructive from our perspective have a very different set of meanings and power from within, for those whose identities were formed through them. Reason's only power is to help us understand ourselves, to develop ideas of the best for us, as humans, and to work to realize these ideals through understanding the power of the affects and carefully using affects to fight affects in an ultimate aim to make our practices better and to increase our power. These ideals alone are not enough, knowing that something is better does not immediately make us choose to follow or realize it. We often see the better and do the worse. Spinoza's naturalistic account of human individuals and theory of the affects is rich enough to have resources both for identifying what's best, what empowers humans, and how we can achieve this empowered state.

## Conclusion:

### Reform, Empowerment and Political Philosophy

- I. Spinoza's Naturalism
- II. Affective Disorders of the State
- III. Spinoza's Motivation and the Unity of Science

#### I. Spinoza's Naturalism

Spinoza understood humans as part of nature. Humans, Spinoza wrote, are not empires within empires.<sup>473</sup> Humans are not exceptions. There are no special set of rules that govern human conduct and that allow humans to transcend Nature. Thus, Spinoza is committed to the unity of nature and the unity of science. Those who propose understanding humans as exceptional, for example the moral philosophers,<sup>474</sup> go on to use these exceptional qualities, their freedom of the will, to denigrate the natural affects and desires of humans. If one understands human freedom in this way, as the ability always to choose otherwise, to go against how one is naturally determined or even just inclined, then of course, one opens up a space for blame for reproach. Spinoza, however, was not interested in accusing human actions, but wanted rather to understand them.

Spinoza's project of reform, of naturalizing ethics also provided a naturalistic basis for political philosophy. When we can understand state power and individual power in the same terms, in terms of the affects of individuals, as Spinoza allows us to, we can use this understanding to diagnose and cure some of the problems of the state, which we can better understand as affective disorders. In the following section, I will provide a brief example of the ways that we can use Spinoza's theory of the affects and the political principles which can be derived from it to improve our understanding of our own political problems.

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<sup>473</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17.

<sup>474</sup> This includes Descartes and the Stoics insofar as they used human's 'exceptional' qualities of freedom and the will to prescribe an impossible standard of conduct for humans.

## II. Affective Disorders of the State

A recent report published by the Pew Center on Public Safety Performance<sup>475</sup> reported that one in every 99.1 American adults is imprisoned, making the United States the ‘world’s incarceration leader’<sup>476</sup> with 2,319,258 adults in prisons and jails. For some groups, this percentage of adults imprisoned was even more distressing. Among African American adult males, one in 9 is imprisoned. Among Hispanics, one in 15 adults is imprisoned. Despite heavy spending on criminal prosecution and imprisonment, Pew researches write, “Recidivism rates remain stubbornly high.”<sup>477</sup> The aim of the legal system is to enforce public safety, a commonly held goal. Yet the means to doing so appear to be inadequate for the task. Despite having a large percentage of the population in prison, crime is not prevented, and the goal of public safety is not reached. In analyzing these results the researchers at Pew stress the importance of reconsidering sentencing mandatory minimums and considering sentencing alternatives other than prisons. However, the causes of crime, what leads people to break the law are not addressed directly.

For Spinoza, having this percentage of its population behind bars makes the U.S. a ‘bad’ state. A bad state, for Spinoza, is one in which the law is not respected, which for Spinoza, suggests that the laws are badly implemented. A bad commonwealth, where all live in fear, Spinoza writes, is no better than the state of nature.<sup>478</sup> Fear is a tool of those governments or forms of dominion which are weak and thus have reason to fear the power of the multitude. A bad commonwealth, in this sense, is a weak commonwealth. Governments that fear their own people are constantly plotting against them,<sup>479</sup> wasting their energies and resources fighting and repressing their own people. They also waste the energies of their own people, who could be working for the interest of the state if properly channeled. The state, by designing its laws and

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<sup>475</sup> The Pew Center on the States, “One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008”, February 2008. Full text: [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/report\\_detail.aspx?id=35904](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/report_detail.aspx?id=35904)

<sup>476</sup> *Globe and Mail Update*, “1 in 100 Americans in prison: study,” February 28, 2008.

<sup>477</sup> *The Pew Center on the States*, Report Summary, [http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/initiatives\\_detail.aspx?initiativeID=31336](http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/initiatives_detail.aspx?initiativeID=31336)

<sup>478</sup> TP 5.2

<sup>479</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 17; TP 5.7.



customs in a certain way has caused a great percentage of its population to become internal enemies. Spinoza understands 'enemies of the state' as those who have nothing to hope or fear from the state, and so who are dangerous to the state. People who break the law fit this description. Having a large percentage of such people is worrying.

Spinoza does not end here, just noting that enemies of the state are dangerous, but argues that a good state must minimize its enemies. Not by locking them all up, but rather by offering them incentives to align themselves with the state rather than against it, and by understanding what affective-imaginative events have caused their becoming oriented against the state. Spinoza encourages us to see problems of crime, violence and chaos as problems of affect and exclusion which it is the job of political institutions to solve and to understand.

Factions, rulers behaving badly, and bad laws can undermine the power of the state. Factions, which form for all sorts of reasons which we can also understand in terms of affect and imagination, draw individuals into groups oriented toward their own goals and projects. They generally form because individuals have been excluded or at least not properly included in the state; they join together because of this common exclusion and the affective and imaginative (or historical) basis of this exclusion. Factions are groups which see themselves as in some ways opposed to the state. The job of the state, according to Spinoza, is first of all to try and minimize factions by avoiding such exclusions and by trying to create affective incentives which will get people to follow the law willingly and to identify with the state. To do so, the state must understand people as imaginative and affective, and must understand how their affects are organized and how they see themselves and the state. Then, the state must understand how to include them, through imaginative and affectively effective institutions. By understanding the role of imagination, of identity and of affect in creating a multitude whose power can work for the state, we can perhaps begin to solve these problems with the proper affective and imaginative solutions.

Spinoza's understanding of power and affects both in individuals and in political communities allows us to reorient our thinking about some of our most pressing political problems. Spinoza focused on the problem of internal enemies, those who are excluded from participation in political life, and those who see no benefit from the state, but rather have their affects oriented against the state. However, I don't think that Spinoza would have stuck to this unreflectively, if he could see how enemies made at home can cause trouble elsewhere, or with the farness of U.S. reach, how the scope of the polity can be extended so that enemies made on foreign soil can be as pernicious as internal enemies.

NPR commentator Sarah Vowell in *The Wordy Shipmates*<sup>480</sup>, her book on the Massachusetts Bay Colony, provides a good example of the persistent problem of internal enemies. The Massachusetts Bay Puritans had a practice of banishing those inhabitants of the colony who became troublesome. Like mass imprisonment in the U.S. today, this is an example of a non-inclusive strategy. The trouble with banishing is that the people banished, in most cases, do not simply disappear. What does happen to them? In the case of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they go back to England, cause trouble, make common purpose with your enemies and get your chartered revoked, almost. But it looked bad there for a while, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has since sought other means of solving its problems with dissidents and potential internal enemies.

Our enemies do not disappear, they continue on with a firmer resolve to make things difficult. Spinoza's focus on the affective foundation of social life and his view that the primary problem of political philosophy is to create institutions and practices that organized the affects of the multitude recognizes this need not to make enemies of citizens, and to make friends with or to find ways to include those who could become our enemies.

Even more damaging than our enemies returning to England, the internal enemies of the United States, our millions of citizens jailed, return to our communities. And what do they find

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<sup>480</sup> Sarah Vowell, *The Wordy Shipmates*. (Riverhead, 2008).

there? They are, for the most part, excluded from political participation, they cannot vote. They are excluded from participation in public life in other ways depending on the state and local ordinance. They have difficulty finding jobs, they cannot get student loans, and in general they continue to be punished long after their sentence is served. Now, why should we care?

Punishment should follow criminal activity. However, I believe that Spinoza's worry about the enemies of the state gives us reason to care. Good reasons. Enemies of the state, who have nothing to hope or to fear from the state – and those who have been in prison no longer have much to fear – these are forces which the state must fear and secure itself against. However, a state in a constant condition of fear is weak, and wastes its power. If we send ex-convicts out into the world, with nothing to hope or fear, without opportunity for living a normal life, then except under the rarest of situations, they will continue to worry us either through recidivism or through our fear, which can be just as weakening.

A Spinozan theory of criminal justice would encourage their inclusion, not just because human empowerment relies on participation in communal life and the help of others, but also because excluding these people further makes them our enemies. And enemies are bad. We have to worry about them, and so we waste our time and energy building more prisons, creating surveillance techniques, employing armies of police. But further, we waste our resources by not including these miscreants. By making them into criminals we lose their potential as good citizens. In this way, Spinoza alerts us to the opportunity costs of a non-participatory state and policies which create such enemies of the state.

Organizing affects was for Spinoza the central problem of political philosophy. Attention to the affects shows us the way in which affects determine individual actions. By creating institutions which are maximally inclusive, and states which are maximally participatory, we can make our states strong through the empowerment and not at the expense of its citizens. Hobbes dream of a state which was maximally powerful through the transfer of all the power and will of its citizens is shown to be impossible by Spinoza. Yes, it would be great to have a totally absolute

government, but we cannot get it by disempowering the people. No single sovereign has the power to rule a group of any number. To build strong states we need strong individuals, and strong individuals can only be made by creating institutions which are maximally inclusive. Those we exclude diminish our power, they make us weak and suspicious, and excluding them robs us of the power they could supply as productive and participating fellow citizens. Spinoza teaches us that we cannot transfer the power of the multitude to the state in one fell swoop or through a contract. Rather, the power of the multitude must be cultivated and organized, oriented such that the power of the multitude can be used for the strengthening of the state. In this way, Spinoza shows us how political stability and human empowerment are inextricably linked, and how the disempowerment of some affects the power of all.

### **III. Spinoza's Motivation and the Unity of Science**

Spinoza's project was one of major, world-changing reform that would lead to banishing all obstacles to human empowerment. However, his program did not consist only of critique of those structures which stood in the way of human progress, although he engages in such critique, his program does not consist only of setting up a model of what is best for humans, although he constructs such a model. The most revolutionary aspect of Spinoza's project is that he tries, in order to change society and to increase the power of human individuals to understand them. He tries to understand humans as part of nature, as creatures driven by their affects, as beings who could not be perfected, but who could nevertheless become empowered.

Spinoza shows us that the projects of human emancipation and naturalizing social and political philosophy are not in tension; rather they can be, in the right hands, one in the same project. By pretending that we are something that we are not, that we transcend the body, that we are pure mind, that we have access to a realm of moral truths outside of time and human life, we continue to misunderstand ourselves. We build great idealist systems and moral philosophies which stand as monuments to our ignorance of ourselves and what we can actually become.

By taking God and human beings to be part of Nature, Spinoza threatened those religious and political institutions in his own time which sought to keep the people in ignorance of their own natural power. Consistent naturalism and its resultant focus on the importance of the affects may be as important and radical in our time as it was in Spinoza's.<sup>481</sup> Spinoza was motivated by what he saw as theoretical and theological obstacles to human empowerment and to scientific exploration, which he saw as an important vehicle for human empowerment. Spinoza's science was the science of causes. To understand causes was to understand the principles of the natural world, and for Spinoza there was only the natural world. Several things stood as impediments to the free exploration of the natural world.

First, and most difficult, those penalties, mainly of religious origin, but set down in law, that prohibited investigation of certain topics, considering the biblical-ancient interpretation of some physical phenomena to be authoritative. Questions of the origin of the universe, the size and shape of the earth and other heavenly bodies, and the origin of human life could not be explored seriously, given that the answers were already set down by church doctrine. Spinoza explicitly attacks such prohibitions. He argues that they limit human power unnecessarily. He argues further that when we understand the causes of the biblical theories we can see that we do not need to follow them to remain devout. The majority of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is given over to the explanation of how biblical explanations for physical phenomena need not be followed since their authors were not learned individuals and they were not trying to write books of natural philosophy.<sup>482</sup> Rather, the prophets' incidental suggestions about physical phenomena needed to be understood in context, as embellishments for moral arguments or as examples in stories which taught at their foundation moral lessons. Religious texts are concerned, Spinoza argues, not with how the world works, but rather how we ought to act in the world and that we should have faith

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<sup>481</sup> Only relatively recently (in the last 10-15 years) have neuroscientists and cognitive scientists taken emotions seriously as impacting, for example decision making. See footnote 5.

<sup>482</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 2.

in God. Spinoza argues that philosophy, which includes the study of the natural world and religion are separate types of undertaking, which ought not to mix and which do not compete.<sup>483</sup>

Though these were difficult in Spinoza's time, and though such religious attacks on scientific investigation remain in our own time, we can argue that they are not as universal as they were in Spinoza's. Other impediments, though derived from and supported by religious dogma, remain in secular form to today. The idea that humans freely determine themselves without understanding what causes their desires and behaviors, the false idea of free will, remains with us. This idea of free will with our modern understanding of ourselves as being influenced to some degree by our bodies gives rise to the dualism of Descartes. Descartes wanted to understand the body, but at the same time could not give up the idea of free will.

Another problem, derived from dualism is the hatred of the passions. In Spinoza's time, the passions were derided as harmful or sinful. Spinoza also understands some of the passions to be harmful, but he thought that the moral philosophers of his time who attacked the passions without trying to understand them were blocking any progress toward actually minimizing the negative effects of the passions. Further, he argued that philosophers like Descartes who tried to understand the passions only to show how they could be fully controlled by free will made another sort of mistake, blocking both scientific advancement and individual empowerment. By assuming that human passions were conquerable, they missed the basic fact that they are unavoidable. We cannot, Spinoza argues, escape our passions. Passions, for Spinoza, are the effects of the world upon us. As long as we are natural beings in the natural world we will be affected by passions. Those who aim to take passions out of the equation also remove individuals from the natural world. Spinoza's aim is not to overcome the passions but to understand them, which means understanding ourselves as natural beings affected by other individuals and by the world around us.

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<sup>483</sup> *TTP*, Chapter 14.

Neuroscientists are beginning to confront the issue of the importance of the emotions, which feminist theorists have sought to bring to light for decades. There has been much resistance to the serious understanding of the passions, whether related to the long shadow of dualism or to the secular scientific norm of reason which understood all other forms of human interaction as base or unworthy of attention. However, now that the affects are being taken more seriously, and their social role explored more fully, a disciplinary divide limits the influx of this new scientific work into the humanities.

Spinoza provides us with one imperative: understand! Understanding the causes of things, and insisting that phenomena are caused, even the phenomena which seem to us to be most freely the expression of ourselves, only this can lead to real freedom. Rather than fearing the idea that we are determined, that we are impinged upon by internal and external forces that we may not understand and that we may not be able to control, we ought to embrace the idea that understanding these forces can only bring us closer to real freedom. Clinging to the idea that we are atomistic centers of our own universes, creators of the rules by which we live and at liberty to do what we like at any moment yields only a fleeting joy. Only the real understanding of what we are, how we are connected to each other and Nature, what power we do have and how we can increase our power by working together can yield the lasting sort of joy that Spinoza sought in the *Ethics*.

For a long time now, philosophers and critical theorists who valued human freedom have been suspicious of the claims of scientists, whose often dogmatic focus on reason and identification of reason with whatever was not affective, and who have insisted on holding up the least interesting aspects of human life as their essence. These scientific and 'scientistic' attempts to reduce the richness of human emotional life to mere epiphenomena, the byproducts of higher level cognition have left only a negative stance for feminists and critical theorists. This negative stance has the unfortunate byproduct of separating a generation of critical theorists from the project of increasing human understanding and knowledge. This persistent critical condition has

led to serious stagnation in philosophy and in feminist theory. Always seeking the next thing to bring down, dismissing at a rate far faster than new knowledge can be produced.

However, I hope that the resurgence of interest in Spinoza will lead to a reversal of this situation, where one can be both a serious feminist critical theorist and scientist – one who seeks knowledge and understanding of the natural world and our place in it and yet subjects the results of this inquiry to the strongest possible critique. Hegel wrote that, “To be a follower of Spinoza is the commencement of all philosophy.”<sup>484</sup> I believe that the reemergence of Spinoza can provide the occasion for the recommencement of philosophy itself. Philosophy as something larger than the analysis of linguistic puzzles and as resolutely opposed to the mystification of human life and nature, opposed to moralizing without understanding the material realities of human life.

Recognizing the important metaphysical questions that persist in social and political philosophy is paramount. These questions of human nature, of what we are and what objects in the world are pertinent for social life must be answered and no longer ignored. If we seek genuine freedom and real empowerment, then our fear of naturalizing human life, recognizing human individuals as part of nature will have to be tempered in favor of the project of understanding. To actually empower human individuals we must understand how human power works, and much of the answer will be about humans as natural beings, as embodied. Spinoza’s theory of the affects and his understanding of individual power are good first steps in this direction.

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<sup>484</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, “Spinoza” in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.  
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hp/hpspinoz.htm>



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