SPINOZA’S JOYFUL REPUBLIC:
ON THE POWER OF PASSIONS, POLITICS, & KNOWLEDGE

A Thesis in

Philosophy

by

Hasana Sharp

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The thesis of Hasana Sharp was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Daniel W. Conway
Professor of Philosophy and Science Technology & Society
Thesis Advisor
Chair of Committee

John Christman
Associate Professor of Humanities and Political Science
Head of the Department of Philosophy

Emily Grosholz
Professor of Philosophy and African American Studies

Shannon Sullivan
Associate Professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies

Jeffrey Nealon
Professor of English

*Signatures are on file with the graduate school.
ABSTRACT

My dissertation contends that, because his theory of knowledge is at the same time a theory of the body and its powers, Spinoza’s epistemology comprises a political doctrine. Commentators typically treat Spinoza’s philosophy of mind separately from his politics. Such a separation, however, violates his fundamental insight into the dependent, dynamic, and passionate nature of bodies and minds. I, therefore, interpret Spinoza’s major texts, political and metaphysical, as a coherent and unitary effort. Spinoza’s philosophy, I argue, is most essentially an account of the transformation of the passionate dispositions of bodies and minds – individual and political – into a joyful coordination of powers. Human freedom, as characterized in the conclusion to the Ethics, requires the democratic constitution advocated in the political writings. More specifically, both democracy and the maximization of intellectual power entail collective practices and institutions that reorient possessive desire and transform sad passions such as envy, hatred, and fear. Wisdom as much as peace depends upon a collective body and mind whose individual constituents unequivocally and joyfully affirm themselves as “parts of nature” necessarily subject to passions. The mutual affirmation of passionate interdependency, paradoxically perhaps, yields greater powers of autonomy and self-determination.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations .......................................................................................................................... vi
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. vii

Chapter 1
  **Introduction: Passions, Politics, and Knowledge** ......................................................... 1

Chapter 2
  **The Mind is an Idea of the Body** .................................................................................. 20
   The Power of Thought
   *Mens Idea Corporis*
   The Individual

Chapter 3
  **Imagination's Servitude** ............................................................................................... 71
   How Imagination Works
   Evil Twins: Servitude and Superstition
   Natural Slavery and Political Tyranny
   Political Imagination

Chapter 4
  **Reason, Power, Freedom** ............................................................................................. 121
   The Sad Mind Cannot Act
   The Virtue and Utility of Reason
   Beyond Good and Evil, Above the Law: Human Freedom

Chapter 5
  **Passage to Intuition: An Economy of Love** ................................................................. 168
   *Nemo non videt: Scientia Intuitiva*, pt. 1
   Intuitive Superiority, *Scientia Intuitiva*, pt. II
   Remedying the Lovesick Mind

Chapter 6
  **Political Scientia Intuitiva** ........................................................................................... 207
   Property Affects
   Feeling Justice
   Deliberative Multiplicity
Chapter 7

**A Joyful Republic?**
- Nature and Norms; Or, What About Hitler?
- Affective Organization
- Hilarious Democracy

References 294
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this thesis the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza’s writings have been used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Ethics (Ethica)</td>
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<td>App</td>
<td>Appendix</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ax</td>
<td>Axiom</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Corollary</td>
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<td>Def</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>Demonstration</td>
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<td>Lem</td>
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<td>P</td>
<td>Proposition</td>
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<td>Post</td>
<td>Postulate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pref</td>
<td>Preface</td>
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<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Scholium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ep</td>
<td>Letter (Epistola)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KV</td>
<td>Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-being (Korte Verhandeling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIE</td>
<td>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TP</td>
<td>Political Treatise (Tractatus Politicus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTP</td>
<td>Theological-Political Treatise (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus)</td>
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Quotations are based on (but regularly modify) translations by Edwin Curley (E, KV, TIE) and Samuel Shirley (Ep, TP, TTP). The original Latin is consulted for all translations, except in the case of the letters.

Note: Curley’s edition of the Ethics translates sive or seu as “or” in italics in order to indicate an equivalence between terms rather than an exclusive disjunction. I have preserved this convention. Likewise, I have maintained Curley’s editorial insertions of “NS” within Spinoza’s text to indicate a variant from the Dutch edition of the Ethics.

All translations from French texts are mine.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like any other natural being, this dissertation is the product of infinitely many causal powers, joyful and not so joyful passions, and a stubborn striving to persevere in existence. Yet, I associate several distinct individuals with the life of this project, without whom it never would have come to be. The teaching and persistent encouragement of Warren Montag prompted both my interest in Spinoza and my passion for philosophy. My earliest thinking about Spinoza was formed in communication with my peers, specifically members of “the materialist workshop” at Binghamton University, especially Jason Read. I was tremendously fortunate to have spent a year of research and writing in Lyon, France, at the generous invitation of Pierre-François Moreau. Such a year would not have been possible without the support of the Fulbright foundation and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, along with the friendship and intellectual camaraderie of my fellow jeunes spinozistes. Throughout the writing process, my dissertation director, Dan Conway, read and commented generously on numerous drafts of chapters. I could not imagine a more exciting, challenging, and supportive committee to work with me on my dissertation. I am deeply grateful to them all: Dan, Emily Grosholz, Shannon Sullivan, John Christman, and Jeffrey Nealon. I must, of course, thank my parents who have never wavered in their support of my ever lengthening graduate student career. Finally, I am profoundly indebted to the constant love and friendship of Ryan Netzley and Sara Brill, without whom I would not have persevered.
Spinoza is celebrated as a philosopher of love and joy, just as often as he is reviled as an extreme rationalist whose philosophy is radically alien to any lived human experience. To a significant extent, the responsibility for such wildly divergent interpretations of Spinoza’s philosophy lies in the writings themselves. Spinoza’s philosophy represents an unparalleled effort to reconcile rationality and affectivity. As with any reconciliation, the parties often seem to resist entering into a cooperative accord. Spinoza himself exhibits resistance, or at least ambivalence, toward the turbulent and violent upsurge of the passions and their susceptibility to rational reprise. Even more resistant may be the habits of interpretation that encounter a total void of meaning, especially in the final part of the Ethics, when Spinoza unites the intellectual love of God and the eternity of the mind with the affective intensity of intuition and the body “capable of great many things” (E VP39).

Indeed, the portrait of liberty that concludes the Ethics is widely acknowledged to be an interpretive enigma, and many scholars who have dedicated a great deal of care to

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their studies of Spinoza either avoid the final part or despair at the fact that Spinoza includes it at all in his otherwise supremely scientific endeavor.⁴ Reason seems to make sense as the master of the passions, the force of the mind to subordinate the body to its will. Spinoza’s philosophy absolutely forecloses such a portrait of reason, however, and thus he is seen, depending upon the interpreter, either to impassion, or even castrate, reason or thoroughly to rationalize and instrumentalize the passions. The final two parts of the *Ethics* present reason as a power that yields community with nature or God, intense pleasure in one’s body and power, and the hope for all of humanity to “compose, as it were, one mind and one body” (E IVP18S). That is, the play between rationality and affectivity compels one to understand the project of knowledge as a collective project of liberation. The effort to know and love God belongs to the same effort to coordinate and organize the powers of the political body in an enabling manner.

The guiding principle of my study is that the relationship between reason and affect, action and passion, bondage and freedom can only be understood if one understands Spinoza’s epistemology, psychology, and ontology to be coextensive with his politics and ethics. Due to the pervasively relational portrait of existence that Spinoza maintains, in fact, no aspect of his philosophy can be adequately understood except as the productive tension between various domains of inquiry into the productive tension that comprises life itself. Indeed, Spinoza makes the project of studying and writing about his philosophy feel like an interminable process of qualifying every remark with the multiple arguments that support and justify it. Every interpreter has to make difficult decisions

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⁴ See, for example, Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 357; 375.
about what to include and exclude in an effort to address any particular problem. My own project is surely hubristic in its endeavor to bring together Spinoza’s theory of knowledge and his political writings. Several thinkers, however, have paved the way by arguing persuasively for the necessary unity of Spinoza’s metaphysics and politics. Most students of Spinoza’s theory of knowledge and philosophy of mind, however, tend not to link inquiry into the nature of knowledge to social and political life. The absence of a rigorous attempt to bring together the two domains of study results in the continued obscurity of the third kind of knowledge as well as Spinoza’s unique conception of democracy. The Ethics culminates in an account of freedom as the maximization of the power of the mind and body together. The freedom of the Ethics, however, is often understood to comprise an utterly “solitary” and “deeply private” intellectual endeavor, wholly irrelevant to political liberation. Yet, if one understands Spinoza’s theory of knowledge not as a theory of truth and falsity but as an analysis of power, the beatitude of the Ethics becomes inseparable from the freedom of the political writings.

Economy or predilection often forces commentators to separate Spinoza’s thought in conformity with current distinctions of professional philosophy, but Spinoza himself often notes the practical implications of his epistemology. Upon finishing his account of

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6 An exception is the co-authored study by Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens. Still, they divide the labor such that Lloyd treats primarily the metaphysics and epistemology and Gatens addresses primarily questions pertaining to political philosophy. The fact that they found it important to conduct their investigation in tandem certainly demonstrates that they affirm the co-implication of knowledge and politics in Spinoza’s thought. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999).

the famous three kinds of knowledge at the end of Part II of the *Ethics*, and affirming his doctrine that the mind has no separate volitional faculty, he openly declares his political motivations.

Finally, this doctrine contributes, to no small extent, to the common society insofar as it teaches how citizens are to be governed, not so that they may be slaves, but so that they may freely do the things which are best. (E IIP49S[IV.d])

Spinoza thus links the problem of knowledge to the problem of government. The doctrine of the three kinds of knowledge aims to illuminate and support the kind of government in which citizens can act freely in the best way.

Paradoxically, I use the matrix of Spinoza’s theory of knowledge to argue, in effect, that Spinoza has no theory of knowledge proper. Throughout Spinoza’s writings, knowledge and mental life are understood to be thoroughly affective and social phenomena. What and how one knows cannot be considered either outside of what and how one feels or outside of the social relations that constitute such feelings and perceptions. Moreover, the development of the life of the mind remains essentially a project of power and freedom, a project of constructing an enabling way of life. As Gatens and Lloyd note, “Different ways of grasping one’s context entail specific ways of being in that context.” Similarly, both Deleuze and Balibar remark that the three kinds of knowledge are not merely different ways of knowing but different modes of living.

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8 Louis Althusser, in “The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza,” likewise asserts that no theory of knowledge can be found in Spinoza as part of a different set of claims that remain—as is typical of Althusser in relation to Spinoza—merely suggestive. *The New Spinoza*, W. Montag and T. Stolze, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 5.

9 *Collective Imaginings*, 123.

I treat the three kinds of knowledge as expressions of the variable powers of bodies; bodies that are nothing outside of dynamic relations of affective communication, the exchanging of parts, and constant decomposition and recomposition. Attention to Spinoza’s epistemology and psychology enable me to interpret his political writings in terms of lived experience and the forms of subjectivity to which different forms of political organization give rise. At the same time, focus upon the political stakes of his complex and elaborate psychology clarifies the most obscure and troubling doctrines of the intellectual love of God and the third kind of knowledge.

Thus, I reconstruct the transmutation of the affective regime of a political body from a disposition of bondage into one of power and freedom from the theory of knowledge and the political writings. I treat each kind of knowledge separately for heuristic purposes and in order to give a principle of organization to this study. It is important to note, however, that all three kinds of knowledge necessarily co-exist in each individual human and political body. Each human mind is primarily characterized by imagination, but also maintains variable measure of reason and intuition. Likewise, politics concern primarily modes of imagining, but also the generation of the powers of reason and intuition internal to the political body. The greater the proportion of reason and intuition, the more freedom the commonwealth and its constituents enjoy. This is not to say, however, that reason and intuition annihilate or supersede imagination. Rather, imagination becomes more powerful and expressive as it is aided by reason and intuition. Although I am forced to treat each kind of knowledge in relative isolation from the others in order to grasp its specificity, I am likewise forced throughout to qualify each
investigation with the other ways of knowing and the powers and passions to which they correspond.

Although this study does not directly address the current political situation, it is animated by what many will readily acknowledge as a climate of fear in the United States. According to my analysis, the present administration, politicians, news media, and religious figures have recklessly abused sad passions such as fear, anxiety, and hatred. Contemporary political theory, as Michael Walzer points out with respect to liberalism, “has been too preoccupied in recent years with the construction of dispassionate deliberative procedures.” Walzer recommends an “extension of rational legitimacy to political passions, because our “feelings are implicated . . . in the practical understanding as well as in the political defense of the Good and even of the Right.” He notes that politics concern conflict and that the values we defend and promote always include passions, even as we endeavor to support them with reason. Moreover, passions, affections, sympathies and attachments drive our affiliation with various groups and causes. “And so the crucial judgment we have to make is not about what decision to favor but what group to join.” Thus, Walzer argues for a kind of critical appreciation and analysis of the political passions. Rather than concern oneself only with deliberative procedures most conducive to the rational and dispassionate adjudication of conflict, political theory and practice should allow space for the consideration and amplification of the passions that support political change and amelioration.

12 Walzer, 629.
13 Walzer, 630.
Walzer’s account suggests, albeit somewhat implicitly, that the commitment to uniquely rational procedures actually betrays anxiety (certainly a passion) in relationship to the passions that necessarily comprise political practice. The attempt to safeguard reason from passion discloses a passionate, irrational fear of the reality that rational convictions gather force from passionate commitments and attachments. Although Walzer does not say this, he expresses the concern that a refusal to allow a legitimate place for political passions gives them free reign, off-stage, in the realm of the illegitimate. If passions necessarily infuse political practice, why not endeavor to make such passions lawful, or render them available to individual and collective scrutiny?

Spinoza’s analysis very much supports Walzer’s argument. Reason itself is always entangled with passions, and is really nothing other than passion that has become active, an active affect. The endeavor to inoculate reason against the passions betrays sad passions rather than a rational affirmation of the nature of the human mind and body “always necessarily subject to passions.” Likewise, Spinozist principles affirm Walzer’s claim that the most crucial political “judgment” is not which decisions to support but which group to join. One’s ability to think and act depends above all upon one’s constellation of human relationships. Moreover, Spinozism compels one to assert that one is always necessarily in a group. There is no individual outside of or beyond her many passionate attachments, collective identities, and practical affiliations. Spinoza, therefore, offers principles against which to measure the quality of one’s collective existence.

Spinoza’s philosophy of the passions offers a way to analyze the effects of being immersed within particular social and political bodies. Spinoza furthers Walzer’s
proposal with a critical analysis of the passions. Spinoza’s philosophy largely comprises an examination of the passions that underlie and enable the emergence of reason and those that corrode powers to think and act. Moreover, Spinoza provides an analysis of the affective structures of socio-political life on a mass scale. Thus, he offers tools by which the individual can determine whether certain relationships, political institutions, and encounters with others tend to increase or undermine her power. An individual cannot decide to extricate herself from relationships altogether, nor can she willfully extirpate the sad and destructive passions. She can, however, experiment with her body and environment, vary the people with whom she interacts, and, as Spinoza recommends, consume a wide variety of nourishment and surround herself with pleasant smells and plants (E IV45S). She can strive to repeat the encounters that enable her to think and act with more clarity and force.

As beings within a political body, Spinoza encourages us to assess the nature and quality of the passions and affects that circulate within the various collectivities of which we are necessarily a part. Citizens can measure the justice of the practices and institutions of their commonwealths by the affects that circulate throughout the political body. Citizens are well-served, according to the interpretation I present here, by developing a passionate measure of justice and democratic enfranchisement. Through ascertaining whether one’s political body enables one to feel and be powerful, capable and autonomous, one can measure not the intentions but the effects of political and social institutions. One should not consider merely whether their government is, for example, democratic in name and inclusive according to the letter of the law. One must determine
whether social and political institutions actually produce the material conditions of collective and individual freedom and power.

Spinoza warns statesmen against proliferating and amplifying sad passions, such as envy, fear, anxiety, and hatred. He exhorts the governing body to promote those conditions that generate joyful passions of friendship, honor, love, and “peace of mind” (*acquiescentia*). He encourages political bodies to organize so as to amplify such passions not only for the freedom and power of citizens but for the perseverance and fortitude of the state. A state suffers and weakens itself insofar as it divides and weakens the bodies and minds of its constituents.

My thesis concerns the political relations entailed by Spinoza’s analysis of the interplay between knowledge and the passions, the mind and the affective complexion of its body. Although I do not diagnose the affective health of the current geo-political situation, I do hope to provide the tools for such a project. My interpretation aims to understand Spinoza’s politics and epistemology first of all, but it also suggests that Spinoza’s analysis of the affective structures of socio-political life are not only useful but imperative in the world today. The proliferation of discourses surrounding threat, terror, violence, and emergency characterize the current political climate. Spinoza is valuable today in that he provides the tools for an analysis of the affective condition of the social body.

His analysis reveals that “fear,” as it pervades the social body, is highly noxious to democracy. Sad passions corrode social relations and democratic institutions, bringing as much harm to the state as to its constituents. From a Spinozistic perspective, therefore, many aspects of our current “war on terrorism”—from the Department of Homeland
Security’s color-coded terror alert to the now defunct TIPS program—threaten both internal cohesion and the durability of the U.S. power structure. Spinoza provides an account of the particular dangers that “a politics of fear” pose to the functioning of democracy internal to the political body. An overwhelmingly fearful, hateful and anxious populace cannot enact democracy. Spinoza provides an analysis of the social body, which amounts to an imperative to construct institutions that promote joyful passions among the masses, in order for democracy to be realized. The current “war on terrorism,” insofar as it promotes fear and hate among U.S. citizens, according to Spinoza, might be a greater threat to power, freedom and our own democratic institutions than any terrorist organization.

For Spinoza, joyful passions are by definition stronger than sad ones, even if the sad ones provoke such dramatic responses. In order to enable people to develop their reason and exercise their freedom, their hatred, anger, and fear must become love, joy and understanding: “Operation Enduring Freedom” must become co-extensive with “Operation Enduring Joy” rather than “Operation Enduring Fear.” In order for objects that once prompted fear to come to mean something totally different, however, a whole network of passionate relationships must be transformed.

Political philosophy and practice, from Spinoza’s point of view, ought to concern the ability of (trans)individuals to think and act freely. They should advocate individual freedom through an engagement with the material conditions of that freedom. They cannot, therefore, take individual freedom for granted as a quality or attribute of human existence. They must begin from an understanding of human beings necessarily subject
to passions, such that those passions become the site of political engagement and constitution. There should be a public use of the passions, an engagement with the affective body for the public good. They must, then, seek not merely to preserve or manipulate the passions in order to achieve an empty peace. Spinozist political philosophy and practice engage the passions in order to move the political body toward its own self-understanding and self-direction. This requires a citizen to understand herself not as an individual originally endowed with freedom but as necessarily part of a composite body, which constitutes the material conditions of her thought and action. The people are simply not powerful—there is not democracy—when they are ruled by fear. To alter a well-known phrase by Foucault, Spinoza forces us to conclude that “democracy is exercised rather than possessed.” The power, freedom and rationality of the multitude depend upon our ability to understand and operate as beings necessarily inside an affective field. Our freedom depends upon our ability to experience, affirm, and build a joyful social body.

Summary of Chapters

The second chapter establishes a common lexicon for the remainder of the study. Because great debate among commentators continues over even the most primitive concepts in Spinoza’s system, I find it necessary to present my interpretation of them. I, therefore, discuss the ontological triad of substance, attributes, and modes. I concern myself especially with the attributes, probably the most controversial and difficult aspect of Spinoza’s system. The affirmation that the attribute of thought is ontologically prior to the existence of minds, including the divine intellect, has great consequences for my
interpretation. Likewise, I find that the priority of thought over minds offers, albeit implicitly, a useful way of understanding and revising the problem of “ideology,” or the perseverance of false ideas, which is a concern of mine throughout the thesis. A fairly technical analysis of terms thus comprises the first section, laying the necessary groundwork for reading Spinoza at all. I endeavor to demonstrate that even the most fundamental metaphysical concepts already contain political and ethical implications. I thereby affirm the contentions of Negri and Balibar that, for Spinoza, metaphysics is necessarily political.\textsuperscript{14}

I proceed to examine the human mode in particular, and the famous argument that the mind is nothing other than an idea of the body (E IIP13). By situating the human mode in Nature, like any other mode of substance, I highlight the “communal” or collectively constituted nature of the mind. The naturalized mind, subject to the same necessary laws as the body, reveals the collective nature of the power of thought. Thus, the effort to think otherwise entails the practice of being otherwise. The project of thinking freely and with greater self-determination necessarily occurs within an affective field, amidst the causal forces of other ideas and minds.

Finally, after emphasizing the pervasive relationality constitutive of Nature and human life, the third section of chapter two determines the status of individual existence. If individuals are irreducibly in and of community, what accounts for their integrity and singularity as individuals? The final section addresses the problem of individuation

\textsuperscript{14} Their arguments can be found in \textit{The Savage Anomaly} and \textit{Spinoza and Politics}, respectively. For a dissenting argument, see Douglas J. Den Uyl and Stuart D. Warner, “Liberalism and Hobbes and Spinoza,” \textit{Studia Spinozana} 3 (1987), 307.
insofar as it pertains to human and political bodies. The second chapter thus provides a ground for an understanding of Spinoza’s system in general, with special attention to the political and epistemological consequences.

The third chapter examines the structure of imagination and the social and political relations that emerge from imagination in its primitive form. Imagination encompasses the vast majority of mental experience. It is called the “first kind of knowledge,” not because it is the lowest or least valuable but because it is the primary mode of knowing. It is, however, the only mode of knowledge that can involve falsity. Imagination as the general fabric of mental experience tends to be unruly, and requires the discipline of reason and the insight of intuition in order to be more than mere “slave-like subjectivity.” The third chapter addresses the affective structure of imagination, which is unavailable to imagination itself. Reason must intervene to understand how it works, because imagination spontaneously presents humans with a false image of their own freedom. Humans spontaneously imagine themselves to be the unique cause of their thoughts, feelings, and actions, unconditioned by external causes. We know, however, that Spinoza’s system opposes such a notion of human minds and bodies. Imagination, in its primitive form, remains ignorant of the fact that ideas and images appear mediated by one’s own body and an elaborate constellation of relationships that necessarily comprise one’s being.

If imagination is not corrected by reason, it renders individuals vulnerable to a life consisting of little other than slavery. Spinoza understands slavery to include any form of activity that is not in one’s interest and undermines one’s power. Imagination enslaves
humans, insofar as they are unable to act with respect to their ineluctable immersion within Nature. Failure to apprehend the relational and immanent structure of Nature, moreover, yields a picture of Nature as alien, external, and other.

Finally, chapter three argues that the sad passions tend to rule imagination when it is unchecked by reason so as to engender a cycle of political tyranny. The final sections endeavor to explain why people so often “fight for their slavery as for salvation.” The analysis of “collective imaginings” emerging from the passions understands tyranny to result not from the wills of malicious rulers but from the domination of particular sad passions, especially fear, anxiety, and superstition. Tyranny, therefore, cannot be overcome simply by beneficent leaders and rational laws, but must be rendered unnecessary by a preponderance of enabling counter-passions.

Although famous for being a “rationalist,” Spinoza conceives reason to be deeply embedded in corporeal experience. Chapter four presents Spinoza’s notion of reason as what names the power of the mind to produce effects that “follow from its nature.” I aim to show that reason is both an effect and an affirmation of the common powers of bodies. I proceed to examine Spinoza’s appropriation of the concepts of “virtue” and “utility.” Like reason, virtue and utility are figured in terms of corporeal aptitudes. His corporeal conception of reason unites it to an investment in collective association, concord, and action. Reason involves the apprehension of one’s own body as co-implicated and always already engaged with the bodies of others. The advantage of reason is not only that one can generate more adequate ideas about the nature of reality, more access to
truth, but that one becomes a more powerful actor in the world through cultivating a more receptive and differentiated body.

If a person were to be entirely determined by reason, she would have no need for law, politics, or concepts of good and evil. Reason expresses pure human freedom, beyond conventional laws and moral guideposts. If all of humanity were to become fully rational, politics would become superfluous. Humanity would be absolutely self-determining and consummately free. Humans, however, are not entirely rational and spend most of their lives without reason as their primary guide. Yet, desire that springs purely from reason wants nothing more than an absolutely self-determining democratic body comprised of the entirety of humanity.

Intuition, or the third kind of knowledge, has playfully been called “the third rail” of Spinoza scholarship.\textsuperscript{15} Spinozists freely admit to not understanding it, and diligent students of his philosophy openly declare dismay that his otherwise sober writings betray an attachment to some sort of mystical doctrine of community with God and the eternity of the mind. The fifth chapter systematically examines the notorious scientia intuitiva. I find that Spinoza discusses intuition in two different registers. At times, the portrait of the feared third kind of knowledge is quite banal, and Spinoza mentions that “no one” does not intuit certain basic relationships, or proportions. Far from being an extremely rare and unique experience, available only to the few genuine sages, everyone has some measure of intuitive knowledge. On the other hand, in Part V of the Ethics, intuition

\textsuperscript{15} Julie Klein made this remark upon giving a paper at Penn State University in 2003.
becomes the greatest joy, and the highest thing for which a human can hope. Intuition is alternately banal and the greatest joy of human existence. Chapter five offers a definition of intuition, a portrait of its distinctive characteristics, and finally demonstrates how intuition “can indeed arise” from reason (E VP28). That is, it presents the specific mental and corporeal practices that Spinoza recommends for maximizing the power and freedom of the mind.

Although intuition remains one of the most difficult doctrines in all of Spinoza’s philosophy, the entirety of the *Ethics* serves to determine how it can be amplified. The more a mind can know things by the third kind of knowledge, the more powerful it is. At stake in the cultivation of intuition is not a beatific vision of God or perfect fusion with Nature, as some would have it, but the maximization of both enjoyment and self-determination. Intuition names the appropriation and intensification of the pleasure and power of the mind and body at once.

Intuitive joy and knowledge is accessible to everyone through the practice of what Spinoza calls “the remedy of the affects.” Subordination of sad passions becomes possible through the reorientation of one’s possessive desire. The final section of chapter five gives an account of the operation upon one’s desire that yields intuition and the intellectual love of God. Spinoza counsels against the restraint and negation of desire for possession. Instead, he advises one to reorient and redirect the irrepressible desire to possess what one loves. If one succeeds, she will come into full possession of her own power and pleasure.
Chapter six develops the political foundation for the “remedy for the affects.” In the most original part of the dissertation, I argue that the freedom of the political writings is not restricted to the freedom to reason, or life in accordance with reason. Many commentators link imagination and reason to the political writings, but very few countenance the notion that politics could have anything to do with the highest form of freedom as it is presented in the *Ethics*. I contend that the reorientation of human desire for possession in the final part of the *Ethics* constitutes an explicitly political problem to which Spinoza responds in his analysis of property institutions. It belongs to the nature of political bodies to shape the comportment of citizens toward property and possessions. Therefore, the state plays a significant role in orienting possessive desire. With specific economic and property arrangements, a commonwealth can serve to “remedy the affects” and reorient one’s possessive desire, enabling intuition and even the intellectual love of God.

Property institutions and their corresponding affects and social relations generate the possibility of a certain kind of justice. Similarly to Plato, Spinoza understands justice to involve not meddling with other people’s things. I interpret justice to be an affect, or an affective disposition, toward what one has and what kind of being one is. Justice enables individuals to affirm themselves as effective parts of a larger body, which only becomes possible when that body is organized so as to enable and disclose the aptitudes of its component members.

The final section discusses Spinoza’s advocacy of large deliberative assemblies for the creation of laws and institutions. Even in monarchies, Spinoza argues for decision-making bodies composed of an unprecedented number of citizens. Spinoza
imagines that mass, public debate spurs the circulation of enabling affects conducive to reason. Because one is not born reasonable but becomes so, reason is encouraged when similar bodies share affects in the endeavor to arrive at a collective notion of the common interest. I contend that such a forum not only aims at the production of reason, but also intuition. Whether or not Spinoza’s prescribed institutional arrangements would actually assuage sad passions and generate wiser and more powerful citizens is beyond the scope of my analysis. I aim only to establish that the political writings definitively concern the highest form of freedom. That is, the purpose of the state ceases to be mere rationality, but also intuitive science.

The final chapter addresses problems pertaining to Spinoza’s political philosophy. Due to Spinoza’s notorious assertion that “right is coextensive with power,” the question of normativity vexes every interpreter of the political works. Chapter seven begins with a critical assessment of the various attempts to resolve or reject the problem. Since most commentators agree that Spinoza’s philosophy does not allow for eternal or universal norms, his preference for democracy, joy, and freedom becomes a problem. Spinoza’s naturalism is largely regarded as deeply problematic, because Nature does not prefer peace to war, reason to imbecility, or democracy to tyranny. Yet, Spinoza claims to prefer democracy on the basis that “it is closest to nature.” If everything is Nature, however, why would one way of life or mode of government represent a better approximation of it?

In offering a way to approach these problems consistent with my interpretation, I present a picture of the aim of politics in general and of democracy in particular. I
conclude the dissertation with an examination of Spinoza’s ambivalent affirmation of “absolute democracy,” in which the people as a whole would rule themselves. Absolute democracy, upon my interpretation, emerges as joy becomes the ruling affect of the political body. Absolute democracy exists when joy becomes the most determinate and powerful affect, infusing the body of each member of the polis. An image of a unified and joyful collectivity persists throughout Spinoza’s philosophy, but it is nearly always qualified by a lament that people so rarely live according to reason. “Spinoza’s joyful republic” thus becomes the articulation of a political desire, a rational “wish,” without ever fixing a transcendent horizon toward which everything must tend.
Chapter 2

The Mind is an Idea of the Body

In the midst of war Spinoza explains in a letter that, although such events often disturb philosophers, provoking them to laughter or to tears, he is moved all the more to philosophize, that is, to engage in “a closer observation of human nature.” He continues, “For I do not think it right to laugh at nature, and far less to grieve over it, reflecting that men, like all else, are only part of nature, and that I do not know how each part of nature harmonizes with the whole, and how it coheres with other parts” (Ep 30). In this letter, at a time of turbulence and bloodshed, Spinoza is moved to engage in a “closer,” more intimate investigation of human nature, a nature to which he is equally subject. Moreover, he notes that in order to understand human beings, one must consider them as “part of nature,” “like all else.” Thus, the war that surrounds him ought not to be understood as a human peculiarity, or as a natural consequence of a “wicked” or fallen humanity. Human phenomena—such as war, love, and the power reason—ought to be examined as parts of a coherent picture of nature, in terms of their immersion within a larger whole.

This chapter is a discussion of the basic elements of Spinoza’s metaphysics, as well as his philosophy of mind, which aims to keep in view what moves him to philosophize. Spinoza’s engagement with philosophy involves, at its heart, a consideration of violence, war, and the human tendency to destroy other human beings and themselves. Spinoza’s philosophy is ultimately a philosophy of love, joy and desire.
At the same time, Spinoza’s affirmation of love, pleasure, and constructive power entails a rigorous consideration of human servitude and self-destruction. The vacillation between power and impotence, freedom and servility already appears in the basic contours of his metaphysics.

I proceed to outline the major aspects of Spinoza’s system, first in terms of nature as a whole, and then in terms of human psychology. Initially, I leave aside many aspects of the life of the mind, including how and what it knows. Because the labor of this entire study is to investigate each kind of knowledge and the affective and political conditions that pertain to them, I confine the task of this chapter to a discussion of the fundamental components of Spinoza’s system central to this study. An account of the system as a whole, or even a consummate demonstration of Spinoza’s philosophy of mind, would require a much more elaborate and detailed account and is not the nature of this project. There is such vast disagreement, however, on several of Spinoza’s grounding concepts that I find it impossible to assume a basic consensus with my reader. It is necessary, therefore, to mark out my position on the most basic concepts and problems. Throughout I contend that Spinoza’s philosophy, even at its most basic roots, remains animated by practical concerns, such as those mentioned in his letter to Henry Oldenburg, cited above.

In presenting the basic elements of the system, I aim to highlight how the metaphysics can be understood as a meditation upon the conditions of human power and freedom and the inescapably ethical and political nature of our existence. Indeed, I do not think Spinoza’s philosophy can be understood any other way. Because all singular things are necessarily in relationship to one another, necessarily “part of nature,” it is the task of philosophy to construct paths for coming to understand these relationships, and to
thereby experience and enact them with greater power of self-determination. Since political formations and ethical norms are the general ways means by which we organize the relationships through which we necessarily have our being, such human enterprises are the proper object of philosophy.

The discussions below highlight the ineluctable relationality constitutive of natural life in general, in order to establish the political and ethical tendencies at the heart of Spinoza’s metaphysics. Spinoza’s philosophy of mind is always a philosophy of minds, in the plural, forcibly in community. The modal nature of human existence entails that humans cannot be considered in isolation from one another, such that it is never a matter of *ego cogito* but always and necessarily a matter of *homo cogitat*. The human individual is primarily affected by those modes most similar to her—that is, to other humans—and thus her power to think is very much determined, amplified, and constrained by those around her. What might be called the “social” nature knowledge, for Spinoza, is neither accidental nor optional. It is an ontological fact, grounded in the nature of minds and the bodies to which it belongs.

The effort to think differently, or to become wise, cannot be brought into being by an act of decision or reflection. The core concepts of Spinoza’s philosophy imply the necessary confluence of epistemology and politics. Thus, this chapter is, concomitantly, an explanation of the technical vocabulary used throughout Spinoza’s work (and in my text) and a disclosure of politics at the heart of being itself.

I begin with a discussion of the three basic metaphysical concepts belonging to Spinoza’s system, the single substance articulated into infinitely many attributes and modes. I proceed to describe the human mode, which participates in the attributes of
thought and extension and assumes the modal forms of mind and body. Humans, like all modes, cannot be understood in isolation from either other humans or Nature itself. Thus, human minds must be considered in terms of their necessary involvement with other minds. Given the forcibly communal, relational, or involved nature of modal existence, the final section endeavors to account for the individuation of human as well as political minds and bodies.

2.1: The Power of Thought

As irreducibly difficult as the first part of the *Ethics* is, one thing remains indisputably clear: Spinoza rejects the image of an anthropomorphic God, in all of its guises. Indeed, “God” does not appear amidst the propositions until the eleventh one, following a technical discussion of the same thing, according to its philosophical—its non-superstitious—moniker, “substance.” Throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza advises his reader that the portrait of God as one who acts according to the rules of human political order obscures his entire philosophy: “For no one will be able to perceive rightly the things I maintain unless he takes great care not to confuse God’s power with the human power of kings, or their right” (E II 35; translation modified). By noting that one must take great care, he acknowledges that there are many ways in which an anthropomorphic, juridical, law-giving conception of God can creep in and pose great obstacles to his alternative conception. Such a task, then, is not a simple dismissal, but a consistent practice to which a student of the *Ethics* must remain committed.

Spinoza discusses God not as a commander aiming to impress his will upon his subjects but as existence itself—an infinite and impersonal substance—whose laws
cannot be obeyed or honored. Rather, divine laws simply are. He further depersonalizes
divinity by, for example, (usually) avoiding the language of “creation.” He aims to
jettison the image of God as a superhuman being, who makes the world as humans
construct houses, who pursues and fulfills desires, capriciously or wisely, as though he
lacks something and strives to please himself with his inventions. The fact that human
beings tend to imagine God in their own image, often as a maker or a ruler, however, is in
complete conformity with “the order of nature,” the outcome of inescapable relationships
of cause and effect. In a well-known letter, Spinoza remarks:

I believe that a triangle, if it could speak, would likewise say that God is
eminently triangular, and a circle that God’s nature is eminently circular. In this
way, each would ascribe to God its own attributes, assuming itself to be like God
and regarding all else as ill-formed. (Ep 56)

This process by which natural beings imagine the world according to their peculiar
characteristics is the subject of the following chapter. For now, let it be established that
God cannot be conceived as analogous to a human being, any better than it can be
conceived as a really excellent triangle.

Although Spinoza aims to rid substance of its anthropomorphic mask, he
preserves the term “God” with many characteristics from the theological tradition. He
ends the first part of the Ethics with a brief summary of his account.

With these [demonstrations] I have explained God’s nature and his properties
[proprietas]: that he exists necessarily; that he is unique; that he is and acts from
the necessity alone of his nature; that (and how) he is the free cause of all things;
that all things are in God and so depend on him that without him they can neither
be nor be conceived; and finally, that all things have been predetermined by God,
not from freedom of the will or absolute good pleasure, but from God’s absolute
nature, or infinite power. (E IApp)
Spinoza attacks many of the prejudices throughout the Ethics with the very concepts that have generated those prejudices in the first place. Spinoza frequently engages in an argumentative tactic, whereby he deploys “the same weapons they take up against us” (KV, I/23; cf. E IP15S[IV]). Such a gesture is not merely rhetorical. It is also an effort to demonstrate that the foundations of reasoning have led us to natural and sometimes correct conclusions, but we have not yet followed the proper order of reasoning by which we can discern the correct premises. The *Ethics* is precisely an attempt to reorder a practice of thinking, such that we can generate as many adequate ideas as possible in the service of human happiness, or *beatitudo*.16

Spinoza takes to their logical limit theological claims that God is perfect, eternal, and omnipotent, in order to dismantle completely the notion that God thinks, wills, and chooses as humans do. If God is indeed perfect, he lacks nothing. This is not because it chooses to satisfy itself exhaustively, but because its nature, its definition even, is perfect, complete, without complement, other, or lack. Moreover, the perfection of God has no relationship to human categories like beauty and harmony, but is simply entailed by the necessity of its being. God’s perfection further implies that nothing is outside of it, and thus leaves no room for the possibility of other substances or external beings. Thus, the perfect, infinite, necessary and eternal being must include and comprehend all beings. Nothing is outside, separate from, or exclusive of divine nature and order. There is no alterity to divinity. There is no contrary force of evil, neither is there non-God or non-

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16 In this way, the *Ethics* embodies and enacts the process described and promoted in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. 
being. There is nothing either above or below God. God is the force and matter by which everything exists, and everything expresses and has its being in God.

To use the less “superstitious” language with which Spinoza begins the Ethics, in order to counter the automatic image of a willing and choosing God, “substance” can be understood as an infinite, unbounded totality, absolutely without an external limit, and, at the same time, infinitely variegated internally. The absence of exteriority ultimately supports Spinoza’s image of substance as a non-transcendent, infinitely productive power. Substance is not outside of what exists, acting upon it, imposing its imprimatur upon being. Substance is everything that exists, and nothing else. By virtue of its infinity and eternity, it neither precedes its productions temporally, nor is it external to them spatially. There is only one substance; nothing is outside of it. It must, then, as the cause of everything, bring things into being within itself, in an infinite process of immanent self-differentiation. Thus, it is the condition of all being and, concomitantly, all knowing. “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” (E IP15). In other words, God or substance is the first premise, from which everything else follows. Substance is (gnoseo-)logically and actually—if not temporally—prior to all else.

More technically, since there is only one substance and it is all that exists, it must be the cause of itself. There is no force external—no independent Other—to the positive totality of all of existence. Meaning that, for Spinoza, there is no doubling of nature. There is no intellectual form that pre-exists things in the world. There is no creator outside of and apart from creation. God (or substance or Nature) is not analogous to an artisan who conceives something and instantiates such an ideal imperfectly in the world.
Substance does not inform recalcitrant matter. What is, whether it is material or ideal, expresses the infinite and perfect power of Nature: “By reality and perfection I understand the same thing” (E IID6).

Substance causes itself. It is an inexhaustible power of auto-production.

Substance is the cause of itself, or, more precisely, is as the cause of everything that exists. Spinoza claims, against Descartes most obviously, that there cannot be two substances, because things having nothing in common cannot have a relationship of causality between them. Clearly, he objects to the idea that mental reality, completely distinct from corporeal reality, causes actions in the body. He likewise rejects the reciprocal notion that the body brings about “passions of the soul.” More generally, in order for all beings in the world to be able to act upon one another, they must all share something in common. There is nothing that does not have a minimal degree of commonality with anything and everything else that exists. Substance guarantees and requires this commonality. The assertion that “[i]f two things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other” (E IP3) requires that there be no fundamental difference between divine, substantial reality and what exists in the world. “Nature” thus becomes a substitutable name for either substance or God later in the Ethics (IVPref). There is no hierarchy or chasm, to borrow Heidegger’s language, between Being and beings. Such an argument provokes Spinoza’s contemporaries to

17 “[T]he mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else)” (E IIIP2).

accuse him of atheism. In the eighteenth century, however, the same principle prompts Novalis to refer to him as “a God-intoxicated man.”¹⁹ Everything is divine; God is everything. Or, if you prefer the less theistic version: everything is natural; nature is everything. Nothing more, nothing less.

The naturalization of substance or God, however, does not render it any less powerful. The infinity of substance is meant in every sense. Substance is absolute, without limit, perfect. It has neither exterior nor other. Moreover, substance expresses itself in infinitely many ways, or “attributes,” and is expressed in infinitely many singular beings, or “modes.” As substance exists and expresses itself infinitely, it has infinite power, force or strength (*potentia*).²⁰ Spinoza remarks that “to be able not to exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power” (E IIP11D). Substance, then, does not have the power not to exist. On the contrary, it exists necessarily, and neither its existence nor its power—which are the same thing—is limited in any way.

The claim that substance, or God, should be able to withhold its existence, maintain some of its power selectively in reserve, to qualify as omnipotent is logical, not ontological. Being is not like logos, according to Spinoza. The absence of a limit cannot be

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²⁰ Negri shows that Spinoza makes a distinction between two Latin words, each translated into English as “power.” Whereas *potestas* refers to institutionalized apparatuses of power and conventional authority that might be said to operate vertically, *potentia* refers to strength, force, and capacity as it operates horizontally. Negri, throughout his work, aims to show that Spinoza and others help us to consider that *potestas*, which may seem to impose a more effective presence, is only ever a function or particular organization of *potentia*. See, for example, Michael Hardt’s lucid introduction to *The Savage Anomaly*. This fecund Spinozian principle is visible throughout Negri’s and Hardt’s work, and is developed as the notion of “constituent power.” See, for example, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).
considered a real negation. Substance must be considered positively as an absolutely infinite power of existing. It is, concomitantly, completely expressed and inexhaustible.

The concept of substance functions to guarantee a kind of commonality among all that exists and to affirm that existence as a whole is inexhaustibly powerful and diverse. The infinity of its power entails that it be differentiated into infinitely many attributes, which are in turn differentiated into infinitely many modes. There is plenty of room for destruction of particular beings in Spinoza’s Nature, but it is not a zero sum game and Nature as a whole remains indestructible. Indeed, Spinoza frequently ridicules the notion that there could be a vacuum, as this would imply a limit to God’s power and disturb the causal community by which all beings are necessarily connected (E IP15S). The particular version of substance, not unlike other God principles, likewise functions to guarantee the intelligibility of all of being. The fourth Axiom of Part I establishes that “the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.” Knowledge of any singular thing ultimately has its causal source in substance. Thus, knowledge of singulars concomitantly discloses substance, or God. Because all that appears has a cause (and, in most cases, many causes), everything is knowable in principle. The causal community of being, and the lack of ontological difference between a cause and its effect, between substance and its modes, renders everything available to knowledge. As a basic methodological principle of the Ethics “the order of knowing models itself on the order of being,” and vice versa.  

There is a necessary relationship between being and being conceived (E IP15). Everything that is has its

being in substance, through which it is also conceived. Substance is the power to exist, it is that through and in which singular things have their existence, and it is that by which they are known.

Moreover, the principle of a necessary connection between being and knowing establishes an absolute coincidence between what the tradition calls God’s intellect and God’s will. Spinoza’s God does not conceive all possible beings and choose to bring his favorite ones into existence, based upon a principle of harmony, beauty, excellence, or anything else. There is no ideal intellect that precedes material existence. It is simply the case that everything that is conceivable necessarily exists. Likewise, everything that exists is, in principle, conceivable (though it is conceived by the infinite intellect, if not by the finite, human mind). Matheron remarks that “everything real is conceived by God,” which likewise entails that “all that is conceivable is realized.”22 The assertion that every real being is conceived “by God,” means that all things have an existence within the attribute of thought and, therefore, can be apprehended by the infinite intellect.23 Everything is not conceived by the power of minds alone, but by way of the causal community that unites all of being, and mediated by a particular form of that being, the attribute of thought. Thus, the principle cause, or reason, conditioning the existence of beings is also what conditions their knowability. In order to further examine the principle of intelligibility, we must turn to Spinoza’s dreaded conception of the “attributes.”24

22 Matheron, “tout le réel se conçoit par Dieu;” “tout le conceivable se réalise” (16).
23 The infinite intellect is not an attribute, but rather maintains the peculiar status of infinite mode. This will be discussed below. See E IP23 and Ep 64.
24 The subject of the attributes is a matter of tremendous controversy among interpreters. For every book on Spinoza, there is a different understanding of the attributes, and several interpretations radically oppose the others. The wide disagreement on the nature of the attributes is largely what requires me to write this
That nothing is outside of substance resembles Spinoza’s claim in the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect that truth must be its own sign and function as its own, immanent norm. Truth requires no sign, because there is nothing more true, or as true, against which to measure it. In order to know truth, one only requires a true idea, which is innate in all of us, like an inborn tool. Spinoza reprises this argument in the second part of the Ethics:

For no one who has a true idea is unaware that a true idea involves the highest certainty. For to have a true idea means nothing other than knowing a thing perfectly, or in the best way. And of course no one can doubt this unless he thinks that an idea is something mute, like a picture on a tablet, and not a mode of thinking, namely the very [act of] understanding. And I ask who can know that he understands something unless he first understands it? That is, who can know that he is certain about something unless he is first certain about it? What can there be which is more certain and clearer than a true idea, to serve as a standard of truth? As the light makes both itself and darkness plain, so truth is both the standard [norma] of itself and the false. (E IIP43S)

An act of understanding must be coincident with knowledge of understanding.

Moreover, truth cannot be determined a priori, or guaranteed by any methodological principle, but rather must be enacted by the mind in order to be apprehended. Still...
further, the act of understanding includes certainty not merely as an active construction of the intellect, but also as an undergoing or perception. The mind that has a true idea experiences the force of this idea, and thus its ability to conceive something from itself rather than through something else.

Substance, then, is a paradigmatic case of the true idea, acting as its own norma. Substance must be conceived from itself and by itself, because there is nothing outside of it. Substance is its own measure. Here, Spinoza does not deploy a correspondence theory of truth where the idea must match or successfully represent its object. Our idea of substance is like the inborn tool, necessarily true, because it is really conceived through itself and not through anything else. Moreover, it is conceived by itself, meaning that it is an activity of substance to think. Or, more precisely, its modes enact thinking, while substance itself, as one of its most elemental ways of being, is thought. It is conceived “by” itself, since it is conceived by virtue of the productive power of substance itself. It is conceived by way of the productive power that is the attribute of thought.

Substance, in other words, is not known by itself in an undifferentiated sense. One might even say that substance mediates itself through its attributes. It is known in itself and by itself through the attribute of thought. The metaphysical couple of “substance-attribute” inherited from Aristotle’s pair “subject-predicate” has already undergone substantial revision by the time it gets to Spinoza. It is important to note that an attribute is not a predicate, or a quality that requires the concept of substance in order to be conceived. An attribute, like substance, “must be conceived through itself” (EIP10). It differs from substance in that it does not have its being in itself. Yet, an attribute is conceived without the help of another concept, and thus should not be
considered a “property” or “accident” of substance. Spinoza cites several “properties” of substance, as mentioned above, including the fact that it is “unique” and acts necessarily (E IApp). He delineates a wide set of “properties,” but the human intellect only knows two “attributes,” thought and extension. Thought and extension, according to Spinoza, are real beings, constitutive of substance, “which express necessity, or eternity, and infinity.” An attribute, according to his definition, is “what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (E IDef4). While they are perceived by the intellect, they constitute the “essence” of substance. The essence of substance, unlike that of modes, necessarily includes “existence” (E IP20). Attributes, unlike predicates in scholastic Aristotelianism, have an ontological status, virtually on par with substance.27

While the finite human intellect conceives two attributes, two constitutive essences of substance, the infinite power of God requires that it consist in infinitely many attributes (E IP11). If an attribute is an “essence,” or a particular power of substance, a particular way in which its infinity is expressed, a being with maximum reality must logically have an infinite number of essences, each infinite in their own kind. Spinoza’s argument is simply logical: “the more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it” (E IP9).28 Since substance is a being with infinite reality, it must have infinite attributes, or infinite fundamental ways of expressing of its power. Attributes,

27 Spinoza inherits the leveling of substance and attributes from Descartes, for whom the apprehension of attributes does not require the concept of substance. Descartes is certainly the invisible interlocutor in the first part of the Ethics in the development of the twin concepts of substance-attribute. The major difference in Spinoza’s system is that there are not different substances, each of which is conceived under a different attribute, as in the Cartesian system. Rather there is one substance that necessarily has all (infinitely many) attributes. See Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy, and Spinoza’s commentary upon it.
28 Cf. “The reason for this is that since Nothing can have no attributes, the All must have all attributes; and just as Nothing has no attributes because it is nothing, Something has attributes because it is something. So the more that it is Something, the more attributes it must have. Consequently, God being the most perfect, infinite, and the Something-that-is-all, must also have infinite, perfect and all attributes.” (KV, I/19/a)
then, are particular powers of substance, the specific forms of being through which it exists.

Thought and extension, then, are kinds of being, conceived in themselves without the support of another concept. They are conceived as “essences of substance,” which Deleuze helpfully describes not as accidents or qualities attributed to substance, but rather as attributive powers that give their way of being to something else, their affections or modes. Thought, then, is an active power of being, not a property that an intellect attributes to substance. Thought is better understood as something that substance does, as a “dynamic form” of being, in Deleuze’s terms, which is itself differentiated into infinitely many affections, or modes. Thought is an essence or power of substance that allows substance to be conceived from itself and by itself. Thought, then, must be understood as a real constituent of being, otherwise one would conceive substance through something else. The reality of thought is a reality excessive of any particular idea, or intellect, and is a power that contains and expresses all of Nature, with no remainder.

Many terms in Spinoza are ultimately reducible to a notion of power. The essence of substance is best understood as its power, yet qualified by its particular constitution. Spinoza remarks that “to be able to exist is to have power” (E IP11D), and an “essence” might be considered the particular form of a being’s power. For example, the essence of a body is its particular proportion of motion and rest. The essences of


30 One might further argue that, if the human intellect had such creative “attributive” powers, it would seem to diminish the power of substance, or God.
substance are the particular forms in which it expresses itself, for example, as thought or extension. Thus, an attribute is a fundamental way in which this essence or power is expressed, which Macherey repeatedly describes as a “kind” or “genre of being” (genre d’être). Moreover, Macherey emphasizes that one ought not to understand the attributes as “beings of reason,” or creative acts of the intellect, human or divine. In his words:

Spinoza does not say that they are what the intellect “conceives” of substance, precisely because that would imply an activity of the intellect in relation to its “object,” in which it would impose a modification, for example, by giving it a form, by “informing” it. The attribute is what the intellect “perceives” of substance, because, in the relation established here, there is on the contrary a passivity of the intellect vis-à-vis substance, which accepts it as such, in the essences that constitute it, that is, in its attributes.31

It is a mistake to understand human minds, or any other mental power, to author the attributes. Thus, one is forced to conclude that the attributes have an ontological status. They cannot be called independent beings, but they are fundamental ways in which beings exist. Every singular thing, or mode, that humans apprehend has its being in either thought or extension, which are irreducibly distinct ways of expressing nature.

Moreover, Spinoza makes clear that the intellect, either finite or infinite, is a mode and not an attribute: “By intellect (as is known through itself) we understand not absolute thought, but only a certain mode of thinking” (E IP31D). Thus, in the metaphysical order, thought precedes minds. Thought is an absolute activity of being, unlimited by any of its particular determinations. Even the infinite intellect is a modal determination of thought that Spinoza refers to as natura naturata, or an effect of nature, rather than natura naturans, a primordial causal expression of nature. Deleuze, in his

more programmatic and brief monograph, notes that Spinoza radically subordinates consciousness to thought. Deleuze remarks that Spinoza takes the “body as a model,” which has its parallel in thought. “It is a matter of showing that the body surpasses the knowledge we have of it, and that thought likewise surpasses the consciousness that we have of it.” Just as we remain unconscious of the activities of our organs, bloodstream, immune system, and so on, we remain unconscious of the various ideas that impact and constitute our minds. Deleuze asserts that Spinoza, against much of the tradition of philosophy, radically devalues consciousness in favor of thought, and thus furnishes “a discovery of the unconscious, of an unconscious of thought just as profound as the unknown of the body.”32 The impact of the ontological priority of thought over minds will become clear below. Let it now be established that the mind is neither the origin nor the source of thought. Minds always belong to a power of thinking much larger than themselves.

The unconscious that constitutes the unknown of the mind belongs to thought itself rather than individual minds. Each mode is in a relationship of reciprocal dependence most profoundly with its immediate “neighbors,” to speak somewhat loosely, and, ultimately, with every other affection within its attribute. The attribute of thought constitutes a particular causal community within the total causal community of substance. Minds belong to the attribute of thought. Thought is not the creation of minds. Minds are naturally and necessarily subject to other minds and infinitely many other ideas within the productive and infinite power of thought. Thus, the parallel I offer above of

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our ignorance of the various activities within our individual bodies is misleading. We are not only ignorant of what might be said to be within our minds or bodies—insofar as it is possible to consider them to be discrete entities—but we are also ignorant of the myriad relationships and forces that make our minds and our bodies what they are. “Thought” describes a kind of being in common, which unites all of its modes in a particular causal community of interdependence. Likewise, extension is the attribute in excess of any body, finite or infinite, that binds these beings within a particular genre and system of inescapable causal relationships.

Thus, we have arrived at the third member of the ontological triad that constitutes Spinoza’s system: modes. Modes are distinguished from substance and attributes in several ways. Whereas substance and attributes are known in themselves, without the mediation of another concept, modes are “affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived” (E IDef5). As I mentioned above, modes are not affections of substance simply, but affections of the attributes of substance (E IP28D). Modes, unlike substance, are not self-caused, but are necessarily dependent upon another for their existence and effective power. Each mode has a singular essence or power, but that power remains inseparable from a vast network of other powers. A mode does not have its being in itself, yet it is a singular thing with a peculiar constitution and an absolutely unique essence.³³

³³ There will be several occasions to return to the nature of singular essences, but I should note that modes, like substance and attributes, cannot be measured against an external “norm” or standard. Their being, while in another, is not an instantiation of some more general, universal essence. Each essence remains an absolutely unique expression of substance, with its proper constitution, proportion, or striving. Macherey’s
The most important aspect of modal existence is that its being is not fully contained within itself, and thus it can never be said to be self-determined, or self-caused.

Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity. (E IP28)34

This proposition asserts that the existence of each finite, singular thing depends upon the infinite power to exist—substance differentiated into its attributes—that is not predicable of any finite individual. Each thing exists within a network of causes, comprising a relatively stable nexus of causes and effects. To exist is both to be affected by other beings (to be caused) and to affect other beings (to be a cause). Balibar, in his discussion of this same proposition, reminds us that “this productive operation is itself necessarily determined by some other thing or cause.”35 In other words, the existence and action of any singular thing is necessarily conditioned by a dynamic network of causal relationships. While the singular thing is itself a cause, its own causal power is derived significantly from its relationship with other singular things as well as nature as a whole.

Finite modes, then, exist conditionally rather than autonomously. “Singular things,” in the terms of Matheron, “cannot exist but in community.” This community of

34 This necessary aspect of the life of a singular thing does not actually apply to “infinite modes,” and thus does not follow for all modes. The object of most of the Ethics, however, is human life, and humans, as well as most everything they encounter in the world, are finite modes. Thus, I am choosing to leave aside the vexing subject of infinite modes, though I did mention that the infinite intellect is an example of an infinite mode of thought. Spinoza discusses them in E IP21-23 and Ep 64.
35 Etienne Balibar, Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality (Eburon: Delft, 1997), 14.
“universal interaction” is such that each being acts upon every other, and is in turn acted upon by every other. This causal community is differentiated within substance, as I have been stressing, by the attributes. Among the first words opening the *Ethics*, Spinoza notes the following example: “Thus a thought is limited by another thought. But a body is not limited by a thought nor a thought by a body” (E IDef2). Singular things must be caused by other singular things, which are caused by other singular things, *ad infinitum*, to exist and produce effects. More specifically, they must be caused by those singular things with which they have a particular kind of being in common. Thus, bodies must be caused to exist and act by other bodies. Thoughts, or ideas, must be caused to exist and act by other thoughts, or ideas. The concept of an attribute functions to describe the particular causal community of universal interaction among modifications.

Although all modes interact to varying degrees within their attribute, all ideas necessarily have relationships to every other idea, different causal communities do not interact with each other. Bodies do not limit, determine, or cause ideas. Ideas do not act upon, animate, or limit bodies, in any way. Modes are necessarily relational beings, having their being within another. Yet, there is absolutely no relationship of causality between attributes. Attributes are autonomous causal communities of Nature, infinite in their own kind, each expressing Nature’s power in a unique manner, as each is infinitely modified internally.

That Spinoza distinguishes the communities of the attributes has several implications for his basic ontology, whose political and ethical stakes will become clearer.

36 Matheron, 19.
in the course of this investigation. Most obviously, in contradistinction to Descartes, extension, the causal community of bodies, is neither inert nor excluded from divinity. Extension is an equally powerful, infinite power of substance, God, or Nature. Spinoza rejects any notion that “[matter] would be unworthy of the divine nature” (EIP15S), since that would imply that there is something outside of God. The relative autonomy of the attribute of extension entails that it cannot be reduced to inert matter, waiting to be ensouled or animated by thought. Indeed, without causality between attributes, thought cannot impact extension at all. Bodies act, have power, produce effects, and mutually shape one another by virtue of their properly expressive power, which is as perfect and infinite as that of any other attribute. In other words, the power and integrity of bodies remains an intrinsic rather than an extrinsic principle. Bodies, for Spinoza, are self-organizing beings.

Thought, concomitantly, is an active constituent of the natural order. Thought is neither transcendent nor impotent. Ideas, like bodies, are singular things that have power and act within the order to ideas, according to an entirely intrinsic principle. Likewise, ideas are not autonomous with respect to one another. They do not emerge spontaneously, and neither are they invulnerable to the impact of other ideas. The power of ideas depends upon their relationship to other ideas, and they can be diminished and strengthened, according to their place within their dynamic order. One might think of an ecosystem of ideas, in which some ideas are nourished and supported while others strain to continue to exist. The health of minds and ideas, then, depends upon the environment of surrounding ideas.
To think is, therefore, to think within a community of ideas, which operates according to natural and necessary laws excessive of any deliberate manipulation by human minds. For Spinoza, it is axiomatic that “man thinks” (homo cogitat) (E IIAx2), that all ideas are conditioned by other ideas, and that the power of thought is beyond even the totality of mental power. To think is to be subject to infinitely many other ideas, most of which remain far beyond one’s grasp. Moreover, to think is to impact all other thinkers. That is, to think is to modify thought itself. The various ways in which human beings negotiate this natural and necessary immersion in a community of thought is a primary question of this study.

The communal and reciprocally dependent character of modes reveals Spinoza’s ontology as ethical and political at its very core. To be is to produce effects, to shape the world, and to be vulnerable to all other beings. To be a singular thing, as all human beings are, is to act upon and in the world, as well as to be open to the world. It is to have your being in something else, to be ineluctably bound to others—most intimately to the beings with which one has the most immediate causal relationships and ultimately to all of nature.

In the next section, I will proceed to examine the nature of a particular mode, the human being. The human mode has its being in thought and extension, at once. Thus, I begin by reprising the discussion of the attributes, in order to understand how it is that a mode can be an affection of two attributes of substance that do not interact. How is it that the human being is a mind and a body, and yet there remains no reciprocal
determination between them? Spinoza’s answer, which has been unsatisfying to many, is that the mind and the body are one thing, expressed by two attributes. Moreover, this one thing exists as a singular essence amidst infinite other essences that contribute to its power of thinking and acting. The attempt to transition from a basic description of the fundamental characteristics of being to an account of the human mind and body leads us, at the same time, to confront in the final section the relationship between what Matheron calls “individual and community.” If being is, in its very constitution, necessarily and profoundly relational, in what do its individual elements consist? What is it to be a mode of the infinite power of thought? What is it to be a body among the inexhaustible forces of extension?

2.2: Mens Idea Corporis

Whereas Part I of the Ethics concerns the totality of existence, the infinite and eternal being from which “infinitely many things follow in infinitely many modes,” Part II confines itself to “only those that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human mind and its highest blessedness [beatitudinis]” (E IIIPref). Spinoza argues forcefully that there is nothing above or outside of God. It is ludicrous, therefore, to assert that God might conform to any principle of “the good.” Part I, then, seems to be an assertion of the true rather than an ethical meditation upon the good, or how to live. Human happiness, blessedness, and freedom, however, require knowledge of Part I of the

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Paradoxically perhaps, the highest blessedness requires that humans cease to see Nature as something that is made to please or honor them. Indeed, humans have no privileged status within Nature as a whole. Both happiness and liberty require that humans cease considering themselves individual substances, operating independently of their environment, moved by desires, thoughts, and feelings that originate within them alone (E II P10). God, or Nature is the only self-determined substance, and even it does not exercise “free will,” but rather acts and exists according to the necessary laws of its nature. Beatitude—which I understand to mean the co-existence of happiness, health (salus), and liberty—requires the exorcism of the special status of humanity rather than its preservation. The first step toward blessedness involves the conception of a natural order that in no way aims to please or otherwise address humanity. The affirmation of God as substance or Nature is the first and a necessary condition for such liberation, from which others may follow. Second, one must affirm a notion of a completely naturalized mind, subject to causal laws no different from those of its body.

Spinoza qualifies Part II of the Ethics as an investigation that selectively isolates those principles conducive to the greatest human happiness and freedom. Yet, Part I, as I have been contending, already establishes the principles necessary to re-conceive human existence. The alternative portrait of God necessarily entails an alternative paradigm of human goodness. Only when we cease to imagine God as an all-powerful monarch, the ultimate paradigm of socially valuable human characteristics, will we cease to imagine

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38 See, for example, KV, I/38.
39 I am suggesting a line of continuity between parts one and two of the Ethics, because many readers of the Ethics are struck by the difficulty of the transition. I, likewise, find the difference between the two parts dramatic, and my argument claims that Spinoza’s work in general becomes far more legible, if we consistently emphasize the ethical and political concerns and the continuity of his writings.
“man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion [imperium in imperio] . . . that disturbs rather than follows the order of Nature” (E IIIPref). Only by interrupting the image of God as the perfection of a particular model of man can a new model of humanity be constructed. God, the intellect impressing itself upon matter, must be razed in order for human existence to embrace and enhance its true nature. Part I yields the possibility of conceiving the mind as the idea of the body, where this body and its mind exist by virtue of the constitutive force of other beings rather than despite it. Moreover, human happiness and freedom are contingent upon the re-imagination of the human as a “part of nature,” in no way exceptional, only different in degree from other natural beings.\textsuperscript{40}

Again, the student of the \textit{Ethics} must take great care, especially when it comes to the examination of the human mind, to guard against the elevation of humanity out of nature. Although Part II concerns the human mind, the mind is in no way uniquely human.\textsuperscript{41}

Princess Elizabeth asked Descartes how the soul can govern the body, given that the two substances have nothing in common.\textsuperscript{42} Descartes is thought to have written \textit{The Passions of the Soul}, at least partly, in response to her query. He develops an account of reciprocal causality, whereby the soul brings about bodily movement through its volitions, and the body in turn causes passions in the soul. This reciprocal determination of mind and body must be mastered in theory and practice, according to Descartes,

\textsuperscript{40}Cf. François Zourabichvili: « . . . la salut dépend d’abord de notre aptitude à comprendre que le monde n’est pas fait pour nous . . . d’apprendre à nous resaissir comme partie de la nature » (64). \textit{Spinoza : Une Physique de la pensée} (Paris : PUF, 2002).
\textsuperscript{41}“For the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain to man more than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are more or less animate” (E IIP13S).
\textsuperscript{42}Letter from 13 September 1645.
because the only source of self-esteem lies in the ability to exercise free will and control over our volitions. Descartes makes the striking assertion that “we become like God by ruling ourselves.” Spinoza, of course, contests both this image of a ruling God, and its corresponding portrait of the relationship between the mind and the body, the will and its errand-machine.

In contradistinction to Descartes, there is absolutely no reciprocal causality between the mind and the body in Spinoza’s philosophy. In his words, “[T]he mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else)” (E IIIP2). Indeed, the mind does not act upon the body, and neither does the body impress itself upon the mind. According to Spinoza, “the mind and the body, are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension” (E IIP21S). This doctrine of Spinoza’s, which contends that the mind and body constitute one mode that is nevertheless expressed by two attributes that are fundamentally distinct, has caused endless confusion and dismayed many commentators.

In order to clarify the problem, I will briefly return to the question of the attributes and their co-existence. The nature of an attribute is such that it “must be conceived through itself” (E IP10), without the help of another concept. Thus, against the tradition, an attribute does not require the concept of substance in order to be conceived. Yet, for Spinoza:

[A]lthough two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e. one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still cannot infer from that that they

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43 The Passions of the Soul, § 152.
constitute two beings, or two different substances. For it is the nature of substance that each of its attributes is conceived through itself, since all the attributes it has have always been together, and one could not be produced by another, but each expresses the reality, or being of substance. (E IP10D)

While attributes are not substantially distinct, they remain “really distinct.” Deleuze defines a “real distinction” as “a given of representation,” whereby “two things are really distinct because they are conceived as such.” Spinoza’s system, as I discuss above, requires a coincidence between what is conceived adequately and what actually is. The intellect is correct, then, to distinguish different ways of being essentially pertaining to substance, but it is incorrect to isolate the attributes from one another, as if they belonged to different substances. The act of rendering the attributes substantially external to one another involves confusion, as several commentators note, between a “real” distinction and a “numerical” distinction.

Deleuze, Macherey, and Gueroult all warn their readers against considering either substance or attributes in terms of “numerical distinction.” According to Spinoza, number is a creature, or an “auxiliary,” of the imagination, and cannot be said to exist in Nature. If the distinction between the attributes is grasped intellectually rather than from the point of view of the imagination, one can guard against the view that the attributes constitute an infinite series. The attributes do not exist, as it were, side-by-side as expressions of substance. It is a mistake to consider the attributes to be separable beings, numerically distinct, and spatially exterior to one another. One attribute does not

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44 Spinoza et le problème de l’expression, 28.
46 See, for example, Ep 12.
lack what the others have. In fact, each attribute exhaustively explains and expresses
substance, but in a completely different way than the others (E IIP7S).

In other words, as Spinoza asserts, substance cannot be divided into parts,
ultimately separable pieces, but the intellect can distinguish between ways of being
pertaining to substance (E IP12, E IP13). Upon grasping an actual essence of substance,
that essence explains substance exhaustively. Since an “essence” is “that without which a
thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without
the thing,” the essence of substance, which necessarily includes existence, does not lack
anything. It cannot be the case that a substantial essence requires something else to be
completed. Thus, thought expresses the entirety of substance, just as extension does. In
Spinoza’s words, “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 the attribute of
thought 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” (E IIP7S).

When considering the human being, then, we note that humans are modes that can
be “now comprehended under this attribute, now under that” (E IIP7S). “Man,”
according to Spinoza, “consists of a mind and a body,” which are the same thing (E
IIP13C). Such a coincidence of mind and body is possible by virtue of the celebrated and
maligned Proposition 7 of Part II: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the
order and connection of things.” This assertion prompted Leibniz to identify a doctrine

47 See also, Ep 36: “Although . . . extension negates thought of itself, this is in itself no imperfection in it.
But it would argue imperfection in it, if it were to be deprived of extension, as would actually happen if it
were limited, similarly if it lacked duration, position, etc.” Quoted in Macherey, “The Problem of the
Attributes,” 85.
of “parallelism” in Spinoza, which has been supported by several commentators and contested by at least as many. The advocates of the notion of parallelism understand Spinoza to maintain the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between ideas in the attribute of thought and bodies in the attribute of extension. This notion of parallelism imagines a kind of double series, whereby to every “fact,” to use Curley’s terms, corresponds a “true proposition,” or idea. Or, to use Bennett’s language, Spinoza maps causal chains onto causal chains, such that a correspondence between being and knowing can be systematically guaranteed. According to this thesis, for every bodily action, there is a spontaneous and accurate representation in the infinite intellect. Thus, the commentators must figure out a way to explain why the human mind does not represent perfectly the actions of its body, and neither does it include adequate knowledge of its body (E IIP19S). Such a philosophy of mind has been seen to fall very short experience, and has brought Spinoza a great deal of criticism.

The image of a double series of one-to-one relations (that must have infinitely many other series, from the point of view of the infinite intellect) suffers, in my view, from having “fall[en] into pictures” (E IIP48S). The relationship between the attributes is so difficult in Spinoza, because, while the attributes are representations given to (not authorized by) the intellect, their relationship cannot be understood by way of representation, or images. Anticipating Hegel, Spinoza reminds us several times that

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48 The notion of a one-to-one correspondence, or “mapping,” has been advocated by Bennett and Curley (though they have several disagreements precisely on this question as well), among others.

49 Curley, 123.

50 Bennett, 127.

51 Margaret Wilson candidly asserts that she finds that Spinoza simply has “no admirable position on the mind-body problem” (126).
being cannot be understood by way of “picture thinking.” The mind-body problem is understood today as a problem of relationality, yet, according to Spinoza, there is no relationship to be considered, strictly speaking. The mind and the body is one individual, albeit a composite one. It is precisely not a complicated system of communication between different entities. At the same time, and I do not dismiss the difficulty of this doctrine, the “mind” names a way of being of this one thing that is irreducible to the way of being named by the “body.” Spinoza asserts what Macherey has called a principle of “autonomy” between the life of the mind and that of the body, such that the power of thought cannot be examined as if it were identical to the power of extension. At the same time, one must study the mind and the body concurrently, as Spinoza himself contends, since they are identical in substance, even as they are different in essence.52

Proposition 7, then, cannot be understood to assert the existence of two parallel series of cause and effect. Macherey has repeatedly argued that ideas must be considered to be “things,” just as bodies are. Thus, the claim that “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” is not equivalent to the assertion that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of bodies. Corporum cannot substitute for rerum.53 Moreover, Spinoza reformulates the famous proposition multiple times as “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of causes” (E IIP7S, E IIP9D). Thus, it is not the case that ideas correspond to extended things, but that “the order and connection” of ideas is the same as

52 Harris, 22.
“the order and connection” of causes. Thus, as Harris contends, there is no “parallelism” in Spinoza, because “there is simply no double series but only a single train of events, which can be viewed in two ways.”

The danger lies in the imagination’s tendency to consider the attributes exterior to one another, numerically distinct. At the same time, imagination pictures ideas as passive representations that mirror the extended world. Ideas, however, are not “mute paintings on a canvas” but actions of the mind. That the human being is a mind and a body is not to say that it is a double series of actions and representations, or facts and propositions. Rather, a human individual exists in two fundamental ways, and modifies two basic powers of being. The attributes, then, do not simply describe two ways of conceiving the same thing, but define two ways of being the same thing. These two ways are distinctly different powers, endowed with a kind of “autonomy,” making them both irreducible to one another and identical in substance.

The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things, yet the nature of one particular idea—the human mind—remains to be understood. Spinoza claims that the human mind is the idea of its body, whose existence it does not doubt. It is simply axiomatic for Spinoza that “man thinks,” or, as he rearticulates it in the Dutch version of the Ethics, “to put it differently, we know that we think” (E IIAx2). One is struck immediately by the departure from Descartes’ “cogito ergo sum” toward the simple assertion that “homo cogitat.” For Spinoza, an individual subject does not

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54 Harris, 17.
55 I thank Ryan Netzley for this formulation. N.B. The attributes are definitely not two ways of representing the same thing, since, strictly speaking, they cannot be represented, or imagined.
56 Harris, 38.
think alone and thereby affirm his isolated existence. It is rather the case that “man” in general “thinks,” and together “we know that we think.” Moreover, axiomatic knowledge is of the existence of the activity of thinking, which does not deduce knowledge of existence, as if that existence were a separate phenomenon needing to be established. Spinoza further asserts among the axioms of part two: “We feel that a certain body [NS: our body] is affected in many ways” (E IIAx4). Thus, we know that we think, and we feel that our body is a site of diverse affections, undergoings, or experiences. The subject of feeling or experience is likewise, if less surprisingly, a “we” with a privileged relationship to “a certain body,” which the Dutch version identifies as “our body.” Finally, Spinoza delimits the nature of human experience with the fifth axiom: “We neither feel nor perceive any singular things [NS: or anything of *Natura naturata*], except bodies and modes of thinking.” Human experience is, therefore, a collective phenomenon that includes knowledge that we think, the feeling of diverse events of our bodies, and the feeling and perception of bodies and modes of thinking, and nothing else.

Spinoza reasserts that God is equally an extended thing and a thinking thing, and that he is the cause of things differently insofar as he is conceived under the different attributes. Part I establishes that each singular thing is not caused to exist and act immediately by God, or Nature, but rather is caused to exist and act within an attribute by other singular things (E IP28). In order to avoid any confusion, Spinoza essentially

57 Cf. Zourabichvili who identifies this formula as a complete reversal of Descartes’ *cogito*, since it not only effaces the “I” but also reestablishes “man” (139). Macherey likewise identifies the figure of the *homo cogitat* as the subject of a “collective experience”(*La Seconde Partie*, 40).
repeats the proposition I highlight in the previous section, but with specific reference to ideas:

The idea of a singular thing which actually exists has God for a cause not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing which actually exists; and of this [idea] God is also the cause, insofar as he is affected by another third [NS: idea], and so on, to infinity. (E IIP9)

Spinoza affirms that ideas do not have a place in nature different from that of other singular things. Ideas are not immediate expressions of God, communicated to human minds by the divine intellect. Ideas are caused by other ideas. Ideas cannot exist except among other ideas, with which they have a relationship of reciprocal dependence and mutual affection. Ideas affect one another, according to natural laws of cause and effect, just like any other singular thing in nature. When Spinoza proceeds to identify the human mind as “an idea” rather than a substance, it is important to recall that this idea exists and acts only by virtue of its relationship to other ideas. It is not the case that “I think” by virtue of a power belonging exclusively to me. “I think” if and only if “we think.”

The mind forms ideas by virtue of being a thinking thing (E IIAx3), and “the actual being of a human Mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists” (E IIP11). The mind forms concepts or ideas, and it is itself an “idea.” It is an idea of its object, which is its body. Spinoza entitles part II “Of the Nature and Origin of the Mind.” Thus far, we have established that its nature is to be a singular thing within the attribute of thought, which must be said to be, to some extent, active, since it is both a cause and an effect within its causal community. Its origin is its object, or its body. The nature of its body nearly eclipses Spinoza’s investigation in Part II upon the assertion in proposition thirteen that “no one will be able to understand [the union of the mind and
body] adequately, or distinctly, unless he first knows the adequately the nature of our body” (E IIP13S).

The suggestion that Curley makes about the relationship between ideas and bodies as analogous (or identical?) to the relationship between a fact and a true proposition seems less “eccentric”\(^{58}\) in light of the following claim by Spinoza: “For of each thing there is necessarily an idea in God, of which God is the cause in the same way he is the cause of the human body. And so, whatever we have said of the human body must also be said of the idea of any thing” (E IIP13S). Moreover, “[a]ll ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true” (E IIP32), because they agree entirely with their objects (EII P32D). This has been seen to lead to “unacceptable consequences” identified by Wilson, including the notion that the mind would have exhaustive knowledge of its body, and that absolutely all bodies must have minds.\(^{59}\) Spinoza explicitly affirms that every thing can be said to have a mind, and to be in some way “animate,” and Wilson is correct to identify this consequence of Spinoza’s philosophy of mind. Spinoza denies, however, that human minds have exhaustive knowledge of their bodies (E IIP24). The fact that the mind is a true idea of its object, insofar as it is related to God, does not at all imply that the mind, insofar as it is related to the finite human mode, has a true idea of its object. On the contrary, “The human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas by which the body is affected” (E IIP19).

One must be careful, then, to distinguish between the mind as a unitary idea of its object, and its existence as a composite mode that perceives, imagines, feels, and thinks.

\(^{58}\) Bennett’s characterization.
\(^{59}\) Wilson, 138.
The human being, far from having consummate knowledge of its body, is characterized by fundamental and irreducible ignorance of its body’s powers: “For, indeed, no one has yet determined what the body can do,” and “the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its mind wonders at” (E IIIP2S). Yet, the mind is a true idea of its object, or body, insofar as it is related to Nature itself. In fact, all ideas, insofar as they are related to Nature, or God, are true, because the infinite intellect has the idea of all ideas together, in relationship to one another, and every aspect of the infinite network of cause and effect within the attribute of thought. Exhaustive knowledge of our body, then, would not be merely a full inventory of its particular activities and functions, but rather knowledge of the entirety of Nature, insofar as it is corporeal. The body’s activities cannot be considered in isolation from those of other modes. It operates as a singular thing whose existence depends upon a causal community of infinitely many other singular things. The mind, therefore, must strive to undergo as many different kinds of experiences as possible in order to construct knowledge of its own body.

Spinoza maintains that the human mind is only different in degree from the minds of other beings. Its difference is attributable only to the internal complexity of its object, the human body. Rock bodies are not terribly variegated internally, and thus their minds are quite simple. The animate idea of a singular rock is as true and eternal as an animate idea of a human body in the mind of God, yet it is not sufficiently complex to have awareness of itself. Cat minds, on the other hand, have their “origin” in a highly complex body, and thus exhibit “sentience” and might even be said to “know” many things we do not.

I am indebted both to Matheron (Individu et Communauté, 68) and Macherey (La Seconde Partie, 192) for this argument.
not know. For seventeenth century philosophers, the extent to which animals can imagine and even reason was a living question. Spinoza remarks “in general, that in proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once” (E IIP13S). Thus, in proportion as a body is closer to the infinite internal variegation of the body of the entirety of Nature, the more it is capable of the infinite power of thought belonging to the mind of the entirety of Nature. As will become increasingly clear, the project of knowledge is to unite oneself as much as possible to this infinite body and thereby gain as much power as possible to consider the totality of relationships constituting one’s essence and existence.

The complexity and what I am calling the “internal variegation” of the human body account for the complexity of its mind and the range of its knowledge. Human individuals, moreover, have different kinds of bodies. In fact, each body is singular, and thus has an absolutely singular composition of parts and affective complexion (ingenium). Thus, the different relationships to knowledge can be explained by the variety and quality of bodily experience, what bodies can do, and the ways in which bodies can be acted upon. Thus, the range of “perception,” which is not yet knowledge, depends both upon an ability to actively affect one’s modal community as well as the affective quality of one’s involvement with other bodies. At the same time, Spinoza contends that “the mind is more capable of perceiving many things adequately as its body has many things in common with other bodies” (E IIP39C). A kind of epistemological imperative emerges whereby a body ought to strive to dispose itself toward as many diverse experiences as possible, and, concomitantly, aim to construct commonalities with
other bodies. Thus simultaneity of the production of internal difference and the construction of commonalities is a central and difficult aspect of Spinoza’s thought. The productive tension between these two imperatives, I will contend, is the key to understanding both Spinoza’s epistemology and his politics.

Many aspects of the life the mind remain in need of clarification. Thus far, I have aimed only to establish a foundation in order to give an account in later chapters of Spinoza’s theory of knowledge and its political entailments. The way in which thought as a power of substance precedes individual thinkers reveals the way in which thinking is not subject to the sovereign will of the individual subject. To think is to belong to a natural power and a community of minds beyond one’s immediate grasp. Although one does not ever grasp the totality of ideas shaping one’s thinking, the existence of such a totality remains conceivable, as the essence of thought is available to minds. The perception that there is thought, then, includes the perception that one is “part of nature.” While perception of thought’s existence is not yet an active conception, such a fundamental experience of the mind furnishes the basis for understanding the human mind thus naturalized. As Spinoza explains in a letter:

So you see why I hold that the human body is a part of Nature. As regards the human mind, I maintain that it, too, is a part of Nature; for I hold that in Nature there also exists an infinite power of thinking which, in so far as it is infinite, contains within it the whole of Nature ideally, and whose thoughts proceed in the same manner, as does Nature, which is in fact the object of its thought.

Further, I maintain that the human mind is that same power of thinking, not in so far as that power is infinite and apprehends the whole of Nature, but in so far as it is finite, apprehending the human body only. The human mind, I maintain, is in this way part of an infinite intellect. (Ep 32)
Because the mind is a part rather than whole, it is always, at the same time, an active constituent of the infinite power of thought and immersed within forces that infinitely exceed its power.

Although one remains a tiny part of Nature whose domain of “apprehension” is confined to its body, one can have very different relationships to one’s finite, partial existence. One can think in a way that more or less affirms and understands what we might consider the “ecosystem” of ideas that constrains and enables one’s mind. Likewise, the finite body can act in a more or less coordinated fashion within its environment of fellow extended beings. Because the mind cannot transcend or know anything absolutely beyond its body, one must maintain that “[t]here can be no liberation of the mind without a liberation of the body.”

Spinoza’s conception of the mind and the body, as a unified thing belonging to one and the same causal order, has the consequence that an action of the body is an action of the mind, and vice versa. Likewise, when the body is acted upon, or affected, the mind is acted upon by the idea of the body that acts upon its body. It is not the case that when the body acts, the mind receives, and nor is it possible for the mind to impose itself upon the body. They comprise one thing: “The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else” (E IIP13). Thus, they are constrained or free, passive or active, at once.

The assertion of the absolute coincidence of corporeal and mental freedom does not logically exclude the possibility that neither the mind nor the body can ever be free.

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62 Macherey, *Le troisième partie*, 64.
Indeed, it often seems that Spinoza emphasizes universal subjection to passions, and the bondage necessarily constitutive of natural life. The claim that the human mind remains subject to the same ironclad necessity as bodies is later seen by Kant to radically exclude human freedom and dignity.\textsuperscript{63} It will be the task and the toil of this investigation to show that, although the order and connection of ideas remains an expression of necessary causal laws no different from the order and connection of all natural things, it does not exclude either the possibility or the imperative to struggle for human freedom. On the contrary, I aim to show that the height of knowledge and the coordinated free action of bodies is possible through the construction of radically democratic association. No one thinks or acts alone.

2.3 The Individual

Thus far I have emphasized the relational and “communal” nature of Spinoza’s ontology. Other commentators, in contrast, consider Spinoza’s philosophy to be radically egoistic, with an unparalleled commitment to individualism.\textsuperscript{64} I have emphasized the way in which singular things remain necessarily determined by a causal community that they can in no way transcend. I have shown that Spinoza’s ontology prohibits recourse to a Kantian solution to the problem of human freedom. It is not the case that one can apprehend human actions such that they are determined, at the same time, by a series of

\textsuperscript{63} See, for example, \textit{The Critique of Pure Reason}, A 555/ B583 – A 559/ B587.

natural causes and by a spontaneous power belonging to all rational beings. Again, in contrast to Kant, Spinoza provides no recourse to a “special cause,” which would exempt the human will from natural causality and thereby attribute to human beings moral agency. The causality that determines the body equally determines the mind, and, against the background of the liberal tradition, it becomes difficult to determine what could count as an individual being or action.

What distinguishes one singular thing from another? How can we speak meaningfully of the existence of individual beings in Spinoza’s ontology? Spinoza describes the whole of Nature as “nothing but the power of all individuals together” (TTP, 173), yet in what sense can we designate any power as belonging to one singular thing rather than another?

In order better to understand the nature of human individuation in particular, let us examine Spinoza’s treatment of the human body from Part II of the Ethics. Human beings can be called individuals insofar as they are singular composites of bodies constituting a stable proportion of motion and rest and strives to persevere in being. In what has been called the “physical digression” of Part II (proposition 13 and its lemmata), Spinoza identifies several kinds of individuals. There are simple individual bodies, as well as complex, composite bodies made up of many individuals, and, finally,
“the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual” (E IIP13S). “The human body,” Spinoza tells us, “is composed of a great number of individuals of different natures, each of which is highly composite” (EIIPostI). Many individuals, then, compose what we think of as the human individual. Since Aquinas, for example, considers matter the principle of individuation, a Thomist could identify a human individual by virtue of its discrete body, numerically distinct from other bodies. The body includes a certain visible integrity that endures in its oneness and yet develops and grows over time. Or, in order to avoid the difficulty of the body and its mutations, the human individual might be identified by virtue of a unique mind or soul that underlies all physical transformation, as Descartes does. For Spinoza, however, the mind or soul (mens) mutates and transforms as much as the body, for the mind is nothing but an idea of the body (E IIP13). Hence any transformations, what Spinoza calls “affections,” of the body, are equally affections of the mind. Whereas for Descartes extension is variable and characterized by flux while the mind remains self-same, eternal and indivisible, for Spinoza the mind has no such independence from the body and is equally mutable.

Moreover, in order to conserve oneself, one aims to increase these transformative relations with other beings rather than avoid them. Self-preservation, in fact, necessarily involves self-mutation. In his words, “The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated” (E IIP13PostIV). The human body is originally a composition of “a great many bodies,” and thus relationality constitutes the body necessarily. The human body does not merely enter into relationships with other bodies because it is always, originally and necessarily,
constituted by a multiplicity of bodies. Moreover, these bodies exchange themselves with other human and non-human beings, “continually regenerat[ing]” the human body in question. In his discussion of this same postulate, Balibar explains, “Right from the beginning, what Spinoza implies is that any individual has a *need of other individuals* in order to preserve its form and existence (see E IIPostIV and above all its use in E IVP39D).”

Such a claim is clearly visible in that we exchange parts with the air and plant life in order to breathe, and depend upon gravity in order to engage in motion. In more social terms, we require other human beings, living and long dead, in order to use language and develop our capacity to reason. One could easily produce endless examples of corporeal exchanges necessary for survival and the development of various capacities.

Neither bodily nor mental discreteness, therefore, can account for the individuation of beings. Bodies and minds exist as flows of exchanges and reciprocal affections with other bodies and minds. The enduring essence of the individual is a principle intrinsic to bodies, yet cannot be identified with any particular piece of matter. Spinoza maintains that the body’s individuation is attributable to nothing other than “a proportion of motion and rest” that subsists through the continual flux and mutation of life.

Note that a proportion is itself an index of a relationship. The essence of an individual cannot be identified by any fixed substantial reality. Rather, the relative autonomy of a composition of bodies depends upon the ability to decompose and


recompose oneself constantly with other human beings and the natural environment, and yet maintain some kind of identity, remain the same “idea” in the eternal order.

Because Spinoza identifies the body based upon a relationship between two principles—motion and rest—one might think that he would use the mathematical principle of “ratio” rather than “proportion,” since a proportion involves at least three or four terms. The motion and rest of a particular individual, however, is not maintained or preserved by that singular being alone. Any body stabilizes its arrangement of motion and rest against the background of other bodies. The proportion of motion and rest that constitutes as body’s “individuation” involves the maintenance of a relational structure among a great number of bodies. A proportion, therefore, is a much more apt description of what Spinoza considers a body’s “essence,” or singularizing principle, than a ratio. There is never solely the preservation of what might be identified as an internal principle of equilibrium, because such “interiority” is necessarily constituted as part of an ongoing negotiation with exteriority. The proportion of motion and rest, then, indicates the body’s self-regulating principle, which is never fully separable from the process by which it regulates its relations with other bodies.

Yet, Spinoza holds that the maintenance of this relational structure constitutes a kind of singular being that cannot be explained by way of any extrinsic principle. He maintains that each singular thing has a unique essence, which depends directly upon the essence of God. It is what some have characterized as a vertical determination, in contradistinction to the horizontal determination of one’s power by other modes. Although one’s singular essence relates to God or substance, it is a singular power of determination that cannot be attributed to any extrinsic determination. We might say that
the singular essential power is the way in which each being acts as God rather than being
acted upon by God or Nature in the form of other singular things. This principle is
known as “conatus.”

Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.

For singular things are modes by which God’s attributes are expressed in a
certain and determinate way (by IP25C), that is (by IP34), things that express, in a
certain and determinate way, God’s power, by which God is and acts. And no
thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its
existence away (by P4). On the contrary, it is opposed to everything which can
take its existence away (by P5). Therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it
strives to persevere in its being. (E IIIP6, P6D)

Spinoza proceeds to assert in the following proposition that this striving “is nothing but
the actual essence of the thing.” Singular things have been previously defined as those
things that cannot determine themselves (E IP28), since they are dependent for their
existence and action upon God, insofar as God functions causally in the form of infinitely
many other singular beings, or modes. Yet, each singular thing has an “essence” all its
own, which constitutes an absolute expression of self-affirmation. It is this proposition,
and this basic principle in Spinoza’s philosophy, that prompts people to consider Spinoza
a rigorous individualist. The proposition almost appears Hobbesian in that each singular
thing “opposes” everything that could possibly take its existence away. It suddenly
appears that modes are causally united, by virtue of the natural and inescapable play of
cause and effect, yet essentially opposed in that they aim only to persevere in their
singular being, and have no essential identity with other beings.

It is, in fact, correct that Spinoza rejects any philosophical principle of “specific”
unity. There is no essence to humanity, shared and common in all human beings, by
which they might naturally strive to persevere together. There is no form of human being
by which we recognize human beings as belonging to one group, or one idea in God. God has an idea for each human, but does not have an idea of “man.” This has led philosophers to suggest that the principle of singular essences promotes a kind of radical equality among natural beings. Thus, Spinoza can assert that the fool acts with as much “right” as the sage, since each acts from the laws of his own nature. There is no natural paradigm of humanity against which to measure individual humans. Each thing operates according to an immanent principle, and thus constitutes its own norm. Likewise, nature should not be judged or measured against human standards of beauty or harmony. Nature acts according to laws that have nothing to do with human nature, since human nature is likewise a fiction that comes from confusing words, or universals, with things. While words may gather disparate individuals into categories, Nature does no such thing.

According to the laws of Nature, each singular thing has its proper and unique conatus. Every singular thing has its own essence, and strives to persevere only in its being. Moreover, it is impossible for a thing, according to Spinoza, not to strive to persevere in its being, and thus “no thing can be destroyed except from an external cause” (E IIIP4). It is compelled by a wholly intrinsic principle, belonging to it alone as a unique instantiation of the infinite power to exist, to continue in existence, and to oppose that which threatens such perseverance. All negation comes from outside, and there is no group of beings naturally excluded from among those that can act as a destructive force. There is nothing within the nature of things that renders impossible the “war of all against all.”

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70 KV, I.vi.
71 For example, Macherey, *La troisième partie*, 85.
72 TTP, 174.
all,” and neither is there anything within the nature of things that makes the principle of suicide, or self-annihilation in the least bit coherent. All sui-icide is necessarily alteri-cide (to be discussed in more in chapter 4). That all singular things have essences guarantees only that they will aim to persevere in existence, and that they will oppose that which threatens this primordial drive to be indefinitely.

The principle of conatus refers to the Latin verbs conor or conari, and indicates what Macherey calls a “primary impulsion.” The verb, which most commentators leave untranslated, has the following possible meanings: “to prepare,” “to dispose oneself,” “to get ready to do something,” “to undertake,” “to endeavor,” and its transitive nature requires completion by something else. In this way, the concept aims to describe that which belongs to a thing’s nature and renders it capable of action, without being the sufficient condition for such action. Thus, a thing’s action occurs by virtue of the affections of other modes, but the essential power or force proper to a thing enables it to be affected and to communicate its actions to other beings. That it requires completion through relations with other beings suggests that, rationally understood, the principle of conatus militates against a “war of all against all.” Indeed, it discloses that we are all beings of need, in our essential nature, and that specific relations contribute more or less

73 La troisième partie, 80.

74 Laurent Bove conceives of the “indefinite” and positive force of the conatus as the expression of the indefinite within the finite, the divine within every finite being, in La stratégie du conatus: affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996). Such a reading is highly persuasive in that the essence of each individual depends directly on substance, whereas our existence depends upon the concatenation of the affective power of modes, which is an indirect, mediated expression of the force of substance. It is interesting in that God only acts through singulars in a positive way, as the pure activity of the conatus, giving them the force to persevere but never intervening to punish, exterminate, or limit them. Every finite being is constantly acted upon by modes, but such passions are the expression of infinitely many finite essences acting within one Nature rather than the immediate imprimatur of God. Insofar as singulars have a direct “relation” to God, it is only as the divine activity that comprises one’s essence.
to the preservation of our being. The conatus functions to indicate that we are, at the same time, primordially relational beings and endowed with an inalienable power that drives us to maintain our particular integrity within an inescapable community of universal interaction. Each singular being, for as long as it succeeds in its perseverance, maintains a unique disposition, or precise composition of power, as nothing else has its identical history of affections, or its precise location within the causal nexus.

One must ask, however, what accounts for the singularity to which we might attribute an essential striving? Many commentators have simply substituted the self-evident category “human” for individual, despite Spinoza’s several claims that other kinds of beings are described by the notions “individual” and “singular thing.” Barbone and Rice, for example, in their claim that the principle of conatus situates Spinoza within the tradition of liberal individualism, assume an anthropomorphic conception of the individual.75 The singular thing as the site of the conatus, however, is in no way confined either to the human or to an unchanging “individual.” Spinoza defines singular things at the beginning of Part II of the Ethics:

By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing. (E IIDef7)

Spinoza has already made clear that ideas are singular things, which likewise strive to persevere in their being, and thus a collective group of individual ideas acting together can be said to constitute a singular thing. The human mind is an example of a composite

of ideas that acts as a singular thing. Yet, it might be the case that a national identity or ideology could count as a singular thing, a kind of national “mind,” in Spinoza’s system, which is materially striving to persevere, opposing itself to the ideologies of other nations.

Spinoza makes clear that individuals are composed of still more individuals, such that even “the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual” (E IIP13L7S). Thus, it seems that an individual, as a particular essential striving pertaining indistinctly to corporeal and mental composites, takes many forms. Moreover, if an individual person were identified from an anthropomorphic perspective, we could say that my body is constituted by several different essential strivings at the same time, and that I have a singular essence qua “Hasana,” while also being a “part” of many other individual bodies, composites producing particular effects in the world, in more and less determinate ways.

Spinoza remarks in a letter that a father foresaw the death of his son, because “a father so loved his son that he and his beloved son are, as it were, one and the same.” He proceeds to assert that the father “participates in the ideal essence of his son,” which suggests that our essences do not remain precisely the same throughout our lives (Ep 17). This father did not always have his son, but his love united them into one individual. The editorial notes throughout both the Letters and the Political Treatise warn the reader of against any “collectivist” interpretations by virtue of the presence of the subjunctive, “as
it were.” There is a fear that collectivist interpretations of Spinoza, including the controversial discussions of the “multitude” in the texts of Antonion Negri and Michael Hardt, either betray a romanticism alien to Spinoza or result in the annihilation of the individual. The interpretations that do not take the subjunctive mood to mean that Spinoza only ever talks about uniting individuals into one body and mind metaphorically, indeed, tend to reject a model of the liberal individual, such that human beings are originally and naturally dissociated, and are only united artificially through custom and political arrangements. Yet, one should note that in this example of the union of the father and son, the difference between the father and the son is not negated. They become one thing, or a singular individual, such that the son’s imminent death is lived by the father, but such unity does not render them indistinguishable.

As I have suggested in the previous section, the individual body, for Spinoza, thinks and acts more effectively to the extent that (1) it is disposed in a great many ways (E IIP13S), and (2) it has things in common with other bodies (E IIP39C). Thus, having things in common with other bodies does not exclude internal variegation, being composed of a great many different individuals. In fact, the more differentiated a body is (the more it is able to coordinate and preserve different individuals), the more “sites” it will have in common with other bodies. Far from being hostile to “individuality” or the preservation of differences, Spinoza’s “collectivism” requires and supports individual difference. Insofar as human beings remain antagonistic toward one another and fail to

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76 See the Hackett editions with notes by Steven Barbone, Lee Rice, and Jacob Adler. The notes to these texts constitute activist interventions into the text, in my opinion, trying to guard students of Spinoza’s text against the influential, yet untranslated, interpretation of Matheron.
combine their powers and efforts to constitute larger bodies that act in concert toward the production of a common effect, they remain less differentiated, less disposed toward a variety of affections and actions. In this sense, Spinoza’s ontology suggests that the more “atomized” a particular society is, the more homogenous and less complex its citizen bodies will be.

To return to the question of whether individual essences can change during the course of what we recognize as a human life, Spinoza tells the story of a Spanish poet in part four of the Ethics who loses his memory after becoming very ill. Although his body appears the same, he must have a new essence and should hardly be called the same man (E IVP39S). If someone’s essence can be transformed in a destructive fashion, I see no reason why an individual can “appear” the same but have become a different “individual” by virtue of a loving, constructive unity. Indeed, the Ethics is little other than an ambivalent meditation upon the material transformation and coordination of as many human beings as possible such that they might share an essence like the father and his son, and thereby act together more effectively, wisely, and joyfully.

The difficulty of such a task may account for the opacity of the fifth part of the Ethics, the ambivalence of Spinoza’s assertions about political life, as well as the unfinished nature of the Political Treatise, where the highest political form never receives either its account or its defense. Commentators debate furiously whether Spinoza believes in “the hideous hypothesis of universal salvation,” or whether he really means what he says, when he repeatedly urges that all men “should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies would compose, as it were, one mind and one body” (E IVP18S).
Those who interpret Spinoza to mean what he says—that human beings really might compose one mind and one body, and unite into one essential, collective striving—literally and not metaphorically, have been accused of engaging in “dangerous” scholarship. I will enjoin the risks of the literal interpretation in this study. Indeed, this is precisely an attempt to examine the nature of the relationships between modes that would make possible the constitution of a single striving, a mass mind and body, or the composite individual of an “absolute democracy.” Individuals do not disappear, but must be understood in terms of their singular relational disposition. That is, they must be seen as proportional beings. Individuals, after all, do not exist alone.

78 The horror in the face of this interpretation, which I will indeed engage the risk of proposing as well, is challenged by Warren Montag in “Who’s Afraid of the Multitude? Between the Individual and the State.”
Althusser refers to imagination in Spinoza’s philosophy as “slave-like subjectivity.”79 The structure of Spinozistic imagination locates the source of our servitude in what Althusser calls “the illusion of subjectivity,” the illusion that the individual subject originates all of its actions, thoughts, and feelings. First, the imagination situates “the (human) subject at the center and origin of every perception, of every action, of every object, and of every meaning.”80 Second, to use Spinoza’s language, the imagination “turns Nature completely upside down. For what is really a cause, it considers as an effect, and conversely” (EIApp).81 Human beings spontaneously regard themselves as the unique origins of their thoughts, desires, and actions, thereby attributing to themselves a spontaneous condition of freedom from external determination. The perception of ourselves as free is actually dangerous, because it prevents us from inquiring into the causal relations that define and determine the range of our powers and abilities. Although the notion of our freedom is caused by purely natural forces, it undermines the ability to follow the Delphic imperative and adequately “know thyself” and, therefore, determine oneself.

Humans consider themselves free only because they are “born ignorant of the causes of things,” and do not know what moves them to act, think, and feel. Because they imagine themselves free, they “do not think, even in their dreams, of what moves them to wanting and willing” (EIApp). Each person assumes herself to be “a dominion within a dominion” (EIIPref), acting in accordance with the ends she has set before herself. This fundamental ignorance of her own nature prevents her from investigating the various forces that constrain and compel her. Individuals regard their appetites as the ends toward which they move rather than causes acting upon them, determining them from the outside to want and will, think, dream, move and feel (EIVDef7). They thus take their appetite to be the end, or effect, of their desire rather than its cause. By virtue of the nature of their bodies, humans have a spontaneous image of their original freedom and sovereign action, and become passionately attached to the pleasure of this self-image. Yet, this very idea of oneself as master of Nature, freely determining oneself and enjoying what Nature has provided for human use and pleasure is the source of all error, suffering, and servitude. Precisely because we imagine ourselves free, we are, in fact, slaves.

This chapter proceeds to define the first kind of knowledge with special attention to the way in which it is often the source of our servitude. “Imagination” as a power of the human mind and body together is as indispensable as it is dangerous. Because it is the source of most everything that we know, we cannot live without imagination.  

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82 Likewise, because it encompasses the vast majority of mental experience, my treatment necessarily will be highly selective. A full discussion of imagination merits its own study. C. DeDeugd covers technical aspects of the first kind of knowledge, but the implications of Spinoza’s original conception deserve still
Imagination is susceptible to rational ordering and use, and ultimately is the very means by which we “remedy the affects” on the way to salvation and beatitude. Spinoza never proposes anything like the elimination of imagination, which constitutes the fabric of most of our mental lives. At the same time, imagination spontaneously lends itself to superstition, servitude, and even the human tendency to embrace tyranny. The project of the *Ethics* as well as the political writings consists in a collective and individual transformation by way of an operation upon imagination. Through such an operation one ceases to regard oneself as a sovereign substance, endeavoring instead to affirm oneself as “a part of nature.” Later chapters, especially chapter five, will account for how the imagination can be re-ordered by reason. The task of this chapter will be to describe the social and political consequences of the failure to renounce the false image of freedom. The renunciation entails the effort to re-imagine oneself as a passionate body, necessarily affected by and in the process of affecting others. Thus, one must redeploy rather than abandon imagination. This chapter will describe how imagination works on its own, and the social and political structure that corresponds to and entrenches its natural resistance to rational reprise. Ultimately, I will attempt to account for one of the fundamental questions animating Spinoza’s philosophy: “Why do men fight for their servitude just as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?”

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83 As C. DeDeugd emphasizes throughout his study.

3.1: How Imagination Works

[All the notions by which ordinary people are accustomed to explain Nature are only modes of imagining, and do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination. (E IApp)]

Imagination, the first kind of knowledge, encompasses a tremendous range of human experience. It includes all forms of sense perception, bodily awareness, and the representation of one’s body as well as external things. Imagination likewise includes what we know from signs, words, names, and memory. Many have noted the derogatory tone Spinoza often uses upon mentioning the first kind of knowledge. Moreover, the traditional ranking, or ladder as seen in Plato, seems to designate it the “lowest” kind of knowledge. The association I have reinforced between imagination and slavery further supports a negative evaluation of the first kind of knowledge. It would be foolhardy to dismiss without qualification, however, the vast majority of mental experience. I, therefore, join the many commentators who emphasize the fact that, while Spinoza often despairs at the human use of the power of imagining, imagination is never expelled \textit{in toto} from the ethical or political project.\footnote{See, for example, DeDeugd cited above, and Pierre Macherey, \textit{Introduction à l’Éthique de Spinoza: La cinquième partie – les voies de la libération} (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1994). Hereafter cited as Macherey, « Vème partie ».}

The fact of imagining is never deemed “bad,” or even lacking, yet it is often associated with “superstition” and sharply distinguished from the more “useful” guidance of reason and the salutary force of intuition. Spinoza notes that the first kind of knowledge is the only “cause” of falsity, while the second and third kinds of knowledge are both necessarily true (E IIP41). Images, we will see below, produce inadequate and
confused ideas, because, without either rational deduction or intuitive apprehension, they do not include their causes, the nexus of relationships that bring them into and sustain their being. As pure imaginations, representations of affections of the body, the mind cannot interpret and use images correctly. Yet, this does not mean that images are by nature either defective or distorted: “imaginations of the mind, considered in themselves, involve no error” (E II49S). Images are precisely not illusions. Neither is imagination pure invention or fantasy. Given that imagination includes all sense experience as well as signification, it would be ridiculous to suggest that the mind should be cleansed of it, or that it should be excluded from science. One must, however, come to understand the particular structure and functioning of imagination in order to avoid its pitfalls. I associate it here with slavery only insofar as its peculiar functioning, without any remedial operations on the part of reason, produces passivity of the body and disempowerment of individual and social bodies and minds. The following section will explore a more specific relationship between the first kind of knowledge and our servitude. The task of this section is to determine how imagination works independently of the other kinds of knowledge.

Spinoza mentions imagination several times in the Appendix to Part I, but defines it for the first time in Part II:

[T]he affections of the human body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, though they do not reproduce the [NS: external] figures of things. And when the mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines. (E IIP17S)

Spinoza later identifies imagination strictly with “corporeal motions,” among which he includes words and signs (E IIP49S). Although he insists upon the corporeality of the
imagination, along with much of the tradition, he rejects the medieval notion of “intentional species” by which the figure or shape of a chair would travel through the medium of other matter and impress itself upon the human eye and be transmitted to the cerebrum. An image, for Spinoza, is not a reproduction of an external thing in the brain (see Ep 56). An image is an affection or modification of the body, the result of an encounter between the body of the perceiver and external bodies, accompanied by an idea, which causes the mind to regard the thing as present. One can certainly regard something as present that is not impacting one’s body at a given time. Strictly speaking, the consideration of something as absent is impossible, and thus the consideration or representation of anything at all involves its presence to mind. Regarding it as present, then, should not imply that a particular object impacts one’s body each time it is perceived. An image is simply the representation, in time, of an external thing.

Images are retained by the body such that, if I am often affected by two images at once, I will only need to be affected by one of those images in order to recall the other one. The body associates and links images according to its particular history of experience, such that any given imagining belongs to an increasingly complex constellation of others. Spinoza provides the example of a horse print in the sand. The trace of a horse having passed by will provoke the image of a horse in a soldier, which for him might be linked to images of cavalry and war. Yet, the same trace will prompt thoughts of a horse linked to images of a plow, harvest, and fields for a farmer (Ep IIIP18S). Thus, an image usually prompts a whole series of other images and feelings for the perceiver, which vary dramatically for different individuals according to their history of experience and their affective dispositions (*ingenia*). For one soldier the thought of
war may prompt feelings of pride and virility, while affecting another with anxiety and
grief.

Spinoza includes, within the same note on association and memory, the example
of the image of the word “pomum.” The mind of a Roman will be determined to think of
an apple, as his body has often been affected with the corporeal motions entailed by the
utterance of “pomum” at the same time as the vision, tactile feeling, or taste of the fruit.
The word has no resemblance whatsoever to the actual fruit, and no one ignorant of Latin
would be prompted to imagine the same object. This natural associative power of
imagination and memory is so automatic that the purely conventional relationship
between disparate things often escapes scrutiny.

Spinoza notes later that ideas of affections, before they have been examined, “are
like conclusions without premises” (E IIP28D). What brought the image into being, how
it came to appear precisely the way it does, and how it carries with it other thoughts and
feelings, remains unknown. Without an examination of the history and even environment
of a particular image, it seems to belong to the nature of “pomum” to signify apple, and to
the trace of a horse to indicate war. Moreau, in his study, provides the less apparently
associative example of a flame. Upon imagining a flame, a human being will often
equate it with burning. The fact that a flame burns other bodies upon encountering them,
however, does not belong to the nature, or essence, of the flame, but rather to a play
between the flame and the other body. An image is an affection of the body. The
imagination is what we do when we represent this affection to ourselves. Most concisely,

86 Pierre-François Moreau, Spinoza: l’expérience et l’éternité (Paris: Presses universitaires de France,
the imagination spontaneously considers external things as they affect us, yet it represents this “affection” as belonging to the nature of the external thing. Thus, the idea of the flame as that which burns is confused. It is a conclusion without a premise. That the flame burns, causes pain, and can destroy me belongs to the nature of my body as much as, if not more than, the nature of the flame’s body. Yet, imaginations require rational consideration in order to affirm that all of our perceptions are mediated by our bodies. Images themselves do not include the fact that “the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our body more than the nature of external bodies” (E IIP16C2).

One problematic aspect of the nature of imagination is its spontaneous evaluation and consideration of external things not as they are in themselves but as they impact us. The thought of things in terms of their power to affect us is not a problem in itself, however. Indeed, we do not know things, strictly speaking, in themselves, in their singularity with no relationship to anything else. Images as representations of relationships, ways in which our bodies are modified by encounters with things, are indispensable to reason. Images, in fact, are the very raw material of reason.

The problem lies in the fact that we attribute the complex relationship between our body and the external thing to the power of the thing alone. The way in which the thing affects us appears to belong to the thing necessarily and to remain invulnerable to

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87 It is proper to the power of reason to consider things in relationship to other modes, and their mutual powers of affection. It is proper to intuition to consider the essences of things as they depend upon divine attributes. Thus, there is no true knowledge of a thing entirely independent and in itself, because, for Spinoza, that is not how things are. The requirement that things be understood in relationship is, therefore, epistemological and ontological. The essence of my argument is that such an ontology and epistemology has definite consequences for politics.
modification. The force of the thing seems to emanate from an external power in which we do not participate, and in which we may not intervene. Things, therefore, appear to be far more external and autonomous than they are in reality. We not only represent things as present, but, I contend, we also represent them as fundamentally and irreducibly external. We thereby attribute false autonomy both to the thing and to ourselves, grounding a spontaneous individualist ontology in which beings are originally and irreducibly discrete.

We imagine ourselves to be observing the world, separate from it. Yet, our every perception is deeply colored by our particular histories of experience, our particular affective “complexions” (*ingenia*), and the particular dispositions of our bodies. Thus, we are deeply shaped by these encounters, which accumulate to form a kind of foundation that determines future appearances and our particular associative chains. At the same time, we alter and determine the character of every perception unwittingly. *The spontaneous autonomy attributed to things, therefore, attributes both too much and not enough power to the external thing.* On the one hand, it imagines that the thing presents itself to our mind by virtue of its independent power. Thus, we fail to recognize our own contribution to the image, our variable power to be affected in always particular ways. On the other hand, we fail to be vigilant as to how our encounters determine our capacities. We thereby do not consider the way in which our imaginative environment functions to increase our powers to think and act or, alternatively, to undermine them.

The mind depends upon the various encounters its body undergoes in order to accumulate images and acquaint itself with both its mental and corporeal powers. Spinoza affirms that “the mind does not know itself except insofar as it perceives ideas of
the affections of the body (by P23). But it does not perceive its own body (by P19) except through the very ideas themselves of the affections [of the body], and it is through them alone that it perceives external bodies” (E II P29C). The body’s acquisition of various experiences is necessary for the highly valuable project of self-knowledge, yet one is impeded insofar as one does not realize that it is the self more than the external world that is being perceived. As long as one does not examine the structure of one’s constantly engaged perceptive power, one blindly gropes about, imagining that one is learning about the nature of external things qua external things.

The lack of awareness about how the body mediates the world renders one vulnerable to haphazard determination by external objects. What one knows about the world and one’s own mental and corporeal powers, without deliberate consideration and cultivation of the body’s powers of imagination, leaves one to be “determined externally” by “fortuitous encounters with things” (E II29S). Some determination by fortune is certainly inevitable, and no individual masterfully controls her circumstances. Yet, the way in which one contributes to and shapes these determinations remains unavailable from the point of view of imagination alone. In addition, one does not think to expose herself to different, more enabling bodies to enhance her perceptive and intellectual power.

Reason, in contrast, regards the image along with one’s “internal determination” “from the fact that it regards a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences and oppositions” (E IIIP29S). Whereas reason grasps things in relationship, in terms of their mutual constitution, imagination regards things associatively and serially (in sequential or serial association), one at a time, in a chain-like formation. It is the
nature of reason to consider “a number of things at once,” and from the point of view of “eternity” and necessity. Images appear “fortuitously,” depending upon their contingent relationship to other images stored in the body. This serial regard by which images appear to follow one another, without either their intrinsic relationships or one’s own internal determinations being understood, fails to discern what belongs to the power of one’s own body and what is attributable to the force of the external thing. The force of particular images cannot be examined or modified, as long as they seem to belong to a random series rather than a complex system of forces in which one’s body is a principal agent.

I have described the general function of the imagination with some reference to its problems. The “first kind of knowledge,” however, is defined a bit more specifically. Since this study will address each kind of knowledge in turn, I will present Spinoza’s definition of all of them, but proceed to discuss only the first.

[I]t is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions:
I. from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way which is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect (see P29C); for that reason I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience [experiential vaga];
II. from signs, for example, from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, like those words through which we imagine the things (P18S); these two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination;
III. finally, from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things (see P38C, P39, P39C, and P40). This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge.

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88 These difficult notions will be addressed in the following chapter dedicated to reason, though some foreshadowing is necessary for heuristic contrast.
[IV.] In addition to these kind of knowledge, there is (as I shall show in what follows) another, third kind, which we shall call intuitive knowledge. And the kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of things.

I shall explain all of these with one example. Suppose there are three numbers, and the problem is to find a fourth which is to the third as the second is to the first. Merchants do not hesitate to multiply the second by the third and divide the product by the first, because they have not yet forgotten what they heard from their teacher without any demonstration, or because they have often found this in the simplest numbers, or from the force of the demonstration of P19 in Book VII of Euclid, namely from the common property of proportionals. But in the simplest numbers none of this is necessary. Given the numbers 1, 2, and 3, no one fails to see that the fourth proportional number is 6—and we see this much more clearly because we infer the fourth number from the ratio which, in one glance [uno intuitu], we see the first number to have the second. (E IIP40S2)

The first kind of knowledge includes both the representation of sense perception prior to being ordered by the intellect and knowledge from signs heard, seen, tasted, smelt, and felt. What unifies the various aspects of the first kind of knowledge, according to Macherey, is that they comprise a form of “indistinct representation.” Whether it is a matter of knowing through sensory perception, or knowing through universal names, such representation remains confused and unclear without rational intervention. Universals, such as “being” or “horse,” remain abstract and vague representations pertinent to many diverse images and do not contain the force belonging to true ideas. An image of a flame remains confused—and, importantly, not necessarily false—as long as I do not consider my body’s mediation and transformation of the flame itself. Although Spinoza may seem to unite many different forms of knowing within imagination, it can be understood as a kind of undisciplined power of representation.

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In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza divides perception from “*experientia vaga*” and perception from “report” (translated into French as “*oui-dire*” or “hearsay”) or “conventional sign” into two different kinds of knowledge (TIE, §19). Perception from “vague” or “random” experience, as Curley and others note, should be understood as “vagabond,” wandering experience, neither determined nor ordered by the intellect. Spinoza considers the knowledge that we will die to be knowledge from “vagabond” experience. Because we have observed others like us dying, we know that we will die. We inductively affirm this impending reality based on experience and observation of similar beings, rather than deducing our death from our proper essence (which is to persevere in existence). Knowledge from report, or hearsay, includes knowledge of who our parents are and the day we are born. Spinoza affirms that we do not tend to doubt this knowledge gathered fortuitously throughout life. Moreover, he asserts that it is the means by which we learn most everything that is useful in life (TIE, §21). Spinoza’s portrait in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, far from disparaging random experiential knowledge, rather affirms it as highly functional and useful.

Spinoza deploys the example of the fourth proportional in the TIE as well. Here, a person that uses knowledge from “report” or “hearsay” is again a merchant who imitates what his teachers have shown him without rational demonstration. The merchant comes up with the correct answer like anyone else, but only by virtue of confidence in

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91 I suspect that it occurs to most children to doubt hearsay knowledge about their own forgotten origin. The abundance of children’s stories that address fantasies and fears about adoption seems to suggest that many children are unsettled by lack of experiential knowledge of their parents’ identity or their birth.
someone else’s authority. He or she does not know the principles that could explain why the result is 6, but he could repeatedly and reliably arrive at the fourth proportional among various sets of numbers. He who relies upon “random experience” “will construct a universal axiom from experience with simple numbers.” He will discover the means of reliably determining the fourth proportional with simple experiments of trial and error (TIE, §23).

It is important to note that, with the example of the fourth proportional in both the Treatise and the Ethics, each kind of knowledge is absolutely sufficient to find the result. The first kind of knowledge is not always false, and, in fact, is usually adequate for solving basic problems and navigating practical life. In addition, one should note that the kinds of knowledge do not have different objects. They appear to be three, or four (in the TIE), ways of knowing the same thing. Thus, each kind of knowledge implies a different relationship to the same known object.

Spinoza distinguishes the first kind of knowledge sharply in that it is the only cause of falsity. Its deficiency, however, does not imply that it is illusory or fantastic. The first kind of knowledge can, in many cases, know what the other two can, but it does not include certainty. It remains uncertain and the only cause of falsity for two reasons. First, it relies upon external authority that it cannot verify by means of the (logical or causal) principles involved in order to determine its veracity. Secondly, it relies upon the aleas of experience, the haphazard accumulation of unexamined observations.

Spinoza often discusses imagination in the Theological-Political Treatise in relationship to prophecy. With the exception of Jesus, God reveals knowledge to prophets through an intermediary sign. Spinoza notes that “the Hebrew word for prophet
is ‘nabi,’ that is, speaker or interpreter . . . always used in Scripture in the sense of interpreter of God” (TTP, 9). Prophets, Spinoza emphasizes throughout his argument, do not have special intellectual or rational powers by which to grasp the principles of Nature. Rather, prophets have a vivid power of imagination especially capable of apprehending and interpreting signs (TTP, 21). Prophets do not know divine commandments through ideas themselves, but only through the appearance of a sign that requires interpretation. The prophets interpret divine revelation for the people, but also for themselves. They do not receive communication from God directly, but rather indirectly, through the manifestation of a sign external to the mind itself. Prophets must be affected from the outside, moved to regard and interpret a sign as a revelation. Prophets, therefore, require external indication and verification of the knowledge revealed to them. The content and character of the idea have not sufficient force to persuade the prophet that what is revealed to him is really true and actually revealed by God. Moreover, prophecy emerges solely from the force of imagination, and, therefore, prophets themselves do not have certainty at all. “Imagination by itself, unlike every clear and distinct idea, does not of its own nature carry certainty with it” (TTP, 21).

Spinoza characterizes certain knowledge, in contrast, as that which is “intelligible through itself” (TIE, § 33). Furthermore, “for the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea” (TIE, § 35). The force of the true idea ought to produce in us an experience of the truth such that truth becomes its own measure. One is subject to an infinite regress, according to Spinoza, if truth requires external verification, which would in turn require verification, ad infinitum. Although knowledge of the first kind encompasses the vast majority of human experience, it is characterized by a muted
mental power to affirm its veracity. The lack of force belonging to imaginative ideas prior to intellectual ordering produces the necessity for external authorities, and indications based on conventional signs. The unreliability of such signs, and the infinite regress necessary to verify them, entails the unreliability of the first kind of knowledge.

To conclude, imagination works, most basically, by considering an external body not in its nature, as it is in itself, but in terms of its effect on us. In addition, how we are affected is then understood to belong to external things rather than to a complex causal relationship between bodies. The spontaneous view of ourselves as independent perceivers undermines our ability to examine how we are affected by external things and how we affect others. Imagination, on its own, is a mode of the world’s appearance that yields a false metaphysics, according to which things are originally discrete, not embedded by necessity in a passionate dynamic through which they mutually enable and constrain one another. We constantly undergo a profusion of perceptual experience that could provide great knowledge about our own mental and corporeal powers, if its basic structure were understood. If we ceased to apprehend external objects as irreducibly external, we could appropriate to ourselves our own contribution to the play of powers between our bodies and those of others.

Signs are likewise not grasped by imagination in terms of their signifying capacity, as things that point to something else. Rather, imagination treats signs as natural indications of external things. Thus, the Magi, “who believed in the follies of

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92 Moreau, 316.
astrology,” perceived the star rising in the East to reveal Christ’s birth (TTP, 24). In reality, their beliefs and upbringing disposed them to find verification in the stars for their beliefs. It is not the case, according to Spinoza, that the stars necessarily point to Christ’s birth. They do, however, conventionally indicate belief in the existence of Christ to the Magi, and the image of the stars did really cause them to think of Christ and the teachings their community associates with him. Signs, then, do not merely point outside oneself to an external object but also, and necessarily, to oneself—one’s history, community, bodily constitution, etc. If one could understand how signs and names vary for different people in history, how they came into being and how they relate to different concepts, according to Spinoza, most human conflict would be resolved (E IIP47S). Spinoza’s faith that we actually maintain, or could maintain, the same basic concepts while using different words is certainly questionable, in my view. The sensitivity to the meaning of words in different contexts, and to how they have changed over time, however, would certainly contribute greatly to collective deliberation as well as intercultural and intergenerational understanding.  

Finally, the basic structure of imagination is to denude affections—corporeal motions and their corresponding representations—of the basic, necessary properties of affections. Affections are relational in nature, yet imaginings are serial, sequential representations of external things as discrete beings. I proceed in the next section to discuss the qualitative difference between affections, since all affects modify the body so as to increase or diminish its power. Furthermore, I will discuss imagination’s

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93 This is precisely what Spinoza tries to do, when he proposes rules for interpreting scripture in the TTP, Ch. 7.
relationship to superstition and its tendency toward servitude. The final section will portray the society in which imagination dominates with little amelioration on the part of reason. That is, I will end with an analysis of tyranny.

3.2: Evil twins: Servitude and Superstition

*Everywhere truth becomes a casualty through servility.*
- *Spinoza, Political Treatise, 7.27*  

Spinoza rejects the common sense definition of a slave as one who is forced to submit to orders rather than doing what he pleases. A slave may not be aware of his own servitude, and his master may be nothing more alien than his own pleasure. A slave neither “sees” what is good for him nor acts so as to bring it about. That is, he neither knows nor does what increases his power. It is quite possible for a slave to do just as he pleases and remain in a condition of servitude, if his activities undermine or impair his ability to think and act. In Spinoza’s words:

> [T]he real slave is one who lives under pleasure’s sway and can neither see nor do what is for his own good [utile], and only he is free who lives whole-heartedly under the sole guidance of reason. Action under orders—that is, obedience—is indeed to some extent an infringement of freedom, but it does not automatically make man a slave; the reason [ratio] for the action must enter into account. If the purpose of the action is not to the advantage [utile] of the doer but of him who commands, then the doer is a slave, and does not serve his own interest [utile].

(TTP, 178)

A slave can either be someone subject to his passions, blindly pursuing his pleasures without determining himself, or someone who obeys commands or teachings that serve

94 The editors note that Spinoza most likely refers to Tacitus, *Histories*, I, i, 1.
95 I note the presence of “utile” when it appears, since it will be an important term in the proceeding chapter on reason.
another. Because all of our actions are supported and determined by many causes acting at once, servitude becomes visible only in its effects. If our actions do not benefit or support our vital interest, we are slaves. Freedom, in contrast, is a mode of activity through which we strengthen, enable, and affirm ourselves. Although we may experience our actions to be without any coercion whatsoever, their debilitating effects nevertheless reveal our enslavement.

In the political writings, Spinoza consistently identifies slaves as those who obey the law in order to avoid death and punishment rather than out of a positive desire to pursue their interest and good (*utile*) (e.g., TP, 5.4). Spinoza never considers “the good” to be something to which one must sacrifice oneself. A rational, true understanding of “good” is whatever supports and amplifies the individual’s and the commonwealth’s power to persevere in being, which depends upon one’s power to grasp the real dynamic of relationships constituting her existence.\(^{96}\) Part IV of the *Ethics*, entitled “*De Servitute Humana, seu de Affectuum viribus*,”\(^{97}\) defines servitude more generally as “[m]an’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects.” It continues, “For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse” (E IV preface). Someone who submits to the law out of fear of death or suffering yields to his fearful affect rather than to himself. Spinoza never blames individuals for

\(^{96}\) The following chapter will contain a more thorough discussion of how Spinoza understands “good.” It is coterminous with *utile*, translated as “good,” “utility,” “interest,” or “advantage.”

\(^{97}\) Montag points out that Curley’s translation of “*servitude*” as “bondage” elides the connection between Part IV of the *Ethics* and the discussion of slavery in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and elsewhere in the political writings. *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and his Contemporaries* (London: Verso, 1999), 29-30.
responding to fear, but rather the political organization that would render fear a more powerful force than actual vital interest. If the state is well-organized, its laws should support the thriving of its constituents such that submission to the law would be nothing other than doing what benefits oneself. To obey out of fear, however, is to be determined by “fortune,” a general term designating external and unknown forces. In the Ethics, in contrast to the above citation from the Theological-Political Treatise, someone might “see” what is good for him, yet still remain unable to act so as to realize that good. A slave’s passions always present more compelling alternatives, such that even when one “sees the better” he does the worse. As we will see in the following section, Spinoza finds that certain political and social environments are so hostile to rationality that most anyone with the power to see the better will nevertheless do the worse.98

One problem with servitude, as it appears in the Ethics, emerges from the fact that the slave “does those things he is most ignorant of” (E IVP66S). Spinoza repeats several times that human beings assume themselves to be free only because they are ignorant of what causes them to act (E IApp). We often attribute agency to ourselves because it pleases us, and blindness to the determinations and passions moving us to feel, desire, and act supports such an image of natural, spontaneous, unconditioned autonomy. Spinoza attributes this “natural attitude” to human nature, which, unchecked, generates a nearly endemic “slave-like subjectivity.”

98 Seeing the better and doing the worse is a reference to a poem by Ovid, which Spinoza repeats throughout the fourth part of the Ethics. Ovid’s words serve as a virtual refrain in his account of human servitude. For more, see Montag, “Seeing the better and doing the worse: why men fight as bravely for their servitude as for their salvation,” Bodies, Masses, Power. 26-61.
Slaves imagine that they do as they please, but their pleasure is caused, produced by external forces, generating in them a desire for particular objects, activities, or experiences. Slave-like subjectivity reverses the order of nature, and one dreams that desire is its own master. It imagines that desire identifies and pursues external objects, when the encounter between one’s body and an object—or, very often, the envy prompted by a friend’s enjoyment of an object—actually compels one to desire them. Without inquiring into what moves us, we tend to pursue our pleasures blindly, doing only that of which we are most ignorant. We spontaneously consider ourselves free when we do not encounter obstacle or restraint to the acquisition of our pleasure. This, however, is no indication of freedom, since we ignore the determinations and constraints acting behind us, as it were, prior to an apprehension of appetite.

In a claim similar to that of Descartes’ in the fourth meditation, Spinoza writes:

[W]e shall easily see what the difference is between a man who is led only by an affect, or by opinion, and one who is led by reason. For the former, whether he will or not, 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 very greatly. Hence, I call the former a slave, but the latter, a free man. (E IVP66S)

As in Descartes, the rational, free man is far from indifferent to what he does. Compelled by his strong desire, a “free man” takes a determinate course, constrained by his knowledge of what matters most. Driven by passion or uninformed opinion, a slave does whatever appears desirable, without knowing what is most important, without any deliberate determination. In contrast to Descartes, one’s foolishness cannot be blamed upon the eager will that leaps ahead of the intellect. Spinoza does not regard the will as a separate faculty from the intellect. “Will” is a name we give to an inadequate
understanding of the force of appetite. We are not slaves because one of our human powers remains unchecked by another. Rather, we are slaves when we do not act with respect to knowledge of our immersion within a causal order, a causal order without a human center. Nature is eternal and infinite. It is not organized around the ends and desires of any being in particular. Slavery can only be mitigated when one affirms herself as a passionate being, determined to a large extent by external forces, many of which act upon her without any regard for human well-being.

When Spinoza accuses the state of aspiring to produce slaves rather than citizens, he clearly means to criticize its mode of government. The Ethics, on the other hand, identifies our bondage as constitutive of our natural condition. Our servitude remains something to ameliorate as far as we can, yet the absence of complete self-determination is a necessity we must affirm. We must examine our servitude, the forces of unfreedom that necessarily circumscribe the activity of finite beings, in an effort to become more active, more powerful, and, yes, freer beings. Spinoza counsels that “it is necessary to come to know both our nature’s power and its lack of power, so that we can determine what reason can do in moderating the affects, and what it cannot do” (E IVP17S). Spinoza asserts as an irreducible given that “[t]he force by which a man perseveres in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes” (E IVP3). Macherey notes that “in explaining that man’s force is ‘infinitely’ surpassed by the power of external causes,” Spinoza presents an “incommensurable” disparity.\footnote{Macherey, “IV\textsuperscript{ème} partie,” 70.} Whereas the power of a human being is finite and measurable, the power of external forces is without
measure, without limit, infinite. In this way, Spinoza finds that human servitude is, to a certain degree, unsurpassable, part of what it means to be a human, or any other finite mode within substance.¹⁰⁰

Althusser identifies imaginative knowing as “slave-like subjectivity” because one remains enslaved to the affects, passively moved by external forces, while, at the same time, under the (debilitating) illusion of autonomy. The slave-like subject is precisely the one who imagines herself a substance, a kingdom within a kingdom, elevated out of the causal order of nature. Such an illusory representation of one’s own freedom fails to grasp the basic nature of one’s existence. A character in the play “Life is a Dream” by 17th century dramatist Calderón de la Barca echoes Spinoza’s sentiment well:

    To spend my life in chains, the cause
    Of it was merely ignorance
    Of my identity. But now
    I am informed of who I am,
    I do declare I am a man
    Who is a beast, a beast who is a man.
    (Segismundo, Act II)

Although Spinoza nowhere claims that we are “manimals,” he does assert that we are natural beings like any other, always involved in causal communities, undergoing and enacting affections. He affirms without qualification, however, the judgment that we remain in chains as long as we are ignorant of our basic nature, as long as we persist without knowing who and what we are. Knowledge of the natural condition of humanity may not be a sufficient condition for our emancipation, but it is certainly a necessary one.

¹⁰⁰ Macherey, “IVème partie,” 71.
Without the rational affirmation of one’s agency and power as embedded within, strengthened, and weakened by the agency of one’s environment and neighboring bodies, one cannot see what is good (enabling or useful) for her. One can neither see nor do what is good, and thus one remains a kind of slave, albeit a slave without a master. One cannot hope to escape either “the force of the affects” or a certain measure of servitude to the external determinations of fortune. An individual remains irremediably enslaved, however, as long as she imagines herself to be the center of Nature, the free and exclusive cause of her thoughts, feelings, and actions. Only by surrendering the illusory image of oneself as master can one begin to determine oneself within, not above or against, her network of constitutive relations.\(^\text{101}\)

Without affirming our passionate nature, we remain vulnerable to haphazard determinations and an inadequate understanding of what nourishes and what poisons our ability to think and act. Rational intervention is necessary in order to engage in a qualitative assessment of our desires, passions, and constellation of relationships. The arduous labor by which passions are understood and transformed is the subject of the following chapters and cannot be addressed here. I mention the passions as variations of the body’s and mind’s power in order to show that Spinoza understands the sad passions to be actually harmful. We cannot avoid sadness and suffering altogether, and sad passions can in some instances support joyful ones. Spinoza remains highly critical, however, of any philosophy, religion, or political order that advocates sacrifice, humility, 

\(^{101}\) The enactment of this passionate agency is the topic of following chapters.
suffering and pain as good in themselves. Sad passions ought to be affirmed only insofar as they might lead to more enabling joyful passions. In the political writings, Spinoza is most wary of fear, because it nourishes and underlies the most noxious and servile passion of all: superstition.

The first line of the *Theological-Political Treatise* asserts that “[i]f men were able to exercise complete control over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition” (1). If humans were not subject to forces completely outside their control, and if they did not have to suffer and despair they would not be vulnerable to superstition. In other words, if they were the masters of the universe that they often take themselves to be, humans would not develop completely fantastic modes of interpreting nature in order to cope with the terrible unknown of fortune. Human beings are exceeded infinitely, however, by external forces, most of which remain uninterested in whether they meet with good or bad circumstance. Superstition, therefore, is a natural, albeit horribly problematic, consequence of human finitude. Because we are subject to the unknowable and overwhelming force of exteriority, we tend to invent practices of reading Nature’s signs for indications of the future. We remain necessarily uncertain about what time and circumstance will bring, but we imagine that our attention to secret codes inscribed within Nature will uncover our fate.

Superstition is the ultimate expression of a subject who imagines herself to be the center of Nature. It is the fantasy of a world always speaking to, warning, or praising the one vigilant or gifted enough to read the signs. Superstition emerges from a mode of subjectivity in which all of Nature appears to seethe with meaning, excreting messages of
menace or favor to individuals and communities. It is a mode of appearing in which the entrails of beasts and the cracks of tortoise shells portend a prosperous, unlucky, or doomed future. The significant tortoise shells and goat guts, however, disclose nothing other than the fears, hopes, and abject servility of their interpreter.

Superstition, according to Spinoza, is fundamentally related to the passion of fear. “It is fear, then, that engenders, preserves and fosters superstition.” Moreover, “only while fear persists do men fall prey to superstition” (TTP, 2). Fear is defined in the Ethics as “an inconstant sadness, born of the idea of a future or past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt” (E IIIDefXIII). Hope consists in the mirror opposite: “Hope is an inconstant joy, born of the idea of a past or future thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt” (E IIIDefXII). Hope and fear, however, always come in tandem: “there is no hope without fear and no fear without hope” (E IIP50S). The superstitious person or community vacillates madly between these two sad passions, both of which express an impotent orientation toward one’s fate. The anxiety that results from this oscillation between fear and hope is only exacerbated by the fact that “anything whatever can be the accidental cause of hope or fear” (E IIP50). Any object can prompt the turbulent emotions, because “we believe easily those things we hope for, but believe only with difficulty those we fear” (E IIP50S). Thus, we regard a sign too easily with hope, and are often overly resistant to genuine warnings, or external indications that might encourage prudence at any given time. When subject to fear, it is a law of human nature that we will do our utmost to escape this most intolerable affect (TTP, 185). We will thus read extraordinary things into Nature, either to confirm our fears, assuaging ourselves
with an illusion of certainty, or to stimulate our hopes. The excessive inflation of hope only makes us more vulnerable to despair, when reality inevitably intervenes.

Nature, for the anxious and superstitious, seems always to contain a special message for its viewer, appearing to have oriented all of its ends toward the superstitious subject (E IApp.). A major problem with the narcissistic and paranoid imagination—where nature contains cryptic messages and threats for whoever is willing to decipher them—is that it amounts to the utter disempowerment of the perceiver. If the ruling affect of a body is fear and nothing can be excluded from the regime of threatening signification, one is left nearly without recourse. Objects appear to be completely independent entities, acting by virtue of their exclusive power and mysterious will. Images by nature, however, are affections, which arise from a relationship between the perceiver’s body and external bodies. As Spinoza repeats throughout the *Ethics*, “an imagination is an idea which indicates the present constitution of the human body more than the nature of an external body—not distinctly, of course, but confusedly” (IVP1S).

When my sister, who suffers from fairly acute paranoia, sees in a fuse box an espionage device of aliens, she is, in reality, apprehending primarily herself. Her own fear—perhaps of not being at all similar to those with whom she interacts—is displaced onto the fuse box. Her condition causes her to simultaneously literalize and displace her own alienation (understood as an elaborate complex of psycho-physical and socio-political conditions). In regard to the fuse box, she is terribly afraid of its power over her, and is without any clear path by which to moderate such fear. If this experience were seen not as an effect of the reality contained by the fuse box but as a complex set of
associations that her body has with the fuse box, an indication of her own anxious bodily constitution, she might be more able to identify ways to address her fear.

Superstition tends to belong to communities of people rather than individuals. Objects of fear and anxiety are often shared. Fear, moreover, is a passion, and thus transindividual in nature, even if each of us necessarily undergoes it in her own way, according to her unique corporeal history. As far as communities are concerned, Spinoza notes that human beings exhibit a typical pattern of response to historical events. If a community has been met with good fortune, the people are arrogant and boastful, attributing their happiness to their own agency. They do not feel gratitude toward their neighbors, nor do they strive to conserve and reproduce the conditions that favor their prosperity. They assume their happiness results from the actions they undertook with their thriving in view. They do not seek anyone’s counsel, and are deaf to any prudent interventions. When met with bad fortune, on the other hand, people become desperate, their emotions fluctuate wildly, and “their credulity knows no bounds.” In times of adversity, “there is no counsel so foolish, absurd or vain which they will not follow” (TTP, 1). The smallest favorable event will balloon their hopes, and any contrary indication will deflate them, transforming hope into terrible anxiety. They waver until they are “possessed by fear,” and all of nature appears as “a partner in their madness.”

Spinoza finds that the superstitious become addicted to the violent fluctuations of their emotions. They spurn all reason, and seek only what strikes them with wonder. They crave stories of miracles, unexpected events, sudden divine interventions to lift

102 P.F. Moreau discusses this phenomenon in his chapter on “la fortune” in Spinoza: l’expérience et l’éternité: 467-482.
them out of slavery and suffering. They “prefer to remain ignorant of natural causes, and are eager to hear only what is least comprehensible to them” (TTP, 71). Spinoza often speaks of “prejudices seized upon men’s minds” (TTP, 105). He understands ideas to occupy the mind such that there is “no place” for other ideas. When the mind is seized or fixed by certain ideas, those ideas must be forced out, actually displaced, in order for one to think differently. It is a question of the actual force and power of ideas and affects rather than a matter of rational persuasion. The superstitious have the affective disposition and corporeal habits that respond quickly and violently to hope and fear, which are passive emotions.

Sad passions cannot lead directly to reason (E IIIP59). People do not yield to the truth insofar as it is true (E IVP1). False ideas have a force of their own, a conatus by which they strive to persevere in being. Any idea resists its elimination and transformation. In Spinoza’s words, “imaginations do not disappear through the presence of the true insofar as it is true, but because there occur others, stronger than them, which exclude the present existence of the things we imagine” (E IVP1S). Moreover, false ideas garner support from other similar false ideas. Superstitious fear, then, grows and receives sustenance from surrounding fearful and anxious ideas. Spinoza describes something like an ecosystem of ideas, an animate field in which some ideas flourish and accrue force, while others are usurped and excluded from presence to mind. The force of more powerful affects must overturn the passive affects, a task made increasingly difficult in communities where fear and hope flourish and infect and infest the social body.
Superstition is a complex effect of relations between bodies and events. It is not solely the result of Machiavellian interventions, or self-interested manipulations perpetrated against the weak by the strong. At the same time, it can easily be exploited by tyrants, because it cannot be overcome simply by recognizing its noxious effects. Superstitious credulity presents a tremendous political danger, as it renders people highly vulnerable to any tyrant who claims to be a “seer” or offers a decisive remedy to their plight. Stories of miraculous events and the promises of tyrants in the guise of prophets transform intolerable fear into hope, while leaving anxious uncertainty and vulnerability to deceit intact. Spinoza asserts that what people call a “miracle” is simply a natural event whose cause is unknown. It is unknown not because God’s omnipotent hand is incomprehensible by nature, but because our finite intellects cannot grasp the entirety of the necessary movement of Nature. Such events should provoke us to study Nature and perhaps to wonder at our own stupidity. They should not, however, reinforce the notion that Nature is a mysterious, alien force that can be dramatically altered at any time by divine intervention or by the actions of a favored prophet. Such stories and images of a capricious God only increase our uncertainty and anxiety.

All finite minds necessarily bear a hefty measure of uncertainty about the future. The dangers pertaining to superstition suggest that we need to learn to live with the feeling of contingency in our lives. Reason provides some rules by which to predict more accurately the course of events, but it does not offer anything like certainty about

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103 “[W]e plainly have no knowledge as to the actual co-ordination and interconnection of things—that is, the way in which things are in actual fact ordered and connected—so that for practical purposes it is better, indeed, it is essential, to consider things as contingent” (TTP, 48-49).
the future. Thought of the future is necessarily constrained to the realm of imagination, though it can be enriched by considerations of causal norms. Reason can grasp ideas sub specie æternitatis, but it cannot see the future. As a result, we are all necessarily vulnerable to the distortions of superstitious anxiety concerning our fates. Because we live in time, we will never be fully rational, considering only the eternal properties of things. We will always imagine the future and be forced to think instrumentally with ends in view. Some measure of slavery to the power of fortune is irreducible. Events always contain unanticipated elements, and we must always act, to some extent, in the face of opacity. We cannot avoid setting goals and making plans, with their attendant hopes and fears. But we must understand our future-oriented activity to be constrained and colored by our history, habits, and dispositions. We can work to transform our particular limits and affective dispositions in order to mitigate our tendency toward superstitious, slave-like thinking. Our tendency as a group to perpetuate destructive and divisive passions poses one of the greatest dangers to our thriving, not the sudden occurrence of divine punishment in the form of natural disasters. We must cease to imagine the wrath of God or even our moral weakness as the cause of bad fortune. We must aim to transform our modes of imagining ourselves, and develop an understanding of ourselves necessarily subject to passions, as tiny parts of Nature.

In this section, we found that slavery consists both in a general condition of subjection to external forces and in a mode of activity by which we undermine our own vital force. We cannot eliminate our vulnerability to fortune, the sheer unknown of the future, the immense power of exteriority itself. We can, however, study Nature and come
to understand its laws and norms rather than consigning it to the realm of mystery. Most importantly, we can strive to understand our own natures. We can develop a critical theory of the passions in order to discern when our activity fails to benefit us, depleting our power rather than amplifying it. Through a better understanding of our affects, we can discern when our activity serves another without helping us. Such a critical theory only becomes possible when we affirm ourselves as passionate, dependent beings, necessarily subject to other natural beings. Finally, we examined superstition as the mode of subjectivity that emerges when the sad passions of hope and fear come to occupy and dominate the mind. Superstition presents all of Nature as radically exterior, mysterious, and alien to the perceiver. At the same time, superstition causes Nature to appear to address the perceiver through secret codes. Only when we recognize that the operations of imagination express the nature of our bodies more than that of any external object can we affirm ourselves as parts of nature, rather than individual substances assailed by exteriority. Superstition, however, cannot be overcome through simple avowal of passionate interdependence. Superstition emerges from the circulation of affects in the social body, and the “affective regime” must be physically altered by the production of counter-affects. The following section presents what happens when we fail to produce counter-affects to displace superstitious, slave-like subjectivity. I argue that the reign of fear and superstition yields a tyrannical power, power that reinforces and reproduces slavery to sad passions.
3.3: Natural Slavery and Political Tyranny

All human beings are born ignorant and spend most of their lives acting under the sway of passions, led primarily by imagination and appetite. We are creatures of need by nature, subject to passions that thwart our ability to act in our and others’ interest, and we must acquire and construct reason during the course of our lives. Because we are creatures of need, we require a political system by which we can provide for the bodies and minds of a commonwealth. The necessity and ubiquity of politics need not be determined empirically, according to Spinoza, as it can be “deduce[d] from the nature and condition of men in general” (TP, 1.7). The finitude and vulnerability of humanity requires that we organize so as to provide and plan for our survival. Such planning, moreover, pertains necessarily to the future, and, as we noted above, the future is the province of the imagination. Because we are in time, have finite intellects and cannot foresee the unfolding of events, we must orient our actions and laws toward ends. Politics, therefore, necessarily involves a hefty dose of teleological thinking and action. We must devise models and determine goals in order to plan for our needs and pursue our pleasures and happiness. Models, paradigms, and goals are never purely rational phenomena, according to Spinoza. We project a model and determine rules (including human laws and norms) based upon particular histories, and these rules are never universally applicable. The inadequacy of models, norms, and even universal terms to singular situations and individuals is a natural consequence of both the human mind and Nature’s infinite variation. Nature does not make kinds, according to Spinoza, but only singular individuals (KV, I.vi).
For example, those who have more often regarded men’s stature with wonder will understand by the word *man* an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men—for example, that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal.

And similarly concerning others—each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body. (E IIP40S1)

Politics necessarily involves a model of humanity, notions of what constitutes good and bad, more and less perfect people, according to which institutions are created. A community’s idea of humanity is always shaped by its affective constitution. Statesmen, moreover, often set their goals with an imaginary paradigm of human wickedness foremost in mind. They thus aim to repress their citizens whom they fear rather than guide them to become bonded in friendship and mutual esteem (TP, 1.2).

Spinoza opens the fourth part of the *Ethics* on human servitude with a discussion of “exemplars” and by reprising his critique of the “final cause” from the Appendix to Part I. The preface to Part IV consists in a kind of exhortation to consider models [*exemplar*] of humanity, perfection, God, and Nature to be caused by our affective dispositions and histories rather than as given by Nature itself. I do not understand his criticism of teleology and finalism to advocate the elimination or transcendence of thinking in terms of ends, goals, and paradigms. His materialist portrait of such paradigms and ends, however, strips imaginary models of perfection and purpose of their eternal, naturalized veneer. He solicits us to destabilize these models, to which we submit and enslave ourselves as though they were divinely implanted into our souls. He aims to interrupt the tendency to absorb such values and models uncritically and use them as measures against which one would judge herself, other humans, cultures, and even God or Nature.
Political regimes of necessity deploy models and, Spinoza asserts, “we desire to form an idea of man, as a model [exemplar] of human nature to which we may look” (E IV preface). Part of our striving involves producing an image, necessarily imaginary, toward which we direct our actions, design our institutions, and measure ourselves and others. It makes a tremendous difference, however, if a model is developed critically rather than passively assumed. If we take these models to be models rather than divine decrees, or natural givens, we begin to actively determine our orientation toward the future rather than being slavishly determined from the outside. Spinoza thereby understands norms and paradigms to be externally imposed and passively absorbed, yet susceptible to critical examination without ever becoming fully rational. Because of its orientation toward the future and its determination by the past, human norms and exemplars never fully escape the domain of imagination and teleology. Because political laws are not coeval with the absolute laws of Nature, politics remains necessarily within an imaginative and teleological framework. The state that endeavors to naturalize and eternalize its norms and rules, as most of them do, hampers the critical and rational capacities of its citizens and promotes their servitude to the force of their affects.

I do not know whether animals have standards of perfection against which they measure individuals of their species, but they are creatures of biological need that plan for the future. They do not appear, however, to construct commonwealths similar to those of humans. It might be said, however, that bees, ants, and others animals appear to have an elaborate system of organization, a division of labor, and hierarchies of power and privilege within their species. Without having a sophisticated knowledge of entomology, I will venture to contend that what is unique to human political organization
and state power is that the gravest threat to its well-being comes from inside. Animals experience tremendous threat from their predators, fight amongst one another for rank, but the most “political,” or collectivity-oriented, animals do not appear to be torn by violence internal to their communities. Human beings, however, face the greatest threat from those closest to them. Most murders are committed by lovers and family members. Most human crimes are—to use a popular phrase Spinoza would affirm quite literally—crimes of passion. Spinoza asserts repeatedly that “the position has never been attained where the state was not in greater danger from its citizens than from the external enemy, and was not in greater fear of the former than the latter” (TTP, 187). Humans are aware that they require one another for mutual assistance, and they have an innate and profound fear of solitude compelling them to join together (TP, 6.1). At the same time, when torn by their sad passions, human beings become fierce enemies.

In so far as men are assailed by anger, envy, or any affect deriving from hatred, they are drawn apart and contrary to one another and are therefore the more to be feared, as they have more power and are more cunning and astute than other animals. And since men are by nature especially subject to these affects ( . . . ), men are therefore by nature enemies. For no one is a greater enemy than whom I must most fear and against whom I must guard myself. (TP, 2.14; translation modified)

We have states, because we have passions and require other human beings in order to survive and cultivate our faculties. At the same time, because we are especially susceptible to passions which are divisive and destructive in nature, it is very difficult to maintain peaceful states, to avoid terrible violence, and for the political body to avoid

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104 Paolo Cristofolini argues that the fear of isolation and solitude in Spinoza serves virtuous and empowering political ends. It should, therefore, be considered a “virtuous fear,” a sad passion conducive to joyful ones. « La peur de la solitude, » Quel Avenir pour Spinoza? Enquête sur les spinozismes à venir, ed. Lorenzo Vincinguera (Paris : Kimé, 2001).
tearing itself to shreds. Human affects, therefore, are both the reason for and the object of politics. Politics exist necessarily by virtue of the passions, and must act out of and upon them.

The object of the state, to put it most broadly, is to create a durable “affective regime” (my term). That is, the task is to constitute an affective regime governed not by hatred, envy, fear, and superstition, but one that can become coherent enough to constitute a singular thing that strives to persevere and opposes, by its very nature, self-annihilation. Like any other singular thing in Nature, it can be destroyed from the outside. The challenge of human politics, however, is to form a body whose greatest threat is external rather than internal. The problem remains, however, that humans perceive themselves to be opposed to one another. Furthermore, they are correct to perceive themselves as vulnerable to other humans insofar as they are determined not by their genuine good but by their destructive and divisive passions. Just as they must become more rational and less compelled by their passions, they must become mutually good (*utile*) for one another.

Affects, however, operate, as it were, beneath consciousness. Etienne Balibar remarks that affects “are not the product of a ‘consciousness’ but rather produce the effect of consciousness.” Affects condition and involve ideas, but ideas neither pre-exist nor produce affects. Moreover, bodies communicate affects without the consent or, very often, the awareness of the mind. Yet, we often remain enclosed within the perspective of imagination, which pictures our autonomy as freedom from determinations

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by other beings. Macherey contends that this desire for freedom from affection—the source of our joy and power as well as our suffering—is the ultimate expression of our servitude. The desire for substantial, absolute independence is a desire to be other than we are, to negate rather than affirm our being. Moreover, the wish that there not be other beings at all is symptomatic of the sadness imposed by exteriority. Whereas the slave flees from determination and affection by others, the free person finds and rejoices in the strength produced by and with other beings. Freedom, however, cannot be enacted by mere will or conscious desire. “[E]xperience teaches only too well that it is no more in our power to have a sound mind than to have a sound body” (TP, 2.6). Health, thriving and mental fortitude remain beyond our power as individuals, because our affective dispositions depend upon myriad other forces. Political organization, however, can generate more and less sane affective regimes. I will proceed in this section to discuss what occurs when the civil body is “ruled” by fear, giving full reign to superstition.

It is never the case, for Spinoza, that all joyful passions are extirpated from the social body. Fear, or any other sad passion, cannot exclude all other affects. The fact that we perceive and live at all signals that there are empowering agreements among ambient bodies and not only destructive relationships. Certain affects, ways of life, and kinds of knowledge, however, can become dominant. It is impossible, as long as we are human, that we should operate solely under the compulsion of sad passions and imagination, without some co-existence of reason and intuition. What follows is a discussion of the dominance of fear and imagination, where the affective regime is

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106 Macherey, “IVème partie,” 120.
overwhelmingly, but not entirely sad. It is a mode of life governed by superstition, such that all of Nature appears radically external, alien, and even opposed to individual power and thriving. When fear rules, I contend, we have nothing other than tyranny.

The classical sense of tyranny does not bear the same moral condemnation it does today. A tyrant (*turannos*), in the classical sense, often institutes power by violent means, usurps power, and tends to maintain an army of foreign mercenaries rather than citizens. Yet, sometimes “tyrant” was used simply to mean a foreign ruler, someone who seizes the governing power of a city of which he is not native. When Aristotle writes of tyranny, he clearly designates it a highly undesirable form of government. The fact that one even has to argue for the undesirability of tyranny, however, suggests that its meaning was not the current one. Aristotle’s condemnation of any foreign rule would be unsurprising, however, since he believed it appropriate to enslave any non-Greeks. Yet, Aristotle does not cite the alien status of the tyrant as the reason to oppose tyranny. Rather, Aristotle notes the antagonistic and lawless relationship that inheres between a tyrant and his people.

For the citizens guard kings with their own arms, while a foreign element guards the tyrant, since the former rule willing persons in accordance with the law, while the latter rule unwilling persons. So the ones have a bodyguard provided by the citizens, the others one that is directed against them.107

Any monarchy must necessarily be a tyranny [. . .] if it rules in unchallenged fashion over persons who are similar or better, and with a view to its own advantage and not that of the ruled. Hence [tyranny is a rule over persons who are] unwilling; for no free persons would willingly tolerate this sort of rule.108

108 *Politics*, 1295a.
Aristotle defines tyranny not based on any particular status of the ruler, but based on the character of the relationship between the ruler and ruled. The tyrant is protected against his people rather than by them. The tyrant must maintain an army to guard himself against the people who are forced to live resentfully under his rule. Their resentment may stem from either the tyrant’s failure to act and treat them in accordance with laws and customs, or from their belief that they are superior or equal to the tyrant, making political convention an affront to their natural fitness to participate in government. Finally, a tyrant rules primarily or exclusively according to his interests, and not those of his subjects.

Spinoza never defines tyranny as Aristotle does, but seems to refer to tyranny generally as any oppressive and violent regime. What renders a government oppressive, however, is often similar to the criteria established by Aristotle. The essence of tyranny consists in a fundamental division between government and its constituents. The presence of mercenaries, which Spinoza strongly opposes, signals the fact that the powers of the state and the people are not coordinated so as to pursue a common interest (TP, 6.10). The advantage of the tyrant is not that of the people and, therefore, government is organized to fortify its own strength at the expense of its constituents. Antagonistic forces fragment the political body, and political institutions are arranged so as to compel people to undermine their own virtue, power, and flourishing. Tyranny is simply the institution of slavery, conceived as activity directed against one’s interest, advantage, or well-being (utile). It may appear that tyranny is in the interest of rulers, but Spinoza
contends, with Seneca, that no one is more servile than a despot who lives in constant fear of his subjects (TP, 7.12).

Spinoza most often uses the language of enslavement to describe the method of government that aims only to force citizens to obey and not to cultivate their strengths and powers. Tyranny, for Spinoza in contrast to Aristotle, appears to be the norm of government rather than its perversion.\textsuperscript{109} Statesmen very often rule with their perceived interest in mind at the expense of their subjects. Both of Spinoza’s political treatises aim to demonstrate that tyrants are mistaken to imagine that it is to their advantage to oppress their citizens, force them into eternal compliance, and render them susceptible, through misery, to constant exploitation. He argues that it would maximize the power of both the ruler and the ruled to create a free commonwealth that promotes the conditions for reason, universal participation in commerce and government, and bonds of love and friendship. Spinoza repeatedly cites Seneca’s estimation of tyranny, “Tyrannical governments never last long” (TTP, 178).

Spinoza does not marvel at the stupidity of tyrants for imagining that government is naturally opposed to its people. It remains the case, as he remarks frequently, that internal strife poses the greatest threat to a government’s endurance. He does wonder, however, at how tyrannical despots consistently succeed in coming to power, and often with the help of the populace. In contrast to Aristotle, Spinoza conceives tyranny to operate often according to the “will” of the people rather than against it. The mystery does not lie in the tyrant’s fear of the masses, which are known to perpetrate terrible

\textsuperscript{109} In this respect, according to Leo Strauss, Spinoza would be closer to Xenophon than to Aristotle or Socrates. \textit{On Tyranny} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).
violence. The masses have repeatedly shown their ability to tear a ruler to shreds, and their sheer numbers always render them dangerous to the relatively few in power. The question posed by political history, on the contrary, is the willingness of citizens to submit to tyranny, and even to give their lives fighting for its preservation. In Spinoza’s famous words:

[The] supreme secret of monarchical regimes, its primary interest, consists in maintaining men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which men must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation, and count it no shame, but the highest honor, to spend their lives and their blood for the glorification of one man. (TTP, 3; translation modified)

How, then, do the many submit their tremendous strength and power not to their own advantage and well-being but to that of a single person? How do the people come to value sacrifice and slavery over joy and freedom?

One simple, even pop-psychological, answer Spinoza provides is that slavery is what people know. More precisely, Spinoza notes that bodies and dispositions determined by servitude cannot be emancipated by the simple removal of a master. Spinoza praises the genius of Machiavelli’s *Prince* as the demonstration of the futility of removing a tyrant when the causes for tyranny remain intact (TTP, 5.7). People do not endure willingly the violent rule of one man. The people will, if sufficiently oppressed, rise up and destroy their ruler. They may easily depose a particular tyrant, yet they often generate a cycle of tyranny, where one despot replaces another. If the conditions, modes of imagining, and complexion of the people still require tyranny, even the best intentioned ruler will become a tyrant or be replaced by one. Spinoza contends that violent revolution itself calls out for tyranny, since the memory of the people’s uprising
and the former monarch’s blood will compel any ruler to oppress a regicidal people. The people, then, must revolt not merely against individual tyrants but against a system of tyranny, a constellation of tyrannical institutions and relationships. Moreover, they must revolt against their own superstitious imaginations and slavish habituation, or they will only reproduce their servitude in another form.

Spinoza’s study of the Hebrew state in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, for example, finds that the Hebrews never overcame their original servitude to the Egyptians. Their commonwealth was highly stable and tightly bonded internally, but it never generated powers of self-determination among the people. One of the reasons it was so successful was that it preserved and exploited the slave-like disposition instituted in Egypt. According to Spinoza, the Hebrews never left Pharaoh.

Indeed, it would be hardly likely that men addicted to Egyptian superstition uncultured and sunk in degrading slavery, should have any sound understanding of God, or that Moses could have taught them any more than a moral code—not, indeed, as a philosopher might inculcate the morality that is engendered by freedom of the spirit, but as a lawgiver, compelling people to live good lives by command of the law. Therefore the right way of life, or true living, and the worship and love of God was for them bondage rather than true freedom, the grace and gift of God. . . . So he taught them in the same way that parents teach children who have not reached the age of reason. (TTP, 31)

Spinoza later asserts that the Hebrew state ultimately fell because divine law became coincident with vengeance of the Lord. Laws ceased to appear as “the safeguard of the people” and were apprehended as “penalties and punishments” (200-201). Spinoza’s words about the Hebrew state should always be considered in the context of his argument in *Theological-Political Treatise*, whose object was to oppose theocracy and promote the separation of politics, philosophy, and religion. The important point for my purposes is that servitude cannot be overcome except through the transformation of the affective
regime, the passionate disposition of the people. “[A]s long as men act only from fear, they do what they are most opposed to doing, taking no account of the usefulness and necessity of the action to be done, concerned only not to incur capital or other punishment” (TTP, 63).

Fear conserves and engenders the superstitious subjectivity by which God or Nature appears utterly external, alien, and mysterious. Spinoza mocks the superstitious for imagining God to be in the stars, entrails of beasts, or even in free will (TTP, 24). For the masses governed by their fear, government appears similar to an inscrutable and vengeful God. The government acts unpredictably, and the fate of individuals is experienced as precarious and unknowable. One is forced to speculate wildly about the future, a future imagined as indifferent to and unaltered by one’s actions. Citizens prepare to endure their fates rather than to determine actively, albeit partially, their lives. State power appears, concomitantly, radically other and infinitely powerful.

The state is tyrannical in that it acts in opposition to the interests of the citizens. It is forced, then, to guard itself against its constituents rather than derive support from them. It thereby encourages volatile and superstitious imagination, which apprehends a fundamentally dissociated world in which one is nearly without any power of self-determination. The government appears as an autonomous entity that does not require the support of its people, as if it could exist without them. Such lack of identification with the government is intensified in that a tyrannical government is not autochthonous. It does not emerge from the milieu of the people’s habits, history, and way of life. Even if the tyrant is officially a citizen, a government acts tyrannically if it does not endeavor to preserve significant continuity with the established ways of life of its people, and
thereby address their affective dispositions in their particularity. It is wholly appropriate for governments to strive to improve the conditions and capacities of their people, but such developments only provoke disaster and violence, according to Spinoza, if they denigrate what the people love, admire, and know. To try to force people suddenly to feel and live differently is equivalent to attempting to coerce a table to eat grass (TP, 4.4). The short duration of individual tyrants often results from their commands being so alien to the citizens that they experience their commonwealth as a complete perversion of their natures.

The rationale for tyrannical law remains opaque, and citizens apprehend the law as an external imposition, forcing them to live in an unfamiliar way. Obedience to the law, because it aims toward the interest of the government and not the citizens, does not generate a better understanding of how to act so as to conserve and fortify one’s being. One’s power is not increased but decreased by her obedience. In fact, the citizens suffer rather than act, since they act out of a passive affect, fear of death and punishment. When yielding to fear, one’s deeds reinforce and reproduce slavery. Citizens know when they are suffering, but, without the cultivation of habits and ways of life that affirm their power and freedom, they rebel only to perpetuate the cycle of tyranny.

The antagonistic relationship to the commonwealth conserves and promotes the rule of imagination and superstition. From the point of view of imagination, power and thriving does not depend upon a complex system of relationships in which one is always, albeit to varying degrees, an agent. Illusory, yet pleasing, imaginary freedom comes at the cost of apprehending oneself as isolated, assailed by the forces of others. The image of radical individuation is likewise an image of powerlessness. Such a consequence is
highly visible in the philosophical anthropology of Hobbes. One is always endangered in Hobbes’s state of nature, because every single other person, no matter how ignorant or feeble, can kill anyone else. One is free insofar as there are no obstacles to one’s motion, and other people constitute the most profound and menacing obstacles. Fear of death thus generates the “rational” calculus by which one judges that only an absolutist regime can protect her from the constant and disorganized threat posed by other human beings. A decision prompted solely by fear, however, can never be rational, according to Spinoza. Fear always causes one to act in her worst interest rather than her best.

Moreover, the image of our radical individuation and powerlessness emerges from an inadequate, confused anthropology and metaphysics. Tyrants rule oppressively and violently precisely because the masses are powerful, not because they are deeply and profoundly vulnerable at all times. As long as the masses are determined overwhelmingly by fear, however, they will generate tyranny and servitude as a necessary effect. They cannot see one another or the commonwealth as sources of power, agency, and well-being, when they act out of fear rather than the affirmation of the necessary interdependence that comprises human life as well as individual agency. In many circumstances, the people are absolutely correct to perceive the government of the commonwealth as opposed to their interest. It is not, therefore, a question of changing perspective and apprehending that the good of the individual coincides necessarily with that of the whole. The aims of the commonwealth must become concretely compatible with the aims of its constituents. The laws must actually be in the interest of the people,

110 See, of course, the famous Ch. XIII of Leviathan.
which can happen only when joyful passions fortify and dominate the affective regime of the civil body. Such joyful passions support both the institution of good laws, and its faithful practice by the people.

3.4: Political Imagination

Balibar claims that “Spinoza’s originality appears from the outset in that fact that for him the ‘mass’ is itself the principal object of investigation, reflection, and historical analysis.” The problem of politics always involves a determination of what Balibar calls the mass’ “economies or regimes of passions.” Spinoza himself wrote during the emergence of mass movements, and his profound ambivalence toward the masses remains palpable throughout his work. Balibar observes that Spinoza provides a sophisticated analysis of “the fear of the masses”: both the fear the masses themselves exhibit and suffer and the fear the masses inspire in their government.

So that, arising in the context of the power (puissance) of the masses and their movements, the problem of the constitution or reform of the state is first posed in the context of that fear—which may be as extreme as panic or may remain rationally moderated, but which never purely and simply disappears.

The fear of the masses can never be fully eliminated, since we are all vulnerable to superstition by nature. Events can provoke terrible anxiety about the future and despair in the face of bad fortune. Likewise, a government, except in the ideal community of universal rationality, always consists in less physical force than its people. Government always balances precariously upon the desire of the masses to preserve its existence.

There is necessarily a measure of fear constitutive of human community, but the
ascendance and dominance of fear poses the greatest threat to both human community
and rationality. It is that which most solicits and conserves the conditions of tyranny,
always opposed to the interest of the people. Likewise, fear renders people most
vulnerable to superstition and false prophets who may prompt violent revolution. The
state then often rules its citizens with threats and violence, disseminating fear, hatred, and
anger throughout the social body. It does so at its own peril, according to Spinoza. To
produce action determined solely by passions and imagination rather than understanding
and reason engenders bodies that respond most easily to impulse. Doubtless, the state
will sooner or later find itself at the mercy of such reactive impulses. Moreover, Spinoza
considers it an absolute law of human nature to desire freedom from fear. People will
react to fear with the hope of escaping it. If fear rules, however, they will not react in a
way that reduces its force. For fear always causes people to oppose themselves. Thus,
affects other than fear—that is, joyful passions supportive of reason—need to be put in
the service of the natural law that compels human beings to try to emancipate themselves
from fear at all costs. The problem, then, is that fear cannot escape fear, and people,
tyran ts as much as citizens, cannot escape responding to fear.

Like Balibar, Negri finds that Spinoza changes the terrain of political theory. For
Balibar, Spinoza shifts political philosophy from an analysis of the relationship between
individuals and the state and typologies of government to a treatment of the passionate
economies of mass bodies, operating beneath consciousness or volition, and in excess of
force and consent. Negri discovers in Spinoza the illumination of a kind of slavery
without masters. “[W]e should emphasize immediately the transformation the very
concept of politics undergoes: It is no longer conceived as cunning and domination but, rather, as imagination and constitution.\textsuperscript{113} The question is not how the masses are manipulated by those in power, as if they were the mere expression of a tyrannical will. The question becomes, how do modes of perception and bodily dispositions come to generate and even demand slavery and tyranny?

Negri characterizes Spinoza’s treatment of the imagination as follows: “The imagination is as strong as tradition, it is as vast as Power, it is as destructive as war—and it is the servant of all this, so that human unhappiness and ignorance, superstition and slavery, misery and death are grafted onto the imaginative faculty itself.” Spinoza conceives the imagination through a tremendously dark lens at times, such that it becomes responsible for all of our immensely destructive tendencies. At the same time, however, Negri completes the sentence by asserting that imagination, “on the other hand, constructs the unique horizon of a human society and a positive, historical determination of being.”\textsuperscript{114}

Imagination makes a people what they are. That is, imagination determines whether a commonwealth is relatively free or servile. Imagination is the world as we live it. It is the way in which we represent our world and our selves within it. We can represent our own existence and environment in better and worse ways. That is, our modes of representing and our modes of relating to external bodies can increase or decrease our powers of self-determination. Without any rational intervention (which,

\textsuperscript{113} Antonio Negri, \textit{The Savage Anomaly}, M. Hardt, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991), 95.
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{The Savage Anomaly}, 89.
strictly speaking, is impossible), imagination tends to preserve our passivity and servility. It maintains us in slavery, because it fails to grasp its own structure. It fails to see that the body always mediates, and thereby determines even its saddest passions. It is impossible to erase agency as long as we exist, however passionate and contingent upon the forces of others our power remains.

Imagination includes a socially inflected constellation of associations, individual and collective memory, as well as the affective disposition of bodies, always shaped by their environment, human and non-human. Imagination is not illusion. It is a “confused” and “inadequate” mode of representing oneself and the world, yet a “positive, historical determination of being.” It is absolutely real, absolutely determinate of our possibilities for thought and action. We must affirm ourselves as imaginative beings, limited and shaped, constrained and enabled by our corporeal and mental history as individuals and as parts of social, civil bodies. If we allow ourselves to be passively determined by sad passions, we will find ourselves acting to erode our own powers and abilities. When we become desperate, overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, we will pursue a way of life actively opposed to our well-being. Nature confines humanity to acting out of imagination and passionate dispositions. Yet, we can also act upon them and endeavor to transform the economies of passion, necessarily shared, that silently determine us to think, act, and feel.
Chapter 4

Reason, Power, Freedom

Perhaps Spinoza is so readily called a “rationalist” because reason often appears as the partner of freedom, if not simply its equivalent. Reason’s alliance with freedom, I would like to suggest, lies not in its privileged relationship to truth, but rather in its expression of mental and corporeal power. Reason names the power of the mind to produce ideas “from its nature.” Reason coincides with the mind’s capacity to act as the predominant cause of an idea. Imagination, in contrast, emerges from passions, or ideas that are only partially caused by the individual that perceives them. Reason does not designate an absolute cause, a fully independent creative act of the mind, but an indication of the mind’s activity exceeding its passivity. Reason implies power.

Reason’s value lies in its capacity to render an individual more active, more powerful, and freer.

Such power and freedom, however, constitute the individual only insofar as she is able to affirm herself as she is—as a passionate being, immersed within Nature, and ineluctably bound to others. Reason is, in part, the grasp of oneself as necessarily constrained, limited, and determined to exist and act as a part of Nature. Reason coincides with freedom because such an apprehension of oneself within and as a nexus of forces binds one to others. Reason enables one to become more active as it confronts the individual with her irreducible bondage to other natural beings, especially human ones. Such bondage, paradoxically perhaps, yields a community of powers far greater than that
of any isolated individual. Reason consists in the generalized affirmation that one is powerful by virtue of, not despite, one’s immersion within a causal community of similar bodies. Such an affirmation, I aim to show, entails a preference for democracy.

4.1: The Sad Mind Cannot Act

Reason names an activity of the mind. The activity of reason occurs, however, as part of a nexus of forces. Reason does not hover above the necessary determinations of Nature, only to intervene at appropriate moments upon the prompting of mental volition. Reason names a causal power of the mind, which operates like any other causal force in nature. Ideas, as chapter two establishes, exist within a force field, a necessary causal community, no different from that of bodies. Ideas maintain the same “order and connection” as any other thing in Nature (E IIP7). The mind is an idea of its body (E IIP13). It exists within a causal community of other ideas within the infinite attribute of thought. The mind is an idea that acts among others, and strives to determine its environment, while always necessarily being shaped by it. Reason is nothing more mysterious than the necessary activity that comprises an existing mind.

The mind always involves some measure of activity by virtue of its sheer existence: “Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow” (IP36).

Existence is power. More precisely, existence is the power to produce effects. Everything in nature is productive. Being is production. An effect that issues from

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115 I echo the slogan of Deleuze and Guattari, “everything is production,” which surely reflects their Spinozism as much as their Marxism. See, for example, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Hurley, Seem, and Lane, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 4.
one’s nature is precisely what Spinoza designates “action.” Spinoza uses “nature” interchangeably with both “essence” and conatus. All beings strive to persevere in their being through acting, producing effects, and thereby determining themselves and the character of Nature at once. By virtue of existing at all, every striving is actualized to a certain measure. Every being is, at the same time, an effect and a cause. Every being is irreducibly both produced and productive. Because the mind is an idea, its “nature” or striving is to act within and upon the milieu of ideas.

Reason itself is what Spinoza calls the “internal determination” or active constitution of ideas. Whereas imagination expresses an “external determination,” i.e., the effect of an encounter with another body, reason names an “internal determination,” i.e., the production of an adequate idea by the mind, which is itself an idea. Insofar as the mind exists at all, it produces effects from its nature and is to that degree “rational.” When the mind acts from its nature, or conatus, it enacts reason. Reason, therefore, is not a set of innate ideas with which the mind is originally endowed. It merely names the very nature of the mind, as its singular power to produce effects that follow from its essence, its striving to persevere in existence. Reason, importantly, is an ontological as much as an epistemological reality. Reason is grounded in the being of the mind, its essential productive power. It yields knowledge as its objective effect, yet does not exist in order to house the idea of God, truth, or anything else. Its end is in no way outside of itself. The striving of the human mind is precisely to act and exist with as much power and self-determination as possible.

I have already referred to one of Spinoza’s descriptions of reason. The mind has adequate ideas, or reason, “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” (E II P29S). It is important to note that such an internal determination does
not constitute an absolute break with imagination. Imagination designates an external
determination, an affection of the body that is necessarily accompanied by an idea. The
idea remains “confused,” or “mutilated,” until the mind learns to consider the
determinations not merely serially, as a string of fortuitous encounters, but together at
once, in relationship to one another as a set of affections with variable sites of
convenience and antagonism. The idea that adequately expresses those ideas presented
by the imagination consists in an active determination of the mind, or an “internal
determination.” In this way, imagination and reason are necessarily co-present.

Spinoza does not view the mind as a passive tabula rasa to be assailed and shaped
wholly by encounters with other bodies. The mind has its own principle of activity and
determination, even if it never transcends the field of forces in and by which it exists.
The individual does not merely receive the impressions of other bodies. Rather, the
individual body maintains a variable power to be affected. When one undergoes a
passion, one is not determined completely from the outside. Spinoza names an affect a
“passion” if the mind serves as a “partial cause” of the idea that occurs (E IVP2D).
Because one is always necessarily a partial cause, one is never absolutely devoid of
causal power, even as one continually undergoes myriad passions. How one encounters
other bodies, what one is able to gain, lose, and apprehend in those encounters, depends
upon the constitution, disposition, and strength of the individual. The power to be
affected constitutes a genuine power and a determinate force. Each individual has a
singular power both to affect and to be affected by virtue of its unique position and history within the field of bodies and ideas.

The former chapter on servitude emphasizes that finite human beings remain “infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes” and, therefore, preserve an irreducible measure of servitude (E IVP3). Humans are overwhelmingly subject to passive affections, and it often appears that their internal, active determination of their selves and environment subsists at a bare minimum. The degree to which one can become active and rational is nevertheless highly variable. Such activity, moreover, is not actualized despite our subjection to passions but by means of such subjection. Our subjection consists in constant exposure to the forces of other bodies, which impact us in both beneficial and harmful ways. Passions can obscure adequate perception, but we do not perceive without them. Thus, we must endeavor to counter passions that undermine our power to think with those that enhance it.

“An effect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained” (E IVP7). Timmermans notes that Descartes examines the passions in terms of their revelation of truth and falsity, yet Spinoza assesses the passions in terms of power and freedom. For Spinoza, truth and falsity are not what is most at stake nor are they the best means of understanding how the passions operate. A passion that produces false apprehensions of reality or the self cannot be eliminated simply by asserting or apprehending a true proposition. True ideas are not more powerful by virtue of their truth (E IVP1). A passion that generates falsity,

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confusion, or inadequacy must be displaced by another, contrary and more powerful, passion.

Fortunately, Spinoza finds a correlation between stronger passions and adequate ideas. Spinoza’s definition of an “adequate idea” remains a bit opaque: “By adequate idea, I understand an idea, which insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations, of a true idea” (E IIDef4). As Deleuze emphasizes, an adequate idea expresses and envelops its cause. An idea is adequate not by virtue of corresponding with its object, but by virtue of containing and expressing its cause, or how it came into being. Spinoza asserts that a mind acts insofar as it has adequate ideas and suffers otherwise (E IIP1). Insofar as the mind causes ideas, or determines them internally, it generates adequate ideas. The action of the individual mind, however, depends entirely upon its affective constitution. Although the mind is always to some degree active and rational, the measure of its activity is determined by its affective disposition, which refers equally to the body and mind. “The idea of anything that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our body’s power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our mind’s power of thinking” (E IIP11).

A body’s power of acting, and thus a mind’s power of thinking, is amplified by joyful passions (E IIP11S). Likewise, they are mutually undermined by sad passions. Joyful passions strengthen reason, the productive force of the mind. Although passions are not yet actions, they aid the power of the mind and body, increasing the ability of the mind to be the adequate cause of its ideas.

117 See Michael Hardt’s discussion of Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993).
To be an adequate cause, however, does not entail being the unique and sole cause of something’s coming into being. Only substance, or Nature as a whole, acts as an autonomous and unique cause. For the mind to be an adequate cause only implies that an idea is caused more by the mind than by external causes. In this situation, the mind experiences itself as a causal agent. Whereas imagination perceives an external thing as an agent appearing by virtue of its own power, reason understands its contribution (not, importantly, its creation) to the appearance of things. Reason understands that its body mediates, shapes, and responds in particular ways to things in the world. Furthermore, reason grasps that the mind and body are relational forces and thus apprehends “agreements, differences, and oppositions” (E IIP29).

Reason, in other words, consists in the apprehension and affirmation of one’s own power. Deleuze notes that reason is the apprehension of a network of relationships “from the inside,” in which one is no longer an observer but an active constituent of a dynamic environment. Thus, reason affirms one’s power, while conceiving that power to be “part of nature,” within a causal community, expressive of a system of relationships. Reason thereby generates consciousness of itself in its joyful activity. “Among all the affects which are related to the mind insofar as it acts, there are none which are not related to joy or desire” (E IIIP59). Spinoza proceeds to assert that “no affects of sadness can be related to the mind insofar as it acts.” That is, reason is the joyful action of the mind yielded by joyful encounters with other bodies that enable the mind and body to increase their productive power.

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The following section describes more fully how the body and mind dispose
themselves toward joyful, strengthening passions, thereby amplifying the power of
reason. In what remains of this section, I account for the natural, even biological, laws
that entail the joyful “foundations of our reasoning.” Spinoza maintains that every
human mind, by virtue of the complexity of the human body, produces adequate ideas,
which express their cause. Thus, every mind is minimally rational. The mind can
“internally determine” a system of relationships, of agreements and differences among
bodies, because each and every body is actually made up of agreements and differences
with each and every other body. The more complex a body is, the more it is replete with
sites of accord and differentiation with respect to other bodies.

Rock bodies, for example, have a great deal in common with other rocks, but do
not have very much physically in common with animals or natural gasses. The
complexity of human bodies makes for a tremendously rich set of relations with other
beings. Human bones have something in common with rocks, our flesh and imagination
have much in common with dogs, our respiration involves a relationship of mutual
involvement with gasses and plant life, our power to organize political relations entails
commonality with all of humankind, our particular languages engender a shared mode of
communication with a more limited group of human beings, and a love of philosophy, for
example, generates a shared experience of affections with a still more limited group of
human beings, and so on, ad infinitum. The complexity of our bodies and experiences is
Spinoza’s only explanation for our relatively advanced consciousness and power to think
(E IIP13S). The foundation of our reason is the fact that our bodies agree necessarily
with other bodies in myriad respects such that we cannot but conceive certain relationships adequately. Such agreement entails some bare measure of joyful passions, which necessarily issue from accord with other bodies. Spinoza calls the commonalities between our bodies and other bodies “common notions,” which he identifies as “the foundations of our reasoning” (E IIP40S).

Spinoza defines a “common notion” as “what is common to all things and is equally in the part and in the whole” (E IIP37). All bodies involve motion and rest. Motion and rest are, therefore, properties that cannot but be conceived adequately by all human beings. There are other adequate ideas resulting from commonalities between two or more bodies, which thereby represent a more local relationship and generate a more specific and useful adequate idea. If A is a property common to two bodies that encounter one another, the mind “necessarily perceives A adequately, and does so both insofar as it perceives itself and insofar as it perceives its own or any external body” (IIP38D). Spinoza proceeds to assert that, therefore, “there are certain ideas, or notions, common to all men” (IIP38C). Moreover, any community generates common notions, since its bodies share certain histories of affections. The totality of an individual’s corporeal history is necessarily singular and cannot be completely shared with any other being, yet many bodies can be affected repeatedly by the same properties and thereby accumulate a significant amount of shared ideas. Spinoza argues, “it follows that the mind is more capable of perceiving many things adequately as its body has many things in common with other bodies” (IIP39D). Thus, Spinoza proposes something like a practical imperative: Generate agreements with other bodies and become more reasonable.
Joyful passions indicate agreements between one’s body and other bodies. The imperative can also be understood to command the building of a community of joyful passions. It is not the case, however, that one automatically has an adequate idea of her passions as she undergoes them. Although Spinoza claims that certain common notions are universal to all humanity by virtue of a shared bodily structure, the rationality of human individuals varies dramatically. It appears that all human beings by virtue of their existence maintain some measure of power, reason, adequate thinking, and joyful experience. Yet, the natural force of reason that our bodies and minds preserve by virtue of their organic complexity is not sufficient to make humans as such predominantly reasonable. We naturally remain servile to some degree, overwhelmed by the contrary forces in Nature. Humans are “necessarily always subject to passions.” Consequently, they tend to respond to such subjection by deepening their differences from one another rather than constructing and augmenting their commonalities.

If we are constantly subject to the often violent flux of our passions, how can we engage in the arduous labor of building affective bonds with those around us in order to increase the rational powers that are not yet operative? Here we encounter a problem for politics as much as epistemology. In the following two sections, I endeavor to elaborate on the political and practical constitution of rationality. For now, I must say a few words about the content of rational ideas.

Reason, for Spinoza, has a foundation in corporeal identities and affective dispositions. At the same time, reason apprehends the “eternal” and “necessary” properties or relations that hold between beings. Reason emerges by virtue of imaginative experience, informed by bodily encounters, but breaks with the imagination
insofar as it no longer regards things as either contingent or in time. Spinoza’s critics often refer only to this aspect of Spinoza’s rationalism when they accuse him of subtracting all human experience and affirming only mathematical verities. Nussbaum likely finds support for her claim that Spinoza pursues “platonic aims” in his assertion that it “is of the nature of reason to perceive things under a certain species of eternity” (E IIP44C2). I find, however, that the eternal regard of reason depends upon a corporeal ground and does not negate affectivity.

Reason can regard universal properties as eternal, necessarily holding by virtue of the nature of existence, because “we feel and know by experience that we are eternal” (E VP23S). Experience of our eternity does not constitute rational knowledge of our eternal essence, but it enables and grounds such knowledge, which characterizes the third kind of knowing. Moreover, our power to regard things as necessary and eternal does not occur by virtue of rising above our experience, but rather by means of seeing it “from the inside,” becoming more intimate with its structure, by recognizing the necessary laws that constrain and enable our very being.

Although Spinoza deploys the geometrical method, he does not claim that the universe reveals a mathematical order. He does not designate mathematics the sole paradigm of truth or rationality. Spinoza asserts that human beings spontaneously view things from their particular point of view and project their idiosyncratic perspectives and desires onto all of Nature. He finds that mathematics helps to counter this natural disposition toward the world, because it is “concerned not with ends, but only with

essences and properties of figures” and thereby reveals “another standard [norma] of truth” (E IApp). Spinoza nowhere asserts that mathematics constitutes the sole norma, or measure of truth. Rather, he affirms that mathematics makes possible another norm of truth. Mathematics does not concern what is lacking, what is aimed at, or how a thing affects one particular individual. Mathematics concerns what follows from the definition of a thing, and the particular relations that necessarily hold by virtue of that definition.

Spinoza defines “eternity” as “existence itself insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition of a thing” (E IDef8, translation modified). Spinoza further specifies that eternity “cannot be explained by duration or time, even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end.” Mathematics teaches us how to regard a thing in terms of its particular nature, or definition. Mathematics does not concern what is lacking, what is aimed at, or how a thing affects one particular individual. Mathematics concerns what follows from the definition of a thing, and the particular relations that necessarily hold by virtue of that definition.

Chantal Jaquet claims that one of Spinoza’s great innovations is to link eternity neither to existence nor to essence but to definition (91). A full discussion of what Spinoza means by “eternity” would demand a great deal of precision and care, which would take me too far astray of my project. Fortunately, Jaquet has produced an illuminating study of time and eternity in Spinoza. Sub Specie Aeternitatis: Etude des concepts de temps, durée et éternité chez Spinoza. Paris: Editions Kimê, 1997.
regard a thing in terms of its particular nature, or definition. To regard something *sub specie æternitatis* is to consider solely what pertains to it necessarily, what follows from its nature by virtue of the kind of being it is. In this way, one learns to regard humans, as the political writings consistently counsel, as they are and not as one wishes them to be. One needs to observe what belongs to the nature of beings, especially human ones, necessarily, rather than projecting onto them one’s desires, aims, hopes, fears, anxieties, and idiosyncratic history of experience.

Reason, in contrast to imagination, involves regarding things as much as possible as they are, and not merely as they affect oneself. In regarding things in terms of their necessary and eternal natures, definitions even, one can begin the project of transforming her bondage. One cannot become free simply by establishing freedom as one’s end and pursuing it blindly. As Spinoza warns, “it is necessary to come to know both our nature’s power and its lack of power, so that we can determine what reason can do in moderating the affects, and what it cannot do” (E IIP17S). Human beings have certain shared properties that can be regarded from the perspective of eternity. There are certain things that follow from our corporeal and mental structure without any regard to time. It is the case that human beings are “necessarily subject to passions,” will always be “a part of nature,” and will never be either fully rational or abjectly bestial. Mathematics would not be possible without either the biological foundation of the common notions or the joyful passions intrinsic to agreeable encounters between bodies. Mathematical reason shows a

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way to consider rules of agreement and disagreement, norms of composition and antagonism, and the necessary properties that pertain to particular beings by virtue of their definition, structural properties, or “nature.”

With this power to observe what necessarily and eternally follows from particular beings, above all from the nature of one’s own body, one can think and act more effectively in the world. Although reason enables a regard for the eternal and necessary properties of beings, its benefits and uses are supremely practical, according to Spinoza. With a standard of truth other than the one proposed by his own wishful thinking, Spinoza hopes to “deduce” the best kind of civil order “from the nature and condition of men in general” (TP, 1.7). The following section will describe the relationship between rationality, virtue, and utility, which leads necessarily to the desirability and necessity of community and collective action. The final section will proceed to diagram Spinoza’s argument that reason not only prefers concord and collective agency but a specifically democratic form of government.

4.2: The Virtue and Utility of Reason

"Of all things that are not under my control, what I most value is to enter into a bond of friendship with sincere lovers of truth. For I believe that such a loving relationship affords us serenity surpassing any other boon in the whole wide world. [. . . ] It is, moreover, the highest source of happiness to be found in things not under our command, for truth more than anything has the power to effect a close union between different sentiments and dispositions.
- Spinoza, Epistle 19

In The Passions of the Soul, Descartes maintains that only the weakest souls deploy passions to fight other passions. The “proper weapons” of a strong and rational
soul are “firm and determinate judgments bearing upon knowledge of good and evil” (§48). Spinoza, in contrast, maintains that affects must be countered with other affects rather than determinate judgments about truth or falsity.\(^\text{123}\) Similarly to Descartes, however, Spinoza identifies the transformation of the relationship to one’s passions with a transformation in one’s apprehension of good and evil. The process of becoming rational, for Spinoza, involves the cultivation of an ability to determine what is truly good, advantageous or useful (utile) to oneself. With such a capacity, one is able better to act toward the realization and expansion of one’s “virtue.”

Spinoza claims that human beings call “good” what gives them pleasure, what appears to be useful and advantageous to them, and call “bad” what they deem harmful or unpleasant. Anticipating Nietzsche, Spinoza holds that, far from discovering what is objectively good and constructing a value system accordingly, human values reflect desires. In Spinoza’s words, “The knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of joy or sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it” (E IVP8). Whereas Descartes maintains that judgments about good and evil serve as reason’s “proper weapons” against the compulsions of the passions, Spinoza considers judgments of good and evil to be nothing other than a conscious indication of our passions, or affects. In other words, Spinoza rejects the notion that one can determine whether something is good or bad independent of its effect, or interaction, with oneself. Evaluative judgments do not tell anyone about the nature of things in themselves, but only about how something impacts the power of

\(^{123}\) Hirschman notes that Spinoza is the “first great philosopher who gave pride of place to the idea that passions can be fought successfully only through other passions.” *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1977), 24.
the individual. As Deleuze demonstrates in his studies of both Spinoza and Nietzsche, such a relative conception of good and evil does not make the determination of good and evil—or, less moralistically, “good” and “bad”—any less necessary. Indeed, affects indicate real transitions in one’s power to think and act. It remains, therefore, essential to one’s vital interest to gauge such passionate responses, which indicate how an encounter modifies one’s striving, power, or nature.

“From the laws of his own nature, everyone necessarily wants, or is repelled by, what he judges to be good or evil” (E IVP19). Following this proposition, Spinoza repeats his assertion that knowledge of good and evil is nothing other than consciousness of an affect, and he proceeds to claim that such an affect necessarily determines what one desires or shuns, and, finally, that such desire is “nothing but the very essence, or nature, of man” (IVP19D). Humans, then, are necessarily subject to passions, which necessarily involve evaluative notions and indications of one’s variable capacities. The objective world is naturally adumbrated in terms of attraction and repulsion. Because the essence, or conatus, of any being is this very desire to preserve and enhance itself, the human essence can be understood largely as the active expression of an evaluating desire.

A major source of human bondage, however, is that individuals err in their determination of what is genuinely “useful” or “advantageous” (utile) to them. They fail for multiple reasons to discover what is good for them. First, they deem “good” whatever immediately produces pleasure. Many pleasures, however, indicate the enhancement of a

particular part of the individual to the detriment of the whole (E IVP44). Joy, therefore, does not present a transparent image of what promotes one’s overall well-being. Humans respond typically to the most potent and overwhelming pleasure, or avoid the most visible and identifiable fear, without having evaluated an entire arrangement of causes and effects and their immediate and potential relationship to their flourishing. Without a full inventory of the situation, their immediate response to an affect often undermines the durability of their joy and amplifies their sadness. Moreover, due to the social nature of our passions (E III P27-P46), human beings develop collective judgments of good and evil that may be harmful to the majority of the members of a social body and only genuinely advantageous to a few. Spinoza maintains that each essence is absolutely singular—there is no universal essence of “man”—and there is nothing that can be deemed universally either good or bad. There is only good or bad relative to a singular striving, the particular body of an individual, be it human, ursine, or political.

The full content of what maximizes one’s singular flourishing is only available with the third kind of knowledge. The second kind of knowledge, however, can determine general laws of composition and interaction that amplify one’s “virtue” and “advantage,” both of which Spinoza links intimately to rationality. Spinoza’s discourse can be confusing, since he appears to deploy a moral language and traditional concepts like “virtue.” Spinoza was reviled in his own time, however, for endowing such terms with “immoral,” even monstrous, connotations. Spinoza identifies the cultivation of

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125 Spinoza refers to this as “titilatio,” which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.
“virtue” through the correct determination of “good” and “bad” as the primary practical function of reason.

Spinoza defines “virtue” simply as the force by means of which one perseveres in being. “By virtue and power I understand the same thing, that is (by IIIP7), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone” (IVDef8). Virtue, then, is nothing other than power, the power to produce effects that follow from one’s nature. Reason, similarly, is the power of the mind to produce effects that follow from its nature. Virtue describes a more general power of the individual to enrich and enlarge its power of action. Virtue refers to the power of the mind and body at once—whose powers are enhanced or diminished simultaneously—to preserve and perfect the individual.

Spinoza identifies virtue with the “prescription” and “dictate” of reason (E IVP18S).

Since reason demands nothing contrary to Nature, it demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage [utile], what is really useful [utile] to him, want what will really lead a man to greater perfection, and absolutely, that every man should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can. This, indeed, is as necessarily true as that a whole is greater than its part.

Further, since virtue (by D8) is nothing but acting from the laws of one’s own nature, and no one strives to preserve his being, except from the laws of his own nature, it follows:

(i) that the foundation of virtue is the striving to preserve one’s own being, and that happiness consists in a man’s being able to preserve his being;

(ii) that we ought to want virtue for its own sake, and that there is not anything preferable to it, or more useful [utile] to us, for the sake of which we ought to want it; and finally

(iii) that those who kill themselves are weak-minded and completely conquered by external causes contrary to their nature.
In one swift gesture, Spinoza identifies reason, striving to persevere in being (conatus), happiness, and virtue. He claims that there is no aim for human existence higher than or external to the maintenance and amplification of one’s existence. Reason appears to be reduced to a power to calculate one’s self-interest and advantage, which is nothing other than continuing to live and avoiding being overtaken by external causes. The happiness of a being as complex and intelligent as a human appears to be no different from that of a spider—to live and forestall death as long as possible.126

The identification of virtue, self-interest, and self-preservation is reinforced in proposition 20: “The more each one strives, and is able, to seek his own advantage [utile], that is, to preserve his being [suum esse conservare conatur], the more he is endowed with virtue; conversely, insofar as each one neglects his own advantage [utile], that is, neglects to preserve his being, he lacks power [impotens]” (E IV). Notably, the opposite of virtue is not vice. One has not failed morally by failing to be virtuous. One lacks virtue only to the extent that one is diminished and harmed. Moreover, Spinoza does not deploy an either/or formulation. If one exists at all, one has power and virtue. Vice is not a positive quality that one can be said to possess. One is more or less virtuous, depending on the extent to which one can “seek his advantage [utile]” and thereby conserve and expand his being and power.

Only one who commits suicide or dies is devoid of virtue. Yet death, suicide, and anorexia, are not actually enacted by subjects, according to Spinoza. Such events are

126 Such assertions have earned Spinoza the appellation of “psychological egoist” and generated comparisons to the most vulgar forms of utilitarianism, along with the more justifiable comparison to Hobbes. For a critical discussion of these labels, see Steven Barbone, “Virtue and Sociality in Spinoza,” *Iyyun* 42 (July 1993).
impositions from the outside, evidence that one has been overwhelmed or corroded by external forces. One simply cannot, from the laws of her own nature, negate her life. Sui-cide is, therefore, necessarily alteri-cide. One is necessarily destroyed by alterity, otherness, external beings that overwhelm one’s ability to persevere in being. Self-negation, then, cannot be a sin or a moral failing. It merely expresses the fact that one exists in a corrosive and violent environment. Rather than serving as a moral designation, Spinozean virtue might be understood as an index of vitality. One is never without virtue as long as one lives, and the measure of virtue is nothing other than the force and power by means of which one lives and thrives.\footnote{127}

From Spinoza’s point of view, furthermore, there are many social “virtues” that undermine one’s virtue. Spinoza staunchly opposes humility, repentance, and any form of self-sacrifice for reasonable human beings, although he does recognize their utility for controlling and managing the ignorant (E IVP53). Humility and self-sacrifice are only valuable insofar as one lacks the virtue (power) to determine what is genuinely good or advantageous for oneself and others. Virtue, therefore, is defined solely in terms of its ability to preserve and increase one’s power to think and act, or to pursue one’s advantage [utile].\footnote{128}

Translators render Spinoza’s term utile, which appears throughout his corpus, as “utility,” “advantage,” “interest,” or “good.” Spinoza defines utile as follows:

Whatever so disposes the human body that it can be affected in a great many ways, or renders it capable of affecting external bodies in a great many ways, is

\footnote{127}{In her most recent book, Judith Butler appears to be thinking through what it means to live a viable life with reference to Spinoza. \textit{Undoing Gender} (New York: Routledge, 2004).}
\footnote{128}{For Spinoza, it would not be sufficient to enumerate individual virtues, but one would have to consider the overall health of the individual.}
useful \text{utile} to man; the more it renders the body capable of being affected in a
great many ways, or of affecting other bodies, the more useful \text{utile} it is; on the
other hand, what renders the body less capable of these things is harmful
\text{noxium}.  (E IVP38)

One’s “advantage,” “interest,” or “good” consists both in a receptive power to be affected by other beings “in a great many ways” and in a power to determine and shape the world. One’s \text{utile}, or vital interest, consists in developing an active and a receptive capacity at once.

It is important to note, however, that one’s vital interest, or \text{utile}, is far from transparent to humans. Macherey asserts that one must “detach the concept of utility from the context of immediacy in which it is initially formed” in order to resist one’s natural servitude.\textsuperscript{129} Becoming reasonable involves learning to distinguish between the appearance and the reality of the “useful,” “advantageous,” or “good.” Although Spinoza rejects the idea that anything is good or evil in itself, he certainly maintains that particular encounters are definitively better or worse for individuals.

Reason involves learning to determine which kinds of encounters actually promote one’s well-being and which ones harm and diminish it. Spinoza seems to have something in common with later utilitarian theory in that “goods” are determined by human preference and desire. Yet, I contend, he also escapes the most common criticisms of utilitarian doctrine. Contemporary critics of utilitarianism complain that there is no measure outside of human caprice for determining either what is actually good

or what counts as happiness. Jean-Joseph Goux maintains that utilitarianism is the perfect foundation for capitalism, since it maintains a radically amoral and entirely subjective mode of evaluation. The economic notion of “utility” detaches completely from even the “useful,” since the value of a thing no longer requires an instrumental, rational, or moral justification. All that is relevant to the value of a commodity is the “intensity of desire” to acquire it. Thus, a glass of water is worth a great deal to someone who has been dancing for hours at a crowded concert, and the half-eaten sandwich of Britney Spears is worth thousands of dollars to an obsessed fan. In Goux’s words, “There are no more eternal values inscribed in Heaven or in the things themselves; there is no more generic man with a priori determinable needs; there are only subjectivities that confer value, and it matters little on what grounds (and within what interrelations).”

Spinoza would likely agree with such a description of human practices of evaluation. Humans spontaneously attribute value to external things according to the intensity of their desire and pleasure. They imagine that such value belongs innately to the thing, and often fail to apprehend their own contributions to its appearance as “good,” “bad,” or “evil.” An economic theory of utility represents a quasi-rational understanding of evaluation that emerges from a relationship between the body of an individual and its encounter with an object of desire. It falls short of the second kind of knowledge, however, in that it does not apprehend the quality of an encounter outside of an

130 Will Kymlicka provides a lucid outline of criticisms of utilitarianism in his Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction.
132 Goux, 14.
immediate consciousness of desire. Although humans designate whatever they desire as “good,” Spinoza defines the good in terms of knowledge rather than pure desire. “By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful [utile] to us” (E IVDef1).

Humans adumbrate the world and the appearance of things in terms of good and bad, but often do not know with certainty what is useful to them. In fact, they often experience the external world itself as a threat to their well-being, and their passions as burdensome intrusions, when human utile depends radically upon the ability to be affected “in a great many ways.”

Human utile, interest, advantage, or good involves expanding one’s ability to be affected by other bodies. Such a claim on Spinoza’s part resonates with his assertion about human perception and knowledge: “in proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once” (E IIP13S). Human bodies can increase their powers of perception by becoming more capable of affecting other beings and being more variably affected at once. The richness of the human body, as Moreau asserts, consists in the diversity of its components, because such internal variegation entails the power to relate to a greater variety of other beings.133

When discussing the common notions, I highlighted Spinoza’s claim that “the mind is more capable of perceiving many things adequately as its body has many things in common with other bodies” (IIP39D). The multiplication of difference interior to a body produces more sameness with external bodies. The internal variety and richness of

a body builds a greater variety of corporeal sites of connection with other bodies, an
increase in commonalities and, therefore, an increase in common notions, the foundations
of reason. The more a body is internally differentiated, the more it has the power to
affect and be affected by a diversity of other beings. Such a notion can be envisioned as
the multiplication of actual corporeal sites capable of connecting with other bodies,
physically joining one’s power to theirs. The more one is open to the world, able to act
and be acted upon, the more one can perceive and grow to understand. The vulnerability
intrinsic to embodied life, in this sense, is the primary source of strength and power.
Spinoza’s principle of utile suggests strongly that it is precisely in being acted upon that
one is activated.\textsuperscript{134}

All affections, however, are not to one’s advantage. There are many encounters
that might destroy an individual, or attenuate her virtue. One must cultivate the power of
reason in order to select which encounters increase one’s virtue, one’s power to think and
act. Because reason depends upon agreeable encounters between bodies that result in
joyful passions, Spinoza holds that “to man . . . there is nothing more useful [utilius] than
man” (IVP18S). Bodies are most benefited by those that agree most with them. Their
powers are increased by encounters with other similar bodies, and “we can think of none
more excellent than those that agree entirely with our nature” (ibid.). Human encounters
involve the most accord, the most joy, and the most fruitful combinations by virtue of
their shared parts and powers. Spinoza proceeds to present a remarkable image.

\textsuperscript{134} Again, Butler develops a notion of a play of vulnerability and power intrinsic to embodiment in her most
recent book, in which she also comes out as a spinozist, albeit an unorthodox one. \textit{Undoing Gender}. 
Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of man.

From this it follows that men who are governed by reason—that is, men who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage [utile]—want nothing for themselves which they do not desire for other men. (IV18S)

Spinoza seems to reconcile what current moral philosophy calls “psychological egoism” with “moral altruism.”135 Reason prescribes that every individual seek its own utile, endeavor to persevere in being, enhance and preserve its strength. Because human preservation is best maintained and expanded by combining with other similar bodies, one’s self-interest, rationally apprehended, instructs one to unite with other human beings to form a unitary power of thought and action, “one mind and one body.”

In fact, reason is precisely this moment in which one binds her utile to that of others. Reason, grounded in corporeal commonality, consists in the comprehension that one’s power to produce effects, within the attribute of either thought or extension, depends upon the coordination of diverse powers. Reason—far from transcending a natural realm of determination, passion, and affection—delivers greater power through affirming and engaging with external, yet common powers. To make a stronger assertion, reason consists in the “interiorization” of the utile of the other, or, at least, those others that manifest a certain measure of corporeal and mental simpatico. If all death is a form of alteri-cide, the importation of alterity, difference, and otherness becomes a rational survival strategy. With the image of the super-individual, reason seems to “wish” for alterity itself to become a common resource rather than a threat. It is

135 See, again, Barbone.
thus that reason incorporates other beings into one’s project of perseverance and thriving. Reason thereby enlarges one’s point of view, one’s sense of her corporeal and mental limits, and affirms oneself to depend upon and exist within a kind of living community of bodies and ideas. The full realization of reason and virtue would surpass a relationship of binding (or bondage!) and actually transform one’s boundaries to include other beings: “For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one” (IVP18S).

Yet, in the political writings, Spinoza never fails to assert the destructive aspect of human interrelations.

Insofar as men are assailed by anger, envy, or any emotion deriving from hatred, they are drawn apart and contrary to one another and are therefore more to be feared, as they have more power and are more cunning and astute than other animals. And since men are by nature subject to these emotions, men are therefore by nature enemies. For he is my enemy whom I must most fear and against whom I must guard myself. (TP, 2.14)

Sad passions, especially those derived from hatred, turn individuals against themselves as they oppose people to one another. Human beings do not agree—that is, they are engaged in a relationship destructive to their bodies and minds—insofar as sad passions impose themselves from the outside.

Reason, however, expresses only agreements and joyful passions. People must be involved in a certain measure of joyful encounters in order to be rational. The common notions consist in bodily identities, shared structures and forms of composition that produce adequate ideas. Passions—sad or joyful—however entail some measure of difference. Bodies do not encounter one another and produce passions except insofar as there remains some measure of difference. Moreover, reason involves the ability to
ascertain agreements and differences, a system of relationships among disparate ideas. In
order for an adequate idea to express its cause, one must be able to apprehend some
difference between a cause and an effect. Furthermore, all finite modes depend upon
external determinations in order to think and act, which suggests that Spinoza affirms and
values non-oppositional differences above all.¹³⁶

Destructive and oppositional differences are to be avoided,¹³⁷ while constructive
and agreeable differences are to be pursued and cultivated, which might be analogous to
the productive differential relations that compose an organic body. Spinoza places value
as much upon differences between individuals within the unity of the polis as he does
upon difference within individual bodies. Timmermans notes that Spinoza’s
understanding of desire in its rational striving “allows him to minimize external
differences without eliminating them, and to accord maximum ontological weight to
internal difference.”¹³⁸ As I emphasize, the body of the individual ought to be as self-
differentiated as possible precisely in order to have more in common with as many other
bodies as possible.

Such mutual, universal productive involvement, however, only occurs insofar as
humans “act under the guidance of reason.” Imagination enslaves humanity to the extent
that external causes compel individuals to undermine their vital interest to seek their
well-being, or utile. In an extreme scenario, when human beings are submerged in fear,

¹³⁶ There is no such thing, however, as a total difference within Nature. Things that have nothing in
common cannot affect each other. There can be no relation, good or bad, whatsoever. Since everything is
part of one substance, there is no absolute difference, only degrees of differentiation and antagonism.
¹³⁷ For a detailed discussion of Spinoza’s affirmation of non-oppositional difference in contradistinction to
Hegel’s insistence upon difference as negation, see the final chapter of Macherey, Hegel ou Spinoza (Paris:
Maspero, 1979).
¹³⁸ Timmermans, 337.
superstition, and hatred, they are enemies to those who, under the influence of different passions, can most facilitate their flourishing. This often occurs, in part, because people do not understand that their virtue is not opposed to that of their neighbor. The more one understands the true nature of one’s good, the more virtuous one is, and the more one desires to unite with others in the common project of understanding Nature and living a robust and joyful life. Spinoza thus concludes that “when each man most seeks his own advantage [utile] for himself, then men are most useful [utiles] to one another” (IVP35C2) and proceeds to cite the adage “man is a God to man” (IVP35S). Reason encourages sociality, political concord, common effort in perseverance, and asserts that others are both necessary and beneficial to our power to think and act in the world. Reason, in short, not only entails a preference for collective life and action but requires it. Virtue involves the amplification of one’s power through involvement and action with others.

Yet Spinoza laments many times, “it rarely happens that men live according to the guidance of reason” (IV35S). Reason consists in a power of affection that issues from one’s proper nature, yet it “is impossible that man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone” (IVP4). Insofar as one remains a finite being, one cannot comprise the unique cause of one’s ideas and actions. All humans remain subject to disagreeable encounters, sad, destructive passions, and thus to imagination and some measure of servitude. Moreover, humans do not compose a single, universal essence “man.” Each human expresses a singular conatus, or striving, and must construct commonalities through social and political organization with other beings. Reason guides one to want
“nothing more” than to link strivings, combine powers, generate a collective utile, and thereby increase the fortitude of one’s mind and body. In other words, reason favors the union of bodies and minds into a collective agency. Reason understands that such a coordination of powers may undermine the fulfillment of one’s immediate desire, but that a much fuller expression of freedom and vitality is available through association with other powerful bodies. Indeed, human freedom is nothing other than a joyful coordination of powers among rational beings.

4.3: Beyond Good and Evil, Above the Law: Human Freedom

*I call him free who is led by reason alone.*
- Spinoza, *Ethics.*

In chapter three, I endeavor to show that the (infantile) fantasy of omnipotence actually reveals human bondage. Because imagination envisions the self as radically unencumbered—as the exclusive origin of its thoughts, feelings and actions—the individual fails to apprehend and act with respect to either the beneficial or harmful impact of other bodies. Slavery becomes visible as one’s actions consistently undermine one’s vital interest rather than supporting and enriching it. Reason inaugurates the process whereby “the fantasy of unlimited power is replaced by a maximum of real power.” In chapter six, I contend that the maximization of real power only occurs in a just society supportive of the third kind of knowledge. Reason, however, deals a death blow to the fantasy that one is “a dominion within a dominion,” an autonomous substance

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that determines its actions over and against the obstacles posed by other beings. By recognizing that being acted upon is a condition of one’s action, mental or corporeal, the second kind of knowledge ceases to desire, against its own interest (utile), freedom from determination and affection. Reason apprehends in other human and non-human beings the necessary foundation for vitality and fortitude. With the affirmation that one is inevitably and irreducibly “subject to the passions,” dependent upon and determined by one’s environment, freedom becomes the power to amplify one’s virtue and perfection by means of the constitutive constraints of one’s natural existence. Rather than being exercised despite the causal order of Nature, such freedom only exists by virtue of the “impositions” of others.

Throughout his writings, Spinoza nearly identifies rationality and freedom: “I call him free who is led by reason alone” (E IVP68D). Moreover, he links freedom to “a meditation on life,” independence from fear, and the absence of concepts of good and evil. “If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remain free” (IVP68). Notions of good and evil, which express moral imperatives to avoid or pursue particular things in all circumstances, are both superfluous and hostile to rationality. If one avoids undertaking a particular action or entering into a particular relation because it is “evil,” one acts out of sadness—fear of what is imagined to be the external, oppositional power of evil—rather than joy. Because sadness cannot be the cause of knowledge for Spinoza, one is determined by ignorance and imagination. Moreover, insofar as ignorance causes the appearance, albeit imaginary, of “evil,” it is proper to the self. Imagination, however, exports the “evil” and attributes it to the external thing. Pure imagination fails to grasp that destructive power belongs to a
relationship between bodies. If “evil” is seen to belong entirely to the external object, an individual has no agency either to modify the object or to fortify her constitution against the noxious effects of a possible encounter. Reason understands badness to inhere in the relationship between bodies, such that the individual always has some measure of agency, even if it is only to flee an encounter with a harmful body. If one avoids a harmful encounter in order to pursue one’s advantage, one is rational and acts freely. If one avoids an object out of fear of suffering or punishment, one is not free but a slave to the (sad) passions.

Adam would not have freely shunned the consumption of the fruit, for example, if he had adhered to God’s command. If he understood such an interdiction merely on the grounds that such an act would constitute sin, “evil,” or disobedience, Adam would have acted from fear of punishment rather than a desire to enhance and preserve himself. Spinoza claims that it was merely the inadequacy of Adam’s knowledge that caused him to understand his idea about the fruit as a divine prohibition (Ep 19 and TTP, Ch. 4). He perceived confusedly what was in actuality a disagreement between the nature of his body and that of the fruit. His confusion distorted a neutral biological reality into a moral imperative: “Thou shalt not eat the fruit!” Deleuze characterizes the rational expression of this interdiction as a simple fact that the fruit acts as a kind of “poison” that decomposes Adam’s body, undermining his virtue and strength. Only from the perspective of imagination does this biological inconvenience appear as a moral command. Imagination, unaided by reason, presents natural order as moral order.

140 *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 31.
Moral imperatives certainly have their uses. In fact, because humans by nature remain primarily subject to imagination for the majority of their lives, no society can exist without them. Moral laws, however, express impotence and the inadequacy of human knowledge rather than social cultivation or virtue. With the second kind of knowledge, Deleuze observes, “expression of Nature replaces signs, love replaces obedience.” Natural, or rational law pertains only to necessity, the inevitable actions and effects that follow from particular beings and relations. With an increasingly adequate grasp of what kind of being one is, “[l]aws of nature no longer appear as commands and prohibitions, but for what they are: eternal truths, norms of composition, rules for the realization of powers.”

In a letter, Spinoza designates certain, presumably rational, individuals as being “beyond law.” He claims that “philosophers and likewise all who have risen to a level beyond law, that is, all who pursue virtue not as law but because they love it” recognize the imaginary nature of good and evil (Ep 19). In stark contrast to Kantian morality, one led by reason does not live in perfect accordance with moral law, but rather ceases to require moral law at all. Rational beings yield to human prescriptions only when they are grounded in *utile* and contribute to the virtue (power) of the mind and body. Those led by reason are free, because they aim to give themselves power (*potentia*) rather than the law. Those beyond the law, however, are not beyond rules and norms. Rather, rules and norms compel and determine rational individuals on the basis of their intrinsic benefit. Those led by reason endeavor to grasp the nature of their own existence and the conditions that support and enable it. They act so as to affirm

141 Deleuze, *EPS*, 291.
themselves as ineluctably relational beings, subject to the order of Nature, and are no longer served by transcendental conceptions of good and evil. They are determined by love of themselves and Nature, not by fear of death or punishment.

Nature’s order no longer appears to be articulated around the individual perceiver, as with imagination. Imagination orients all of nature around the self and personalizes one’s relationship with God. Nature manifests as a set of signs that God is either hostile or amenable to one’s aims. One imagines that good fortune constitutes a reward for having pleased God, as if God regards individuals hoping to be gratified by their good deeds. On the other hand, one imagines natural misfortune in tragic proportions as punishment for disobedience, as if God were a disapproving parent or judge (see E IApp and TTP, preface). Imagination fails to apprehend that Nature’s order has little regard for a single human individual, and that one is better served to act with respect to more local relations of concurrence and antagonism. With reason, one gains the power to determine “rules for the realization of powers,” instead of capricious or mysterious imperatives that emanate from an unknowable source.

Insofar as one is free, one thinks and acts with regard to one’s strength, power, and virtue rather than one’s impotence, anxiety, and fear. If Adam were to affirm that his body had the power to be affected favorably by a different kind of encounter, he could pursue his utile out of a desire to enhance himself and live more joyfully. Yet, if he were to avoid the apple out of fear of suffering, he would not be pursuing the enrichment of his life, but rather avoiding the imaginary judgment and punishment of a divine father. According to Spinoza, the rational person understands virtue to be its own reward, to have no end set beyond it. The rational person desires and loves virtue simply as the
power to exist, thrive, live, and express Nature in a “precise and determinate way.” The free person directly desires this good (utile) for its own sake, for the sake of one’s vital power to think and act more comprehensively (E IVP63C).

Reason, according to Spinoza, considers positivities, real determinations, and actual power rather than privation, weakness, or absence. All apprehension of privation is based upon comparison and remains in the realm of imagination. One only says, to use Spinoza’s example, that a blind man lacks sight, because one compares him to a generic standard of human being, or to a previous state, if he previously had been able to see. The privation of sight is not real and has no relation to a blind man in himself (Ep 19). Reason endeavors as far as it can to reflect upon the positive features and powers of an individual, not relative to an imagined model of humanity, or even to one’s prior or future self. In considering one’s self, the rational person reflects upon her virtue or power, her actual characteristics, and endeavors to consider the virtues of others that may aid and encourage her own thriving. In reflecting upon one’s lack of power, one ceases to think of herself as she is, but has measured herself according to an external, imaginary standard.

Spinoza acknowledges that we desire and seek such models, and even that we cannot live without them. Yet, such models indicate our finitude and bondage rather than our freedom (E IVpref). From the perspectives of freedom and rationality, we consider our power in its actual connections to the powers of others. For this reason, “A free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not death” (E IVP67). Spinoza continues, “A free man, that is, one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone, is not led by fear (by P63), but desires the good directly (by P63C), that
is (by P24), acts, lives, and preserves his being from the foundation of seeking his own advantage [utile]” (IVP67D). In other words, freedom consists in thought and action that are determined by one’s virtue and utile, one’s strength, pleasure, and vitality. Freedom is purely positive, from Spinoza’s perspective. It consists not in the absence of constraint, but in the purely positive determination of one’s vital force, a force embedded within and dependent upon the force of others. Freedom becomes manifest in the direct expression of virtue or power, an experience that one desires and enjoys for its own sake, for the sake of (one’s) life, and nothing else.

Although Spinoza insists that our desire has no external end or telos from the perspective of reason, it nevertheless seems that one not only desires to live but to live more fully, with more power, and an expanded ability to persevere in existence. Although one is never without virtue, Spinoza seems to equip beings with an impulse or drive to increase one’s power, virtue, and knowledge, which posits some sort of goal or aim. Joyful passions act as a natural motor to support this innate drive to be, to be always more, but within the determinate limits of one’s particular nature. Thus, the mind, as an idea, strives from the nature of its being to know more, to produce more ideas, and thereby to act upon and respond to its environment (consisting of other ideas) (E IIIP12). The body, within the realm of extension, strives to link itself with and to interiorize other bodies, so as to become a more powerful, effective and productive body, and to constitute more of existence.

Although the enhancement of one’s existence seems to resemble an “end,” for Spinoza, it is not an end that is ever external to oneself, and perhaps its distance and exteriority are only creatures of the imagination. Another difficulty lies in a tendency to
think in terms of an inertial model of materialism. According to a Hobbesian model of atomism, each being preserves its integrity due to the inertia that causes it to remain in being, barring any external interference. Spinoza’s conatus, however, if not a pure dynamism, involves a dynamic aspect. Each being is a desire, a striving to be that belongs to it alone. Because there is no exteriority to existence, God is not acting upon Nature. Therefore, every being comprises an irreducibly active striving, even if such activity is infinitely surpassed by the aggregate of the rest of Nature’s power (E IVP4). Nature and God do not create except as the infinitely many singular strivings that compose all of existence. But the content of what I create, for example, is neither pre-given nor is it exemplified in a universal paradigm, or form, of humanity. I desire to be, which constitutes something like an immanent goal, but a goal without which I would not be at all. The telos of being embodied in conatus resembles a material and an efficient cause at once. It is a necessary condition of my being (and, even, of God’s being), which necessarily has effects in the world. A rock or a table, likewise, comprises a striving, yet humans are conscious of their strivings and often imagine them to include eternal goals. (Such consciousness of our striving, however, may be one reason humans fail to realize their aims far more often than tables do!)

In addition, Spinoza contends that from the laws of one’s own nature, one never strives to be something radically other than oneself. External factors may compel us to strive to be something radically other, like, in my case, a supermodel, sumo wrestler, or the spirit of an age. If I were to become a supermodel through surgery (including height implants), deprivation of food, removal of all body hair, and far less reading, I would die in a real sense. As Spinoza remarks, “no reason compels me to maintain that a body does
not die unless it is changes into a corpse” (E IVP39S). Some version of one’s species or kind imposes a limit upon the expansion of one’s power: “a horse is destroyed as much if it changed into a man as if it changed into an insect” (E IVpref). In the realm of the human, I would add, becoming a god would be no less of a death than becoming fecal matter. Strivings, insofar as they flow from one’s nature (reason) do not aim for power and perfection *simpliciter*, but for the maximization of power and perfection within the constraints of one’s being. What precisely those constraints are varies depending upon one’s body and its context.

As temporal beings, however, it is impossible for humans to escape thinking in terms of ends and toward the determination of futures.\(^{142}\) Even in their rational endeavors, they must predict and, therefore, imagine which kinds of encounters might be enabling and which might be harmful. Human laws and rules of conduct are necessarily characterized to large extent by imagination. Yet, insofar as laws establish the conditions of virtue, they increase the efficacy of rationality and enable the exercise of freedom. Finite individuals must use imagination, informed as much as possible by reason, to determine local goals in order to pursue their virtue, which wisdom loves for its own sake. Such a practical use of reason may be more or less encouraged by the political body, of which one is a part.

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\(^{142}\) Spinoza does not say this explicitly. He does affirm that we should strive to think as much as possible in terms of reason and necessity, but that “we plainly have no knowledge as to the actual co-ordination and interconnection of things . . . so that for practical purposes it is better, indeed, it is essential, to consider things as contingent” (TTP, 49).
In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza asserts that slaves, not free men, are rewarded for virtue (10.8). A well-organized and healthy state creates citizens that pursue their advantage (*utile*) for its own sake and are thereby guided by reason, not constrained by sad affects. States often endeavor, however, to create children and slaves that are determined by fear and threats of punishment. Such citizens follow the law only because they do not want to die, suffer, or lose their property. They relate to the law as though it were the lesser of two evils, the lesser of two imaginary constructions. One obeys the law not because it corresponds to and supports one’s interest, but because a perceived threat might be avoided. Spinoza affirms that one must choose the lesser of two perceived evils. But such a relationship to the law cannot be called a relationship of freedom:

> Freedom, in fact, is virtue or perfection; so anything that signifies weakness in man cannot be referred to his freedom. Therefore a man certainly cannot be called free on the grounds that he is able not to exist, or that he is able not to use his reason; he can be called free only insofar as he has the power to exist and act in accordance with the laws of human nature. (TP, 2.7)

One is free insofar as one expresses and expands one’s power or virtue. Yet, in order to express one’s power, one must think and act “in accordance with the laws of human nature.” That is, one must affirm and act within the constraints of one’s particular nature, the particular conditions of one’s life and power. Freedom and reason involve the affirmation, in thought and action, of one’s being as relational, finite, and a determinate instantiation of Nature’s infinite power. With the knowledge of one’s peculiar dependence, or existence, within the natural order, one acquires a kind of autonomy, a power to determine one’s self from the knowledge of the necessary laws that simultaneously constrain and enable one’s existence. In a letter, Spinoza explains that
dependence upon God, or Nature, in no way implies that one is “dead, corporeal, and imperfect.” “On the contrary, it is . . . insofar as [men] depend on God, that they are perfect” (Ep 21). That is, human beings are perfect and virtuous insofar as they affect and are affected as determinate, positive, and living parts of Nature, or expressions of God.

Spinoza refers to the expression of one’s power in political terms as “right” (jus). In the Ethics as well as the political writings, the task is to maximize one’s power through the affirmation of one’s particular nature or constitution. From the perspective of the second kind of knowledge, one strives to know and love oneself and Nature in order to think and act more effectively in the world. Spinoza maintains the same principles in his political writings, whereby rational citizens and states strive, at the same time, to harmonize with their nature and maximize their power. Spinoza argues in favor of democracy on the basis that “it seemed the most natural form of state, approaching most closely to that freedom which nature grants to every man” (TTP, 179). Thus, Spinoza appears to present a kind of Stoic doctrine wherein the role of reason is to allow human beings to accommodate themselves as closely as possible to Nature. One hears echoes of Stoic political theory as well, which holds “true law” to be “right reason, in agreement with nature,” and counsels that the state, no different from human individuals, ought to endeavor to accord with Nature. Spinoza differs from Stoics, however, in urging conformity to Nature so as to embody, express, and wield its power as much as possible.

143 I examine this further in section three, chapter seven.
One does not endeavor to translate the cryptic moral code hidden within Nature, on the grounds that it contains eternal truth, wisdom, or beauty. Moreover, one does not study nature in order to steel oneself against the cruelties of necessity, but rather to open oneself, make oneself available to myriad possibilities for power and pleasure. One strives to know and love Nature, because it is the well-spring of one’s pleasure and power.

Spinoza holds that the best way to empower oneself and decrease one’s vulnerability to hostile forces is to cultivate a kind of empowering vulnerability—which is no easy task at all—so as to unite with Nature, cease to manipulate it as though it were an external force, and endeavor to join the forces of other beings. If one is irreducibly tied to other human and non-human beings, the best way to secure one’s interest is to struggle for the trans-individualization—in thought and action—of that very interest (utile). The will to power, for Spinoza, can only be realized through the transformation of one’s understanding of the very nature of power and freedom. The will to power is fulfilled the more perfectly one is able to coordinate and integrate the powers of a social and political body.

Spinoza uses a similar logic in his understandings of both political “right” and natural law. Political right is not something that is conferred on citizens by the commonwealth, but rather something that is exercised by natural beings. Spinoza asserts that right, like virtue, is “coextensive” with power (TTP, 173). Right is reducible to the sheer physical and mental force of a determinate being, which means that the right of a single person extends as far as what that person can do, and no further. While the state does not endow individuals with “right,” neither does it preserve an original right that can
be said to belong equally to individuals in the state of nature. According to Spinoza, Hobbes’ notion of isolable individual natural rights existing in the state of nature is purely fictional:

> [E]very man in the state Nature is in control of his own right just as long as he can guard himself from being subjugated by another, and it is vain for one man alone to try to guard himself against all others. Hence it follows that as long as human natural right is determined by the power of each single individual and is possessed by each alone, it is of no account and is notional rather than factual, since there is no assurance that it can be made good. And there is no doubt that the more cause for fear a man has, the less power, and consequently the less right, he possesses. Furthermore, it is scarcely possible for men to support life and cultivate their minds without mutual assistance. (TP, 2.15)

From the point of view of power as well as Nature, the human individual cannot be understood in isolation from others. The natural right, or power, of the individual, Spinoza makes clear, does not exist per se. It is “notional” because it cannot be exercised. Individual essence depends directly on Nature or God; individual thought and action depend upon the powers of fellow ideas and bodies. The exercise of right has its origin and finds its completion in other beings. Since the individual in Hobbes’ state of nature does not have the ability even to “support life,” she cannot preserve the natural right to survive without the mutual assistance of others. Thus, the right of the individual considered either independent of the social body or of the power of Nature cannot be conceived by reason. By abstracting the real power of individuals from the conditions of that power (other individuals, human and non-human), one fails to grasp the means for maximizing one’s power.

The final chapter addresses the normative implications of Spinoza’s equation of right and power. Presently, I will briefly sketch only the most important consequences of this central tenet of his thinking for this part of my argument. Chapter 16 of the
The Theological-Political Treatise, entitled, “The basis of the state; the natural right of the individual, and the right of sovereign powers,” elaborates a notion of individual rights within a political body as a part of the power of Nature. States, as I mentioned, neither grant nor protect the right of individuals. The right of individuals in a state is not different in kind from the right of fishes to swim, or of the “big ones to eat the smaller ones” (TTP, 173). Social and political life belongs to the nature of human existence just as water belongs to the existence of fishes—it is the natural medium in which we live.

The right of individuals must be understood not as an expression of a uniquely human reality, but rather as an effective constituent of nature’s determinate power:

And I here do not acknowledge any distinction between men and other individuals of Nature, nor between men endowed with reason and others to whom true reason is unknown, nor between fools, madmen and the sane. Whatever an individual thing does by the laws of its own nature, it does by sovereign right, inasmuch as its acts as determined by Nature, and can do no other. [. . .] Thus the natural right of every man is determined not by sound reason, but by his desire and his power. (TTP, 174)

In the words of Warren Montag, “Right, far from belonging to a human world of freedom, outside of and beyond the necessity that governs the natural world, becomes coextensive with that very necessity outside of which nothing exists.” Montag, 64. Those led by reason do not wield more right than fools and madmen by virtue of corresponding to any kind of eternal law; neither is their virtue different in kind from that of the vulgus. Those led by reason have greater right, power, and freedom, for Spinoza, because they apprehend their passionate interdependence and bind their utile to others. Furthermore, they do this not because it is independently good or honorable, but because it benefits

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145 Montag, 64.
them, supporting and enriching their power to live. Because right and power belong to
the order of natural necessity, reason recommends that “in order to achieve a secure and
good life, men had necessarily to unite in one body” (TTP, 175).

Spinoza, therefore, examines political life based on the physical principles of
nature. “Now since fear of isolation is innate in all men inasmuch as in isolation no one
has the strength to defend himself and acquire the necessities of life, it follows that men
by nature strive for a civil order, and it is impossible that men should ever fully dissolve
this order” (TP, 6.1). Individual existence is impossible by nature. Individual right and
power cannot be said to exist apart from the natural order of necessity and collective life.
Given that we must live together, and that human beings are helpless on their own, they
should aim to organize themselves such that they collectively increase their right or
power. Political organization, however, is not merely a matter of supporting bare life and
conserving the biological functions of one’s body. To live as a human being—even if
humans do not have a universal essence—is to cultivate and enrich the myriad diverse
powers of the mind and body. Bare life requires the care for infants, but the
maximization of human power and virtue requires far greater collective coordination and
effort. No one develops remarkable powers of the mind and body without a tremendous
amount of collaboration, intentional or not.

Simply put, the social body conditions our individual capacities. This is as true
for individual citizens as it is for kings. As Spinoza remarks, “the king’s sword is in
reality the will of the people” (TP, 7.25). The king has no great power by virtue of his
social role. His right and power consist in the power of the body of which he is a mere
part. Many kings have fallen by virtue of insufficient regard for this fact. The king’s
strength requires a strong people, rather than a frightened, obedient and dispersed populace. Spinoza, therefore, would give a prince similar advice to that of Machiavelli: arm your people. The most powerful arms, for Spinoza, are joy, love and wisdom. A people united by joy rather than fear will be a rational people, able to work deliberately in concert, “guided as if by one mind.” Such a united body would be a natural force maximizing its collective power to think and act.

The argument in favor of democracy is grounded in physical nature. Democracy avows, in theory and practice, the mutual interdependence to which we are naturally bound. As Balibar argues,

It is as if democracy were being given a double theoretical inscription. On the one hand, it is a particular kind of political order, which results from determinate causes. But it is also the “truth” of every political order, in relation to which the internal consistency, causes and ultimate tendencies of their constitution can be assessed.\(^\text{146}\)

The *demos*, the many, the multitude necessarily constitutes the ground, body, and force of any political formation. A *polis* does not exist without a populace. A state may be organized according to the principles of monarchy, and it may instruct its citizens that its power is granted by God or the consequence of an unchangeable natural superiority. This ideology, however, only serves to conceal, perhaps from the king himself, the absolute dependence of political power on the daily activity, power, and obedience of the many. Such activity has to be continually animated and repeated, moment after moment, day

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\(^\text{146}\) *Spinoza and Politics*, 33.
after day. Monarchy thereby remains the rule, the constituent power, of the multitude, be it noble and wise or vulgar.  

Balibar thus contends that, on the one hand, every political body is “in truth” a democracy, insofar as its power is rooted in the sheer force, corporeal and mental, of the many. Every monarch’s power exists only as long as her constituents allow. On the other hand, Spinoza privileges the self-conscious form of democracy that enjoins and cultivates the power of the citizenry as a diverse, yet unitary whole. The second function of democracy, I think, should be understood less as a form of government—although it has corresponding institutions and laws—and more as a political practice and project. Democratic practice consists in an endeavor to proliferate differences internally, since they are a source of power and wisdom, and to produce commonalities and joyful passions that ground effective thought and action.

Moreover, Spinoza argues in favor of democracy on behalf of both the rulers and the ruled. Just as reason is more effective because it affirms the necessary and natural dependence upon others, democracy is most powerful because it does not deny the nature of power. Political right, like any natural power, is nothing but the coordination and animation of the force of many individuals. Although Spinoza affirms the natural equality of human beings and the existence of just laws and institutions, he finds that such political principles can be instituted by other forms of government. Democracy expressly affirms power as a relational phenomenon. Democracy consists in an

147 The emphasis—mine as well as that of Balibar and Montag—upon the “constituent power” of the multitude is indebted to the studies of Antonio Negri. See especially, Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State, trans. M. Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).
affirmation of the power of the many as the vital foundation of individual as well as political bodies. An explicitly democratic state endeavors to endow all of its constituents with as much power as possible to deliberate and participate in the political process. It thereby cultivates reason in its citizens, because reasonable citizens are more powerful, better able to use their mental and corporeal capacities in their ineluctable involvement with the powers of others. Citizens who are guided more by reason, joy, and a pursuit of their genuine advantage (utile) know that a “man who is guided by reason is more free in a state, where he lives according to common decision, than in solitude, where he obeys only himself” (E IVP73). One attains greater freedom in a state than alone, because reason emerges only in communication, in every sense of the word, with others. One is freer in a state, because one is more powerful. The advantage of reason coincides with the benefit of democracy: In affirming the passionate interdependence of humanity for the cultivation of one’s mental and corporeal powers, one becomes more, not less, able to determine oneself and give shape to one’s life.

Although I have not given a full portrait of democratic institutions and principles, I have tried to show that both reason and democracy depend upon the common powers of human bodies and the joyful passions that issue from such a community of aptitudes. In chapter seven, I give a fuller account of Spinoza’s conception of democracy. In this chapter, I have tried to show that the second kind of knowledge depends upon the common powers of similar bodies. Reason involves the apprehension of one’s own body as co-implicated and always already engaged with the bodies of others. The advantage of reason is not only that one can generate more adequate ideas about the nature of reality, more access to truth, but that one becomes a more powerful actor in the world through
cultivating a more receptive and differentiated body. Reason, freedom, and virtue appear as the binding of one’s interest to those of other rational beings. The political form of the actualization of one’s natural power implicated in that of others is democracy. Although the many always constitute the power of any political body, the political body that knows and affirms collective interdependence and the constitutive relationality of natural life is most powerful and, therefore, most virtuous. That is, democracy and reason create, and are created in turn, by bodies “capable of a great many things” (E VP39).
Chapter 5

Passage to Intuition: An Economy of Love

*Summus Mentis conatus, summaque virtus est res intelligere tertio cognitionis genere.*

*Ethica, VP25*

The third kind of knowledge is best known for its incomprehensibility. Jonathan Bennett has famously identified it as one of the three doctrines in the final part of the *Ethics* that can only be considered “an unmitigated . . . disaster.”\(^{148}\) Moreover, Bennett counsels: “Those of us who love and admire Spinoza’s work should in sad silence avert our eyes from the second half of Part 5.”\(^{149}\) Yet, if one were, shamefully or otherwise, to disregard the second half of part five, the third kind of knowledge, or intuition, would have to be excised from Spinoza’s system. Spinoza mentions it among the kinds of knowledge in part two, but only dedicates any serious attention to it in the embarrassing last twentieth of the *Ethics*. While many commentators have objected to Bennett’s complete dismissal of the three final doctrines (the third kind of knowledge, the intellectual love of God, and the eternity of the mind),\(^{150}\) it is generally agreed upon that the third kind of knowledge is one of the most difficult concepts in all of Spinoza’s philosophy. At least two interpreters have proposed that, by virtue of being intuitive knowledge, it cannot be an object of reason and, therefore, remains unavailable to

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\(^{149}\) Bennett, 375.

\(^{150}\) Yirmiyahu Yovel, for example, notes that Bennett’s remarkably impassioned objections betray that he is in fact quite affected by what he calls mere “rubbish which causes others to write rubbish,” and it cannot therefore be completely dismissed. *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 1 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 228.
discursive description and analysis. Thus, Klein suggests that Spinoza can gesture toward intuition, but, since its nature is to exceed reason, he cannot fully articulate it.

I agree that Spinoza’s texts do not directly furnish their reader with an experience of intuitive knowing, and thereby join Amélie Rorty’s assertion that it would be “ridiculous to suggest that one could just read the Ethics and become free.” Yet, Spinoza’s texts aim entirely at giving an account of the distinctive character of human freedom, and what would be required for its enactment. Because the third kind of knowledge is central to his notion of freedom, the suggestion that it cannot be communicated, by virtue of the limits of language or the constraints of reason, amounts to the claim that the entirety of the Ethics is an inarticulate gesture, a futile striving to direct its readers toward the ineffable and sparsely populated heights of scientia intuitiva. This may, in fact, be the judgment of those who avert their eyes from the “unmitigated disaster” with which the Ethics culminates. Although Spinoza’s words about intuition remain among the most difficult to grasp, I find that they nevertheless account for its distinctive character. Moreover, I contend, Spinoza provides a program, albeit an abstract one, by which one can come to fully realize intuitive knowing and the freedom that accompanies it. Indeed, I understand intuition to be included as part of “the true good, capable of communicating itself,” in every sense, sought by the narrator of the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (§1).


This chapter attempts to isolate the third kind of knowledge—to the extent that any concept can be isolated in Spinoza’s work—in order to offer a description of the ever elusive *scientia intuitiva*. I proceed to give an account of the specific practices that Spinoza prescribes in order to experience the third kind of knowledge and the maximization of human freedom. In the following chapter, I maintain that the specific practices, called the “remedy for the affects,” are supported and prefigured by particular institutional arrangements. My contention here is that intuition can best be understood upon consideration of the particular practices and method Spinoza prescribes for those seeking it. This does not amount to a comprehensive description of intuitive experience itself, but it clarifies both its contours and the fact that Spinoza understood it to be attainable in this life. My argument is not only that the concept of intuition is intelligible, but that Spinoza presents an identifiable program and way of life conducive to its acquisition.

5.1: *Nemo non videt: Scientia Intuitiva*, pt. 1

Within the inventory of knowledge kinds in Part II of the *Ethics*, the third kind of knowledge appears almost as an afterthought. The description of the second kind of knowledge begins by noting that “finally, [knowledge] from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things . . . This I shall call reason and the second kind of knowledge” (EIIP40S2, my emphasis). In his edition of the *Ethics*, Curley inserts a roman numeral, which does not exist in the Latin, to mark a distinction, when Spinoza proceeds to say that “Besides *praeter* these two kinds of knowledge, there is ( . . . ) a third, which we shall call intuitive knowledge [*scientiam*
intuitivam]” (translation modified). The third kind of knowledge seems to be tacked onto the second. Spinoza proceeds to define intuition in the following way, which he will repeat verbatim in Part V: “this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the formal essence of things.”

Spinoza continues by providing the well-known example of three ways of arriving at the fourth number in a proportional corresponding to each kind of knowledge, an example discussed in chapter three. To review, the example of the fourth proportional reveals that the three kinds of knowledge do not necessarily pertain to different objects, but rather to different relationships toward the same object. Each way of knowing eventually arrives at the correct fourth number. Each way of knowing, therefore, can be true, but each designates a different means of reaching a conclusion. Upon describing the third kind of knowledge, Spinoza remarks that in the case of this simple proportional, “no one” fails to intuit the right answer. Thus, this phenomenon, notorious for being so “difficult and rare” in the fifth part of the Ethics, is universally accessible vis-à-vis a simple mathematical proportional. “Given the numbers 1, 2, and 3, no one fails to see [nemo non videt] that the fourth proportional number is 6—and we see this much more clearly because we infer the fourth number from the ratio which, in one glance [uno intuito], we see the first number to have the second” (EIIP40S2; my emphasis). It is certainly remarkable that commentators continue to consider the third kind of knowledge

153 My claim differs from Yovel’s who insists repeatedly that the third kind of knowledge is distinguished from the others by virtue not of its content but its object. I will claim that the ways of knowing mark primarily different relationships toward and experiences of objects or ideas. See “Knowledge as Alternative Salvation,” in Spinoza and Other Heretics, vol. 1.
to be a highly elusive and even mystical doctrine, experienced as both private and incommunicable, irreducible to either signification or rational discourse, and available only to the few. 154 In this example, the intuitional inference is something no one fails to make, and the fourth proportional is seen clearly in one act of the mind. What is so difficult and rare, at least before we arrive at the shameful second half of Part V, appears to be utterly banal.

Despite its banality, one is already in a position to note some remarkable differences between the third kind of knowledge and the other two. Spinoza immediately indicates a couple of them: “Knowledge of the first kind is the only cause of falsity, whereas knowledge of the second and third kind is necessarily true” (EIIP41). Because adequate ideas can only beget adequate ideas, the procession from an adequate idea—be it of common properties (reason) or the essences of certain attributes (intuition)—is necessarily true. Therefore, the third is distinguished from the first by virtue of its necessary truth, its grounding in adequate ideas.

Spinoza follows this proposition with what might seem to be an unnecessary addition: “Knowledge of the second and third kinds, and not of the first kind, teaches us to distinguish the true from the false” (EIIP42). Whereas the first kind of knowledge can happen to agree with its object, as when the merchant imitates what someone has shown him in order to perform a calculation, it does not have the force of a true idea, and it cannot teach one to distinguish between what is true and what is not. The first kind of

154 The exclusive availability of the third kind of knowledge is found everywhere in commentary on Spinoza, see, for example, Yovel (op. cit.) and Jon Wetlesen, The Sage and the Way (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1979). I will return later to oppose this widespread thesis, which I consider, insofar as it posits its exclusivity to be necessary, absurd.
knowledge does not carry with it the feeling of certainty. “He who has a true idea at the same time knows he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing” (EIIP43). As Spinoza emphasizes, in the Ethics as well as the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, truth must be its own standard. If something outside a true idea is required in order to measure its veracity, one will be met with an infinite regress. A true idea is a compelling force by which the mind experiences its own power, which it is unable to doubt. When one intuits, in one glance, the fourth number in the proportional, the force of this act suffices to indicate to the knower that her idea is true. This very experience of certainty becomes the teacher, the standard, by which one distinguishes between the true and the false. At a minimal level, there is “no one” who has not intuited the most basic proportions, the most fundamental structural relationships, and, therefore, every one has some measure—an internal criterion or experience—by which to distinguish true and false ideas.

Like reason, intuition is necessarily true. Both the second and third kinds of knowledge proceed from adequate ideas to other adequate ideas. Yet, whereas reason is grounded in adequate ideas of “common notions,” that which is shared among all beings, intuition sets off from an adequate idea of common essences to an adequate idea of singular essences. Reason maintains its traditional position as a deductive procedure from basic rules and universal properties, but intuition is a strange kind of deductive, inferential procedure from something universal or common—essences of certain
attributes of God—to something singular—the essence of a thing. Everything that the human mind perceives is a modification of an attribute—either thought or extension. Nothing falls outside of a relationship to an attribute of God, and, therefore, nothing exists that cannot be intuited.

As I claim in chapter two, essences are particular ways in which Nature exists, particular forms of Nature’s power and self-expression. Thought and extension pertain to *natura naturans*—one of Spinoza’s neologisms, meaning “nature naturing”—and not to *natura naturata.* In other words, thought and extension pertain to the essence of Nature rather than to its existence. They are the determinate force that attributes to other beings their constitution as ideas or bodies (one might think of them as dynamic “material causes” that can nevertheless have the form of ideas). These essences, or powers, are common to Nature as a whole—each attribute exhaustively expresses all of Nature in its own way—and yet they are intrinsic rather than extrinsic determinations of beings. Thought and extension are not “common notions” or properties existing equally in the part and the whole, like motion and rest, because they do not exist by virtue of the extrinsic determination and heteronomy described in one of the most important

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155 Several people have interpreted “one glance” to mean that intuitive knowledge is immediate—a fusion of knower and known—but such immediacy has no place in the *Ethics.* It is true that intuition appears to be immediate in the TIE, but even in the example where Spinoza describes the single intuition (*uno intuito* translated as “one glance”), he writes that “we infer the fourth number from the ratio.” Such a process of inference and the fact that one proceeds *from* the essences of the attributes *to* the essences of singulars makes clear that this is not an instance of immediacy, or a fusion of subject and object, even if the intuitive act is singularized as *uno intuito.* In this case, I agree with Yovel’s interpretation of the third kind of knowledge as “highly mediated.”

156 Though since the essence of substance includes necessary existence, this distinction is only one of reason, when it comes to substance.
propositions pertaining to modal life. Attributes do not act by virtue of the universal, reciprocal determination of finite singular beings, as do modes. Attributes are ways in which Nature cannot but express itself, if it is to be infinite and exhaustive of the powers of being. They are not determined extrinsically, but follow the definition of Substance, God, or Nature. They are pure activity, pure attributive essence, necessarily flowing from infinite being, and giving particular form to their modifications, or modes. There is nothing which is not a modification of an attribute of substance, and therefore attributes are common to all beings; that is, attributes are ontologically universal.

From an adequate idea of the essence of certain attributes of God—that is, from an adequate idea of this substantial activity constitutive of all bodies or ideas—the human mind proceeds to an adequate idea of the singular essence of a thing. The essence of a body is its particular proportion of motion and rest, and the essence of any given thing is its *conatus*, its desire to persevere in its being (EIIIP7). Because human beings only conceive the attributes of thought or extension, they proceed from the essence that is thought, or the essence that is extension, to the essence of a particular idea or body. In other words, one proceeds from an adequate idea of a common power to a singular instantiation of that power, insofar as it strives to persevere in its being. In contradistinction to either the first or third kind of knowledge, we have left the realm of

157 “Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity” (EIP28). In a different context, Chantal Jaquet emphasizes this proposition as a form of extrinsic rather than intrinsic determination, *Sub Specie Æternitatis: Etude des concepts de temps, durée et éternité chez Spinoza* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 1997).
existence and are following a chain of ideas of essences. That is, we are operating in the realm of a being’s power, insofar as it is intrinsically determined and remains in Deo.

Formally, then, the third kind of knowledge begins from the basic proposition already affirmed by reason: “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” (EIP15). Essence is defined very similarly to this fundamental proposition of the Ethics: “that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing” (EIIDef2). No being can be or be conceived without God, but the definition of essence adds the notion that “the thing” must also be given in order for the essence to be conceived. Thus, we do not conceive pure essences, or pure divine expressive power, without things that persevere in singular, distinctive ways. The third kind of knowledge begins with an adequate apprehension of natura naturans and arrives at a singular, finite expression of the infinite power of thought or extension. Such simultaneity, by which one grasps an essence and the thing of which it is an essence, seems to belong to Spinoza’s definition of essence: one must, in one intuition, apprehend that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived—an attribute—and the thing. In this way, we apprehend the thing, its particular striving, and the source of that striving.

In the realm of rational knowledge, by contrast, the order of discovery reverses the order of being. From an experience of things in the world, we are able to deduce that they are all in God and all contain certain basic characteristics. This procedure is not mistaken, and the second kind of knowledge remains necessarily true. We require the conception of things, or particular modifications of Nature’s power, in order to have the idea of Nature at all. In the moment of intuition, however, we proceed in correct
metaphysical order by inferring from the intrinsic and infinite power of Nature to its singular instantiation, from essence to essence.\textsuperscript{158} It grasps, then, not only that everything is in God, that every being involves and expresses the infinite power of Nature, but \textit{how} a singular thing is in God. It grasps the finite singular as a modification of the infinite, and, at the same time, the particular limits of its power—the thing’s essential striving to remain indefinitely what it is and to amplify its powers insofar as its nature allows. To apprehend something’s essence, one must grasp, concomitantly, its source of power and its singular constitution, its particular limits. One must apprehend it as a modification of the infinite self-affirmation of Nature and as differentiated from every other modification. Thus, the third kind of knowledge proceeds from the infinite “efflux” of substance (the attributes) to the finite intensity of singular beings.\textsuperscript{159} It proceeds from what is concretely universal in all beings to what distinguishes them from anything and everything else. It is the single apprehension of both universality and singularity. It is universality and singularity at once, as the intrinsic power by which beings strive to persevere in existence, strive to express in their determinate way the infinite power of Nature.

In proceeding from a common shared power to an individualized singular power, one grasps the real movement of being. Such a movement is expressed equally in political and ethical terms, since, for Spinoza, individual strength and power has its source in Nature, not uniquely in itself. Singulars are not originally dissociated, only to

\textsuperscript{158} Spencer Carr argues that intuition’s superiority to other kinds of knowledge belongs to it by virtue of its being correctly ordered. “Spinoza’s Distinction between Rational and Intuitive Knowledge,” in \textit{The Philosophical Review} LXXXVII.2 (April 1978), 246.

\textsuperscript{159} Spinoza asserts, in Letter 12, that modes cannot be understood if they are separated from substance and “the manner of their efflux from eternity.”
be organized artificially into social and political units. Individuals have their being in Nature, and their strength comes from a common power to persevere in existence. To the extent that they strive not to separate themselves from other beings—in the futile effort to inoculate themselves against affections and infections—but rather strive to affirm the relationships constitutive of their existence, they can think and act all the more effectively. Individual strength and power, as we have already and will continue to see, emerges out of—not against—common power and striving. There is no conflict between the singular and whole, in Spinoza’s portrait of existence. The singular being is in the whole, and thereby strives to persevere in being. The third kind of knowledge apprehends precisely this co-existence of the common power (essence) of Nature and the singular power to be what one is, irreducible to any other particular organization or expression of that power. Intuition sees the singular power emerging out of the common, and what follows from it. It apprehends the essence of the singular as a productive, constitutive, causal force in and of Nature, or God.

To return briefly to Spinoza’s example in part two, the third kind of knowledge sees “much more clearly because we infer the fourth number from the ratio which, in \textit{uno intuito}, we see the first number to have the second.” We see clearly, because from a relationship, from a ratio, we see that the first \textit{has} the second. The ratio is in a relationship of immanent belonging, and when that relational structure is “seen,” we, easily and with the full feeling of certainty, grasp what follows from it. Relationships are causal; they bring things into being. Thus, the ratio of two terms—the modal essence within the attribute—entails a self-reproducing proportion, a being that continues to
produce effects through the relational structure in which we are all implicated. On some level, however inchoate, “no one” fails to apprehend the proportion and what it involves.

5.2: Intuitive Superiority, *Scientia Intuitiva*, pt. II

Whereas the example from Part II of the *Ethics* suggests that intuitive science is a relatively banal act that “no one fails” to accomplish, the shameful second half of Part V portrays it as a source of great power, dependent upon the ability of the sage to “remedy” her affects. I will discuss the remedy for the affects, which concerns propositions one through twenty of Part V in the following section. I confine myself here to a discussion of the propositions naming the third kind of knowledge (E VP25 – 28, P31 – 33, P36S, 38) in the attempt to further furnish a description of its distinctive characteristics. Presently, I aim to describe the third kind of knowledge as it appears in Part V, and in what its superiority consists.

Spinoza begins the final part of the *Ethics* by citing its purpose:

I pass, finally, to the remaining part of the *Ethics*, which concerns the means, or way, leading to freedom. Here, then, I shall treat the power of reason, showing what it can do against the affects, and what freedom of mind, or blessedness, is. From this we shall see how much more the wise man can do [potior] than the ignorant. (E Vpref)

The following section concerns the practical application of reason, which constructs the “means, or way, leading to freedom.” I treat this in the chapter on the passage to intuition, because it shows precisely how it is that the “striving, or desire, to know things by the third kind of knowledge . . . can indeed arise from the second” (EVP28).

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160 I do not address the vexing questions of the eternity of the mind and the nature of blessedness. On eternity, see Chantal Jaquet.
Moreover, I contend that reason must establish a particular arrangement of political and ethical relationships, and thereby a particular orientation toward love and possession, which cultivates the body that can know and love with the third kind of knowledge. The discussion of the third kind of knowledge pertains to the freedom of the mind, which is achieved through the “remedy of the affects” that increases the capacities of the mind and body at once. Although Spinoza insists repeatedly in the preface, in opposition to Descartes, that the power of the mind is strictly confined to its capacity to understand, he emphasizes that the wise can “do” much more than the ignorant, and, furthermore, that he seeks to show just “how much [quantum]” more powerful [potior] the wise person is. Thus, while the mind cannot impose itself upon the body, the benefit of wisdom is not merely, or even primarily, truth, but a material augmentation of strength and capacity, an increased power of the mind and body to act.

By restricting the power of the mind to its own understanding and its power to produce ideas rather than master its unruly body, Spinoza asserts a particular understanding of freedom. Macherey notes that Spinoza escapes a paradoxical form of freedom that plagues a system, such as Descartes’, grounded in self-subordination. If morality were purely a question of will, it would, with the same gesture, be enclosed within the paradox of a liberty that would be a manipulation, therefore an enslavement, or a subordination to an external order; instead of being the natural actualization of a power that liberates in liberating all that lies within it to do, insofar as it is a cause determined to produce effects that would naturally be its proper effects.  

The third kind of knowledge is the full actualization of this freedom by which the mind affirms and maximizes its particular power. This self-affirmation arrives not at the expense of the body, but by virtue of a simultaneous maximization of pleasure and joy. The fifth part of the *Ethics* aims at no less than the complete and simultaneous affirmation of the body’s and mind’s proper activity as beings in and of the natural order, beings whose powers emerge from and constitute the common power of Nature.

The part of the *Ethics* dedicated to an account of human freedom clearly understands freedom as something that develops tendentially, little by little, as a process of augmentation and transformation within constitutive limits. Spinoza consistently uses the formula “the more . . . the more,” throughout Part V. Noting this phenomenon, Macherey asserts that Spinoza’s is “a problematic of degrees of power,” and must be understood as a continuation of the claim in *Ethics*, Part IV that “it is necessary to know both our nature’s power and its lack of power” (P17S). The project that augments freedom, little by little, as the development of the powers that belong to one’s nature—precisely not the overcoming, transformation, or negation of one’s lack of power—consists in an affirmation of the mind’s particular causal power, its condition of being determined to exist and act in a particular way. It is thus that the *Ethics*, as much as the politics, takes as its starting point human beings as they really are, and not as we would want them to be.\(^\text{163}\)

\(^{162}\) Macherey, « Vème Partie », 31.

\(^{163}\) This is a reformulation of Spinoza’s criticism of all hitherto philosophical treatises on politics in the opening paragraph of the TP: “The fact is that they conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be.”
Spinoza identifies several aspects of the superiority of the third kind of knowledge. Firstly, he notes that the “greatest striving of the mind, and its greatest virtue is understanding things by the third kind of knowledge” (E VP28). We have already noted that virtue, for Spinoza, is coextensive with power:

By virtue and power I mean the same thing, that is (by IIIP7), virtue insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood from the laws of his nature alone. (E IVDef8)

“The greatest striving of the mind [summus mentis conatus],” the mind’s essential activity, its constitutive desire and intrinsic drive is to realize its proper “virtue” or power. The power that belongs to the mind is nothing other than understanding. Thus, the mind strives to realize its particular power, its particular nature, to the greatest extent possible. The summit if its own self-expression, the affirmation and cultivation of its own power as a modification of the attribute of thought, is scientia intuitiva, the third kind of knowledge.

Spinoza proceeds to demonstrate this proposition by repeating the definition of intuition from Part II, and asserting that “the more we understand things in this way, the more we understand God.” Because we apprehend the essence of things from the essence of a divine attribute, and because everything is in God, we understand God more as we understand more singular things intuitively. This assertion requires that God be internally differentiated. Understanding the essence of God in the form of attributes does not provide the human mind with exhaustive knowledge of God or Nature. Rather the mind understands more of God’s power, or essence, by understanding more of its singular differentiations, or modes. God’s essence is not uniform. Rather, divine essence
is a productive power that yields infinite singular variations, infinitely many unique organizations of its power.

The next proposition follows naturally: “The more the mind is capable [aptior] of understanding things by the third kind of knowledge, the more it desires to understand them by this kind of knowledge” (E VP26). Spinoza demonstrates this proposition with a characteristic remark: “This is evident. For insofar as we conceive the mind to be capable of understanding things by this kind of knowledge, we conceive it as determined to understand things by the same kind of knowledge.” The capacity or aptitude of the mind emerges not by virtue of freedom from determination but the contrary. Moreover, the “desire [cupit]” to understand by the third kind of knowledge is nothing other than its being determined to do so. The desire and aptitude that move the mind to actualize its freedom consist in being determined. This determination, however, is what we might call “an intrinsic” determination. The mind is determined by its very nature, its particular constitution as a complex mode of thought, to understand as much as its nature allows. The mind aims to reproduce its joyful experiences of knowing and cultivate a milieu of encounters that enables it to maximize its power of understanding, within the limits of its particular “intensive” instantiation of the infinite power of Nature. Thus, it strives, little by little, to know more and more singular things.

Spinoza establishes in Part II that “the ideas we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of external bodies” (P16Cor). The knowledge of more and more singular things, therefore, must be secondary to knowledge of one’s own body. The thing that one knows first, by inference from certain divine attributes, is the essence of one’s own body as a singular thing, which involves the
essence of one’s mind, the idea of one’s corporeal essence. The third kind of knowledge is primarily a kind of self-knowledge, from which flows an increased capacity to know external things and God, or Nature.

The proposition that follows in Part V affirms the notion that the third kind of knowledge is firstly a form of self-knowledge: “The greatest peace of mind [Mentis acquiescientia] there can be arises from this third kind of knowledge” (P27, translation modified). Spinoza sometimes attaches the term “acquiescentia” to the mind (mens or animi) and sometimes to the “self” (in se ipso). “Acquiescentia” is a neologism of Spinoza’s, which is not easily translated. It is likely related to the Epicurean notion of “ataraxy,” but, given his criticism of Stoicism in the preface to Part V, should be considered to be a revision of late Greek or early Roman notions of inner peace and self-possession. Curley does not render it consistently throughout his translation (translating it sometimes as “self-esteem” and others as “satisfaction of mind”), and thereby does not treat it as a term of art. The term contains the Latin “quies,” and is thus related to “rest.” I understand it to imply a condition of being at peace with one’s self, affirming one’s nature as it is, a kind of acquiescence to the constraints of one’s particular essence; and, at the same time, a mode of acting out of, and in harmony with those constitutive constraints.

164 I prefer the French translation, not used by all translators, “apaisement de l’âme” for reasons I will explain in the final section of this chapter on Justice. The English rendering of “apaisement” as either “appeasement” or “pacification” has such negative connotations that I was forced to use a substantive “peace” when I would prefer a word suggesting a transition and an activity. I will maintain the word “peace” by virtue of its definition in the TP as “strength of mind” and a “unity of minds,” a decision I will justify below, or I will leave it in the Latin.
In Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza claims that “Peace in one’s self [acquiescentia in se ipso] is really the highest thing for which we can hope” (P52S). He defines “acquiescentia in se ipso” as “a joy born of the fact that a man considers himself and his power of acting” (P52D). From the third kind of knowledge arises this joy in which the human being contemplates her own power to act, to bring about effects in the world. The third kind of knowledge begets this greatest peace of mind, this joyful experience of considering one’s own effective and affective power, as part of the infinite power of God or Nature. Whereas in Part IV Spinoza asserts that “acquiescentia in se ipso” is born from reason, “Mentis acquiescentia” arises from the third kind of knowledge. Donald Rutherford has suggested that Spinoza “must be speaking loosely” when he claims the former is “the highest thing we can hope for,” since it is clear that salvation is that highest thing, and it belongs not merely to reason but to the mind insofar as it is eternal.\(^{165}\) He, therefore, makes the novel and interesting suggestion that these terms must not be equivalent. Given that it is also of the nature of reason to conceive things “*sub specie aeternitatis*,” however, I do not see why the mind could not apprehend its own eternity by means of reason. Moreover, the power of the body to act and that of the mind to think are strictly equivalent, for Spinoza. Thus, the nearly parallel assertions about reason (IVP52) and intuition (VP27) giving rise to a profound satisfaction of the self as it reflects upon its own power of action raises a question, I would argue, about the nature of the distinction between the second and third kinds of knowledge.

The demonstration to proposition 27 of Part V only confirms the parallel formulation from Part IV: “So he who knows things by this kind of knowledge passes to the greatest human perfection, and consequently (. . .), is affected with the greatest joy, accompanied (. . .) by the idea of himself and his virtue.” The second and the third kind of knowledge both produce an “acquiescentia” by which the mind rejoices in the apprehension of its own causal power. In the case of the third kind of knowledge, however, this includes the assertion that the knower “passes [transit] to the greatest human perfection.” In what does this “passage,” or transitio consist?

Spinoza’s formulation echoes his definition of “joy” from Part III: “By joy, therefore, I shall understand . . . that passion by which the mind passes [transit] to a greater perfection” (P11S). The third kind of knowledge is the passage to “the greatest human perfection” accompanied by affection of “the greatest joy.” This moment of highest human perfection is notably characterized by “an affection” of the greatest kind. Later in Part V, Spinoza asserts that the superiority of intuition lies not in the fact that it contains or reveals more truth than reason, but in the fact that it affects the mind more powerfully. Spinoza claims that he aims here to show how much the knowledge of singular things I have called intuitive, or knowledge of the third kind (see IIP40S), can accomplish, and how much more powerful it is than knowledge of the second kind. For although I have shown generally in Part I that all things (and consequently the human mind also) depend on God both for their essence and their existence, nevertheless, that demonstration, though legitimate and put beyond all chance of doubt, still does not affect our mind as much as when this is inferred from the very essence of any singular thing which we say depends on God. (E VP36S; my emphasis)

The advantage is thus that the intuitive knowledge of singular things “affects” the mind more powerfully. One could even say that its advantage lies in that it is a more definitive
determination of the mind. One undergoes the feeling in such a powerful way that one is determined to pass to the greatest joy and the greatest perfection. The third kind of knowledge clearly does not mark an exit from the realm of affectivity. Indeed, the consummate force of the joyful affection distinguishes intuitive from rational knowledge.

Proposition 27 circumscribes further the particular character of this affection, which proposition 36 reformulates. This affection by which one passes to the greatest perfection and is affected by the greatest joy is *acquiescentia* of the mind. *Acquiescentia* is a name for the joy experienced upon the contemplation of one’s own power of action. This greatest affection, then, is a kind of self-affection. One passes to the greatest affection by rejoicing in her own ability to produce effects and act in the world. Love, defined in Part III, “is nothing but joy with the accompanying idea of an external cause” (P13S). *Acquiescentia* is the self-love, the immanent joy by which one affects oneself with pleasure by affirming one’s essence. In other words, *acquiescentia* consists in rejoicing in one’s causal power in and of Nature. It can be genuinely understood as self-love, but only on the condition that one re-conceives the nature of this “self.” It is one’s singular power inferred from the infinite power in and by which all beings exist and act. By acting, one is always affected by others, who are always, in turn, affected by one’s actions. Moreover, because the finite world of modal inter- and intra-action participates in the actual determination of the character of divinity, or Nature, the mind can grasp itself as genuinely constitutive of, to borrow a phrase, “the real movement” of things.166

166 This, of course, is borrowed from Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*.
The highest joy and passage to the greatest perfection emerges from the affirmation of oneself as a causal being, a real constituent of Nature, whose power is determined intrinsically by virtue of being a modification of divine attributes, and extrinsically by virtue of the co-affection of fellow modes. Thus, according to Spinoza, intuition always involves, simultaneously, an apprehension of causal relationality and a feeling of pleasure. “Whatever we understand by the third kind of knowledge, we take pleasure in, and our pleasure is accompanied by the idea of God as a cause” (EVP32). He continues in the demonstration, after linking intuition again to acquiescentia, “this joy is accompanied by the idea of oneself, and consequently (by P30) it is also accompanied by the idea of God, as its cause.” Thus, we are pleased that our actions and our essence express the essential activity of God or Nature. Our actions please us, then, not because we consider ourselves singular authors of events in the world, imposing our unique imprimatur upon existence, but insofar as we express something eternal, definitive and real. We are pleased in that we take God to cause our existence, and in that we in turn constitute being.

Because the other propositions naming the third kind of knowledge pertain to the problematic of the “eternity of the mind” and “the intellectual love of God,” I will end this section with an attempt to define the third kind of knowledge. The first section of this chapter demonstrates that intuition should generally be considered an act by which the mind grasps a singular essence as a finite instantiation of the common power of Nature. The following section highlights the relationship between intuition, joy and self-affirmation, and thus intuition’s superiority to reason by virtue of its greater force of affection. Intuition reveals no more truth than reason, but “can accomplish more” and
affects the mind more powerfully. I would like to suggest that it is more powerful in two major senses. Firstly, knowledge of one’s own essence as a modification of the essence of divine attributes delivers an indication of the particular limits and quality of one’s power to think and act. Moreover, as one comes to know more and more singular essences, singular intensities of force, one can act more effectively than if one generalizes on the basis of universal properties, as is the case with reason. Intuition yields knowledge of how other singular essences affect one’s own. It discloses which beings are enabling and which are destructive. Intuition begins to illuminate how collective, composite bodies can be constructed so as to increase the capacity to determine oneself and constitute more definitively the real movement of Nature.

Secondly, intuition is more powerful than reason, because it corresponds to opening the body and mind to being affected more determinately by other essences. Such a phenomenon is not really distinct from the one described immediately above. Intuition involves the affirmation that one’s ability to act and think effectively in the world depends upon coordinating powers that are necessarily involved with one another by virtue of being modifications of a single Nature. The greatest joy and pleasure are made possible by one’s finitude, by one’s being necessarily determined by the infinite power of Nature, in relationship to which there is no interiority, no reserve that remains untouched. Knowledge of oneself as fully permeated by the divine essence brings the greatest joy and the most satisfying love. One may think of Freud’s Judge Schreber rendered psychotic by the penetrating love of God. Spinoza’s intuitive knower, however, is not dissolved or disintegrated by this constant infusion, but rather singularized, rendered more autonomous by such an affirmation. As one comes to affirm oneself as ineluctably,
essentially related to and determined by Nature, one can direct oneself more effectively. One is not lost, but empowered to the maximum extent in the act of appropriating one’s power of striving through understanding one’s particular character. Such appropriation requires the simultaneous sense of oneself as determined intrinsically to express the power of God with one’s activity, and, at the same time, dependent upon the concurrent activity of other modes in order to carry out particular actions.

Intuition, then, is the joyful knowledge of singular powers inferred from the common power of Nature. It is the pleasant affirmation of difference within the common. It is the thrill of finitude infused with the infinite. It is the maximization of the power to think and to act by virtue of knowing the self as it really is, and not as we would like it to be. It is, in short, the greatest thing for which we can hope.

5.3: Remedying the Lovesick Mind

The first half of Part V of the Ethics aims to show how one can institute a set of practices by which her affective regime yields “love toward God [amour erga deum].” Macherey contends, correctly in my view, that the entirety of Part V consists of an effort to reconcile rationality and affectivity. Commentators do not fail to notice the dramatic distinction between the first and second halves of Part V, where the first represents a fairly intelligible prescription for the assuagement of the mind (acquiescentia), or the “remedy for the affects,” and the second half appears to take flight into the realm of the eternal and mystical. Macherey characterizes the division as one between a “minimal” or
“weak solution” to human servitude and a “maximal” enactment of emancipation.\textsuperscript{167}

Thus, for Macherey, Part V delineates “two steps in the process of liberation”: one step available to anyone; and another more arduous labor, possible only by virtue of a massive collective effort.\textsuperscript{168} In this chapter on the “Passage to Intuition,” I provide an account of this minimal solution to human servitude as the re-orientation of one’s possessive love toward that which one can truly possess. Although the first half of Part V describes a rational rather than an intuitive practice, it shows precisely how “the striving, or desire, to know things by the third kind of knowledge . . . can indeed arise from the second” (EVP28). The following chapter contends that the orientation of political institutions toward the training of our possessive desire constitutes a political foundation for intuition. The accounting here remains in the domain of reason, but reason insofar as it “gives rise” to intuition. Such a path of liberation by which one utilizes a more accessible human practice of freedom in order to accede to a maximal realization of freedom is, unsurprisingly for Spinoza, a path of love.

The maladies of the mind (\textit{animi ægritudines}) as well as the misfortunes that generally befall us, according to Spinoza, result from the fact that we typically, and excessively, love things that we cannot possess (EVP20S). Because the things we usually love are by their nature subject to many variations, are perishable, and cannot be shared with others, our desire to possess the things we love is frustrated. The mind and body attached to mutable things—in other words, to finite modes—are subject to the

\textsuperscript{167} Macherey, « Vème Partie », 40–43.
\textsuperscript{168} Macherey, « Vème Partie », 41.
same violence implicated in the particular limits of their object. Because the object of love must change constantly by virtue of its finite, modal existence, the lover who aims to possess and unite herself with an object loved suffers: her joy is always accompanied by some measure of sadness. The “remedy,” according to Spinoza, for this overwhelming, sickening possessive desire, notably, does not consist in its constraint or negation. On the contrary, the desire to possess completely, entirely and without any limit, what one loves is entirely possible and even laudatory. One must, however, re-orient her love toward the sole object that one can truly possess infinitely, without frustration, without any fear of its loss or degradation. Maladies of the mind and misfortune in life occur by virtue of the fact that we love that which, by its very nature, denies the possibility of its consummate possession. The remedy for the sick mind, therefore, is love toward the only thing that can satisfy this inexhaustible, possessive desire. If one can fill the body and mind with love toward that which is infinite, immutable, imperishable, and shareable with every other being, one will truly and entirely possess “the infinite enjoyment of existence,” which is to say, eternity (Ep 12).

Although Spinoza here associates love and suffering, it would not be an exaggeration to assert that his is most fundamentally a philosophy of love and joy, and that it affirms pleasure as an integral part of the life of wisdom (EIVP45S). Love and joy are ineluctably linked to the amplification of strength, force, and power (potentia), and thus to perseverance in being, the essential striving belonging to all that exists. The highest good, therefore, necessarily involves joy, love, and pleasure. Usually, however, human beings do not act according to the laws that follow from their proper natures. Rather, they act according the provocations of their passions, encounters with external
things. “And since,” Spinoza warns, “the greatest good men seek from an affect is often such that only one can possess it fully, those who love are not of one mind in their love—while they rejoice to sing the praises of the thing they love, they fear to be believed” (EIVP37S; my emphasis). Note that the problem is neither the fact of loving excessively, nor the desire to possess the thing that is loved. On the contrary, a problem arises by virtue of the fact that the love object cannot be shared without loss, as its full possession can only be had by one person. The lover, then, is not of one mind, whereby she would be solely fortified and pleased by her love. Her mind is beset, at the same time, by fear that necessarily accompanies the love toward finite things. Put otherwise, love toward the finite carries with it, inevitably, fear of the finitude of love itself, anxiety about the necessary end to the empowering joy of this encounter between her body and that of the one she loves. Yet, the difficulties and limits belonging to such love pertain not to the desire or mind of the lover but to the object desired.

In the throes of love people experience an exhilarating increase in power, and—like the people described in the Theological-Political Treatise—they cannot hold their tongues. They want nothing more than to sing the praises of their loved one, but this very joyful speech provokes, as Spinoza puts it, the fear of being believed. That is, it provokes the fear of theft. The lover, therefore, is torn by two tendencies at the heart of human existence: on the one hand, “each of us strives so far as he can, that everyone should love what he loves, and hates what he hates” (EIIIP31C), because “each of us, by

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169 P.F. Moreau has a wonderful analysis of Spinoza’s treatment of language in the TTP. He notes that, for Spinoza, the inability to shut up (se taire) is a fact of human nature, and the State only appears ridiculous if it institutes laws proscribing speech. The interdiction of certain words or feelings would be as futile as the interdiction of gravity. Or, to use Spinoza’s example, commanding people to hold their tongues is tantamount to forcing a table to eat grass (TP, 4.4). Moreau, *Spinoza: experience et éternité*, 369-376.
his nature, wants others to live according to his temperament” (EIIIP31S); on the other hand, each hopes to enjoy what she loves without fear of its loss or erosion. In other words, there appears to be a conflict between the affects of “glory,” or “ambition,” and of “avarice.”

Love toward finite things, on Spinoza’s account, is necessarily implicated in an economy of scarcity. There is only ever one person who can consummately enjoy the object of love, and this enjoyment cannot last forever. If the object of love, as in most of Spinoza’s examples, is another person, the economy may be limited by the fact that the other cannot love everyone equally and fully in return, even if many can have the same object of desire. Even if humans were to successfully develop non-exclusive institutions of romantic love, whomever is loved can always revoke her love, and, regardless of the interpersonal dynamic, she will eventually die. As Spinoza would surely say, these problems with quotidian love are clear enough to everyone.

In order to remedy the suffering that attends everyday love, one ought to completely avoid dwelling on human vices and disparaging human weakness (E VP10S). Such a concentration on viciousness and the imputation of an absence of strength amounts to, according to Spinoza, an eagerness to “enjoy a false appearance of freedom.” One imagines herself falsely free from affective servitude by virtue of ironic, critical, or satirical distance. Implied in the mockery or condemnation of humanity is the imaginary belief either that one does not suffer the same passions or that one can only submit wholly to human suffering, and is left with laughter as her only consolation. In reality, the dwelling on human folly or viciousness reveals a sad constitution, affected and diminished by human bondage. In order to resist this tendency to condemn and mock
human struggle, and to be thus determined by sad passions, “we must always attend to what is good in each thing so that in this way we are determined to acting from an affect of joy” (EVP10S, translation modified). From this point of view, we should be able to discover that “glory” can be either the greatest distraction of the mind (TIE, §5), or its greatest source of satisfaction (acquiescentia), the greatest thing for which human beings can hope (EV36S). The remedy for any given affect, then, is to find what Spinoza calls its “correct use” (EVP10S). In the heart of these affective burdens—the drive to have others love and desire the same things and the quest to possess completely what one loves—belonging to human nature, one can find both what is truly good and the means for its acquisition.

The fifth part of the Ethics treats precisely the identification and cultivation of freedom from within slavery. Whereas Part IV describes human existence insofar as it naturally tends toward its own enslavement, the first half of Part V prescribes practices by which these very same tendencies can be re-ordered in order to produce an active rather than a passive mind and body. In this way, Part V does not aim to transform or suppress the pre-rational desires that often propel us toward suffering and diminish our power to act. On the contrary, the emancipatory practices of Part V fulfill those pre-rational desires, by orienting them towards the objects that support them rather than those that can provide momentary satisfaction, followed by terrible sadness. Insofar as Part V concerns the power of reason to moderate the affects, this moderation consists in cultivating a constellation of relationships by which these affects and drives will be nourishing and enabling rather than harmful. Reason does not function best by finding a
way to avoid or attenuate the force of the affects. Rather, reason is empowered and amplified by exposure to the force of joyful affects.

The primary criterion for identifying a noxious affect is what I would like to call its “exclusivity.” Reason counsels that affects are only harmful insofar as they affect the body and mind in a way that excludes other affections. In Spinoza’s words, “An affect is only evil, or harmful, insofar as it prevents the mind from being able to think” (E VP9D). This statement serves to demonstrate the proposition asserting that “[i]f an affect is related to more and different causes which the mind considers together with the affect itself, it is less harmful.” An affect that the mind relates to a multiplicity of causes does not have an exclusive relationship with a particular object, and the mind is consequently not fixed upon one thing. Even the most beneficial and empowering affects—love and desire—can be excessive (EIVP44), when they limit their relation to one particular part of the body. The impact of an affect upon a highly circumscribed corporeal site consumes the mind, rendering it unable to consider other feelings or ideas. Although the body is highly moved and excited by a particularly favorable feeling, such an experience provokes a love that encloses it, seals it off from the world, other beings, and other experiences.

Risking a departure from Spinoza’s vocabulary, one might say that consciousness spontaneously concerns itself with its immediate satisfaction. Spinoza mentions repeatedly that, at the moment of pleasure and joy, one is fixed by the present, enclosed within imagination whose nature is to consider things as present. Far from considering things sub specie æternitatis, one imagines the thing insofar as it presently affects her, without orienting her actions either toward the future or in light of the past. The desirable
thing captivates her, commands all of her attention, compelling her to consider, if anything, only the means by which she can guard her covetous object. Such joy, unfortunately, is often followed by sadness, or fear of its loss. In extreme situations, to which the arts have long attested, a powerful fixation on a loved one can provoke madness:

Generally, then, the affects are excessive, and occupy the mind in the consideration of only one object so much that it cannot think of others. And though men are liable to a great many affects so that one rarely finds them to be agitated by one and the same affect, still there are those in whom one affect is stubbornly fixed. For we sometimes see that men are so affected by one object that, although it is not present, they still believe they have it with them.

When this happens to a man who is not asleep, we say that he is mad or insane. (E IVP44S; emphasis added.)

The exclusive attention to one thing, albeit rare, can literally occupy the body and mind to the extent that they are no longer meaningfully affected by their environment. In this way, one does not know what is actually appearing before her, because she is so moved by something not necessarily present in actuality. Spinoza’s assertion underlines his materialism: if the body is arrested by one thing; so is the mind. If the body is occupied, affected determinately and overwhelmingly by something, it cannot be affected by anything else. The mind cannot simply transcend its situation, and thereby will itself to contemplate other things. The individual is possessed by something external, constrained to consider only the force of its passion. The single-minded desire for possession, in this case, results in being possessed oneself.

The situation can become still worse. If this love affecting one part of the body and obsessing the mind is very powerful and endures for a long time, it could change the proportion of motion and rest that defines the individual; that is, this love could kill. For
Spinoza, it is clear that death does not require a corpse (E IV30S), and love can be either
the most enabling human experience or the most destructive. Because it is rather
commonplace to seek this delirious, crazy love, this intoxicating joy without end, it may
appear that we spontaneously seek our own death. Such a conclusion, however, would be
to take an effect for the cause, a common trick of the imagination (E IApp). One does not
seek death in endeavoring to remain joyous and united with her object of love. One aims
at life, power, and an enabling and joyful union, but in a maladroit fashion.

The lover, in fact, desires eternal joy. The problem, according to Spinoza, is that
with these quotidian pleasures and loves—toward, to use his example, “a mistress or a
prostitute”—one cannot maintain ceaseless joy without being crazy. Sempiternal love—
that is, love with a beginning but no end—toward finite things is neither possible nor
sane. All finite things pass away, making it impossible. But even if it were possible,
such a love would constrain and harm the body. If one loves completely, exhaustively
and without reserve, the infinite thing, however, one can undergo eternal joy. One ought
to orient her inexhaustible desire to eternally possess her object of love—to generate a
stabilizing and enriching experience of this enabling joyful union toward—the one thing
that can genuinely, ontologically support it. Only with love toward God (*amour erga
deum*), or all of Nature, is one truly, and eternally exposed to pleasure and joy. With the
constant joy proper to love toward God, one is no longer mad but as wise as possible.
What must happen, then, in order to transform this tendency toward mad love into wise
love? In other words, how can insanity become philosophy?

One might call the problem posed by mad love a problem of “economics.” Mad
love relates to one sole part of the body, and thereby constrains the mind to one object.
To deploy the lexicon of the market, such love is highly risky since one is not sufficiently diversified. Moreover, the consummate investment of the mind and body in one thing violates the sovereign principle of reason—utility (*uti*le).

Whatever so disposes the human body that it can be affected in a great many ways, or renders it capable of affecting external bodies in a great many ways, is useful to man; the more it renders the body capable of being affected in a great many ways, or affecting other bodies, the more useful it is; on the other hand, what renders the body less capable of these things is harmful. (E IV38)

Crazy love closes the body and the mind off from the world, and, in this way, injures the individual. The criterion of utility, as discussed in the former chapter, determines reason to seek openness—passive as much as active—to the world. The effort to know demands that one endeavor to multiply corporeal sites susceptible to affection, as Spinoza establishes in Part II (P14). Furthermore, the greatest peace of mind (*acquiescentia*) emerges from considering one’s actions in the world, one’s ability to relate to and affect others (E IV52D).

In Part IV, Spinoza defines “cheerfulness” (*hilaritas*) as precisely the kind of joy that comes from an openness of the entire body to being affected by other natural beings: “Cheerfulness (see its Def. in IIIP11S) is a joy which, insofar as is related to the body, consists in this, that all parts of the body are equally affected” (P42D). Because the human body is a complex individual with many different kinds of parts, this demands that it relate itself to many different kinds of things, and love in as many ways as possible (see, e.g., E IVP45S). Following the rule of utility (E IVP38), through which one aims to be affected and to affect others as much possible, is the rational path leading toward intuition.
Cheerfulness, or *hilaritas*, does not generally happen spontaneously. Naturally, humans fixate upon a single source of joy, identify a single love object and thereby fall prey to various sicknesses of the mind and follies of fortune. If one can, however, engage in a practice by which the love sick mind opens itself to increasingly more objects of pleasure and joy, and amplifies as many parts of its body as possible, it will find itself on the path toward the intellectual love of God.

Mad love is exclusive: it is a love that touches especially one part of the body, is available only to one person, closing that person off from her fellow human beings, and, in the worst cases, destroys her singular proportion of motion and rest, changing her essence so as to bring about her death. Love toward God, on the other hand, delivers eternal joy, because it affects every part of the body at once. It is an inclusive love that opens the body to relate all of its affections to God. There is no part of Nature that cannot enjoin the body to know and love God still more. Nothing is, in principle, excluded as an object of love.\(^{170}\)

The first half of *Ethics*, Part V is nothing other than the affective training by which the lovesick mind re-orient its irrepressible drive to love toward what will make it healthy, sane, and wise. As Moreau notes, a human being cannot choose whether to love,

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170 I was asked at a conference whether this means that one would cease to prioritize, for example, one’s children, or those one loves most immediately and palpably. I do not understand this more tentacled and complex love of the infinite within and through finite, singular beings to entail a dilution of the love of singular individuals. First, one cannot love the infinite except through singular things. Second, I imagine the love of the singular as a determinate and creative aspect of Nature to enrich one’s love of singulars. With the intellectual love of God, I love my child for who she is as a unique, non-reproducible part within the whole and as an actual constituent of Nature’s character. Third, I love, albeit in a way I experience differently, all of those other singular things that contribute to making my child who and what she is. That is, ultimately I love all of Nature in and through my child. I am indebted to Amélie Rorty for this understanding. “Spinoza on the Pathos of Idolatrous Love and the Hilarity of True Love,” *The Philosophy of (erotic) Love*, eds. Solomon and Higgins, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).
but only what to love.\textsuperscript{171} The cure for lovesickness, then, is more love, but love toward a more richly variegated object, one that ultimately infuses all of Nature. The training of Part V involves learning to love more and different things, open oneself to more and different sources of affection. The “remedy” consists in an effort to consider one’s affects as they are; that is, as modifications of one’s power provoked by various causes at once, and to thereby consider one’s power to be conditioned in myriad ways by qualitatively different relationships with other beings. By endeavoring to understand one’s experiences as much as possible as “overdetermined,”\textsuperscript{172} one learns to relate her affects more and more to the idea of God, the infinite and necessary power by which everything exists. Because “everything that is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God,” this practice of relating one’s affects, experience, and ideas to God is supported by the nature of existence itself. If the mind truly conceives its affections, it conceives them as \textit{in Deo}. Spinoza claims that when one understands things according to this procedure—of relating one’s affects, pleasant or otherwise, to the idea of the infinite productive power of God—one cannot but love oneself, God, and things. Increasingly, then, one ought to be able to love with one’s whole body, each part at the same time. The body’s power is thereby augmented entirely, part for part, and its proportion of motion and rest remains intact. The body, thus, becomes increasingly

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{171} Moreau, 177.

\textsuperscript{172} “Overdetermination” is a term coined by Freud and expanded by Althusser to refer to events and social formations that have a multiplicity of causes. The term militates against reductivist mono- or serio-causal explanations for psychic phenomena, ideology, or social and political relationships. It resists an assertion that any given phenomenon might be the brute determination of, for example, “It’s the economy, stupid,” or, even, “It’s God, stupid.” See Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” \textit{For Marx}, trans. B. Brewster (London: Verso, 1996).
\end{footnotesize}
“capable of a great many things” and “has a mind whose greatest part is eternal” (EVP39).

In other words, the body implicated in “useful” relationships arrives at a wise, proportional love, love toward God. Such wise love conditions a conception of things, primarily oneself, as in God, as something which belongs to God. Moreover, insofar as she belongs essentially to God or Nature, she expresses and constitutes its infinite power. In other words, the body’s openness to the world, and its cultivation of love toward God, becomes acquiescentia, peace in oneself by virtue of considering oneself an active and definitive constituent of being. The rational practice of relating one’s affects and experiences to the idea of God, in this way, leads to the third kind of knowledge. The third kind of knowledge is hereby understood as the intuitive grasp of one’s essential striving to persevere in being, in concert with others, and ineluctably related to God. This wise love consists in an apprehension of oneself included within Nature, along with other beings. It is an inclusive and including love.

The love of wisdom, therefore, does not fear to be believed. Whereas intoxicating love includes the anxiety that it will be stolen by others, wisdom’s love wants nothing more than to be shared with others, to include others in its joyful engagement. In contrast to the joy born of love toward finite things, the joy from the love of God is increased by being shared with other beings. Substance, by definition, cannot be divided into parts, such that each person would receive her equal share of Nature’s power. God, or Nature, does not belong to an economy of scarce resources, but to a dynamic of power absolutely without limits. Love toward God is a communication, in every sense, of power by means of useful encounters. Beings who encounter and relate to one another in a joyful way
amplify each other’s power mutually. One does not lose power by virtue of another being’s growth, or strength. On the contrary, joyful encounters reciprocally intensify and augment one another’s corporeal and mental aptitudes, together at once. These encounters are rational and useful insofar as they belong to bodies that love openly, with all of their parts, mutually furnishing a way of being that discloses to them the real conditions and expression of their power. The mutual joyful empowerment of the inclusive love toward God shows the individual who and what she is. In other words, love with one’s body entire, though sought rationally, gives rise to intuitive knowing. That is, it enables the understanding of oneself as eternally joyful by means of an inviolable and unending relationship between one’s own essence and that of God, by means of, not over and against, its engagements with other finite beings.

In everyday life, our desire to possess fully and exclusively what we love provokes avarice, jealousy, and competitive struggles with fellow human beings. Yet, this desire to have and not to lose what we love is not our source of suffering, according to Spinoza. Although we are made sick and suffer because we love what we cannot have, we are not sick because we want, desperately even, to have it. We can assuage these unpleasant affects of avarice and jealousy, if we love the one thing we can really have, that will never diminish, and which is not threatened by other beings. Love toward God cannot be taken away: once it is achieved, it remains constant and entirely devoid of sadness (E VP18C). Moreover, if other people love God, one is compelled both to love them and God more. “This love toward God cannot be tainted by any affect of envy or jealousy: instead, the more men we imagine to be joined to God by the same bond of love, the more it is encouraged” (E VP20). It is both a love and a manner of possession
entirely compatible with human sociality. Both its enjoyment and its possession are made all the more possible by being shared.

In ordinary life, “glory,” or “ambition,” likewise frustrates us. We want others to love what we love, approve our desires, and esteem our actions. Such an aim is often frustrated in an exclusive economy whereby only some can be esteemed, and often for their “vain” accomplishments. Spinoza considers accomplishments to be “vain,” if they are deemed “good” by virtue of their proximity to external, arbitrary standards. One ordinarily seeks esteem by conforming to the popularly praised models of humanity, rather than acting according to an understanding of one’s proper nature or essence. Love toward God, however, gives one genuine “glory” in that it includes a rich understanding and appreciation of oneself as part of Nature. If one is able to actively construct her world through understanding the useful relationships in which she is implicated, she cannot but esteem herself, others, and God. She esteems herself, Nature, and other beings in that together they constitute the real movement of being. The joy and self-love that emerges from the collective love of God is the fulfillment of our possessive desire, our desire to have a ceaseless joy and an eternal union with another.

Love toward God does not belong to an economy of scarcity, in that one wants nothing more than for others to love God as well. Moreover, this desire for esteem and glory, in Spinoza’s view, does not correspond to a desire to be desired. “He who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return” (E VP19). Love toward the infinite does not participate in an economy of debt, but in an economy of reciprocal empowerment, mutual affirmation, and reciprocal communication of power. The love of God is not like love as it is defined in Part III: it is not “a joy accompanied by the idea of
an external cause” (E IIIDefVI). God cannot love us back, because it is not exterior to us. Although I suggested that the possessive desire fulfilled by love toward God includes a drive toward union with another, God is not merely an extrinsic but, importantly, an intrinsic determination of one’s power. Insofar as this love remains in the realm of reason, however, it is primarily experienced through others, with others, in the domain especially of inter-human relationships. Understood from the perspective of intuition, however, love toward God becomes the love of God, in both senses of the genitive. It is no longer just love toward God as all that affects and enables one’s body and mind, but love of God as the constitutive desire that comprises one’s very essence.

In loving God, one is not possessed or consumed as with an overwhelming, finite love. Paradoxically, Spinoza suggests that one possesses most completely when she affirms herself as belonging entirely to Nature. What does one have? How is the desire to possess what one loves fulfilled in the love of God? Saverio Ansaldi finds that, with intuition, “the mind is in full possession of its means, it deploys entirely its power of knowing, which it renews incessantly within the expression of its desire.” Ansaldi further describes the Ethics as a project of love grounded in a dynamic of power, by which one “appropriates” her power of activity. Spinoza claims that intuition begets a love toward a thing immutable and eternal (see P15), which we really fully possess (see IP45), and which therefore cannot be tainted by any of the vices which are in ordinary love, but can always be greater and greater (by P15), and occupy the greatest part of the mind (by P16), and affect it extensively. (E VP20S)

Although this love occupies, fills up the greatest part of the mind, it is something “we really possess.” It may seem that this love possesses and captivates the human mind, but it constitutes a real possession, something that we truly have, something of our own. It belongs to the mind, I here join Ansaldi’s claim, in that it yields the full realization of its own powers. It allows it to appropriate to the greatest extent possible its own constituent power within and of Nature.

The practice of relating one’s affects to an idea of God consists in a rational process, because it begins from the experience of being affected and relates it to the power of Nature. Through repeating such a practice over and over, one is no longer sickened by the sadness accompanying the love of finite things. One is progressively able to understand her being affected as belonging to a genuine power of her own body. At the same time, she progressively understands her own activity as a necessary part of Nature’s self-expression. With much practice and application, as Spinoza asserts repeatedly in Part V, the “cheerful” cultivation of the body’s powers assuages the mind as it delivers an understanding of the limits and extent of its own power. The body’s ability to love God without reserve, delivers to it full possession of its power to act, and to the mind its power to think. Once one’s affects are always necessarily accompanied by an idea of Nature’s power, one generates ideas in the same order as Nature, by inferring from the common to the singular. With ideas in proper genetic order, the mind is in full possession of its power to think. By fulfilling one’s desire to “really possess” what one loves, reason gives rise to intuition, and the rational remedy for the affects yields the intellectual love of God.
Chapter 6

Political Scientia Intuitiva

Spinoza affirms explicitly and repeatedly a relationship between rational and political order, between reason and a thriving commonwealth. In Spinoza’s words:

It is not, I repeat, the purpose of the state to transform rational men 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 vicious mutual abuse that are prompted by hatred, anger, or deceit. Thus the purpose of the state is, in reality, freedom. (TTP, 223)

Spinoza not only links political aims to the development of reason, he nearly identifies reason and freedom. Likewise in the Ethics, freedom is tightly linked to reason, the ability to act from the laws that follow from and affirm one’s nature, essence, or conatus (E IVP68D). Yet, the Ethics culminates in a higher form of freedom embodied by intuition, acquiescentia (peace of mind), and the intellectual love of God. The political writings unequivocally affirm a relationship between the life of the commonwealth and the exercise and development of the mind, yet they do not so much as mention intuition, the highest expression of mental power and freedom. The realm of political freedom seems to aim as high as reason without addressing the question of the third kind of knowledge, the “maximal” realization of human freedom.

Indeed, commentators frequently note the relationship—completely explicit and justified by the letter of Spinoza’s text—between imagination and politics, as well as the ...........................

The silence on Spinoza’s part seems to justify the absence of analysis of the relationship between ethical and political freedom. Nevertheless, a few thinkers have undertaken the creative work necessary to envision their rapport. I propose here that the necessarily political phenomena of property and ownership constitute an explicit connection between the state’s work and the passage to intuition.

In Part V of the Ethics, Spinoza asserts that sickness of the mind comes from loving what we cannot possess, and the third kind of knowledge “begets a love . . . which we fully possess” (EVP20S). The suffering of the mind results from a defective relationship toward possessions and objects of love and desire. The third kind of knowledge emerges from the “correct use” of this possessive desire, this proprietary love. The centrality of property relations in Spinoza’s account of justice and political organization, I aim to show, comprises a political foundation for intuition. In constituting citizens that comportment themselves in a particular way toward property and possessions, the state ought to be, from Spinoza’s point of view, acting to remedy our natural tendency toward lovesickness, and cultivate the kind of beings that can love and possess inclusively.

In asserting that the desire to possess what we cannot exclusively and permanently have lies at the root of human misery, Spinoza’s Ethics discloses a problem

\[176\] Perhaps most notably, Alexandre Matheron, Individu et Communauté Chez Spinoza (Paris: PUF, 1968).
that requires a political response. Although the final part of the *Ethics* appears to be the least practical of Spinoza’s writings, it nonetheless foregrounds the tangible problem of our desire for possession, our desire to have what gives us joy. Moreover, as I outlined in the preceding chapter, Part V proposes a remedial practice by means of which this problematic desire might generate satisfaction and strength rather than frustration and suffering. The “remedy for the affects” demands a reorientation of one’s possessive desire corollary to the fundamentally affective and affirmative understanding of justice propounded in Spinoza’s political writings. The cure for the possessive lovesickness portrayed in the *Ethics*, I aim to show here, entails institutions of justice insofar as they operate upon our proprietary desires.

The remedy for political misery includes the establishment of institutions and practices that will produce a reorientation of our possessive desire similar to the program presented in the *Ethics*. Spinoza makes several practical suggestions about the organization of property and economic relations in his *Political Treatise*. Moreover, he defines justice throughout his work as “the constant mind [*animi constantia*] to attribute to each what is his by civil right” (TTP, 180), suggesting an intimate connection between imperatives for property relations and justice. Although a particular orientation toward possession appears to be central to Spinoza’s prescriptions for the assuagement of the destructive passions, in both the mind and social body, neither Spinoza’s claims about property nor his conception of justice have received much analysis.\(^{177}\)

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\(^{177}\) While some interpreters mention it, few treat it philosophically. Exceptions include Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et Communauté Chez Spinoza* and Steven B. Smith. Smith remarks repeatedly that Spinoza prefers a commercial society, and thereby affirms the importance of Spinoza’s economic remarks. I think Smith is correct to note the importance of economic relations, but disagree with his characterization.
Spinoza’s concept of justice and his proposals for property and economic organization are integral to his overall project for the maximization of human power and freedom. According to my interpretation, the transformation and amelioration of the intellect should not be distinguished from the transformation and amelioration of the political body. Ultimately, I hope to show that the cure for the lovesick mind of the *Ethics* includes the institution of a just society and a just affective disposition. The “remedy for the affects” found in the concluding part of the *Ethics* entails a reorientation of possessive desire inaugurated by the feeling of justice.

6.1: Property Affects

The constitution of citizens who comport themselves in a particular way toward property and possessions comprises a major function of political organization. If this function is performed effectively and well, the composition of the body politic should serve the effort to remedy our natural tendency toward lovesickness and cultivate the kind of beings that can love and possess inclusively, rather than jealously, anxiously, and fearfully. Because the sovereign good for Spinoza consists in the “acquisition of a nature” that loves so as to be nourished and fortified by “a joy entirely exempt from sadness,” politics must be organized in a way that best supports this project. Love, the greatest and most powerful indication of joy, often includes sadness and fear of loss.

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of this commercial society as fundamentally capitalist, a disagreement I will discuss more fully below. Smith, *Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*, (New Haven: Yale, 1997).

178 TIE, § 9. For Spinoza, we are creatures that love, and whether we love cannot be a question. We love necessarily, but often in a way that carries with it sadness, and even the production of our own servitude. The ethical project, then, involves a negotiation with, and operation upon this inevitable fact of our being.
If citizens learn to experience having, possessing, and proprietary status differently, they make great strides toward acquiring that joyful, powerful nature and way of being at the heart of Spinoza’s ethical project. In everyday life, laws, customs, and institutions of the just commonwealth facilitate an affirmative orientation and good disposition toward what one has and how one owns. It does so by reducing the burdensome shadow of loss that overwhelmingly determines typical habits of possession. Loss is a constant and necessary part of natural life. In order to live, one must continually give up parts of oneself, as one constantly gains nourishment and life from parts of other beings. Property for Spinoza can be organized in such a way that might both banalize loss and foreground its necessity as a source of gain, pleasure, and development. In fact, I will try to argue that Spinoza’s proposals for property relations aim to create a secure foundation that enables a freer, more powerful, and peaceful comportment toward loss and flux in the realm of finite, perishable things.

In his discussion of the foundations of monarchy in the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza counsels that land, houses, and farms should not be owned by private individuals but should be held in common, belonging to “public right (*publici juris*)” (TP, 6.12). At the same time, everyone should be constrained to make her living through commercial exchange and trade relations.

Another factor which is also of great importance in promoting peace and harmony is this, that no citizen may own real estate . . . Hence the danger from war in practically the same for all; all will have to make a living by engaging in trade or

lending money to their fellow citizens—assuming that, as was once the case for Athens, a law is enacted forbidding the lending of money at interest to any but native inhabitants. So they will have to engage in commercial dealings that either make them mutually involved with one another or that require the same means for their furtherance. Thus the greatest part of the council will generally have one and the same attitude of mind toward their common interests and peaceful activities; . . . every man upholds another’s cause only so far as he believes his own position to be strengthened thereby. (TP, 7.8)

Spinoza imagines that the common ownership of immovable property promotes “peace and harmony,” since citizens have an equal investment in its cultivation, conservation and defense. They thus imagine themselves co-owners, belonging equally to the country and equally dependent upon its well-being. More importantly, the wealth and advantage of statesmen must “depend on the general welfare and peace of all” (TP, 7.4). The “council,” or king’s advisors (chapter 7 is on monarchy), should have the same relationship to land as any other citizen. Spinoza notes that the state must be organized such that there is always more profit to be gained by peace than war, otherwise monarchs, senators, and councilmen will be prone to sacrifice their people for riches (TP, 8.31).

Moveable property, on the other hand, should be moved as much as possible in order to put citizens into relationship to one another, and fortify both real conditions and mental conceptions of inter-dependence. Such assertions have provoked at least one philosopher to characterize Spinoza’s “economics” as vulgar mercantilism, while another has lauded those same principles as the earliest promotion of democratic capitalism. All people would be obligated to enter into trade and lending relationships with their fellow citizens. They should create relations of trust and interdependence

\[179\] The editors of the Hackett edition of the TP note that Vico in *Scienza Nuova* (I, 335) disparages Spinoza’s commonwealth as “a society of shopkeepers.”

\[180\] Steven B. Smith makes this assertion repeatedly throughout *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity.*
through lending, borrowing, and exchanging. This is not an economy of hoarding land, money, or goods. All moveable property should be released into circulation, and such circulation should be intensified *internal to the polis*, internal to the community bonded by a common ground of security and prosperity. In concept and in practice, people will be moved by their passions, and their passions will lead them to reason, which counsels that they should uphold the cause of the other to strengthen their own position.

Spinoza’s commercial vision, I propose, corresponds to his ontological claims about human existence, and aims to support and promote acting and thinking in accord with the real movement of Nature. His economics belong to the ethical, political, and even epistemological program contained in all of his writings. The economics, I contend, represent neither a simple-minded, incentive-based promotion of peace and social concord, nor a faith in the liberating force of the invisible hand. Spinoza, to borrow a term, envisions a strictly *non-fetishistic* economy.

The commercialism Spinoza promotes aims precisely at the affirmation of inter-human relationships. The economy of trade and exchange puts constituents of the multitude into explicit relationship with each other, foregrounding their mutual inter-dependence and the fact that their power has more force when collectively deployed. The exchange of goods and services—as well as an organized division of labor—is a brute necessity belonging to human existence.

If men did not afford one another mutual aid [*operam mutuam dare*], they would lack both the skill and the time [*ars et tempus*] to support and preserve themselves to the greatest possible extent. All men are not equally suited to all activities, and

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181 The notion of fetishism is, of course, borrowed from Marx. See the famous first chapter of *Capital, vol. I*. 
no single person would be capable of supplying all his own needs. Each would find that strength and time [vires et tempus] fail him if he alone had to plough, sow, reap, grind, cook, weave, stitch and perform all the other numerous tasks to support life, not to mention the arts and sciences which are also indispensable to human nature and its blessedness. (TTP, 63)

In a discussion of this same passage, Moreau notes that, for Spinoza, any individual lacks the “time” required to care for basic bodily needs, let alone develop the most enriching aspects of human life. That is, human finitude entails a life of “mutual aid,” cooperation, and exchange. In order to live, one must create things of value to others, surrender them, and sustain oneself with the activity and power of one’s fellow humans. Although every human being is equal in her dependence upon commerce, exchange, and “mutual aid,” most, if not all, societies exempt some portion of the ruling class, among others, from committing some part of their energy, time, and skill [ars] to mercantile engagements. Spinoza imagines that no one, regardless of her station in life, would escape committing her “art and time,” in some measure, to the universal practice of trade. All members of the polis—be they politician, citizen, devout Christian, atheist, or Jew—would incorporate the brute necessity of exchange into their regular lives, self-conception, and orientation toward others.

The brute necessity of exchange belongs to the existence of every finite mode in Nature. It might even be the case that the more complex a being is, the more dependent it becomes upon a regular and diverse flow of exchange with other parts of Nature. The human body itself constantly engages in relations of exchange with myriad other bodies: “The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as

it were, continually regenerated” (E IIP13postIV). The individual body depends upon a constant dynamic of give and take, composition and re-composition, in order to exist at all. Moreover, as I emphasize in chapter four, “The human mind is more capable of perceiving a great many things, and is the more capable, the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways” (E IVP14). The power of the human mind, for its cultivation and perfection, depends upon diversifying its experience, bodily affections, and relations with others. It is certainly the case that simply to live “we can never bring it about that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being, nor that we live without having dealings with things outside ourselves” (E IVP18S). To live well, moreover, we must have as many different kinds of dealings as we can. The higher powers of the mind, the more robust expression of human freedom, needs a body that “disposes” itself in a great many ways, undergoes many kinds of experiences and exchanges, and involves itself with many different kinds of things.

Spinoza does not elaborate upon his reasons for obligating every single person to enter into exchange relations beyond the promotion of peace and harmony. The reasons, I contend, cannot be merely pragmatic. Many, if not all, societies respond to human finitude with a more or less strict division of labor, which creates a distinct class of mercantilists. I am not aware of any philosopher prior to Spinoza who proposes that every one—the most talented philosophers and scientists, the most influential clergymen, as well as the most noble and rich—must bring themselves on a regular basis to the
I implied above that one reason for this obligation may be to render explicit, in concept and practice, the universality of our interdependence and finitude. Although everyone requires the “mutual assistance” of other human beings, not everyone thinks of herself as irreducibly bound to the care, support, art, skill, time, and labor of other people. Moreover, Spinoza asserts that the ideas that compose the human mind express the same lived reality of its body. The mind is nothing but an idea of its body (E IIP13). If the body does not physically engage in practices of exchange, the mind’s knowledge of this particular form of mutual assistance and the necessity of reciprocal dependence upon others will be weaker, less determinate. The idea of the body that remains far from practices of exchange remains the product not of direct corporeal engagement but of, perhaps, “hearsay,” detached observation, or devastating exclusion. One who actually, physically experiences her dependence upon and benefit from the marketplace will think and feel differently—presumably, more adequately—about economic relationships and the system by which a polity organizes its absolutely necessary “mutual assistance.”

It is not clear from Spinoza’s text what form universal participation in trade must take, thus I cannot guess what its precise parameters might be. Although I confess to remaining in the realm of speculation, another reason to obligate all members of society to encourage the diverse and perpetual movement of movable property could be that universal participation in trade might allow for universal involvement in non-trade

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183 Spinoza may not have been original in every respect, but as a major philosopher in the Western tradition, I suspect he is. There were certainly other known radical democratic movements emerging in the seventeenth century, such as the Levelers. See, for example, C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford, 1962) and Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford, 2001).
relations. It could free enough time and energy for each citizen to pursue “the arts and sciences which are also indispensable for the perfection of human nature and its blessedness” (TTP, 63; my emphasis). Notably, in asserting that the arts and sciences are “also” necessary for beatitude, the highest form of freedom associated with intuition, Spinoza implies that “mutual aid” and “all the numerous tasks necessary to support life” are far from irrelevant to the highest aspiration of human life. Thus, it appears to be the case that both the commitment of “art and time” to care for others and the necessities of collective survival and involvement with arts and sciences are “indispensable” to salvation, beatitude, and intuition. In order to be free, one needs to commit one’s body and mind to work, trade, art, and science. Perhaps everyone must go to the marketplace in order for everyone to be free.

Thus, I have proposed that universal participation in trade relations both promotes a more adequate idea of what it means to be a “part of nature” and maximizes opportunity and access, to speak in crude terms, to intuition and beatitude. I am contending that universal participation resists a depersonalized system that puts things into relationship with things, concealing human labor power, and social relationships of production. Capitalism, according to Marx, requires that things appear “miraculated,” made by no one and everyone, indifferently available to whoever has the means for their purchase. Things, under capitalism, must be “fetishized” in order for the system to function, in order, that is, for a large majority of the people to be exploited and underpaid for their activity. Capitalism, then, depends upon concealing the collective power and activity
necessary for its existence. Capitalism, in other words, requires precisely the kind of metaphysical worldview to which Spinoza objects. Spinoza’s substance cannot be understood in abstraction from the constant productive activity of its modes or attributes. It is not ontologically distinct from its singular instantiations, as with the model of a creator God—or the mysterious machinations of the market—separate from and untouched by his creations. The imperative that obligates everyone in a community to engage in exchange relations, and to invest in the common land, belongs to this vision of Nature, constantly varying and renewing itself through the inter- and intra-activity of modes.

Universal mercantile involvement, of some unspecified kind, yields an epistemological benefit by illuminating the nature of existence as an interdependent whole. At the same time, its universality diversifies the corporeal experience necessary for the development of the mind. Such a benefit must be imagined as at once physical and intellectual, which creates a necessary—but probably not sufficient—foundation for living a more ethical and free life. A more adequate apprehension of reality promotes freedom in that one can determine oneself more effectively by virtue of a better grasp of the nature of her own power and its sources in other beings and the environment. Such an active, lived understanding likewise supports an ethical life, in Spinoza’s sense of

185 In this sense, I disagree with Smith’s contention that Spinoza fathers a liberal, capitalist republic, even as I affirm the importance Smith accords to commercial life in Spinoza’s political thought.
ethics. That is, it grounds a life in which one increases her power and enhances her life the more she affirms her own existence, in its singularity, and, concomitantly, as ineluctably connected most immediately to neighboring humans and ultimately to all of Nature.

In addition, the economy of interpersonal involvement fosters a social benefit, which, for Spinoza, cannot be separated strictly from an “egoistic” benefit. The encouragement of shared practices and ways of life serves to construct, affirm, and fortify bonds within a community, as it aims at the constitution of a collective identification with the larger political body. It is important, on Spinoza’s account, for people not only to engage in exchange but to have, as far as possible, a universally shared relationship to immovable property. The strongest polity is one in which land is held in common, offering a shared ground, literally, of security and stability for everyone. Spinoza thus advises monarchies to establish common ownership of the land, along with a vibrant local system of exchange, in which everyone participates and from which everyone benefits. Most important, at first, is that the members of a commonwealth generate a common interest, a shared investment, and a sense that their security and their strength depend upon one another.

The universal title to immovable property serves at least two purposes. While everyone enters into relationships of constant exchange, perpetual loss and gain, an enforced surrender to flux and variation proper to natural life, neither loss nor gain is ever absolute. Each citizen has a ground of security and stability beneath the flux, which encourages fortitude and courage in the face of risky involvements with other people and unpredictable events in the realm of the market. Of course, the stability of shared land is
only relative to that of market relations. The land can be more and less fecund on a seasonal basis, devastated by earthquakes, floods, or tsunamis, and is always, in some measure, vulnerable to conquest. In the ideal scenario, however, citizens are not vulnerable to one another in relationship to the land. Threats to their perseverance and flourishing are experienced to be external. The utter unpredictability of fortune and other nations always pose some kind of menace to survival. Yet, the shared ground enables citizens to identify their own perseverance with that of the commonwealth and their neighbors, because “the king’s sword or right is in reality the will of the people” (TP, 7.27). Moreover, in the best situation, such identification will not be a ruse deployed by the state to generate loyalty. Neither will it be a kind of devil’s bargain, where people say to themselves, “I am better off in the commonwealth than among the wolves.” The economic and property arrangements should be such that, if people act to cultivate and defend the shared land, it will genuinely increase their power. They will apprehend their conatus as meaningfully bound to that of the polis, because it will be. The integration of strivings will promote the best aspects of human life and the maximization of freedom rather than serve only to perpetuate bare life and generate a common source of fear and anxiety.

187 This imperative is similar to Aristotle’s: “If a regime is to be preserved, all parts of the city must wish it to exist and continue on the same basis” (Politics, 1270b). Spinoza would add that all parts of the city must participate in the city’s functioning as well as the political, deliberative process. Thus, the city must be constructed such that the flourishing of the city would be correctly conceived and felt by the citizens as co-extensive with their own. The city would, therefore, not depend upon the wishing or willing of its parts, but upon their material well-being, power, strength and virtue. I make these claims based upon Spinoza’s assertions about how constitutions work, ignoring his caveat at the end of the TP that women and servants should neither vote in the supreme council nor rule, since I regard those claims as a violation of his own previously established argument. I have no trouble imagining someone able to make the same argument about Aristotle’s exclusionary policies as well.
The commonwealth, in the best case, should follow the same rules to generate a healthy and powerful body that an individual human being should. The body of the polis flourishes to the extent that it can develop and nourish its existence as a whole, part for part. In the Ethics, Spinoza distinguishes between the exclusive and harmful pleasure of titilatio and the strengthening inclusive pleasure of hilaritas. “Titillation is a joy which, insofar as it is related to the body, consists in this, that one (or several) of its parts are affected more than others.” Moreover, Spinoza adds, it can happen that it “remains stubbornly fixed in the body, and so prevents the body from being capable of being affected in a great many other ways” (E IVP43; translation modified). As I discussed in the previous chapter, such fixation of pleasure can lead to madness and a complete loss of access to reality. “Titillation” actually increases the power of one or some parts of the body, but to the exclusion of others, and ultimately to the detriment of the overall well-being and life of the individual body. The body’s exclusive stimulation and growth corresponds to a proscription of the minds’ power to think and act. When only one or a few parts of the body are pleased, the mind is fixed upon that source of pleasure and cannot consider what supports the life and perseverance of either the source of pleasure and power or the body as a whole. Many economies that fortify the few as they deplete the life energy of the many generate a kind of titilatio of the political body. There are parts that undergo an exhilarating injection of power and pleasure, but such power can lead to madness and ultimately the destruction of the body. The titillated parts become parasitic upon the whole rather than generating an increased vitality and rationality of the whole.
Hilaritas, on the other hand, increases the power of each part of the body at once, and can only be good (E IVP42). It is a universal pleasure that enlarges the range of experience and thought rather than foreclosing it. Notably, Spinoza does not here promote the well-being of the whole over and against that of individual components of the body. The distinct parts preserve their identities as parts. The most sane activities for the body are those that engage and fortify all of its parts, one by one, so as to enable it to “be affected in a great many ways,” as it affects itself and others in a great many ways. The point is not to subordinate the power of individual parts in favor of the vitality of the whole body. Rather, one aims to attend to, care for, and please every part, in its difference, as the necessary expression of the flourishing of the whole. Just as the individual human should pursue the joys that nourish as many parts of its body as possible, both for its physical health and its mental fortitude, so should the polis. Spinoza’s economic and property proposals foster hilaritas of the polis rather than titilatio.

According to my interpretation, it may be easier to generate political hilaritas in either a monarchy or a democracy. Whereas a monarchical system ought to put its land completely in common and not charge any rent other than taxes, Spinoza does not advocate the same policy for an aristocratic regime. Aristocracies should rent or sell property to their citizens, because, aside from those selected to participate in government, they are like foreigners. By virtue of their political exclusion, citizens will not tend to identify their own conservation and desire with that of the State. “For subjects who have no stake in the state would all be likely to desert their cities in times of danger if they could carry whatever goods they possessed” (TP, 8.10). Because aristocracies choose
people to participate in the government, certain citizens are definitively excluded, provoking resentment and motivation to cheat and deceive either the government or their fellow citizens.

In a monarchy it is easier to integrate the striving of the parts into the production of generalized corporeal and intellectual power than in an aristocracy, because all of the citizens share the same status. There is a king, but the population is not divided into two mutually opposing groups: the included versus the excluded. A monarch is best served by treating his citizens as equally and generously as possible and allowing them the greatest freedom its constitution allows. Moreover, it can promote more love and trust among its citizens, since, on Spinoza’s model, citizens of a monarchy have common conditions of flourishing. Certainly, Spinoza thought democracy could best sustain the mutual identification and shared material conditions of thriving and freedom. But aristocracy might be the weakest system, in that it requires two classes of citizens, and thus two modes of joining bodies and minds with the state. Aristocracy must, therefore, resort to selling its land in order to unite its people to the state’s perseverance in being, something which may risk establishing still further distance between those who purchase the land and those who cultivate it by political right. Regardless of the kind of

\[188\] I have not encountered any other readings of Spinoza’s Political Treatise that agree with me on this point. Several commentators understand Spinoza to prefer aristocracy to democracy in the TP, arguing that he changed his mind between the TTP and the TP. For representatives of this argument, see especially Raia Prokhovnik, “From Democracy to Aristocracy: Spinoza, Reason, and Politics,” History of European Ideas 23.2-4 (1997). Feuer remarks that the TP advocates a “dictatorship of the commercial aristocracy” (165). Lewis Samuel Feuer, Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism (New Jersey: Transaction, 1958). In contrast, I am suggesting that aristocracy, far from being Spinoza’s preference, is the least effective mode of government, due to the restlessness and incoherence of community caused by inequality.
regime, however, property and exchange relations are paramount in the effort to constitute a political body led, as much as possible, by one mind.

I have argued that the economic and property arrangements that Spinoza promotes serve to generate particular affective conditions. Human life is conditioned by a hefty burden of anxiety in the face of loss, as I discuss in the previous chapter. The inability to possess what one loves results in “maladies of the mind or soul” (E VP20S). Loss, as much as gain, belongs to biological life, but the project of mental health, a necessary foundation for beatitude, demands that we respond in some way to the suffering it provokes. The universal participation in trade serves both to banalize the inevitable circulation and variation of finite things and to feature the shared communal experience of the constant flux necessary for survival. Likewise, universal participation establishes the material conditions for the exchange of diverse pleasures and experiences with one’s community. It might also ensure the equality of access to arts and sciences and the time to cultivate practices of freedom and beatitude. The shared title to immovable property serves the affective need for security and stability, while also promoting the harmonization of interests and passions among citizens. The coherence of the political body, grounded in a shared way of life and source of security, ultimately supports the political project of collective hilaritas over the debilitating exposure to titilatio.

6.2.: Feeling Justice

Spinoza constructs his principles concerning property relations around the establishment of “peace” and “harmony,” which we will see are also affective conditions of citizen and political bodies. Peace does not consist in a merely negative principle,
such as the absence of conflict or obedience to the law. Although Spinoza denies its actual possibility, a tyrant might strive to create a system of slaves such that no one ever violates the law, engages in seditious acts, or kills other people. If the tyrant were to succeed, however, this would not amount to a regime of peace: “For peace is not just the absence of war, but a virtue which comes from strength of mind [animi fortitudine]” (TP, 5.4). Peace is a virtue, or power (E IVdef8), a positive quality characterized by mental fortitude. Spinoza re-describes peace soon after in the Political Treatise, again, not as the absence of war, but rather as “the union or harmony of minds [animorum unione],” with “minds” (or “souls”) rendered, importantly, in the plural (TP, 6.4). Peace denotes a collective power, corresponding to the mutual augmentation of mental and, therefore, corporeal capacities. Peace emerges as the existence of an internally variegated unity that can act and think as one, that can strive together all the more effectively by virtue of its coordination of diverse powers.

The economics, then, as they aim at peace, aim at the amplification of all parts of the community, and the joy that comes from acting and desiring in concert, having greater ability to affect and be affected as a collective body. Spinoza identifies “peace,” rather than mere security, as the highest aim of society (TP, 5.2). Peace as the harmony of minds, I hope to show, resembles the “peace of mind,” or acquiescentia, of the Ethics, which Spinoza describes as “the highest thing we can hope for” (IVP52S). Just as the Ethics traces a trajectory from servitude to acquiescentia to beatitude and the third kind of knowledge, the politics sketches the possibility of transforming tyranny into security and ultimately collective corporeal and mental flourishing in the form of peace. The
**Political Treatise** is no less than an effort to establish practices that bring “peace of mind” (*acquiescentia*) to the collective mind and its body.\(^{189}\)

Acquiescence to and peace in the political body consists in affirming oneself as part or co-author of what it is that the *polis* does, not experiencing its actions as alien, imposed from the outside, but rather as sources of joy and “self-esteem.” The harmony of minds and enjoyment of political peace consists in expanding one’s sense of self, and multiplying the ways in which one regards and enjoys one’s power of activity.

Acquiescence to, and experience of, peace and joy in the contemplation of one’s powers in and of the political body is consistent with the remedy for the mind that one finds in the *Ethics*. The fact that the *Political Treatise* likewise identifies as its aim the construction of a strength of mind constitutive of peace suggests that a collective *acquiescentia* of the mind in and of the community, of the mind in and of Nature, is nothing less that the animating impulse of Spinoza’s entire philosophy.

Spinoza’s concept of “justice” anticipates the union and peace of minds. Spinoza defines justice in both political treatises as “the constant mind [*animi constantia*] to attribute to each what is his by civil right” (TTP, 180; TP, 2.23). Spinoza is not original in defining justice this way, and refers to it himself as it is “commonly defined” (TTP, 189).

\(^{189}\) *Acquiescentia*, translated by Curley as “Self-Esteem,” is defined in the *Ethics* as “a joy born of the fact that man considers himself and his power of acting” (IVP52D). It appears again in Part V as “the greatest satisfaction of mind” whereby one passes to “the greatest human perfection,” and “is affected with the greatest joy, accompanied (by IIP43) by the idea of himself and his virtue” (VP27D). Such satisfaction emerges from remedying the unhealthy relationship to possession, and thereby acceding to the third kind of knowledge which “begets a love . . . we truly possess” (VP20S). I leave *acquiescentia* in the Latin, or translate it “peace of mind,” though I am not yet satisfied with any English translation of this term, a neologism of Spinoza’s. The French translation is “*apaisement,*” which I prefer by virtue of its etymological relationship to the political term “*paix.*” “Appeasement,” however, has infelicitous connotations in English. Although I do not support all of his conclusions, Donald Rutherford has a solid and interesting discussion of the term as it is used in the *Ethics*. See “Salvation as a State of Mind: the place of *Acquiescentia* in Spinoza’s *Ethics,*” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 7.3 (1999).
In context, however, this notion of justice yields a vision of the subject as one who acquires particular mental and corporeal powers by virtue of her relationship to the civil body. Not unlike Plato, one sees that justice, like peace, does not consist in a merely negative quality, by which one abstains from taking what belongs to others, despite the desire to do so. Justice is a disposition of the mind – what Plato calls “a quality of the soul” – and its body, an animi constantia by which one relates to the possessions of others, and one’s desire to possess things. The acquisition of a constant mind, for Spinoza, would not be a merely altruistic endeavor, but would serve meaningfully to assuage and fortify the mind of the just person. According to the Ethics, one suffers greatly when subject to animi fluctuatio, or the vacillation of the mind, provoked by the co-presence of love and hate. Such volatility and inconstancy of the mind characterizes envy especially, a passion often born of the desire to have what belongs to another (E IIIP35S). When subject to animi fluctuatio one is overwhelmed by her desire to possess and enjoy what belongs to another, she loves what the other has, admires and loves the other for having it, and yet hate and sadness beset the joy that accompanies this love. If the envious person acts out of this vacillation, sad passions determine significantly her actions, and she thereby suffers rather than acts. Thus, the animi fluctuatio constitutes a decrease in one’s power, freedom, and autonomy. Institutions of justice, however, aim to constitute a milieu in which beings can develop and cultivate an animi constantia, a constant and therefore more self-determined mind, acting out of joyful passions.

On Plato’s view of justice, see, of course, The Republic. Although there is not space to explore the relationship to platonic justice, which likewise depends upon the good organization of the city, a clear distinction lies in the fact that for Spinoza the city’s various parts would not be pre-ordered according to a strict division of labor. Spinoza is clear that a just social order requires that everyone participate as much as possible in the political decision-making process as well as in mercantile exchange.
The mind becomes constant by means of a practice highly similar to the “remedy” for the affects described in the *Ethics*. Part V prescribes a practice through which one assuages her suffering by relating her affects to the idea of God, infusing those affects with pleasure and joy. Justice prescribes that “one attribute to each what is due to him by civil right.” That is, one must relate her sad passions, such as envy, to an idea of “civil right,” or the collective power of the people. Because one does not understand God as an external entity but as a source of one’s proper power and being, Spinoza contends, relating affects to the idea of God brings one peace, joy, and self-esteem. Likewise, if one affirms civil right as constitutive of one’s activity and existence rather than as an alien imposition, one is not constrained or oppressed by conferring upon the other her possessions.

In a just society, it belongs to one’s power, not to one’s suffering, to attribute to the other what is hers. If one conceives the civil right as a power, and love and joy as a real possession, one appropriates to herself her real power rather than denying herself what she wants. Justice, then, requires that one consider herself a determinate part of the commonwealth, and consider the power of the commonwealth essential to her own striving, her own self-determination. In the *Ethics*, just as one remedies her affects by affirming her power as ineluctably related to God, justice involves the recognition and affirmation of oneself as part of a common body, as a singular and determinate instantiation of its power.

Justice—like the remedy for the affects that gives rise to *scientia intuitiva*, the highest power of the mind—consists in a re-orientation of one’s desire for possession. Because “[a]n affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to,
and stronger than, the affect to be restrained” (E IVP7), the force of justice is affective: justice is an affect. Moreover, it is a more robust affect than those that attend the desire to steal, deceive, and dispossess others. The affect of justice requires that the mind apprehend itself as a constituent and definitive part of “civil right.” The mind becomes constant when it gets more pleasure, more joy, and more satisfaction upon the contemplation of its relationship to the collective power of its political body than from the capacity to take finite, desirable things from others. In this way, the just mind does not subordinate its possessive desire, but fulfills it by other, more powerful means. The joy the mind seeks in wanting to unite with a particular object must find greater satisfaction and pleasure in uniting itself to, and acting as, the greater civil power. It must experience itself as passing to a greater perfection, empowered in and by virtue of this body in order to apprehend love of oneself and one’s community as a real possession.

Does this mean, then, that justice entails supporting and authorizing everything that the commonwealth does? Is justice nothing other than obedience? Is justice the absence of dissent, the unequivocal affirmation of political power? I do not think so. I do not know whether contemporary psychology would agree with Spinoza, but I find his concept to imply that someone working for Hitler, to use the most belabored example, could not have a “constant mind.” Justice involves the absence of ambivalence, which means that one cannot be determined by either a preponderance of sad passions or external determinations. In order to have a “constant mind,” one would have to affirm one’s activity as proper to one’s own striving to persevere in existence and enhance one’s life. I think that Spinoza would find it impossible for a functionary in Hitler’s army, or even Hitler himself, to be determined solely by love of oneself, knowledge of God or
Nature, and the pursuit of one’s genuine *utile*. A constant mind could not organize much of its life around the pre-emptive destruction of perceived evils. Nazism, whatever it was, was not a self-affirmation and assuagement springing from love devoid of hatred. Although it certainly generated effects in the world and exhibited a great deal of organized force, I venture to say that it was not the expression of a robust harmony of minds, mutually affirming an enduring vital joy. I cannot support these claims with empirical evidence of Nazi psychology, but I think that Spinozean justice includes an affective stability and fortitude that simply cannot co-exist with profound anxiety, however “authentically” it is assumed.

“Injustice,” on the other hand, “is to deprive a man, under the false appearance of right, of what belongs to him according to a correct interpretation of laws” (TTP, 180; translation modified). Such a definition of “injustice” suggests that Spinoza is far more concerned with institutional theft than individual property infractions. Injustice violates the accords governing property relations, and does so, importantly, beneath the mask of “right.” Thus, the gravity of such injustice is that it changes the appearance of right, and thereby threatens the capacity of citizens to relate their affects to an adequate idea of civil right and to affirm such right as their own. If they cannot sufficiently grasp and understand the collective body of which they are parts, their ability to recognize and act in accordance with the perseverance and enhancement of collective power is undermined.

6.3: Deliberative Multiplicity

In order for the right of the commonwealth to appear coextensive with that of its constituents, Spinoza advocates including as many people as possible in decision making
practices. In the Political Treatise Spinoza makes unprecedented recommendations for the mass inclusion of the citizenry in public reasoning and law-making. As Guiseppa S. Battisti points out, “the supreme assemblies envisaged by Spinoza have, especially in federal Aristocracy and Democracy, a numerical size without precedent, align themselves with the most daring proposals emergent during the English Revolution, and foreshadow the dimensions of popular suffrage of the nineteenth-century state.”

Even in monarchy, however, Spinoza promotes utter transparency and the empowerment of as many advisors as possible. Transparency, although almost never conceded by governments, is one of the greatest mechanisms for ensuring that “the people’s welfare is the highest law” (TP, 7.5).

The policies of this state [the one he describes and promotes], I admit, can hardly be concealed; but everyone will agree with me that it is far better for the honest policies of the state to be open to its enemies than for the guilty secrets of tyrants to be kept hidden from the citizens. Those who are able to shroud in secrecy their dealings with affairs of state have the state completely in their hands, and their treatment of citizens in peace is no less hostile than their attitude to the enemy in war. No one can deny that secrecy is often of service to the state, but no one can ever prove that the same state cannot subsist without it. (TP, 7.29)

Spinoza soon adds that those who “lust after dominion” often cite the absolute necessity of secrecy for the security and welfare of the people. Yet, “the more [such assertions] are cloaked with a show of utility, the more they are likely to lead to oppressive slavery” (TTP, 7.29). Transparency as a result of inclusion clearly benefits the citizenry and limits the amount of abuse and hostility governors can perpetrate against their own people.

At the same time, Spinoza contends that it benefits the state as well to maintain policies of inclusion and transparency. A single king, of course, “cannot all alone know

what is beneficial to the state; for this purpose he must have a number of citizens as counselors . . . And it is quite inconceivable that in a matter of policy there can be anything that has escaped the attention of such a large body of men” (TP, 7.5). The council should consider both the opinions of its members and those submitted by other constituents of the populace so as to maximize their understanding of the various needs of the polis. In order to avoid serving what today might be called “special interest groups,” and thereby becoming subservient to them and decreasing regal sovereignty, “the council’s regulations should require that opinions be submitted to the king with no indication of their sponsors” (TP, 7.5). Although the government should remain transparent to its citizens, it should not consider the interests of noblemen, or any particular group, as such. At the same time, no one, noble or peasant, is prevented from providing her perspective to the council. Yet, the council must take care to weigh opinions equally in order always to prioritize its own welfare, which, for Spinoza, is absolutely co-extensive with that of the citizenry.

A policy of inclusion that comes as near as possible to mass public deliberation generates better decisions, which will sustain and nourish the power of the commonwealth.

For if “while the Romans debate, Saguntum is lost,” on the other hand, when all decisions are made by a few men who have only themselves to please, freedom and the common good are lost. The fact is that men’s wits are too obtuse to get straight to the heart of every question, but by discussing, listening to others, and debating, their wits are sharpened, and by exploring every avenue they eventually

\[192\] While I use the feminine pronoun here, Spinoza does mean to exclude women, because they are financially dependent upon their husbands, and are, in that sense, sponsored, not in control of their right. I will discuss this in the following chapter, but admit that my use of the feminine pronoun as the generic pronoun is misleading. I will note briefly that I think Spinoza’s absolute exclusion of women from political participation represents a grave violation of his own philosophical principles.
discover what they are seeking, something that meets the general approval and that no one had previously thought of. (TP, 9.14)

Clearly, a process of deliberation generates powers of reason among the participants such that the best course of action is created. It is something that is simply unavailable to the few, and, even for a large group of citizens, it must emerge as what “no one had previously thought of.” Higher forms of knowing, for Spinoza, are not accessed in a stable, pre-existing, selfsame form. Humans are not born with reason, but become so in relationship to other humans. Moreover, a temporal process of discussion, listening, and relating to others with a common view toward the well-being of the polity creates a stronger polity through the mobilization of a process that enables citizens to become stronger and wiser.

Commentators remark regularly that Spinoza defends democracy, but maintains a low regard, even disgust, for “the masses.” While Spinoza certainly exhibits great ambivalence toward the masses, noting that they “terrorize unless they are frightened” (TP, 7.27), he also blames their vices largely on the organization of the commonwealth. He finds all humans to have the same basic nature, and their power to reason, and thereby to act for the common good, is radically improved when they are included in the political process and given access to the functioning of the commonwealth. Opaque and mysterious policies—for example, those promoted by most theocracies that receive law through prophecy—make stupid citizens. “For freedom and slavery do not go well together. Finally, that ‘there is no truth or judgment in the common people’ is not

193 Such comments are so abundant that it is difficult to isolate them, but one such example is Smith, 121. Strauss and Yovel also regularly make similar comments.
surprising, since the important affairs of state are conducted without their knowledge, and from the little that cannot be concealed they can only make conjecture” (TP, 7.27). Since the masses have never been fully included in decision-making procedures, I would venture to rephrase a famous saying of Spinoza’s, “nobody knows what the people can do.” Surely, however, Spinoza does not think there is anything in the nature of the masses that should exclude them. In fact, such exclusion and systematic secrecy is precisely what makes them so terrifying, but also what makes them afraid. Spinoza exhibits real fear at being killed himself by his contemporaries, a group easily swayed by rousing accusations of heresy and evil, but he did not cease to promote the “absolute sovereignty” of the people as whole, in the interest of the state as much as the people.

The best scenario, the *Theological-Political Treatise* clearly avows, and the *Political Treatise* begins to assert before Spinoza’s death cuts it short, is one in which sovereignty lies in the hands of the entire populace. “[I]n a democracy absurd orders are hardly to be feared, because it is nearly impossible for the majority of a single assembly, if it is of great size, to agree on the same absurdity” (TTP, 178; translation modified). In a democracy, one hardly needs to fear absurdity. That is, one undergoes less anxiety when a massive assembly collectively deliberates and establishes policy for the commonwealth. A tremendous body of diverse citizens increases collective wisdom, since, as we have noted, an individual actually becomes more wise “the more its body can be disposed in a great many ways” (E IIP14). Exposure to many people, opinions, and arguments opens the body to a greater variety of affections, while, at the same time, putting it in a context where it can affect a great many other bodies. The site of public
deliberation is an optimum environment for the occurrence of *utile*, the most potent spur to reason and intuition.

Moreover, in the context of public action, people not only become more reasonable through encountering the affections of others engaged in the effort to consider their own good in and as the commonwealth, but they have the opportunity to witness their own power. Public action can be a profound occasion for *acquiescentia*, that highest of joys that comes from enjoying one’s own power to affect the world (E IVP52). At its best, in a unified and just commonwealth, the process of deliberating and experiencing the increase in one’s mental power through the exchange of affections and ideas with one’s fellow citizens can become something like a theater of aptitudes.

Moreover, the site of discussion about the good of the polis might disclose not only the powers of reason but intuition. Intuition is distinguished from reason in that one experiences her power to determine reality as, concomitantly, singular and universal. One experiences her power as, at the same time, a unique expression of her corporeal existence and as a determinate, definitive instantiation of a larger, universal power.

Since I am only discussing Spinoza’s policy, and not its contemporary practicability, I will not take this occasion to validate or modify current theories of “communicative action,” or deliberative democracy. I take the criticism that human communication and reason involve far more opacity than most theories of communicative action allow to be quite strong. I think one could develop a complex theory of communication with Spinoza’s principles, which would take into account especially the way in which particular affects promote or impede communication and reason, as Balibar begins to do at the end of *Spinoza and Politics*. It seems clear, however, that the actual
process of debating, listening, and being physically co-present with one’s citizens is an essential component to making capable citizens and a thriving commonwealth.

“Men are not born to be citizens, but are made so” (TTP, 5.2). Likewise, humans are not born rational, and spend most of their lives without a highly developed capacity to reason. In order to become rational, people must engage in relationships that increase their power. A commonwealth’s power to endure and flourish, moreover, depends upon the intellectual and corporeal power of its citizens. It is in the interest of the polis to make the most enabling and rational policies possible, which means that it must commit itself to the development of the powers of its citizenry, since a commonwealth is nothing but the organized power of many individuals. Although Spinoza does not elaborate upon the precise procedures and practices that would be necessary in order for huge assemblies to function effectively and to safeguard themselves against the production of absurdities, I do think that just property arrangements and transparent institutions that cultivate and present the power of the populace comprise some of the necessary conditions for productive deliberation.

Such institutions support and ground becoming just, which depends upon the ability of the people to relate their own actions and feelings to an idea of civil right, and thus to act toward the preservation and fortification of themselves within and as the commonwealth. When institutions sever access to their own functioning, and dispossess people of what belongs to them according to a correct understanding of the laws, institutions undermine the ability and freedom of the people, which in turn greatly attenuates the power of the state. Only when the people actively and physically involve themselves in some measure of government do they affirm the laws and institutions as
their own. Thus, in affirming the power of the commonwealth, they are not slaves but free. “And so that commonwealth whose laws are based on sound reason is the most free, for there everybody can be as free as he wills, that is, he can live under the guidance of reason” (TTP, 178). More than that, in enjoying and feeling that collective power as the product of one’s regular activity, one approaches scientia intuitiva, that knowledge that discloses what kind of being one is. That is, one affirms herself as irreducibly both singular and plural.

To summarize my conclusions, the commonwealth must, with and as its constituents, create the material conditions and practices whereby minds become constant toward the possessions of others. The constant mind is one that relates its troubling affects to the idea of the collective power in which it dwells, from which it draws its strength, and whose character it determines in a meaningful way. Rather than acting out of sad passions, such as envy, the mind feels its power increased and affirmed by considering its active determination of its collective body. The economics of mutual empowerment described in the Political Treatise support and ground becoming just. The system Spinoza envisions is, contra Hobbes, one in which expansion and strength do not depend upon individual accumulation. On the contrary, it is a system of trading, lending, and exchanging, collective reasoning, not one of storing, hoarding, amassing objects and land, “inclosing” oneself away from others. It is not an economy of

196 The reference to “inclosure” is an allusion to Locke’s discussion of property in Chapter V of the Second Treatise on Government.
scarcity, but one in which the gain of one’s neighbor does not diminish one’s possessions, power, or pleasure but supports and increases them. Whether or not such an equitable and mutually affirmative economic system is possible is certainly beyond the scope of this theoretical discussion. I am arguing, however, that Spinoza’s conviction that complex unities are as necessary for physical survival as they are for the maximization of the power of the mind animates his economic principles and understanding of justice. Collective action and concord in everyday life make possible the affirmation—characteristic of the third and highest kind of knowledge—of our singular strivings as instantiations of a universal common power.

The *Ethics* instructs its students to relate their powerful desires for the possession of finite things to an idea of God, which begets, with the third kind of knowledge, a love one can truly possess (E VP20S). The mind no longer suffers from *animi fluctuatio*, the feeling of love accompanied by hate, but achieves the highest human satisfaction, “peace of mind,” *animi acquiescentia*, and a joy entirely free of sadness. Political organization, according to Spinoza, ought to orient people toward the same practice, but vis-à-vis a particular political body rather than the whole of Nature. It ought to organize its institutions, practices, economy, and laws such that the sad passions that afflict the mind—dividing the people against one another and thereby undermining their power and freedom—can be resisted with stronger passions, giving rise to justice, *animi constantia*. The just community functions to remedy the anti-social and sad passions. Thus, I contend, the *animi constantia* of the political writings belongs to the same transformative project as the *animi acquiescentia* of the *Ethics*. 
It belongs to the nature of political organization to shape our comportment toward possessions and our proprietary desires. Thus, the best commonwealths should treat the maladies of the mind that belong to a defective relationship to one’s desire for possession, thus giving rise to the transformation of one’s relationship to possession. Politics, in the best circumstances, should be no less than the orientation of our desires such that we no longer aim to dispossess others but to appropriate to ourselves our capacity to determine “civil right,” the power of Nature as a political composite individual. In the polity of shared right, power, land, the exchange of goods, and lively practices of deliberation, one becomes increasingly self-possessed, guided by knowledge of what increases one’s power and affirms one’s life.

Although I have not delineated a precise form of government that would necessarily constitute the maximization of human freedom, I hope to have established that the capacities that political organization cultivates are not merely those associated with reason, but those of a higher satisfaction of mind born of the re-orientation of our possessive desire. A self-transformation, through which the mind would become constant and the minds of the republic would be engaged in an enabling coordination of powers, requires no less than the actual constitution of a collective body “capable of a great many things” (E VP39).
Chapter 7

A Joyful Republic?

Thus far, the organization of my thesis has been guided by the principle that “the political problem (how do we come to form reasonable collectivities?) is analogous to the epistemological problem (how do we come to form adequate ideas?).” The (possibly) lamentable consequence of my approach has been the bracketing of questions that most studies in political philosophy are obliged to address more centrally. Despite my contention throughout that the individual in Spinoza can only be understood with reference to its political context, I have largely discussed the way in which community enables or disables the cultivation of the mind of the (trans)individual. When I finally arrive at a specific discussion of institutional arrangements in chapter six, I present them as a kind of training ground for beatitude, intuition, and the intellectual love of God. I risk presenting the commonwealth as a means to the end of individual power and freedom, even if that end includes the maximization of freedom for as many individual “parts” of the whole as possible.

197 This citation is from Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present. (London: Routledge, 1999), 106. My methodology, as I discuss in the introductory chapter, is inspired by remarks made by Deleuze and Balibar, both of whom, but especially Deleuze, are also significant influences upon Gatens’ and Lloyd’s study. Like Balibar and Deleuze, Gatens and Lloyd do not draw out a relationship between politics and intuition, which is the most innovative aspect of my thesis. It is fair to say, however, that I am closer to Gatens and Lloyd than any other Spinoza interpreters, due to our significant debt to the continental (French and Italian) interpretations, our respectful dialogue with Anglophone commentators, and our underlying interest in problems specific to feminism. At the same time, Gatens, Lloyd, and myself have yet to produce a thorough and explicit encounter between feminism and Spinoza. They both begin tentative forays in this direction in several articles in a special issue of Hypatia, “Going Australian: Reconfiguring Feminism and Philosophy,” 15.2 (Spring 2000). My next project will be an effort to present a project of Spinozist feminism (rather than the feminist Spinozism presented here, the feminism of which is quite implicit).
My approach generated more of a phenomenology of the state than I had intended. Due to my use of the development of the body and mind of the individual within the commonwealth as a way to illuminate the importance of political considerations for Spinoza’s epistemology, the commonwealth came to be examined as an object of subjective perception. My argument, very much despite my persistent attraction to a materialist interpretation, has come to claim that a dynamic between the powers of individuals and those of the state produces a more or less adequate appearance of the self to herself, as part of a more adequate grasp of her environment, political and natural. The stakes, then, of politics seem to come dangerously near to a platonic argument that a better polis crafts a better soul, and the aim of statecraft is nothing other than wisdom.

The highest good certainly includes wisdom, but truth *qua* truth is not the aim of either Spinoza’s epistemology or his politics. Truth and wisdom express the mind’s power, which is corollary to the power of the body. Spinoza’s epistemology, as much as his politics, is a meditation upon the vicissitudes of the powers of individuals (their bodies and minds) as singular strivings within a larger totality. The *Ethics* and the political writings comprise an effort to consider an operation—concomitantly, individual and collective—upon one’s affective complexion so as to maximize the aptitudes of individuals and collectivities. Moreover, Spinoza presents something like a phenomenology of Nature and religion in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and parts of the *Ethics*, especially in the Appendix to Part I. Spinoza provides a portrait of how nature appears to the superstitious and how humans tend to represent God to themselves as a lawgiver and father. His phenomenology is a peculiar one, however, in that Spinoza
demonstrates very little interest in consciousness as a phenomenon and attributes “minds” to all natural beings, including rocks (E II P13S). I hope that I have succeeded in performing a kind of political phenomenology that does not transcendentalize the subject, lifting her out of Nature, and effectively making her a “dominion within a dominion” (E IIIpref).

I have not sufficiently addressed the commonwealth as a structure with its own proper laws and striving, irreducible to either an instrument or necessary condition for human wisdom and thriving. More specifically, my study’s proper focus has permitted me to leave to the side the normative questions that plague most contemporary interpreters of Spinoza’s political theory. This chapter will take some steps back from the analysis I have been offering in order to consider Spinoza’s political theory as such. I will begin by addressing the question of normativity—that is, the question of the legitimacy of political authority—from Spinoza’s perspective. I will proceed to sketch the purpose and object of political entities beyond the most general facilitation of wisdom and power, in the second section. Finally, I will end with a return to Spinoza’s preferred form of democracy and the possibility of a joyful republic.

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198 This remark already suggests that I do not think Spinoza has a liberal notion of the state as a pure instrument for regulating human affairs and adjudicating conflict. As the previous chapter already sketches, I understand his commonwealth to have a very positive role in the formation of subjectivities, identities, and powers. Moreover, I do not think such a positive role for the state is optional, according to Spinoza. Even if a government were to maintain the most stringent liberal principles and self-restrained statesmen (and commercial entities, and educational, media, and religious organs, etc.), it would shape the powers, perception, and freedom of its people to a tremendous extent. Although I admire and laud many liberal principles—especially the strict anti-paternalism of Kant and the commitment to public reason and education—I remain a Spinozist in my contention that the realization of liberal values is only possible alongside a materialist ontology. Material conditions are not ignored by liberals such as Rawls, but I will address below how I think they should be conceived in thicker terms (especially regarding affective life) for questions of justice.
7.1: Nature and Norms; Or, What about Hitler?

Spinoza is arguably the most Machiavellian of all great modern political philosophers.
- E. Curley, “Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan”

The entire Ethics presents itself as a theory of power, in opposition to morality as a theory of obligations.
- Deleuze, Spinoza: Practical Philosophy

In a largely sympathetic article, Curley discusses Spinoza’s most reviled doctrine of right (jus) and power (potentia) as co-extensive: “I find this a disturbing thesis, and I imagine that most readers of Spinoza share this reaction.” Curley notes a kind of visceral response to the thesis (of a philosopher he surely loves), and surmises that his reaction is fairly universal. The repulsion to the doctrine expresses his estimation that it contradicts normative commitments most people maintain, and that such commitments are so obvious that they do not even need to be supported. Of course, most anyone would be disturbed to hear that “Nature’s right [jus] is co-extensive with its power [potentia]” and it is by natural right that “fish are determined to swim, and the big ones to eat the smaller ones” (TTP, 173; translation modified). Most may not be disturbed by Spinoza’s evocation of the non-human food chain, but when the right of human beings is understood to be no more sacred, it appears that anyone has the right to do whatever her power allows. Matheron, certainly a sympathetic reader, finds that, according to Spinoza, “a new Genghis Khan” would have the right to “occupy a territory and oppress its

citizens as long as it has the power to do so.”²⁰⁰ That is, Spinoza will appear to be a scientific Thrasymachus, or a popular version of Machiavelli, fit for reality show entertainment but not worthy of the hallowed tradition of great political philosophers.

Leo Strauss makes one of the strongest cases for a problem with this central tenet of Spinoza’s political theory. He notes that, despite a resemblance to Hobbes’ theory of natural right, which is already disturbing enough, Spinoza’s is devoid of normative content. For Hobbes, one’s natural right is limited by the need to preserve one’s life. Even in the state of nature, natural right only extends as far as the necessity to protect “life and limb.”²⁰¹ For Spinoza, however, right extends as far as one’s capacity to act—period. “Spinoza’s theory of natural right,” Strauss affirms, “offers no immediate handhold for the foundation of right as right.”²⁰² Because human right is not different in kind from the right of God or Nature, it is not measured against any properly human standard. Moreover, if right is measured only in terms of power, the individual human has negligible right in relationship to the remainder of existence. In relationship to infinity, all human actions are flattened to become equally meaningless: “All disharmonies in the human realm—all things derisible, contra-rational, or evil—are resolved into the harmony of the universe.”²⁰³ Finally, natural right becomes “summum

²⁰² Strauss, 233.  
²⁰³ Strauss, 232-233.
naturale jus, as the power of the imperishable whole which produces and thus consecrates even the irrational, and which is higher than all human reason."  

Although Strauss and Curley both argue against a simplistic “might makes right” interpretation, they both find disturbing conclusions that, in their estimations, cannot be avoided. Two things most disturb both Strauss and Curley. First, from the point of view of Spinoza’s natural right, “no being can be criticized.” “Right,” in Spinoza’s terms, does not provide criteria for justice or morality against which we might measure the legitimacy of individual human actions. If an agent has the right to do all that it can whether it is prompted by reason or madness, on what grounds can we condemn any action? Second, and far more disturbing to both thinkers, such a conception of right offers no resources for criticizing abuses of political authority.

If we cannot make sense of the idea that people have rights to such things [their lives, their property, their honor], then we seem to be handicapped in the criticism we want to make of the Roman conduct (or of a tyrant’s treatment of his own people). That the notion of natural right (not coextensive with power) disappears in Spinoza seems . . . to be a defect in his political philosophy.

Strauss condemns Spinoza still more harshly when he finds Spinoza essentially to advocate a right of society against the individual. He understands Spinoza to argue that, since humanity is replete with idiocy, we must construct an all powerful state, which

207 Strauss, 240.
has incontrovertible right against the impassioned and foolish crowd, and ultimately any single human agent.

Ultimately, Spinoza’s notion of “natural right” seems to be a complete perversion of an understanding of the natural right that would affirm the innate value and dignity of human life as such. Without a normative connotation to “right” in Spinoza, the concept of right does not impose any kind of limit upon what is just, legal, or good. Den Uyl asserts that the notion of right and power is simply devoid of normative content.\(^{208}\) Moreover, he suggests that the imposition of a strict fact-value distinction upon Spinoza’s concept is anachronistic, alien to Spinoza’s thought and time.\(^{209}\) He notes that the prescriptive and descriptive elements flow in and out of each other, and Spinoza does not seem concerned to distinguish between ontological and value claims. In a sense, Den Uyl solves the debate by saying that it is misapplied. Spinoza’s theory does not mean to have normative content, and thus the criticism makes limited sense.

The authors of the introduction to the *Political Treatise* propose another way to side-step the debate. They note that the discussion often remains confused, because Anglophone readers conflate various meanings of the word “power.” Spinoza nearly always claims that the *jus* of any natural being extends as far as its *potentia*, which is best understood as capacity, ability, or strength. The term *potestas*, on the other hand, translates “authority,” “permission,” or “privilege.” An individual or political entity can be endowed with authority, but capacity belongs to an individual as part of its “nature” or


\(^{209}\) Den Uyl, “‘Why Read the Political Treatise?’” included in the Hackett edition of the TP, xii.
“essence.” Thus, when contemporary readers shrink in horror at the idea that the state has the right to do what it has the power to do, they understand power in terms of legitimate authority. They note that Spinoza is not saying anything about what the state has the political or moral authority to do, but only about what it has the strength to do. Any reader of Latin would recognize a meaningful distinction between a being’s proper potentia and conventional potestas.\textsuperscript{210}

The remarks of Den Uyl, Barbone, and Rice are useful for guarding against a simple equation of Spinoza’s terms with the contemporary lexicon of political philosophy. Yet, they do not answer the more general charge that Curley and Strauss make against Spinoza’s philosophy as a whole. Curley finds Spinoza’s political thought “defective” insofar as it fails to provide “the theoretical resources to condemn tyrannical governments as strongly as we would wish it to.”\textsuperscript{211} Curley recognizes that Spinoza manifestly dislikes tyranny, slavery, and human misery. Spinoza’s political theory expressly takes itself to present “how a community governed as a Monarchy or an Aristocracy should be organized if it is not to degenerate into a Tyranny, and if the Peace and Freedom of its citizens is to remain inviolate” (TP, subtitle, Chapter 1). The question is not whether Spinoza espouses values, or whether those values animate his inquiry, but whether there is a ground in his theory of right to maintain the judgment that Hitler and Genghis Khan, for example, were evil.

\textsuperscript{210} See the section on “Natural Right” in the fine introduction to the Hackett edition of the TP by Steven Barbone and Lee Rice.
\textsuperscript{211} Curley, 334.
Although it is possible that Spinoza's pairing of right and power is completely disinterested in normative questions, and thus the debate is misapplied, another possibility is that he means to attack normativity itself with his famous “strategy of the sive.” Spinoza must have been aware of the normative and moral connotations of “natural right.” The assertion that *jus sive potentia* (like *deus sive natura* or *virtus sive potentia*), right is equivalent to power, could be an active intervention into the moralizing and “utopian” political theory that Spinoza derides in the opening of the *Political Treatise*. The implicit argument of the verb *extendere* is not only that right extends only as far as power, but that right is absolutely meaningless without it.

The traditional notion of natural right, whereby “humanity” itself confers inviolable dignity and value to persons has no material impact upon the flourishing of individuals without the power to express and enjoy such right. It is absurd that citizens, from a certain point of view, should be obligated to respect or feel grateful for “rights” they have no power to exercise. The right of thinking freely, for example, means nothing without the power to speak freely, to use the example from the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Moreover, Spinoza could be offering a corrective to Hobbes’ model of absolute sovereignty (which is already implicit in Hobbes) by affirming that the sovereign can only do what its people will allow, and there are real, unsurpassable limits to what beings whose essences comprise an irrepressible desire for freedom will tolerate. Such a claim supports his argument against Hobbes that a democracy generates greater power (*potentia*) by guaranteeing the freedom of the citizenry to act, to determine both themselves and the laws that shape their commonwealth. A free and grateful populace
(“Only free men are very thankful to one another” (E IVP71)) will fortify the polis with its own strength and affirmation.

Thus, an alternative reading of the doctrine of right and power, *pace* Strauss, is that it advocates the right of *society (the multitude) against the state*. In direct contrast to the justification of the right of society against the lone individual that Strauss fears, Montag proposes that Spinoza “offers the most potent critique of domination that has been seen.”

Spinoza affirms numerous times that “men have never transferred their power to another so completely that they were not feared by those very persons who received their right and power, and that the government has not been in greater danger from its citizens, though deprived of their right, than from its external enemies” (TTP, 185). Montag remarks that “though deprived of their right” refers to the “commonly accepted, i.e. transcendental, sense, a sense diametrically opposed to the definition he advances in chapter 16, according to which right is coextensive with power.”

According to Montag’s interpretation, Spinoza deliberately criticizes and even ridicules the normative meaning of natural right, but in the service of a materialist critique of domination. He argues, quite persuasively in my view, that Spinoza gives the lie to Hobbes’ incipient liberalism. Putatively a materialist, Hobbes locates the freedom of the individual in a moment of consent—retroactively and ideally constructed in the social contract—that never actually takes place. Thus, Spinoza’s equivalence of right and power effectively refuses to exile freedom into an ideal space that renders its exercise

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213 Montag, 63.
superfluous. Spinoza disrupts normative political theory as an effective fiction that supports a bankrupt vision of human freedom. In Montag’s words:

> The definition of human freedom as having always already been exercised, as having always already preceded the state of subordination, and as having always existed in the past that preceded the present, far from permitting a critique of servitude, becomes its most cunning justification, producing retroactively the foundation that gives it legitimacy, a legitimacy not derived from the naturality of command and obedience, and thus of hierarchy, but a legitimacy derived from the unconditioned will of naturally free and equal individuals who can be shown to have voluntarily given up not their lives (the right to which is ‘inalienable’), to be sure, but merely their power and productivity.²¹⁴

Spinoza thus rejects a juridical and idealist normative political philosophy, according to this reading, because it fails to do precisely what it is ostensibly designed to do. Rather than serve as a bulwark against the abuse of political authority, it “blames the victim,” so to speak, for having always already agreed to it. Normativity is just another form of the cruelty embedded in the law that Nietzsche and Kafka illustrate so well.

Negri likewise interprets Spinoza not only to be non-normative, or not sufficiently normative, but anti-normative. With justification, most of Spinoza’s readers understand him to be concerned with the oppression and brutalization of citizens. Negri (along with Montag, Macherey, and myself) locates Spinoza in the tradition of Machiavelli, an admittedly ambiguous defender of political liberty. His equation of right and power, like Machiavelli’s *Prince*, makes an argument for freedom grounded ostensibly in the interest (*utile*) of state power. He aims to show not that it is good, laudable, or just for the state to safeguard and promote the freedom and rationality of the people, but that the state should

²¹⁴ Montag, 50.
do so out of self-interest, as part of a project of power.\textsuperscript{215} According to a highly
Machiavellian interpretation, Spinoza adopts the perspective of the state strategically, or
even sincerely. He thus plays to its interests in domination and power, in order to
convince pretenders to thrones that their aims at absolute sovereignty are not only
compatible with the freedom of the citizenry but are \textit{only possible} through the liberation
and empowerment of the many.\textsuperscript{216}

Negri’s argument goes even further than the one I am sketching. He contends that
all \textit{potestas}, all conventional authority, is illusory. It never exists in itself, but is always
necessarily, by nature, an expression of the \textit{potentia} of the multitude. Political authority
has no existence and, therefore, neither right nor power, outside the activity of the many
that animate it everyday.\textsuperscript{217} Negri’s interpretation presents Spinoza as Rousseau’s
Machiavelli. That is, as one who putatively addresses his text to the rulers, but actually
whispers a secret to the people about the nature of their own power. In his equivalence of
right and power, Spinoza is heard to intimate:

\begin{quote}
Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place
hands upon the tyrant and topple him over, but simply that you support him no
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{215} Such a mode of argumentation inevitably produces opposed readings, and gives validity to Strauss’
argument (which, I will admit, is sharp and seductive as an argument). Strauss, of course, did not see either
Machiavelli or Spinoza as champions of freedom, but rather as inaugural thinkers in a tradition of “evil”
political philosophy, and the founders of a corrupt and amoral liberal tradition. The liberal tradition
developed away from Machiavelli and Spinoza, but they reveal its sinister origin as most fundamentally a
rupture of the enterprise of morality and politics. The tradition of Negri, Montag, et al. likewise interprets
Spinoza and Machiavelli as separating morality and politics, but in the service of freedom. Admittedly,
Machiavelli is deeply ambiguous, but I think the case is far easier to make on behalf of Spinoza. Deleuze
makes the argument very strongly for Spinoza and Nietzsche as unforgiving critics of morality and lovers
of freedom in \textit{Spinoza: Practical Philosophy}.

\textsuperscript{216} I, in fact, think this is true, and that Spinoza is completely sincere. I will argue for a version of this
thesis below.

\textsuperscript{217} \textit{The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics}, M. Hardt, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991). Negri elaborates this most systematically in
relationship to Spinoza in \textit{The Savage Anomaly}, but this basic principle animates all of his work.
longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces.\textsuperscript{218}

On this reading, Spinoza’s shocking, if implicit, inclusion of Hobbes among “utopian” political philosophers makes perfect sense.\textsuperscript{219}

As persuasive as I find this interpretation of right and power, I have not answered the charge of whether there are “theoretical resources” to condemn and criticize oppression, violence, and tyranny in Spinoza. If Spinoza is, indeed, radically anti-normative, is there ground not only for a critique of domination but for a practice of freedom? Why should the multitude re-direct its \textit{potentia} away from its cruel master? If Spinoza’s philosophy is above all an affirmative theory of power—as at least one person asks me at every conference presentation—what about Hitler?

Gatens and Lloyd argue that there “are resources in Spinoza’s philosophy for distinguishing between legitimate, or virtuous, and illegitimate, or vicious, forms of authority.”\textsuperscript{220} Unfortunately, they only provide a very general account of how such normative criteria might arise. They borrow the notion of “ethology” from Deleuze in order to suggest that, although there are no \textit{a priori} or transcendental norms in Spinoza, immanent norms emerge naturally within the life of a body politic.\textsuperscript{221} Deleuze describes ethology as a mode of study “which defines bodies, animals, or humans by the affects

\textsuperscript{219} Matheron points out this counterintuitive implication of Spinoza’s remark in his article, “Spinoza et la Décomposition de la Politique Thomiste: Machiavélisme et Utopie,” In \textit{Anthropologie et politique au xviie siècle} (Paris : Vrin, 1986), 30.
\textsuperscript{220} Gatens and Lloyd, 112.
\textsuperscript{221} Gatens and Lloyd, 107.
they are capable of . . . no one knows ahead of time the affects one is capable of; it is a long affair of experimentation, requiring a lasting prudence, a Spinozean wisdom that implies the construction of a plane of immanence or consistency.”

Ethology takes the general perspective of individuals as they are affected by their environment and as they affect that environment. It treats the vitality of individuals as contingent upon a complex arrangement of relationships, in order to determine the well-being of individuals as well as their impact upon their environment. “The important thing is to understand life, each living individuality, not as a form, or a development of form, but as a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles.”

Using the model of ethology, Gatens and Lloyd suggest that one can measure whether a situation is better or worse, good or bad, depending upon the “compossibility” of individual powers within a collective. One cannot simply conduct a survey in order to determine whether universal characteristics of justice are met, or whether certain procedures are being followed, but one can examine the “living individualities” of a polis to determine whether the system of relationships is conducive to human thriving. The measure of such thriving, moreover, would not be the mere report, or self-representation of the individuals involved, but an assessment of the nature of the affects in circulation. I think this is a promising—and, if one is after normative criteria, it is the best—direction to pursue, but it is fraught with difficulties.

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223 Deleuze, 123.
224 Gatens and Lloyd, 102.
The good news first: Spinoza maintains a complex view of human psychology and the affective complexions of individuals and collectivities, but he does not maintain a neutral view. It really is the case that sad affects signal a decrease in the power and perfection of individuals. Joyful affects likewise indicate actual variations in one’s capacity to think and act. Thus, joyful passions should provide a measure of the flourishing of a social body. The preponderance of sad passions, like anxiety, fear, and envy, on the other hand, offer an affective index of injustice. As the previous chapter indicates, I am deeply interested in discovering in Spinoza something like an affective measure of justice.

Now, for the bad news: Human passions are far from transparent to those who undergo them. As I discuss in chapter five, joy can indicate an enduring and healthy increase in power (hilaritas) or an excessive and dangerous stimulation of one part of the body to the detriment of the whole (titilatio). It is not clear, to me at least, how an ethologist would determine the quantum of joy and sadness, let alone the precise causes of those affects. Since this is the business of ethologists, they may be quite good at it. Perhaps it is not so difficult, when certain affects becomes dominant. Presently, I can identify a measurable increase of anxiety and hatred in the U.S. in the past few years. It is not impossible to make these general claims about the affective thriving of a social body, but there will certainly be many conflicting reports depending upon various factors, including one’s location within the social body. There are those whose power is profoundly increased and supported by the particular configuration of powers and pleasures, and others who are deeply damaged by it. Moreover, there are few things that anger people more than telling them how they feel. Thus, the very practice of ethology,
if not performed carefully, could generate a lot of sad passions. Although I support and
develop something like an affective measure of justice derived from Spinoza—which
would give normative content to joyful and sad passions—I am not at all sure how such a
measure might be taken. Fortunately, I am not a social scientist. Perhaps unfortunately,
neither am I an ethologist.

Finally, I will attempt to answer one more question and defer another until the
final section. Without definitive and eternal norms, once more with feeling, how can we
say that Hitler is evil? Are there resources in Spinoza’s philosophy to criticize either
Hitler as an individual or the Nazi regime as an abuse of political authority? An evasive,
but no less true, response is that Spinoza’s philosophy displays no interest in declaring
anyone evil. Spinoza assumes a naturalist attitude against the sentimentalist, moralist,
derisive and utopian stance that he thinks plagues philosophers as such. While others are
moved to mock, decry, and otherwise judge human behavior, as he remarks on many
occasions, he wants only to understand it (see, e.g., Ep 30). I suspect that Spinoza would
refuse to enter into any normativity debate, as it is configured today. He declares that his

225 The persistence of this question and the demand for normative criteria itself has become unavoidable in
contemporary philosophy. Rather than attempt to answer this question as I have, it is also legitimate (and
even called for) to refuse to answer it, as I suspect Spinoza would. Dianna Taylor, in a conference paper
presented at SPEP 2004 entitled “Normativity and Normalization: A Feminist Perspective,” makes a strong
argument for what is to be lost by agreeing to enter into this conversation. She contends that the discourse
of normativity has had a domesticating, indeed, a “normalizing,” effect on philosophy, which forecloses
alternative models of thinking about ethics and politics. She argues for a reasoned opposition to entering
the conversation, since it only grants legitimacy to those that remain within its terms (which themselves are
beyond deliberation). I think her diagnosis of contemporary philosophy is absolutely correct, which is
evident, for example, in the mean-spirited criticism Judith Butler often receives, especially from putative
feminists. Because Butler examines social processes and power relations that make gender, she is accused
of denying reality to women’s suffering and trafficking in “evil.” Yes, evil. If one describes something
without explicitly lamenting it, one must either endorse it or be indifferent to it. The refusal to present
oneself as normatively motivated is tantamount to the embrace of evil.
aim is to consider basic characteristics of human and natural life without prejudice, without interest, “as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies” (E III Pref). He is invested in freeing a space for practicing philosophy and politics that does not have to answer to anything external to its own practice. The point is to understand, not to judge. One fails to understand insofar as one measures objects of inquiry against preconceived ideals rather than doing whatever one can to grasp something on its own terms, according to its own norma, or singular definition, as if it were a figure of mathematics (E I App).

I would argue, however, that a passionate interest animates Spinoza’s “more geometrico.” Spinoza aims above of all to increase the powers of his own mind and body, and thus to expose himself as little as possible to noxious and debilitating affects. The imperative to judge and despair at evil promotes sad passions and decreases understanding. He counsels against dwelling on human vice, and asserts that, as much as possible, one should try to find the good in each thing, no matter how disturbing it at first appears (E VP10S). Foregrounding vice in one’s own mind amplifies sadness and suffering, which harms one’s ability to think. Spinoza likewise suggests that preoccupation with human wickedness prevents one from grasping her own vulnerability to and complicity in the things she condemns. By using evil as a way to exile certain individuals and actions from the category of humanity, one is more likely to be blind to her own dangerous tendencies. If evil is something radically alien and other, it does not allow one to be vigilant about identifying the affects that one might need to remedy.

226 It is probably for this reason that many ascribe to Spinoza a deeply held commitment to “tolerance.” Spinoza himself does not use the word tolerance, but many interpret his refusal to judge others against a universal, abstract ideal to be animated by the religious conflicts that plague his time, and to thereby promote a doctrine of religious diversity.
Generally, Spinoza objects to isolating violence and tyranny in a single individual. If one does not regard Hitler as an effect of myriad causes, one cannot examine the conditions that produced, even necessitated, Hitler and his impassioned followers. In order to generate a theory that can be useful in practice, it does not suffice to announce what is good and bad. One must determine why, and under what circumstances, a political body tends toward tyranny, slavery, and misery. Spinoza suggests that Machiavelli’s *Prince* demonstrates “how foolish are the attempts so often made to get rid of a tyrant while yet the causes that have made a prince a tyrant cannot be removed; on the contrary, they become more firmly established as the prince is given more grounds for fear” (TP, 5.7). Neither political action nor theory is ameliorative in the long run, if it is content to name suffering “evil” without addressing the causes that brought it into being. In the short run, however, naming things evil can lead to the deaths of many individuals. Mere naming and the passions it enflames cannot, however, explain the dynamic of relationships that make such individuals appear evil to the accusers or the concatenation of events that made “evildoers” commit harmful acts.

Ultimately, Spinoza does not manifest any interest in asserting that a historical figure was bad. He simply asserts factually, citing Seneca, “violent governments never last long” (TTP 178; translation modified). Violence cannot form a stable body that can persevere in existence. Violence interrupts life, but it cannot ground it. Hitler was vicious, according to Spinoza’s criteria, because he generated a life and a political body that could not endure. He instituted horrible genocide, but it is no coincidence that he had to kill himself as well. No matter how powerful he became, his power was “infinitely surpassed” by beings opposed to him. He could successfully generate a frenzy
of sad passions and a parasitic way of life only for so long. A ruling body can only prey upon its own foundation for so long, because its host will die or revolt. Moreover, overwhelmingly sad and corrosive passions create spectacular effects, but they cannot stabilize into a desire to persevere. Hatred and fear within the social body cause people to suffer rather than act, and a fully passive body eventually ceases to be. The Nazi regime thus promoted abject servility to the whole rather than self-determination. In Spinoza’s terms, Hitler did not create a commonwealth but a desert (TP, 5.4). Although Spinoza does not subscribe to absolute notions of good and evil, one could comfortably assert that Hitler was bad relative to many, many people.

Judging Hitler as bad for creating an ultimately weak and futile political way of life might seem to promote a kind of political quietism. If a regime or individual is bad, it will necessarily bring about its own undoing. One need not protest it, because that person or political body will die anyway. Spinoza’s principles, however, advocate actively fighting for one’s survival as well as for the increased quality of one’s life. Every being damaged by the Nazi regime was virtuous to fight against it, including those who were made to subordinate their interests to that of the whole. Moreover, insofar as all of humanity is ultimately connected by virtue of similar bodies and affective communication, everyone would be right to fight against a regime that amplifies violence and sad passions on a mass scale. It is not necessarily true that each person alone would be prudent to fight against a genocidal maniac. If such fighting would result in certain death, one should not fight. At the same time, just as in Hobbes, one is always right to resist certain death, even if it involves breaking promises or contracts. Thus, it is a fact of
nature that violence will be resisted, but also an imperative of reason to diminish its presence in one’s life as far as possible.

Ultimately, critics are probably right to note that Spinoza does not develop robust resources for criticizing either individuals or corrupt political authorities. He may not think a nuanced political philosophy is necessary in order to judge something bad, since all humans spontaneously deem bad whatever they imagine to harm them. The difficulty lies in determining whether what we spontaneously call good and bad genuinely benefit and harm us. Then, the even greater difficulty lies in determining an entire configuration of relationships that contribute to harm. Finally, the ultimate task and toil of political theory consists in devising practices and institutions that will promote an enabling coordination of diverse powers, which is the topic of the following section.

7.2: Affective Organization

The most general argument that Spinoza makes throughout the *Ethics* and the political writings applies as much to individual human bodies as to political ones: power and freedom, far from being opposed, imply, reinforce, and animate each another. In a well-organized, rational polis, the power and freedom of individual citizens amplifies rather than limits the power and freedom of the state. Likewise, in a polis whose activity is guided by reason, the power and freedom of the government enhances the power and freedom of its constituents. The optimum political organization and arrangement of bodies allows the commonwealth and its individual constituents to develop and

\[227\text{Cf. “[U]ndemocratic states . . . are those most ignorant of the fact that freedom and power imply one another.” Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, P. Snowdon, trans. (London: Verso, 1998), 32.}\]
strengthen one another in a dynamic relationship that augments the powers of all participating minds and bodies. Since reason and freedom are nothing other than the effective capacity to increase one’s power to think and act, the rational polis is the one that benefits, nourishes, and strengthens the multitude and the governing body together.

In this section, I interpret the purpose and object of Spinoza’s political theory to concern primarily the organization of human passions and, therefore, relationships between and among individuals rather than the individuals themselves, be they guardians or subjects of the political order. Spinoza’s ontology underscores and informs an understanding of political life in terms of the arrangement, composition and disposition of bodies and minds. Being, for Spinoza, comprises an unbounded totality of relationships between, among, and as individual beings, which are, concomitantly, singular and necessarily open to perpetual re-composition and transformation.

Commonwealths are as natural and necessary to human life as water is to the existence of fishes. Spinoza never poses the question of the origin or necessity of politics, but rather “deduce[s]” civil order “from the nature and condition of men in general” (TP, 1.7). Since political organization is a necessary fact of human existence, it should not be treated as a necessary evil or an artifice of human volition. Humans are not, except as political creatures. Thus, the task of political philosophy is to affirm, understand, and optimize this necessary condition of human life. Politics must affirm its own necessity and the nature of being itself so as to determine the specific kinds of relations that support an enduring, powerful, and joyful political body. Politics, in this sense, should be ethological. That is, politics concerns passions and affects.
Due to his emphasis upon the affective dimension of political life, Spinoza is staunchly anti-revolutionary (e.g., TTP, 209). Although he evidences preference for democracy throughout his work, he never advocates the overthrow of any kind of government so as freshly to institute a just and free democratic order. The Political Treatise diverges from the tradition of Aristotle’s Politics, as well as other political taxonomies, in that it does not delineate the various pros and cons of diverse regimes so as to argue for the supreme excellence of one. The Political Treatise, notably, does not treat each form of government as a stable, generic structure that can be imposed upon any given people so as to produce an equivalent outcome. Just as there is no single form of human of which each person is a representative, “it is evident that we can conceive different kinds of democracy” (TP, 11.3). The Political Treatise is not, first of all, a polemic, but rather an examination of the interplay of passions and their determination of the durability of political bodies.

Violent revolution, whether it is generated by fear, love, or any other passion, necessarily generates great fear and anxiety for a newly installed ruler: “the successor will be a tyrant not by choice, but by necessity; for how will he be able to endure the sight of the citizens’ hands reeking with royal blood, of the people rejoicing in regicide as in a glorious deed, a deed perpetrated as a warning for him alone?” (TTP, 209). Indeed,

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228 For an opposing view that contends that Spinoza evidences a clear preference for Aristocracy in the TP, see Raia Prokhovnik, “From Democracy to Aristocracy: Spinoza, Reason, and Politics,” History of European Ideas (23.2-4, 1997: 105-115).

229 Balibar notes that the Theological-Political Treatise “was a militant intervention in a contemporary polemic.” In contrast, the Political Treatise “is presented as a work of theory, an inquiry into the ‘foundations of politics’, unrestricted by any particular event or circumstances” (51). Whereas the TTP aims to solve a particular political problem confronting Spinoza’s time and place, the TP aspires to (natural) political science in the tradition of Machiavelli.
the people know that, should they be abused or displeased, they have the requisite agency
to displace the current power, be it by regicide or other means. The brute force of the
populace—their quite literally executive power—is visible to them and to the
government. Any new ruling body is forced to oppress—or, in Machiavelli’s words,
“crush”—the people in order to displace the stench of successful revolution. Spinoza
seems to affirm Machiavelli’s conclusion in the *Prince* that “there is nothing harder to
undertake, nothing more likely of failure, nothing more risky to pull off, than to set
oneself up as a leader who plans to found a new system of government.”

Spinoza’s “conservatism” entails that, rather than proposing the best kind of
government and advocating its institution at any cost, he sketch principles of organization
for each form of government. The best mode of organization includes whatever promotes
freedom, reason, stability, and peace, while avoiding tyranny and violence. Freedom,
reason, and peace are not good because of any eternal value equally valid for all
humanity, but because they name a powerful *conatus*, the essential pulsion to persevere
in existence to the greatest extent one’s nature allows. The best organization is not
merely the most stable, since a tyranny might enslave its citizens and secure a supremely
enduring state. Tyranny disables the *conatus*, and enslaves people by directing their
activity against their well-being and interest (*utile*). Moreover, Spinoza’s political
principles do not aim at life and power as such, but at the realization of particular human
powers.

So when we say that the best state is one where men pass their lives in harmony, I
am speaking of human life, which is characterized not just by the circulation of

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blood and other features common to all animals, but especially by reason, the true virtue and life of the mind. (TP, 5.5)

Although the best state is not in every case called a democracy, Spinoza identifies various criteria of better and worse throughout his political writings. “The best,” however, is not an abstract ideal to be imposed indifferently upon any and all social bodies. Reason and freedom are not universal and self-same. They name the power of individuals to determine themselves, to be more active than passive, which varies depending upon the particular constitution of one’s body and environment. Each state, with and as its constituents, must determine the conditions of freedom specific to their histories, bodies, habits, and affective complexions.

Spinoza thus advocates an immanent political practice that increases the power and freedom of individuals without a radical violation of the integrity of the political body. Political practice should respond to and engage the peculiar character of political and individual bodies. With Balibar, one might say that Spinoza advocates the maximization of democratic content, while respecting the form or “essence” of the commonwealth. In order to nurture enabling affects, the body must maintain a kind of consistency as it expands and intensifies its capacities. Spinoza exhibits, perhaps inherited from Machiavelli, a wary respect for custom, habit, and tradition, as part of a strong commitment to the maximization of power and freedom from within established ways of life.

Most generally, then, the aim of the Political Treatise is to find the

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231 Spinoza and Politics, 33.
232 Of course, many contend that Machiavelli has only a shrewd, calculative investment in power as such. Indeed, Spinoza himself notes that Machiavelli’s “purpose appears uncertain” (TP, 5.7). Since my task is not to interpret Machiavelli, I will only assert that I find strong evidence that his work serves, at least in part, to advocate for the well-being of the people as a whole. Consider, for example, the following typical
principles of organization that maximize peace and freedom gradually from within a
given form of government without drastically rupturing its coherence, or changing its
essence into a different kind of being, provoking its death. 233

The effort to avoid violent revolution emerges from Spinoza’s basic
understanding of all human beings as “necessarily subject to passions” (TP, 1.5). A
natural and irreducible subjection to passions entails that humans never determine
themselves wholly by reason, and remain immersed within a field of infectious affects
not susceptible to individual manipulation. The passionate character of humanity exhibits
some basic features common to all individuals and especially pertinent to political life.
First, “fear of isolation is innate in all men” (TP, 6.1) and it necessarily follows from
human nature to desire to be free of fear (TTP, 185). Although fear is an especially
destructive passion, it also drives people into political and social life, as they aim to
reduce, as much as possible, this least tolerable of passions. Although Spinoza may seem
to resemble Hobbes by identifying fear as the passion that necessitates political life, fear
of solitude, or isolation from other human beings, is not reducible to the fear of violent
death. 234 As human beings, we desire more than to avoid death; we strive to develop the
capacities that enable us to enjoy our power as much as possible in the realms of thought

remark from the Prince: “one cannot honorably give the elite what they want, and one cannot do it without
harming others; but this is not true with the populace, for the objectives of the populace are less immoral
than those of the elite, for the latter want to oppress, and the former not to be oppressed. […] If the masses
are opposed to you, you can never be secure. […] [Yet,] all they ask is not to be oppressed” (32).
233 cf., E IVpref and my discussion of conatus in 4.3
234 Paolo Cristolfini argues that the fear of isolation constitutes a virtuous fear, since it promotes sociality.
He notes that, for Spinoza, it is a matter of the quality of life rather than the mere evasion of its “brutal
conclusion” (87). "La peur de la solitude", Quel Avenir pour Spinoza? Enquête sur les spinozismes à venir,
and extension. We desire not power as such, but rather the powers that pertain to and enhance our peculiar natures.

The problem remains, as Hobbes’ account reveals, that humans respond to fear in a way that exacerbates it. Politics should enable people to respond less immediately, anxiously, and reactively to perceived and real threats to their well-being. Hobbes’ solution only increases superstition and sad passions, rendering both citizens and commonwealths servants to their fear. Spinoza aims to construct a mode of response to the sad passions that diminishes rather than amplifies them. Spinoza does not leave the passions in the state of nature. The passions and affective complexion of the political body remain the raw material of politics. Or better, politics are both effects and causes of human passions. Political life is the natural state of human beings, because we are finite, dependent creatures who require one another to live and to furnish a life as free as possible from fear. The passions determine the health, vitality, and durability of a polis.

Spinoza maintains that “in a state of nature and in a civil order alike man acts from the laws of his own nature and has regard for his own advantage” (TP, 3.3). The primacy and irreducibility of the conatus demands that “man is led by fear or hope to do

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235 Although Spinoza contends that there has never been an actual state of nature preceding civil life (TP, 1.7), he does discuss the natural state of human beings, which seems, as in Hobbes, to be little more than a heuristic device. Unlike Hobbes, the state of nature does not embody some kind of threat of the brutal suffering to which we might return, should we fail to establish an enduring order, or “artificial eternity.” Like Hobbes, however, one could say that “the natural condition of mankind” remains necessarily present in the form of the passions. Such an irreducible natural condition, for Spinoza, represents, concomitantly, a threat to order and civility and the means to freedom and virtue. Throughout this very general discussion of Hobbes and Spinoza, I primarily rely upon well-known parts of Leviathan. “Artificial eternity” is a term found in Ch. XIX, par. 14. Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).
or refrain from doing this or that. The main difference between the two conditions is this, that in civil order all men fear the same things, and all have the same ground of security, the same way of life” (TP, 3.3). Civil life functions to organize passions into a kind of functional unity. Passions are necessarily trans-individual phenomena, but their status as shared, communicated, and a source of connection (and not merely division) becomes visible at the level of experience of and reflection upon oneself as part of a political body.

Earlier in the Political Treatise, Spinoza mentions that hate, anger, and envy make humans enemies of one another: “For he is my greatest enemy against whom I must most fear and against whom I must guard myself” (2.14). As long as anxiety and fear remain highly disorganized, as Hobbes famously portrays, anyone and everyone may appear as an enemy. In civil order, however, “all men fear the same things.” That is, people in civil life—which is “impossible that men should ever utterly dissolve” (TP, 6.1)—have the possibility of understanding fear as something that links them to others rather than as something that automatically renders them opposed and bellicose. Spinoza eagerly affirms that a shared way of life “does not deprive the individual of his faculty of judgment, for he who has resolved to obey the commands of the commonwealth, whether through fear of its power or love of tranquility, is surely providing for his own advantage [utile] in his own way [ex suo ingeniō consulti]” (TP, 3.3). The conatus of any being remains primary and irreducible. The power and desire to persevere and enhance oneself, moreover, belongs to all natural individuals. Such individuals include commonwealths, ideas, tables, and singular human beings.

While the desire to persevere in being belongs essentially to all beings, the capacity to affirm and develop one’s utile depends upon one’s unique affective
complexion, or passionate disposition (ingenium).\(^{236}\) Just as individual human virtue depends upon one’s ability to affirm and enhance her own vital power, political virtue depends on the ability of the commonwealth to preserve and amplify its own power. Spinoza thus presents the principles of organization that will reduce the vulnerability of the polis to the various and changing passions of the few. As passionate beings, even the well-cultivated philosopher is liable to superstition, poor judgment, and the tendency to place her perceived advantage before that of the commonwealth.

If it is to endure, its government must be so organized that its ministers cannot be induced to betray their trust or to act basely, whether they are guided by reason or passion. Nor does it matter for the security of the state what motives induce men to administer its affairs properly, provided that its affairs are in fact properly administered. (TP, 1.6)

The structure of the state should be organized such that its ministers will contribute to the state’s perseverance and well-being regardless of their ability to consistently judge wisely and put public right before private pleasure.\(^{237}\) The disposition, or passionate constitution, of the political body should enable its ministers to act in the interest of the state and its citizens, whether or not their individual minds have acquired the power and virtue necessary to do so. Whereas Machiavelli famously exhorts a prince to learn to be

\(^{236}\) “In his own way” is a very rough translation for “ex suo ingenio consulit,” admittedly a phrase that does not have a simple equivalent in English. It might be better expressed as “according to his disposition.” “Ingenium” is a term of art for Spinoza that is often translated as “character,” which helpfully links it to Aristotle’s Ethics. I prefer “disposition” only because it applies at least as much to the position, orientation, and context of the body as its does to the soul’s development. Arguably, the habits that form character in Aristotle’s texts pertain equally to the mental and corporeal practices and histories. I do not treat “ingenium” in any detail in this text, but others, especially Moreau, perform rich analyses of this concept. See Pierre-Francois Moreau, Spinoza: l’expérience et l’éternité (Paris: PUF, 1994), especially Deuxième Partie, Chapitre III.

\(^{237}\) Spinoza believes that such virtuous leaders would be serving themselves as much as the state, and would be enabled by the situation to affirm a coincidence of their own utile with that of the multitude.
bad,\textsuperscript{238} Spinoza exhorts his statesmen to make a situation in which one cannot be bad. Although Spinoza’s advice is less sexy than Machiavelli’s, it comes nearer to Rousseau’s no less notorious assertion that people should be forced to be free.\textsuperscript{239} Yet, the agent of force is nothing other than the aggregate of individual powers that co-enable each other within and as the commonwealth.

Reason, as I highlight throughout, consists in the power to act from the laws of one’s nature so as to increase one’s power to think and act. “From the laws of one’s nature” entails not that one increase her power indefinitely, but rather in accord with the particular limits of her proportion of motion and rest. Spinoza asserts that one is virtuous in proportion to her ability to act in accord with her vital interest and affirm her life. This demands, of course, that the human individual act so as to preserve and enhance the lives of beings with “similar bodies” and all others that most contribute to her flourishing.

Spinoza presents a nearly identical image of rational and virtuous activity for the polis.

[A] commonwealth errs [\textit{peccat}] when it does, or suffers to be done, things that can cause its own ruin; and we say that it errs in the sense that philosophers or doctors say that Nature errs, and it is in this sense we can say that a commonwealth errs when it does something contrary to the dictates of reason. For it is when a commonwealth acts from the dictates of reason that its own right is truly greatest . . . In so far, then, as it acts contrary to reason, it falls short of its own self, or errs. (TP, 4.4; translation modified).

Reason, for states as much as for humans, is nothing but the actualized power to affirm oneself. Such a conception of reason attributes normative value to rationality. Yet reason cannot be determined \textit{a priori}, because the “laws of one’s nature” vary for each

\textsuperscript{238} This is, of course, Chapter XV of the \textit{Prince}, and the quote is actually “learn how not be good,” but is popularly transformed into learning to be bad, or evil.
\textsuperscript{239} For a fascinating interpretation of Rousseau’s doctrine that is fairly compatible (more so than the typical reading) with my portrait of Spinoza, see Steven G. Affeldt, “The Force of Freedom: Rousseau on Forcing to be Free,) \textit{Political Theory} 27.3 (June 1999).
and every singularity. Just as the doctor cannot prescribe medicine in blanket fashion to whomever presents with similar, or even identical, symptoms, a polis must diagnose its particular needs and manner of response. The measure of political success and failure, then, is not the adherence to abstract laws, principles, and contracts. The life of a political body necessarily includes laws and customs, but its thriving depends upon the ability of such laws and customs to contribute to the well-being of the commonwealth and its constituent parts in their individuality.

At first glance, the principle of conatus, when applied to the polis, comprises a naturalized justification for imperialism, analogous to the justification of rape as nothing other than the irrepressible impulse belonging naturally to males to plant their seed in as many receptacles as possible.\textsuperscript{240} If a polis naturally seeks to expand its power and enhance its life, it seems to be equipped with a motor to interiorize all of existence into one mass commonwealth. Indeed, Spinoza seems to suggest that reason prompts humans to a kind of imperialistic drive to harmonize all of humanity into a single rational whole, such that “the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body” (E IVP18S). I freely admit that an ambiguity remains in Spinoza, and I am not at all clear about what the rational “wish” to unify humanity into a single striving entails.\textsuperscript{241}

At the same time, however, the principle of conatus imposes a limit upon transformation. As I discuss in chapter four, “the main thing to note is that when I say

\textsuperscript{240} The pseudo-discipline of evolutionary psychology has actually produced a flurry of such “scientific” arguments recently concerning the “natural history of rape” and the evolutionary advantage of breast implants.

\textsuperscript{241} While Spinoza presents this “wish” as a natural conclusion of reason, he never asserts its actualization as a real possibility, since no one is solely rational and everyone spends most of her life without reason as her primary guide.
that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one form, or essence, to another. For example, a horse is destroyed as much if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect” (E IVpref). The passage to perfection should not be imagined only in spatial terms as a simple expansion of territory. Such a simplistic idea, when applied to individual humans, would make the conatus an imperative to get as fat as possible. The increase in perfection can and should be considered primarily an intensification of power. Such intensification may involve the acquisition of a bigger body, but it would depend upon the powers that already pertain to the individual political community in question. The perfection of state power need not be understood as the pursuit of a cosmic super-state, or a harmonious, global ur-nation. As I understand it, the striving for perfection must be constrained by one’s nature/ essence/ conatus, and is best understood in terms of hilaritas.

The perfection and flourishing of a political body, like a human body or any other highly complex individual, entails the pleasure of as many of its parts as possible. That is, it ought to avoid excessive pleasure of a few particular parts to the exclusion of others, and aim at the generalized health and vitality of its body as a whole, as I discuss in the previous chapter.\footnote{I realize that the discourse of the health and vitality of the polis raises the specter of National Socialism, as well as other ideologies of genocide that deploy notions of cleansing, purification, and cure. Any quasi-organicist model risks a portrait of certain groups as diseases that must be excised for the good of the whole, but I do not think such dangers were especially visible to Spinoza, since his concern was primarily religious hatred and murderous moral, rather than biological, judgment. Moreover, Spinoza’s philosophy precisely opposes, on my interpretation, an absolute priority either of the whole over the individual or of the individual over the whole, as I argue in chapter six. Politics and metaphysics always consist in an uneasy endeavor to think the whole and the part together, such that the whole is nothing without its parts,}
affects circulating among the people. Certainly, the political body depends likewise upon the flourishing of crops, the quality of air necessary for plant, animal and human life, the health of animals that work for and feed the populace, and innumerable other non-human natural bodies. Above all, however, in order to become a rational body that can affirm and pursue its *utile* effectively, the political body must maintain an enabling passionate composition, and the most determinate passions are intra-human. Human bodies, their passions and vitality, in and of the political body comprise the greatest part of a commonwealth’s reason and its life.

The centrality of human passion as an object of political concern is not a novel suggestion on Spinoza’s part. He observes that governments often endeavor to control and manage the passions of the people, but in ways that fail to understand the dynamic and unconscious activity of passions. They conceive the passions of the people—or, more often, the *vulgus*—as though political power depends upon the suppression and complete domination of human passions, aside from those that are imagined (often wrongly) to prevent insurrection. Such an understanding does not sufficiently respect the irreducibility of the passions or their genuine utility and value. Spinoza’s task is to demonstrate that both the extirpation of the passions and the subjugation and enslavement of the populace, even as they seem to represent the realization of absolute power, are far

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243 However, Albert O. Hirschman, in his classic study, credits Spinoza as “the first great philosopher who gave pride of place to the idea that passions can be fought successfully only through other passions” (24). *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1977).
from the genuine *utile* of a commonwealth. He wants to show that the maximization of political power entails the maximization of the power of its constituents.

Spinoza maintains that a commonwealth, in order to avoid error or generate its own gravediggers, ought to concern itself with the cultivation of some passions and the minimization of others. Specifically, it must maintain some measure of fear and respect as it strives to maximize the freedom of its constituents, and thereby its own. “Thus, in order that a commonwealth be in control of its own right, it must preserve the causes that foster fear and respect; otherwise it ceases to be a commonwealth” (TP, 4.4). Note that Spinoza does not claim that a commonwealth must preserve fear and respect, that it must order its citizens to fear and respect it, or that it must oblige them, by means of a contract or otherwise, to honor its laws. Rather, he asserts that in order to persevere in existence, a commonwealth must preserve “the causes that foster fear and respect” (my emphasis). The laws and institutions of a well-organized commonwealth do not consist in mere mandates or direct appeals to the passions. Laws, institutions, and governing practices act upon the causes of those passions, because passions are not epiphenomena of deliberate, intentional directives. Certainly those who participate in government must reflect carefully upon what tends to support and cultivate such passions, which entails intentions and planning. One ought to use reason to generate passions, but only indirectly, since, as we know, an affect can only be transformed by another, stronger affect (E IIIP7).  

244 Chapter six is an effort to sketch particular institutional arrangements that generate the causes of enabling affects among the citizens.
Spinoza offers some concrete advice to those charged with maintaining respect for the law that seems quite obvious, even if politicians today seem unable to follow it.

For if the rulers or ruler of the state runs drunk or naked with harlots through the streets, acts on the stage, openly violates or holds in contempt those laws that he himself has enacted, it is no more possible for him to preserve the dignity of sovereignty than for something to be and not be at the same time. Then again, to slaughter subjects, to despoil them, to ravish maidens and the like turns fear into indignation, and consequently the civil order into a condition of war. (TP, 4.4)

Although Spinoza does not call for philosopher kings, he does advise exemplary behavior for rulers to promote favorable, sustaining passions. Sane and healthy practices, moreover, would be a material condition of the wisdom of the rulers as much as the people. The rulers are not expected to act solely under the guidance of reason, but rather to generate and participate in institutions that are most likely to enable the reason of citizens and governors alike. All people, regardless of their station in life, remain vulnerable to superstition, hatred, envy, anxiety, fear, and other passions that tend to undermine reason. The good commonwealth diminishes the causes that tend toward anti-social, anti-political, and anti-rational affects. At the same time, it strives to support and encourage whatever causes friendship, honor, and joy. The good commonwealth produces, in the politicians as well as the citizens, the “desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason,” or pietas (E IVP37S1).

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245 Although I am not terribly shocked that we seem to forgive Ronald Regan and Arnold Schwarzenegger their stage performances, the lack of overwhelming indignation among contemporary U.S. citizens for the blatant disregard for the law, international and otherwise, among politicians could be an interesting study, from a Spinozist perspective. One would have to investigate which passions (and which causes of such passions) are more robust than respect for law and particular manifestations of character and fortitude among leaders.

246 Negri defines pietas as “the desire that no subject be excluded from universality” (238). “Reliqua Desiderantur: A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza,” The New Spinoza, W. Montag and T. Stolze, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997).
The organization, disposition, arrangement of institutions, and configuration of human passions is of primary political importance. As cited above, a “government must be so organized that its ministers cannot be induced to betray their trust or to act basely, whether he is guided by reason or passion” (TP, 1.6; emphasis added). Likewise, “it is certain that rebellions, wars, and contempt for or violation of the laws are to be attributed not so much to the wickedness of subjects as to the faulty organization of the state” (TP, 5.2). Spinoza does not analyze politics as a contradiction between individuals and the state to be resolved by a transcendent system of laws. Rather, he examines relationships as such, passionate encounters, exchanges, and engagements. He examines how the constellation of relations determines citizens and politicians to act. What matters is not, first of all, whether the wise or the ignorant are in power; or whether the state successfully selects for good breeding, shrewd decision-making, or military prowess. What matter most of all are the arrangements of individuals, the kinds of relationships and passions that are enabled.

The most vital composition of the political body will be mindful of basic human tendencies and endeavor to enhance human powers rather than exacerbate weaknesses. The art of political organization must respect several basic principles:

Men are necessarily subject to passions (1.5); [m]en are not born to be citizens, but are made so (5.2); it is a fact that everyone would rather rule than be ruled (7.5); [and, finally,] [m]en should be governed in such a way that they do not think of themselves as being governed but as living as they please and by their own free will, so that their only restraint is love of freedom, desire to increase their property, and hope of attaining offices of state (10.8).

A properly organized commonwealth has citizens that animate and affirm the law out of direct desire and in their own interest: “it is slaves, not free men, who are assigned
rewards for virtue” (TP, 10.8). It is no wonder that Jonathan Israel has recently named Spinoza the father of a “radical Enlightenment.” Spinoza makes several remarks that anticipate a Kantian notion of autonomy: “in so far as the mind uses reason, it is not subject to the rights of the sovereign but is in control of its own right,” or power (TP, 3.10). The aim is to organize a commonwealth so that people determine themselves in accord with the law, which is only possible if the law itself is in accord with reason.

Too often, however, states govern according to a dualistic model. They aim to impress their power upon their subjects as though their own strength and well-being were not contingent upon that of the citizens. They imagine themselves to be the embodiment of a Creator separate from its creation, or a transitive cause untouched and unmodified by its effect. Governments, although composed of human beings, contribute to their own ruin by, for example, imposing absurd laws that can never be respected or followed. They attempt to control the minds of the people, make them love what they hate, and honor what disgusts them. Their dualistic endeavor to coerce people to love and respect state power, very often, is tantamount to the effort “to make this table eat grass” (TP, 4.4).

Political practice, for Spinoza, ought to institute a way of life that opposes both a theological and a Hobbesian worldview. Spinoza’s political project includes the effort to perceive the immanent relationality that comprises freedom and power. Existence is


Of course, Spinozean autonomy is far from that of Kant insofar as it has to be developed within the causal order of nature and remains dependent upon external determinations. Spinoza has no notion of a “special cause” by which we can attribute moral responsibility and autonomous will to every act by a rational being (human or alien!).

neither the molded clay of a master subject nor a more or less stable aggregate of radically dissociated individuals. The commonwealth is nothing without its constituents; constituents are in and as the commonwealth; everything is a part of Nature.

Although many disagree with—or, more often, exhibit alarm at—the notorious “French” interpretation that “the state must be imagined as an individual, or more exactly, as an individual of individuals, having a ‘body’ and ‘soul,’” it is helpful to consider the commonwealth as something that strives to persevere in existence in a way that is irreducible to the particular aims of either its rulers or its citizens. Opponents to such a reading suspect interpreters of giving the state a conscious will, set of intentions, and a power to reason independent of its human constituents. But all beings strive to continue to exist, whether or not they are endowed with consciousness and volition. Insofar as a commonwealth makes up a coherent being, it endeavors to continue to be, not independent of its material and efficient causes—people, land, plants, etc.—but with and as its various parts. At the same time, the state is not the crafted object of any finite set of individuals, but rather the complex effect of an entire constellation of bodies—their histories, passions, dispositions, ideas, and minds. Moreover, Spinoza asserts many times, with slightly different formulations, that “the right of the state or of the sovereign

249 Balibar, 64.
250 William Connolly, in a review essay that concerns especially Montag’s work, calls this a “dangerous” interpretation, Political Theory (August 2001, 29.4: 583 – 594). For a detailed and persuasive argument against the image of the polis as an individual, see Steven Barbone, “What counts as an Individual for Spinoza?” In Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes, Koistinen and Biro, eds. (Oxford: Oxford, 2002), pp.89-112. Such an interpretation is not exclusively French, of course, but the earliest and most comprehensive interpretation of this kind is probably Alexandre Mathéron, Individu et Communauté Chez Spinoza (Paris: PUF, 1968).
is nothing more than the right of nature itself as it is determined by the power not of each individual but of a people which is guided as if by one mind” (TP, 3.2).

Without trying to settle the issue, it is fair to say that the persistence of the image, which appears throughout the Ethics and the political writings, of a super-individual comprising the commonwealth suggests that individuals belong definitively to a constellation of ideas, bodies, passions, and desires that they can neither escape nor control. Since individuals are a definitive part, they can strive to impact and shape this body as much as possible from the inside. They cannot decide whether it will affect them, yet they strive to affect and contribute to it without knowing in advance what their efforts will produce. I do not contend that the state is an anthropomorphic individual endowed with consciousness, but, insofar as it comprises a unity, it maintains a definite character and resists its destruction. The principles in the Political Treatise support an image of peace, as the union or harmony of minds. The task of politics includes an effort for people to imagine themselves joined profoundly to others in a project of knowledge and power. The question the Political Treatise endeavors to answer is: What best generates a sovereign power that thinks and acts as “a people which is guided as if by one mind” (TP, 3.2)?

7.3: Hilarious Democracy

Most commentators understand Spinoza to prefer democracy on the basis of his assertion that it is “the most natural form of state, approaching most closely to that freedom which Nature grants to every man” (TTP, 179). The meaning of this claim, however, remains somewhat unclear. Smith finds that “Spinoza endorses the democratic
republic because it is the regime most consistent with the autonomous individual and the
liberated self.”

Presumably, Smith understands autonomy to be rooted in nature. On
this understanding, the values of liberty and autonomy are prior to political life and
intrinsic to human striving. Therefore, Spinoza selects the best government based upon
its ability to facilitate or fulfill this irrepressible drive of human (and non-human) life.

Smith finds that a preference for democracy is compatible with Spinoza’s naturalism—
wherein Nature itself cannot prefer democracy to tyranny—since it belongs to the nature
of human beings to live in society. Because self-preservation demands human
community, human desire to persevere recognizes better and worse ways of doing so
within political society, even without the existence of a transcendental good inscribed in
human nature.

Israel interprets the assertion that democracy is closest to Nature to be tantamount
to what Rousseau contends in the “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” nearly a
century later. Israel understands “Nature” to perform a normative function against which
all political legitimacy ought to be measured.

[T]he pristine equality of the state of nature is our ultimate guide and criterion,
not just in determining the character and legitimacy of any society’s political
arrangements but also in shaping the volonté générale, or Spinoza’s mens una,
which alone can ensure political stability and salvation.

Israel finds that Spinoza criticizes the aristocracies and monarchies of his own day by
colorizing them as defilements of an original, natural equality. Nature, then, is

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{251} Smith, 122.
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{252} Smith, 127.
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{253} Israel, 274.
originally democratic, and therefore democracy is to be preferred on the grounds of normativity built into Nature itself.

In his effort to render Spinoza the founder of a “radical enlightenment,” Israel elides major differences between Rousseau and Spinoza. Israel is correct to note that Spinoza repeatedly advises governments to preserve (but also to generate) the equality of its citizens to the greatest extent possible. Spinoza’s portrait of the state of nature, however, is far from a natural condition of freedom and independence as in Rousseau. Rather, he asserts that individuals have no power, no right, and no freedom in the state of nature, and any claim to the contrary is “notional rather than factual,” since individuals have no ability to exercise power or preserve their lives in isolation (TP, 2.15). His use of the state of nature primarily serves to criticize Hobbes’ notion that such a state could include freedom in any meaningful sense. Moreover, Spinoza’s claims about human equality are far less romantic and far more ambiguous than Israel allows. Spinoza argues for institutional equality, at least in part, in order to protect the state against a generalized human arrogance and narcissistic psychology.

Every single man thinks he knows everything, and wants to fashion the world to his disposition [ingenio]; he considers things to be fair or unfair, right or wrong, according as he judges them to be to his profit or loss. Vanity [gloria] makes him despise his equals, nor will he suffer being guided by them. (TTP, 187; translation modified)

Concerning equality, Spinoza’s premises are much more Hobbesian, even if his conclusions appear Rousseauian.
Matheron notes that, with the concept of the state of nature, both Spinoza and Hobbes give logical priority to democracy. While neither seems to believe that a state of nature actually occurs in history, it is logically the case that all human beings are equal by nature and that political society is effectively determined by the many. For Spinoza and Hobbes, equality is derived from universal vulnerability and an antagonistic psychology that resists being subject to another’s power. For Spinoza, in contrast to Hobbes, the antagonistic psychology emerges from the structure of imagination, which mistakenly represents human interaction as fundamentally atomistic. The experience of other beings as obstacles to one’s freedom signals a failure to grasp the nature of one’s body and its passions. Tendencies toward hostility and conflict can be minimized, if not eliminated, through the production of ways of life conducive to reason, which understands the necessary co-implication of power and freedom.

Spinoza and Hobbes diverge most significantly in those moments when Spinoza attributes not only a logical priority but an “ontological priority” to democracy. Democracy is ontologically prior because, even in monarchy, the many determine the power (potentia) of the polity. Democracy is most natural, on this understanding, because it affirms the nature of existence itself, as the expression of the productive power of infinitely many interdependent individuals.

The entire logic of the Political Treatise supports the interpretation that the power (potentia) of any political body lies in the many. Thus, if states want to preserve

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255 See chapter 3.
257 Balibar makes a similar argument, Spinoza and Politics, 33.
themselves, they must be attentive above all to the passions of the populace, upon which the power of the commonwealth necessarily depends.

We conclude, therefore, that a people [multitudinem] can preserve quite a considerable degree of freedom under a king, provided that it ensures that the king’s power [potentia] is determined only by the people’s power [potentia] and depends on the people’s power for its maintenance. This has been the one and only guideline [regula] I have followed in laying down the foundations of monarchy. (TP, 7.31)

Yet, if any form of government is already a democracy in essence, why is it better to establish institutional democracy? If democracy is a fact of Nature, if the many is always ontologically most powerful, why does it require a political expression at all?

On the one hand, bodies naturally strive to persevere in their existence and the mind naturally endeavors to posit the activity and joy of its body (E IIIP12). Thus, it seems that bodies and minds tend toward both autonomy and joy of their own accord, by virtue of an intrinsic and irrepressible essence. Likewise, a collective body might strive to persevere in existence and thus expand and develop its power. On the other hand, the powers of all finite beings, including humans, are “infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes” (E IVP3). Spinoza does not have a principle of entelechy whereby a human will naturally tend toward rationality, just as an acorn tends toward becoming a tree. Humans naturally desire reason, since reason expresses the active power of their minds. Nothing, however, guarantees that they will become rational. Nothing guarantees that the intrinsic striving of the mind to enhance its body’s power of acting will be actualized.

The powers of the many determine the political body as the objective effect of a more or less unconscious circulation of passions and affects. They do not necessarily
determine the collective body in a manner that maximizes the powers of the minds and bodies of the constituent members. The collective definitely increases the power of individuals, since anyone would die in solitude. Yet, it rarely increases those powers as much as it could, since sad passions undermine the ability of individuals and collectivities to think and act. Democratic institutions better assuage the passions, according to Spinoza, because they affirm the ontological reality of agency as conditioned necessarily by the passions. If political institutions treat individual and collective bodies as they are, not as they would like them to be, they enhance everyone’s power of reason and enable democratic practice.

At the same time, however, it is not necessarily better to institute democracy. If the establishment of democracy would provoke unrest and violence, one is not well-advised to institute a democratic regime. One is far better served to respect the customs and desires of the populace and progressively enable them to live a more democratic way of life. Thus, Spinoza’s prescriptions for the best organization of monarchy and aristocracy are radically democratic, such as the property relations discussed in the previous chapter, even as he preserves some aspects specific to each form of government.

In the words of Israel: “To render monarchy conducive to harmony, peace, and [the] common good of subjects, Spinoza makes recommendations which effectively emasculate it, depriving it of all genuinely monarchical features, turning it, in effect, into a ‘crowned republic.’”  Spain. Israel interprets Spinoza implicitly to taunt monarchy as he castrates it. Israel may be right, but without the ability to know Spinoza’s intentions, I

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258 Israel, 262.
tend to take him at his word. I venture to argue that Spinoza sincerely believes that a
monarch, like Machiavelli’s prince, should arm its people in the interest of its own
power. Such empowerment of the multitude to determine the body of the polity, with all
of its diverse art and skill, enlarges the power of kings as it amplifies the capacities of the
multitude. Establishing a radically egalitarian economy and large assemblies drawn from
the common people, far from emasculating the king, fortifies him with the passions and
power of the people. Because Spinoza understands dangers to political power to arise
primarily internal to the polis, state power, monarchical or otherwise, depends upon the
ability to join the powers of the multitude to that of the governing body. Little by little,
such a government will become nearer and nearer to being “absolute.”

Israel’s suggestion that Spinoza is a crypto-radical democrat may be correct—and
there is much evidence that he is—but it is difficult to ground Spinoza’s concerns solely
in respect for equality and rationality, or other enlightenment principles. Spinoza does
appear prompted most of all by concerns of power and freedom, but in a way that
prioritizes neither the state nor the multitude. Such ambiguity has led to Spinoza being
called a dictatorial absolutist and a friend of emancipation. Israel, in particular, has a
difficult time swallowing Spinoza’s statements in opposition to revolution. While
acknowledging his disdain for faction and rebellion, Israel asserts that “one cannot say
that he was opposed to political revolution.” To say that Spinoza opposes revolution,
despite his several assertions to that effect, would be tantamount to claiming that he is
radical and conservative at once.

259 Israel, 261.
Spinoza’s resistance to received categories in the history of either political theory or philosophy prompts Negri to dub him “the savage anomaly” rather than proto-Marxist, liberal, or anything else. Negri, in contrast to most commentators, emphasizes the absolute rather than the natural character of democracy. In the unfinished *Political Treatise*, Spinoza begins the severely truncated final chapter “I pass on at length to the third kind of state, the completely absolute state *omnino absolutum imperium* which we call democracy” (11.1). Earlier in the text, Spinoza offers something close to a definition of *absolutum imperium*: “We may therefore conclude that the sovereignty [*imperium*] conferred on a council of sufficient size is absolute, or comes closest to being absolute. For if there is such a thing as absolute sovereignty [*imperium absolutum*], it is really that which is held by the people [*multitudo*] as a whole [*integra*]” (TP, 8.3). The distinctive feature of democracy in the *Political Treatise* is no longer its proximity to nature, but its absoluteness. That is, democracy is the form of government by which an integrated multitude rules itself. The *omnino absolutum imperium* has no division internal to it. It is inclusive, comprehensive, and entire.

The Latin word absolute has a verb (*absolvo, absolvere, absolve, absolutum*) and participle form (*absolutus, absoluta, absolutum*). The verb literally means “to loosen,” but can also be imply “to free,” “to complete,” and “to finish.” The English word “to absolve” derives from *absolvere*. The adjective form can be translated “perfect,” “complete,” “unfettered,” and “unconditional.” Democracy, then, is identified as both a liberating and a loosening of the multitude into an unfettered expression of Nature’s

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260 See, for example, “Reliqua Desiderantur.”
power. *Omnino absolutum imperium* starts to sound a lot like God—a self-caused, unconditioned multiplicity. Since God and Nature are equivalent, democracy might be said to be closest to nature in that it is closest to an active self-construction of being. Democracy is nearest a self-sufficient body that drives itself internally, by its own self-affection rather than swaying this way and that in response to any and every passion-inducing encounter. Maybe democracy does not aim to restore the “pristine equality of the state of nature.” Rather, as Negri suggests throughout his *oeuvre*, democracy might name the maximization of natural (*qua* human, if not exclusively human) powers through uniting and releasing the multitude into a quasi-divine condition of unconstrained self-love and self-determination.

I find real evidence for Negri’s interpretation, but I will present some caveats momentarily. First, Spinoza everywhere is concerned about the stagnation and coagulation of power. Thus, I find him to be guided by an impulse “to loosen” *potentia* as part of a project of liberation and the amplification of aptitudes. Such loosening, however, is equally a strategy of protection, which does not foreclose its liberating potential. For example, Spinoza counsels that it is best to design an aristocracy where power and money is dispersed throughout multiple cities rather than one central city. He advises that there should be multiple centers of power, since one site of power is more vulnerable to attack and seizure. At the same time, “in this kind of state, freedom is shared by more of its members; for when one city has sole rule, regard is paid to the good of others only as far as it suits the ruling city” (TP, 9.15).

Likewise, when it comes to individual bodies—which applies as much to human as political bodies—Spinoza regards the concentration of pleasure and power in one or a
few parts \( (titilatio) \) as highly dangerous to one’s health and sanity (E IVP43). The concentration of power in isolated places rather than loosening it and encouraging its multifarious production renders a body vulnerable, weak, sick, and potentially servile. Ultimately, the sanest, freest, most powerful and joyful body is one that is pleased and fortified as a whole, part for part. The most absolute body is, concomitantly, the most and the least conditioned. The body of \( hilaritas \) is affected equally in all of its parts (E IVP42). By virtue of such affection, the body is enjoined to affect other parts more easily and readily. The power of the body is released into more effective intra-communication of affects and intensification of its powers. Parts become open to one another, affected more immediately and seamlessly, and the mind can act through affecting itself so as to generate more adequate ideas. With \( hilaritas \), undergoing and self-determination become co-extensive, mutually supportive powers unfettered by anxiety, fear, melancholy, and hatred.

The emphasis upon the absolute character of democracy clarifies rather than corrects the claim that democracy is closest to Nature. Democracy as the \( omnino absolutum imperium \) approximates Nature’s, or God’s, fully realized self-determination and self-love. Democracy, on this portrait, not only approaches Nature’s autonomy but also becomes the vehicle for the intellectual love of God.

This love the mind has must be related to its actions (by P32C and IIP3), and action by which God, insofar as he can be explained through the human mind, contemplates himself, with the accompanying idea of himself [as cause]; so (by P35), this love is part of the intellectual love by which God loves himself. From this it follows that insofar as god loves himself, he loves men, and consequently that God’s love of men and the mind’s intellectual love of God are one and the same. (E VP36D-C)
Spinoza proceeds to assert that *salus* (salvation, health, well-being) consists in the intellectual love of God, which is not different from *acquiescentia* and *gloria*. That is, the *gloria* that is so burdensome among human beings, causing them to resist all domination and order the world according to their idiosyncratic complexions (*ingenia*), is fulfilled the more one can join the image of oneself and one’s fellow humans to the image of God, Nature, or a self-creating whole. One fulfills the desire for esteem and approval from God and fellow humanity in the affirmation of oneself in and as God. Democracy, insofar as it approaches divine activity, enables the love of God and other humans, as well as the intense pleasures yielded by *gloria* and *acquiescentia*.

God loves itself, and all of humanity, to the extent that the human mind acts and enjoys its actions. Humans love themselves and glory in their existence to the extent that they are enabled to affect and be affected by other bodies. The human mind acts only in community, and acts most effectively in community with other reasonable minds. A community, or a multitude, reciprocally empowers the mind to act insofar as it is integrated into a singular, yet internally variegated power. Democracy by enacting an integrated, diverse body that rules and determines itself might show—or, as some would argue, be—the way to beatitude.261

261 While I only tentatively suggest this, most Anglophone commentators would vehemently reject such a claim. Smith, among many others, asserts that the pursuit of the intellectual love of God is “intensely private” and “utterly solitary.” He interprets the TTP to argue that the state need not fear a wise philosopher, because such an individual “is likely to seek not domination of, but freedom from, the community in order to pursue this all consuming passion” (144). Although I am not going so far as to argue that personal and political *salus* are identical, I do think that personal flourishing, freedom, and beatitude depends upon an enabling community and actual, physical proximity to other reasonable beings, such that Spinoza’s sage desires community, albeit a joyful and enabling one. Moreover, Spinoza’s principles of political organization support the generation of human mental and corporeal powers and thus strive to maximize the potential for *salus* of and in the whole. Thus, without reducing the *salus* of a human individual to the *salus* of the collective, they comprise a joint project. Feuer goes too far, for example,
Since Spinoza only barely began the lengthy treatment of democracy that he promises, we do not know what his practical suggestions for its organization and enactment would have been. As a result, many interpreters of Spinoza’s political philosophy treat primarily, or even exclusively, the *Theological-Political Treatise*. They may also restrict their scope to the TTP, since there is something both disturbing and utopian about the *omnino absolutum imperium* and the unitary mind and body of *hilaritas*. The liberal interpreters (and their critics) of Spinoza’s political thought are naturally drawn to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, since it argues for the separation of church and state, the freedom to philosophize and speak one’s mind, and for the priority of the law. In addition, the *Theological-Political Treatise* presents a social contract, albeit a highly ambiguous one, that founds and legitimates political authority. Such interpreters have some difficulty with Spinoza’s claims in the TTP that sovereignty should be in the hands of the people as a whole that exist alongside his assertions that the dictates of the sovereign should never be contradicted and that the “mob” will ultimately do whatever it has the power to do.

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when he asserts that one who lives under tyranny can also enjoy the intellectual love of God (103). In contrast to the Anglophone tradition, the dominant thesis of French (and Italian) interpreters asserts a necessary connection between collective and individual salvation. Jean-Marie Beyssade endeavors to refute this widespread thesis among his compatriots, but only to assert that *salus* is preferably but not necessarily mediated by favorable political relations. « VIX (*Ethique* IV Appendice chapitre 7) ou peut-on se sauver tout seul ? » *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 4 (1994). I contend that there is a measure of collective freedom and justice that must be met in order for individuals to achieve *acquiescentia* and beatitude, since they entail the ability to actually enjoy one’s power of determination. *Salus* cannot be only in one’s head. If we are to presume that Spinoza enjoyed *acquiescentia* and beatitude, at some point in his life, his community of Amsterdam and circle of friends was sufficient. Thus, while every resident of Amsterdam did not enjoy the intellectual love of God as Spinoza may have, Spinoza would not have been Spinoza and would not have had such powers of the mind, if he had lived in a brutally repressive social and political environment.
Steven B. Smith makes the strongest argument for Spinoza as a founder of several positive features of the liberal tradition. He interprets the insistence upon mass popular sovereignty to follow from Spinoza’s conviction that “there is little likelihood that a people would knowingly harm itself.” He finds Spinoza overconfident in the ability of the people to recognize their own interest, and accuses him of not having considered “the Socratic objection.” Smith is correct to identify Spinoza’s reasoning as one which promotes the sovereignty and self-government of a populace so that it will be least oppressed, least governed by external powers that do not regard collective well-being as “the highest law.” However, I hope to have made a persuasive argument throughout my thesis that Spinoza was well aware of the Socratic objection. The epistemological and political writings cannot be separated, precisely because humans are not born rational and they do not do what is in their own interest. Far from spontaneously making wise decisions, given certain conditions, they will “fight for their servitude as though it were salvation” (TTP, 3). Spinoza’s entire philosophy is an effort to understand the forces and passions that so successfully undermine the human conatus to affirm and enhance its life so as to persevere in being.

I do not contest Smith’s identification of shared values between Spinoza and liberalism. Upon my interpretation, however, Spinoza’s best contribution to liberalism is his analysis of the conditions under which institutions and laws can enable people to determine themselves and generate the material, affective conditions of autonomy and reason. Spinoza distinguishes aristocracy and democracy on the basis that “in an

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262 Smith, 133.
aristocracy the right to govern depends solely on selection, whereas in democracy it
depends mainly on a kind of innate right” (TP, 8.1). Such “innate right,” however, must
be secured in democracy by law (TP, 11.1). Although equality is natural or unqualified
in principle, even in democracy equality requires institutions and laws to be maintained
and safeguarded in practice. Smith, then, astutely recognizes the centrality of law. At the
same time, Spinoza sounds like a more contemporary “radical democrat” than a classical
liberal, more Hegelian than Kantian, since even the omnino absolutum imperium requires
fallible, revisable human “law” (as opposed to laws of nature, which cannot be
contradicted) to serve as a guide for action and the enablement of reason.

“If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free” (E IVP67). Balibar thus correctly asserts that, if only free and
rational men were to comprise a commonwealth, politics and history would cease to be
and law would become superfluous.\(^263\) Citizens would do only what is best, with no need
to consult either abstract principles or customs. In order for politics and law to become
superfluous, moreover, such a commonwealth would have to encompass the entire globe,
and be free of any external limits. Only a completely rational community of all
humanity, forming a single mind and body could become as absolute as Nature itself.

People are born neither free nor rational, however, and politics will always
necessarily be an enterprise primarily of imagination. Human community will always
require laws, institutions, and civilizing practices. The problem becomes how to make
good laws, if fallible humans, necessarily subject to passions, are charged with

\(^{263}\) Spinoza and Politics, 66.
constructing them. Moreover, they cannot devise their laws and institutions with “pure” reason, which knows only general properties *sub specie aeternitatis*, because imagination necessarily accompanies prediction, anticipation, and the making of plans in time. If such imagination is supported as much as possible by joyful passions and reason, however, political authority will not feel compelled to enslave its people to false idols, by portraying its laws as unchanging, eternal truths, or the word of “God.” Moreover, effective government will not depend upon promoting a Hobbesian atomistic worldview, where individuals always fear the encroachment of others upon their “freedom.” Political powers have felt the need to portray human law as natural law, which is absurd, according to Spinoza. If natural law could be contradicted, God would be pathetic and impotent. Instead, “for practical purposes it is better, indeed, it is essential, to consider things as contingent” (TTP, 49).

To undertake the gradual transmutation of natural slavery into liberty “it is necessary to come to know both our nature’s power and its lack of power, so that we can determine what reason can do in moderating the affects, and what it cannot do” (E IVP17S). The enablement of the multitude entails an affirmation that humans can develop tremendous powers of the mind and body, but can never eliminate their dependence upon their contingent, particular, and fallible imaginations. Such an affirmation entails that law be grounded in both imagination and reason. The development of reason, and the intuitive apprehension of one’s singular nature, requires
that humans treat their codes and customs as revisable and open-ended projects. Normativity thereby becomes “wholly human and fallible.”

Because reason and intuition emerge through the amplification of imagination rather than its suppression, the highest forms of knowing (and ways of life to which they correspond) require attention to the passions, relations between and among bodies. The more joyful the passions, the more robust the minds and bodies constitutive of the republic become. The more powerful each part becomes, the more sovereign and absolute the body politic is. Statesmen, in their own interest, should aspire to a hilarious democracy, where each individual (part) is enabled by her constellation of relationships and life activities. Hilarity only emerges, however, when bodies—political and human—affirm themselves as parts of nature, whose autonomy and freedom derive from relations with others.

If everyone remains by nature vulnerable to superstition, fear, and madness, why should anyone believe a joyful republic or hilarious democracy is possible? Spinoza certainly vacillates on this question. On the one hand, he enthusiastically declares that “[m]an can wish for nothing more . . . than that all should agree in all things that the minds and bodies would compose, as it were, one mind and one body” (E IVP18S). On the other hand, and with as much frequency, he notes that “it rarely happens that men live according to the guidance of reason. Instead, their lives are so constituted that they are usually envious and burdensome to one another” (E IVP35S; my emphasis). Solitude, however, is not an option. Both the mind and body depend upon community with others.

264 Gatens and Lloyd, 128.
The problem lies in the fact that “their lives are so constituted” that they do not act according to reason, according to their genuine *utile*. What can one do, then, other than strive to constitute lives otherwise? Political power often presents law as a form of “daily invective,” threat, or unconditioned command, so as to flame the passions of anxiety, fear, envy, and hatred. History shows that collective power is certainly capable of terrible acts of violence, stupidity, and self-destruction. One’s power and freedom, however, are necessarily tied to collective agency. What can one do other than strive to transform that body from within so as to generate its no less awesome powers and pleasures?

Spinoza garnered some hope from the city of Amsterdam, which did not treat its people as either “beasts or puppets.” Instead, it began to reveal a world in which people would be enabled to think, speak, smoke, and trade freely. Perhaps now, we can turn our eyes upon our own political bodies and ask wherein the potential for *hilaritas* lies. Spinoza’s hope, however ambivalent, for a joyful republic might prompt us to resist and negate the amplification of corrosive affects, such as of fear, hatred, anxiety, and envy. We might demand and pursue hilarious joy because our minds and bodies depend upon it.
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Vita

Hasana Sharp studied Literature and Religious Studies at Occidental College, in Los Angeles, California (Class of 1995). She arrived in Los Angeles the same year that Rodney King’s attackers were acquitted and the city erupted in violence and intense interracial conflict. The anxiety and fear circulating in the city prepared her for a powerful encounter with the ideas of feminism, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and, finally, Benedict de Spinoza. She worked in social services for a year after graduation, contemplating the relative merits of public health, social work, and graduate study in philosophy. Although philosophy seemed indulgent at the time, she determined that her passions were most inflamed and assuaged by exploring the political and metaphysical writings of various, especially Marxist and feminist, thinkers. She received her Master’s degree from Binghamton University (SUNY), and connected with several peers who later formed the Society for Social and Political Philosophy: Continental, Historical, and Feminist perspectives. She nourished her love of Spinoza and philosophy among her peers and professors at Penn State and spent a fabulous year at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, in Lyon, France on a Fulbright fellowship. Her writings can be found in the following journals: Rethinking MARXISM, International Studies in Philosophy, Intertexts, and Crossings. Beginning in the autumn of 2005, she will be an Assistant Professor of Philosophy, specializing in political and early modern thought, at McGill University, in Montréal, Québec.