

## Spinoza on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity

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“When he wrote about politics, Spinoza was ahead of his time. When he wrote about God, Spinoza was ahead of our time.”

Those words came to me one day, out of the blue, and I agreed with them. So every summer, like clockwork, I trotted them out when teaching a Spinoza workshop. They were intended to be as complimentary to Spinoza as possible given the circumstances. He was, after all, the person who influenced me more about metaphysics and theology than any other writer – and in that regard, I had good company (Albert Einstein, to name one example). Yet when it came to politics, I saw Spinoza as being on the right side of history on most issues and horribly wrong on others. What he said about women was an absolute embarrassment, and his statements about the relationship between church and state were not exactly cutting edge either. So I spoke well of Spinoza’s politics when I could, apologized for it when I had to, and concentrated the vast majority of my workshops on his teachings about other matters – God, metaphysics, human psychology, ethics – in short, the topics that are *not* the central focus of my talk today.

This essay takes a deep dive into Spinoza’s political writings. I have approached those writings with no agenda. My goal was primarily to understand the foundation of Spinoza’s political ideas, and only secondarily to explore the insights we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can gain from them. I was fascinated to see the evolution of Spinoza’s political thoughts, from when he first expressed them in the *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)*, to when he returned to them briefly in the *Ethics*, to when he would discuss them systematically in the *Political Treatise*, a work that was tragically left incomplete due to his death at the age of 44. But today, I will treat Spinoza not as a series of person-stages, each of which had something different to say about politics. Rather, I will treat his political thoughts as the product of a single mind, one obsessed with certain foundational principles. Specifically, I will argue that Spinoza’s politics can be largely understood based on the writer’s attitudes about three fundamental concepts: liberty, equality and fraternity. After discussing how Spinoza treated those concepts, I will then explain how they fit into his philosophy as a whole and how his philosophy can indeed provide invaluable insights for the 21<sup>st</sup> century student of American politics.

### Liberty

Perhaps no word is more associated with Spinoza’s political philosophy than “liberalism.” Spinoza is known as one of the founders of modern liberal political thought. This is hardly surprising, given that all his works placed central emphasis on liberating humanity from various prisons. Superstition is one such prison. So are the passions. Each of these prisons gets in the way of our path to happiness, which involves a life committed to reason and

understanding. Spinoza also associated this path with freedom or autonomy.<sup>1</sup> To be free, we as individuals must liberate ourselves from anything that prevents our unique natures from maintaining control over our thoughts, feelings, and conduct. The rarest of individuals may be able to accomplish this feat even in the most oppressive of states. But to take politics seriously as a Spinozist is to realize just how much our freedom and happiness as individuals depend on living in a society devoted to liberating its members.

For Spinoza, “the end of the Republic is really freedom”<sup>2</sup> – meaning freedom in the positive sense of the term (“freedom *to*” express ourselves autonomously). However, we get there largely by fostering the conditions of liberty, which refers to freedom in the negative sense of the term (“freedom *from*” restraints by third parties). To quote Spinoza, the ultimate end of the Republic “is not to dominate, restraining men by fear, and making them subject to another’s control, but on the contrary, to free each person from fear, so that he can live securely, as far as possible, i.e., so that he retains to the utmost his natural right to exist and operate without harm to himself or anyone else.”<sup>3</sup> That passage, from the TTP, was a precursor of what Spinoza would write years later in the *Political Treatise*. There, he claimed that “[p]eace isn’t the privation of war, but a virtue which arises from strength of mind... When the peace of a Commonwealth depends on its subjects’ lack of spirit – so that they’re led like sheep, and know only how to be slaves – it would be more properly called a wasteland than a Commonwealth.”<sup>4</sup> To translate this passage into terms a political marcher could understand, “No liberation, no peace. No self-expression, no peace. No individuality, no peace.”

For Spinoza, liberty starts with some of the rights we contemporary Americans associate with the Constitution’s First Amendment. Everyone, he said, “should be granted the right to think what he wants and to say what he thinks.”<sup>5</sup> These rights “not only ... can be granted

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., *Ethics*, Part I, Definition 7: “That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone. But a thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to produce an effect in a certain and determinate manner.”) When citing Spinoza, this essay will use the translation of Edwin Curley, as reflected in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, (Princeton U. Press: Princeton, NJ, Vol. 1, 1985, Vol. 2, 2016). At times, I will include page references to Gebhardt’s *Spinoza Opera* (4 vols. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), including the volume, page, and line numbers (e.g., II/37/5-9). Those page references are also found in Curley’s *Collected Works* and represent a major help to scholars in determining the exact passage that is being cited. At other times – when the passage at issue is short enough that the *Opera* cite is unnecessary – I will simply cite to the paragraph number, in the case of the *Political Treatise* (PT) or the TTP, or to the proposition, corollary, definition, scholium, appendix, preface, or axiom, in the case of the *Ethics* (E).

<sup>2</sup> TTP XX.12.

<sup>3</sup> TTP XX.11.

<sup>4</sup> PT V.4.

<sup>5</sup> TTP XX.46.

without detriment to the peace of the Republic and to the piety and right of the supreme ‘powers, but ... *must* be granted, if we are to preserve all these things.’<sup>6</sup>

Though respecting the freedom of thought and speech was fundamental for Spinoza, that hardly exhausted his commitment to liberty. Spinoza was also an early advocate of a principle that has come to be associated with John Stuart Mill, in his classic work, *On Liberty*: “[T]he sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection.... [T]he only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.... Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”<sup>7</sup>

Those are the words of Mill, but the argument for them was enunciated two centuries earlier by Spinoza. In the *TTP*, Spinoza wrote that “it can’t happen that a mind should be absolutely subject to the control of someone else. [N]one can transfer to another person his natural right, *or* faculty, of reasoning freely, and of judging concerning anything whatever. Nor can anyone be compelled to do it.... These things are subject to each individual’s control. No one can surrender that even if he wants to.”<sup>8</sup> Spinoza went on to talk about how the freedom of judgment “is especially necessary for advancing the arts and sciences” and that the more the authorities try to restrict this liberty, “the more stubbornly men will resist.”<sup>9</sup> Then, years later in the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza criticized any law that is intended to regulate vices. “All laws which can be violated without wronging anyone else are objects of derision,” he said. “Far from reigning in men’s desires and lusts, they make them stronger. We always strive to have what is prohibited, and desire what we’re denied.”<sup>10</sup> Spinoza never had children, but he obviously would have understood one of the basic truths of contemporary parenting – that the best way to get your teenager to want to smoke more pot is to try to compel him *not* to. Similarly, the best way for a government to create virtuous citizens is to free them so they may find virtue for themselves, rather than to try to impose it upon them.

So yes, Spinoza truly is for the most part the champion of liberty he is celebrated to be in the annals of history. But his love of liberty is not absolute – not even close. He explicitly recognized that, in order to protect the public at large, societies require “authority and force” in the form of “laws which moderate and restrain men’s immoderate desires and unchecked impulses.”<sup>11</sup> There, he is referring to prohibitions against hurting others or endangering the

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<sup>6</sup> TTP XX.44.

<sup>7</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Introduction, p. 68-69 (Penguin: Harmondsworth, England, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> TTP XX.2.

<sup>9</sup> TTP XX.26-28.

<sup>10</sup> PT X.5.

<sup>11</sup> TTP V.22.

stability of the state – and with respect to the latter, he was not nearly as restrained as a 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal might be. In fact, Spinoza extended his willingness to regulate even to certain forms of religious expression. “External religious worship and every exercise of piety must be accommodated to the peace and preservation of the republic,” Spinoza wrote.<sup>12</sup> So when it comes to religious *beliefs*, we as individuals can think what we want, and say what we think. But as for our public manifestations of religious expression, Spinoza allowed the government to take control. Indeed, when it came time for Spinoza to explain what the best possible form of aristocracy would look like, he said that “large assemblies of religion ought to be prohibited” except insofar as they involved the official national religion, and only for that national religion could temples be built that are “large and magnificent.”<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Spinoza wasn’t a big fan of seditious speech, to say the least. If someone is opposed to a law,” he wrote, and “submits his opinion to the judgment of the supreme power ... [while doing] nothing contrary to what that law prescribes, he truly deserves well of the republic.... But if he does this to accuse the magistrate of inequity, and make him hateful to the common people, or if he wants to nullify the law, seditiously, against the will of the magistrate, he’s just a troublemaker and a rebel.”<sup>14</sup> While he is less clear on this point, there is reason to read into Spinoza that the state has enormous powers to prohibit such acts of rebellion, including by imposing capital punishment.<sup>15</sup> So this same Spinoza who in some respects was a deep precursor of the liberty-loving Founding Fathers of America was in other respects more than willing to restrict even certain First Amendment liberties for the sake of a stable republic.

Truly, this willingness to restrict liberties should not be surprising when you consider what Spinoza wrote about natural rights and the reason for forming governments, which in turn was grounded in his teachings about metaphysics and God. Spinoza was committed to the notion that human beings are not the product of a supernatural deity who created us as completely free-willed entities subject to a special set of laws. Rather, he believed, we are constrained by the “common laws of nature” just like any other organism.<sup>16</sup> No less than a lion in the Serengeti, Spinoza taught, nature has given every human being a set of powers and rights that go with them. And this is because every individual in existence is a mode of God and, as such, expresses the eternal power of God. To quote Spinoza, “since God has the right over all things, and God’s right is nothing but his power itself, insofar as [his power] is considered to be absolutely free, it

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<sup>12</sup> TTP XIX.21.

<sup>13</sup> PT VIII.46.

<sup>14</sup> TTP XX.15.

<sup>15</sup> See TTP XVI.48-51.

<sup>16</sup> E.3 Pref., II/137/8-15. To illustrate this point, Spinoza contrasted his own views with those who “seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself.” *Id.*, II/137/10-15.

follows that each natural thing [including a human being] has as much right by nature as it has power to exist and have effects.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, while every action we take is not necessarily the best or wisest choice, we have a natural right to take it.

Spinoza also recognized, however, that if you put human beings into anarchic state-of-nature conditions and arm them with a “might makes right” attitude, all hell would break loose. That is why we form states in the first place – to take advantage of the security and other benefits that come from associating with one another. But with those associations come rules and responsibilities. So, in order to avoid a “war of all against all,” to use Hobbes’ characterization of the state of nature, we fundamentally and voluntarily restrict our liberties by turning over to the state the right to restrain us. In this way, a liberty-loving individual like Spinoza came to appreciate that too much liberty is perhaps even more dangerous than not enough.

### Equality

Judging strictly from what Spinoza wrote about human individuals and the emotions that drive them, the picture he painted of human society is the polar opposite of equality. In one portion of this picture we have a tiny number of people who Spinoza held out as the ideal. He described them as “men who are governed by reason – i.e., men, who from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage – want nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men. Hence, they are just, honest, and honorable.”<sup>18</sup> They are also, if fully devoted to reason, blessed – because they have become consumed with the love of God, “the most constant of all emotions.”<sup>19</sup> Such individuals, Spinoza taught, replace their passive emotions with emotions grounded in self-esteem, and come to live an active, autonomous and ever-affectionate existence.

And then there are the rest of us – and I mean, nearly all of us. According to Spinoza, “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.”<sup>20</sup> Spinoza added that “men are far more ready for [v]engeance than for returning benefits”<sup>21</sup> and “men are by nature enemies – and however much they’ve united and bound by laws, they still retain their nature.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, Spinoza was surely referring to what he considered to be the vast majority of us when he said that “[e]veryone is proud when he’s master; everyone terrorizes when he’s not cowed by fear.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> PT II.3.

<sup>18</sup> E4P18S, II/223/15-18.

<sup>19</sup> E5P20S, II/292/19 – II/293/1.

<sup>20</sup> E4P35S.

<sup>21</sup> E3P41S.

<sup>22</sup> PT VIII.12, III/329/8-9.

<sup>23</sup> PT VII.27, III/320/14-15.

Spinoza obviously did not see full intellectual and moral equality as an intrinsic feature of human society. This same philosopher who devoted much of his life's work to debunking the superstitions of religion also wrote that the "common people" have a mentality that "is not able to perceive things clearly and distinctly," so they need to be taught about religion "according to the weakness of their understanding."<sup>24</sup> Further, Spinoza felt compelled to point out that "there is no small difference between the gladness by which a drunk is led and the gladness a Philosopher possesses."<sup>25</sup> I do not doubt for a second that Spinoza was struck by the stark differences in mental and moral power between the disciples of reason, on the one hand, and the multitude, on the other.

Then there is the so-called "Black Page" of Spinoza's *Political Treatise*, which is also the very last page of that work. That's where he pointed out that "If women were by nature equal to men, both in strength of character and in native intelligence ... surely among so many and such diverse nations we would find some where each sex ruled equally, and others where men were ruled by women ... [b]ut since this has not happened anywhere, we can say without reservation that women do not, by nature, have a right equal to men's, but that they necessarily submit to men."<sup>26</sup> From that and similarly specious reasoning, Spinoza went on to conclude that the two genders "can't rule equally without great harm to the peace."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, even in his ideal democracy, Spinoza would deny the suffrage and the right to hold political office to women, children, criminals and servants, as well as to foreigners – all of whom he deemed inadequately independent to serve the state as full citizens. It is impossible to read his writings on this topic and not be reminded of the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, philosophical geniuses of the highest order, who were consumed by the idea that some of us are born masters and others born servants. Talk about showing your age.

It would be easy for men like myself who love Spinoza to trivialize the importance of the Black Page. We could suggest it was the product of a writer who "wasn't really himself," attributing the page to the fact that he may already have been waging what turned into a fatal bout with tuberculosis. Or we can say, "Oh, it was only one page, let's not overemphasize it." Or we could offer explanations, like the one I'll include in a footnote later in this essay, that would at least defend Spinoza against the charge that he was consciously willing to cause women pain in order to perpetuate a male-dominated society. But I would advise all of Spinoza's disciples, male and female, to avoid the temptation to ignore this page or rationalize it away. Rather, I think we need to learn from it. We who read Spinoza owe it to 50 percent of the population to also steep ourselves in feminist theory. We who read Spinoza owe it to 50 percent of the population to see his words as not merely insulting to women, but as subjugating women –

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<sup>24</sup> TTP V. 40, 44, III/78/2-5, III/79/7-9.

<sup>25</sup> E3P57S.

<sup>26</sup> PT XI.4.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

as stripping them of their very humanity. And we who read Spinoza owe it to 50 percent of the population that when we do read his affirmative thoughts about the importance of equality, we periodically must add the words: “among males.” Otherwise, we are likely to take on many of the same biases he has on the subject, only we will not even recognize these biases in ourselves. At least Spinoza was honest about them.

So yes, if we were to rank philosophers based on their commitment to human equality, Spinoza may not be at the top. But as I am about to explain, he would nonetheless score far better than you might now think. In fact, in light of the Black Page and Spinoza’s sharply critical language about the masses, the extent to which he argued for equality as a political goal was really quite striking, and at least for me, inspiring.

We originally saw Spinoza’s egalitarian tendencies in the *TTP*. There, Spinoza frequently revealed his preference for democracy, both in the abstract and in the context of romanticizing what he considered to be an early exemplar of democracy – the ancient Hebrew state. In the *TTP*, Spinoza praised the idea that in a democracy, “no one transfers his natural right to another that in the future there is no consultation with him. Instead he transfers it to the greater part of the whole Society, of which he makes one part. In this way everyone remains equal, as they were before, in the state of nature.”<sup>28</sup> As for his tribute to the democratic society of the ancient Hebrews, Spinoza commented that all the members of that society “held the whole administration of the state equally, without qualification”<sup>29</sup> and enjoyed the benefits of having a separation/diffusion of powers. But what was especially remarkable about this state was the extent to which it preserved equality *economically*. “Nowhere did the citizens possess their property with a greater right than did the subjects of this state, who, with the leader, had an equal share of the lands and fields. Each one was the everlasting lord of his own share. If poverty compelled anyone to sell his estate or field, it had to be restored to him once again when the jubilee year came.”<sup>30</sup> Spinoza left no doubt that in his mind, these were all positive features.

In the *Political Treatise*, the lengths to which Spinoza would go to preserve equality – *among males* -- were spelled out in great detail. He died before he was able to elucidate the structure of what an ideal democracy would look like. But he was able to describe the respective features of an ideal monarchy and aristocracy, and in each case, those designed to preserve equality were dominant.

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<sup>28</sup> TTP XIV.36. See also *id.*, referring to the democratic state as “the most natural state, ... the one which approached most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone,” and claiming at TTP XVI.30 that “in a democratic state, absurdities are less to be feared ... [for if] the assembly is large, it’s almost impossible that the majority of its members should agree on one absurd action.”

<sup>29</sup> TTP XVII.33.

<sup>30</sup> TTP XVII.85.

Regarding a monarchy, Spinoza said that all citizens would bear arms.<sup>31</sup> No citizens would be allowed to possess immovable goods.<sup>32</sup> All citizens would be placed into clans that would each be given equal power.<sup>33</sup> “For the citizens to be as equal as possible,” Spinoza added, nobody would be identified as “Noble” except for the descendants of the king,<sup>34</sup> and as for those descendants, they would face special severe restrictions, including limitations on the right to marry or have children.<sup>35</sup> The king would be deprived of absolute power – an advisory council would advise him, promulgate laws and administer the state.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, these counselors would be chosen to serve only for a relatively short period of time so that more citizens could legitimately hope to achieve that honor.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, in Spinoza’s ideal aristocracy, equality is served early and often. To ensure that power is not placed in the hands of too small a proportion of individuals, the ratio of patricians to the multitude – “the most important Law of the state” – “ought to be about 1 to 50.”<sup>38</sup> That means that in a nation as large as contemporary America, Spinoza’s ideal aristocratic state would have had nearly seven million patricians, so political power would be far more diffused than in our so-called “democracy.” As for those patricians, Spinoza repeated the principle that equality must be preserved among them to the extent possible.<sup>39</sup> For example, some members of the supreme council would be chosen by lot, they would then nominate candidates for various public offices, and each Patrician would vote by secret ballot on whether to accept each candidate.<sup>40</sup> With respect to the Senate (a council with a number of important state powers), terms would be as short as one year, thereby ensuring that as many patricians as possible could serve in that body.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> PT VI.10.

<sup>32</sup> PT VII. 8.

<sup>33</sup> PT VI.11, 23.

<sup>34</sup> PT VII.20.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*, PT VI. 14.

<sup>36</sup> PT VI.15-19.

<sup>37</sup> PT VII.13.

<sup>38</sup> PT VIII.13.

<sup>39</sup> PT VIII. 11, 19.

<sup>40</sup> PT VIII.27.

<sup>41</sup> PT VIII.29-34. See especially III/335/20-25, and III/338/25-31.

While most of what Spinoza said directly on the topic of supporting equality was written in his political treatises, the *Ethics* was not completely silent on this topic. There, Spinoza argued that “to bring aid to everyone in need far surpasses the powers and advantage of a private person ... [so] care of the poor falls upon society as a whole.”



How, then, could a philosopher like Spinoza have been so devoted to equality if he at the same time depicted a chasm between the philosopher and the multitude that is as large as the Grand Canyon? In part, you can explain Spinoza's obsession with equality by the idea that from a strictly *formal* standpoint, he did see all human beings as the same. Spinoza liked to talk about the "essence of the human mind," by which he meant the capacity that human beings possess when we live according to our potential. "That essence," he wrote, "is defined by reason," adding that "because man could neither be nor be conceived if he did not have the power to enjoy [his] ... greatest good [the knowledge of God]," that greatest good is common to everyone.<sup>42</sup> "For it pertains to the essence of the human Mind to have an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence."<sup>43</sup>

Spinoza also recognized numerous basic psychological principles that pertain to human beings generally. Just consider Parts III and IV of the *Ethics* and you will find one psychological generalization after another that Spinoza applies to all of humanity -- not men vis a vis women, or masters vis a vis servants, but everyone. As part of that discussion, Spinoza wrote about how susceptible we are to the "passive" emotions that can be so destructive when not subdued by even greater, more wholesome emotions, like the so-called "intellectual love of God." He spoke of the impact of external forces with whom we interact -- some of which bolster our power, whereas others deplete it. And he highlighted as an axiom the statement that "There is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed."<sup>44</sup> With that in mind, Spinoza taught that no person can prudently go it alone. We need one another. We need to combine with the power of those who are like us (other human beings) to take on the power of external forces. We need to come together, in short, as members of a community -- formally equal and similar in so many ways, even if some of us are philosophers and others are drunks.

Finally, of all the factors that explain Spinoza's devotion to equality (at least among males), perhaps none is more important than the centrality he placed on envy as a human impulse. "From love of esteem," Spinoza said of the typical human being, "he disdains equals and will not put up with being ruled by them. From envy for the greater praise or better fortune someone else receives -- these things are never equal -- he wishes the other person ill, and is delighted when bad things happen to him."<sup>45</sup> Spinoza taught explicitly that "great inequality

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E4App.XVII. Given his further statement that "[t]hose ... who know the true use of money, and set bounds to their wealth according to need, live contentedly with little," we can speculate that he may have favored a progressive tax system in order to care for the poor, while enabling the affluent to possess all they need and more.

E4App.XXIX.

<sup>42</sup> E4P36S.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> E4 Ax. 1.

<sup>45</sup> TTP XVII.15.

among the citizens [leads] to envy, constant grumbling, and finally to rebellions.”<sup>46</sup> Only by ridding ourselves of inequalities can we hope to minimize the dangers of envy and ensure the stability of our state. In other words, only by ridding ourselves of perceived inequities can we hope to find the sense of justice that kills envy and the desire for vengeance, a sense that each of us is getting our due and nothing less.<sup>47</sup>

In the last chapter of the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza made it clear that if we truly could guarantee that an aristocracy could be led by a group of righteous men, “free of every affect, and guided only by zeal for the public well-being,” that would be the best form of government.<sup>48</sup> But by experience, he added, we know that such states don’t exist – for patricians are as corruptible as anyone else. And so, we are left to advocate for democracies, where the state is ruled by the masses, and the masses are fueled by envy and hatred, and they’re willing to terrorize whenever they’re not afraid of the consequences.

Preserving stability in such a state is not an easy task. And without an extensive effort to protect equality, it is an impossible one.

### **Fraternity**

So far, I have argued that Spinoza was strongly pro-liberty and pro-equality, though in each case, his support for these concepts was bounded, as there are important respects in which he wanted to limit both. Now, we turn to the concept of fraternity, and this time I am forced to quote the words of Teyve the Dairyman: “there is no other hand.” Oh sure, Spinoza appreciated the value of strife in modest, superficial respects. Yet when it comes to what was truly significant, let alone profound, he *invariably* came out on the side of fraternity. For him, not only is fraternity crucial to a long-lasting state, but you simply cannot have too much of it.

Spinoza the political theorist always seemed to take his cues from Spinoza the ethicist. And so I will begin this section with a quote from the *Political Treatise* when Spinoza looked at the ethical ideal insofar as it enters the realm of politics: “[I]f we consider that the supreme

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<sup>46</sup> TP VII.13.

<sup>47</sup> For descriptions of “justice” in Spinoza’s works, see TTP IV.7 and XVI.42, and PT II.23.

A consideration of what Spinoza said about envy and what gives rise to it may be informative as to why he thought he could get away with depriving women of the right to vote or seek public office. According to Spinoza, people only envy those who we see as our equal – i.e., who we see as someone like ourselves. To illustrate this point, he contended that “when we said ... that we venerate a man because we wonder at his prudence, strength of character, etc., that happens ... because we imagine these virtues to be peculiarly in him, and not as common to our nature. Therefore, we shall not envy him these virtues any more than we envy trees their height, or lions their strength.” (E3P55 D&S, II/184/9-14). Spinoza may possibly have reasoned that women and men see themselves as sufficiently unlike one another that when a woman was not given the franchise or was precluded from public office, she would not resent the men who were given those opportunities any more than we resent a bird for its powers of flight or a whale for its powers of deep-sea swimming.

<sup>48</sup> PT XI.2.

exercise of loving-kindness is to protect the peace and bring about harmony, we won't doubt that a person has really done his duty if he has brought each person as much aid as the laws of the Commonwealth – i.e., harmony and tranquility – permit.”<sup>49</sup> There you have a recognition that in a functioning state, the laws are designed to promote harmony and tranquility. And he repeated this concept later in the *Political Treatise* when he said that “peace does not consist in the privation of war, but in a union *or* harmony of minds.”<sup>50</sup>

Recall that for Spinoza, the entire point of a state is to increase the power and security of its members by providing for the conditions of mutual aid. “Everyone ... would lack both the strength and the time, if he alone had to plow, to sow, to reap, to grind, to cook ... and to do the many other things necessary to support life,” but together, we can reap the benefits of each other's skills and interests.<sup>51</sup> In the *Ethics*, Spinoza repeatedly cited the willingness of virtuous people to help out their fellows and serve as agents of harmony. Allow me to quote just a few relevant passages from that great work. “He who lives according to the guidance of reason strives, as far as he can to repay the other's Hate, Anger and Disdain toward him, with Love, or Nobility.”<sup>52</sup> “By Nobility, I understand the Desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship” (emphasis removed).<sup>53</sup> “[H]e who strives from reason to guide others acts not by impulse, but kindly, generously, and with the greatest steadfastness of mind.”<sup>54</sup> And finally, “free men are very useful to one another, are joined to one another by the greatest necessity of friendship ... are very thankful to one another ... and ... always act[] honestly, not deceptively.”<sup>55</sup>

You get the idea – Spinoza's ideal citizens treat those they encounter with love, and bring a spirit of social service, generosity and gratitude – a sharp contrast to what Spinoza described as the general human tendencies toward envy and vengeance. It is, in fact, precisely because of the strength and ubiquity of our hate-based tendencies that the state must go out of its way to foster the spirit of love and fraternity. The question is, how is this accomplished? Or stated differently, using a phrase that Spinoza repeatedly invokes, how can people be led “as if by one mind”<sup>56</sup> – in other words, by a commonality of purpose?<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> PT III.10.

<sup>50</sup> PT VI.4.

<sup>51</sup> TTP V.18.

<sup>52</sup> E4P36.

<sup>53</sup> E3P59S, II/188/27-28.

<sup>54</sup> E4P37S1, II/236/16-18.

<sup>55</sup> E4P71D, E4P72.

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., PT II.16, III.2.

<sup>57</sup> I have borrowed the term “commonality of purpose” from Curley, *The Complete Words of Spinoza*, Vol. 2, p. 494.

To begin, Spinoza reminds us on multiple occasions that people unite for one of three reasons – “a common hope, or fear, or a common desire to avenge some harm.”<sup>58</sup> Any student of the *Ethics* would recognize that over the long haul, a “common hope” – an emotion based on love, rather than hate -- would be far more stable. And this point is reinforced in the *Political Treatise*, which stated that “a free multitude is guided by hope more than by fear, whereas a multitude which has been subjected is guided more by fear than by hope.”<sup>59</sup> So the challenge for the state is to develop a sense of fraternity through a common set of hopes, yet when a society is deeply divided, this is more easily said than done. Presumably, the members of the society would need to have enough affection for the society’s past, or trust in the prospects reflected in its present, to support happily anticipating its future. In order to foster trust and security, Spinoza recommends a firm commitment to law and order, including equal justice under law.<sup>60</sup> More generally, and consistent with what we have said already, Spinoza would have appreciated the need to spread both liberty and equality throughout the land if there is to be a prospect of developing any set of hopes that is truly common to one and all.

However, Spinoza also recognized that ideological commitment to principles such as liberty and equality cannot blind us to the realities of the human condition. Accordingly, he reminded us that envisioning societies capable of preserving a fraternal spirit requires taking people as they are, with all the passions (envy, ambition, etc.) that they bring to the table. Spinoza emphasized this point in the very first chapter of the *Political Treatise*, where he took philosophers to task for speaking of people in unrealistic, idealized terms. To quote Spinoza, “[t]hough everyone is persuaded that Religion teaches each person to love his neighbor as himself ... this persuasion has little power against the affects. ... [I]t has no weight in the marketplace or the court, where we need it most.”<sup>61</sup> In his attempt to be a pragmatist, Spinoza taught that a state may recognize the need to build in incentives that wouldn’t be needed if everyone was maximally virtuous but could prove very useful given the reality of the human condition. For example, he cited the benefits of rich people being greedy.<sup>62</sup> He also spoke of ambitious people seeking “portraits, triumphs, and other incentives to virtue [which] are signs of bondage, not freedom [and yet] these incentives spur men on more than any other.”<sup>63</sup> Obviously, the state must be careful not to go overboard in creating too much inequality, but Spinoza seemed to recognize that even such a high goal as equality needs to be balanced against others.

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<sup>58</sup> PT VI.1, PT III.9.

<sup>59</sup> PT V.6.

<sup>60</sup> PT VII.2, TTP XVI.42.

<sup>61</sup> PT I.6, III/275/13-19.

<sup>62</sup> PT X.6.

<sup>63</sup> PT X. 6, 8.

Reflecting his insistence on taking people as they are in an effort to build fraternity, Spinoza additionally taught us about the curse of factions generally, and religious sectarianism in particular. He warned against allowing an aristocratic state to form discrete, strong factions, thereby undermining its stability.<sup>64</sup> With respect to religion, Spinoza said that “it’s very necessary to make sure that the Patricians aren’t divided into sects, some favoring one group, others favoring others.”<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, he suggested that Patricians ought to be of the same Religion, a very simple and most Universal Religion.”<sup>66</sup> Spinoza, as a philosopher, hardly adopted all the principles of his so-called “Universal Religion,” but his willingness to promote such a generic faith tells you just how much he felt that factions and sectarianism threaten the fraternity, and therefore the stability, of a society. Indeed, the depth of Spinoza’s antipathy toward factions clearly follows from his general philosophy. For in the *Ethics*, Spinoza painted a portrait of our species as a naturally combative group that would be wise to protect itself by associating with entities we perceive as resembling ourselves. He was, of course, referring to humankind as a whole. But when you consider how envious we are as a species, and how generally hateful we can be to anyone who isn’t viewed as an ally, it isn’t hard to see how instead of loving our country, let alone all our neighbors, we confine our love to the members of our faction of choice – and we *otherize* everyone else as roadblocks, threats or enemies. In this way, fraternity becomes a pipe dream and societies begin to implode.

Finally, Spinoza taught that the state should support a free and open marketplace of ideas, even if it becomes a bit quarrelsome, in which large numbers of people are involved in the decision making. “When the few decide everything, simply on the basis of their own affects,” he wrote, “freedom and the common good are lost. For human wits are too sluggish to penetrate everything right away. But by asking advice, listening, and arguing, they’re sharpened. When people try all means, in the end, they find ways to the things they want which everyone approves, and no one had ever thought of before.”<sup>67</sup> Personally, I love the metaphor Hasana Sharp uses when she compares the mental harmony of a functional Spinozist state to the unity belonging to a quarrelsome family.<sup>68</sup> Yes, you will find plenty of disagreement, yet you will also find plenty of love, mutual aid, and loyalty. That’s the kind of fraternity Spinoza had in mind.

### Synthesis

Centuries after Spinoza departed from the earth, Martin Buber wrote a passage about Jewish creativity that reminds me of Spinoza. “It is this striving for unity that has made the Jew

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<sup>64</sup> See PT VIII.1.

<sup>65</sup> PT VIII. 46

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*

<sup>67</sup> PT IX.14.

<sup>68</sup> Hasana Sharp, “Family Quarrels and Mental Harmony,” published in *Spinoza’s Political Treatise, a Critical Guide*, edited by Yitzhak Melamed and Hasana Sharp (Cambridge U. Press: Cambridge, U.K, 2018), pp. 93-110.

creative. Striving to evolve unity out of the division of his I, he conceived the idea of the unitary God. Striving to evolve unity out of the division of the human community, he conceived the idea of universal justice. Striving to evolve unity out of the division of all living matter, he conceived the idea of universal love. Striving to evolve unity out of the division of the world, he created the Messianic ideal, which later, again under the guiding participation of Jews, was reduced in scope, made finite, and called socialism.”<sup>69</sup>

No, I’m not suggesting that Spinoza was a socialist, a believer in a single world government or a devotee of other political movements that took flight only after he died. What I am suggesting is that Spinoza, one of the most creative Jewish thinkers in recorded history, was driven perhaps above all else by the devotion to unity. His monist, naturalist metaphysics centers around that concept. So does his religious philosophy, which posits a single God and asserts that every individual thing is but a property or quality of the divine Substance. And Spinoza’s political philosophy similarly reflects that devotion to unity insofar as he shows us that without a strong unifying fraternal spirit, no state could be stable and none of its citizens secure.

If we students of Spinoza wish to emulate our teacher, we would be wise not only to focus on the devotion to unity in each facet of his philosophy, but also to consider his entire body of work as a single, coherent fabric. So, in that spirit, I shall take a moment to view Spinoza’s political philosophy as part of that fabric. We begin with his metaphysics and the sense of cosmic univocity (one voice in nature) – or to use his words, the belief that “nothing happens in nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same.”<sup>70</sup> Then we bring in “God,” a name Spinoza constantly invoked to refer both to the ground of being (the one *and only* power-generator, or voice, that underlies all of reality) and to the life of beings (the infinite diverse expressions of this divine voice). This leads us to focus on individual forms in nature, including humans, each of whom expresses a finite quality of God in unique respects. Then, as we contemplate ethics, we recognize the blessedness of living in accordance with our fullest powers as expressions of God, especially our faculty of reason. More specifically, we recognize that when we act rationally and in accordance with our own unique natures rather than being battered about and dominated by external forces (including other human beings), we not only live in freedom but also in harmony with God’s other human expressions.

So, as we begin considering Spinoza’s political philosophy, we find ourselves striving to find a path for human beings to interact in a way that best preserves our freedom in a positive sense of the term – as freedom *to* express ourselves in the ways that maximize our personal power in life. As we have seen, we may locate that path in affirming liberty (so that we can live as masters of our destinies, not as slaves), equality (so that we feel we are treated justly and don’t give in to envy and the desire for vengeance) and fraternity (so that we can assist one another, willingly, as if we are part of a single, loving, loyal, though at times quarrelsome, family).

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<sup>69</sup> Martin Buber, from the address entitled “Judaism and Mankind,” first published in 1911, and republished in Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, edited by Nahum Glatzer (Schocken Books: New York, 1973), p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> E3 Pref., II/138/12-15.

Now, I ask you to picture the author of this philosophy transported through time and space to the America of Donald Trump, Mitch McConnell and Nancy Pelosi. He has been tasked with the job of evaluating how our society is faring from the standpoint of ensuring liberty, equality and fraternity. On the issue of liberty, he might well be impressed. We have carved out many rights belonging to individuals, not to mention an ethos that fears the tyranny of government overreach. My sense is that our time traveler would have paid many compliments to our Bill of Rights, and special praise to our First Amendment and the judicial gloss provided to it over the past two centuries.

On the issue of equality, I suspect our time traveler would not be nearly as pleased. To be sure, a wide swath of society now enjoys all of life's material necessities, and those who are down on their luck can draw on various welfare benefits at the government's expense. Yet the disparities in wealth, opportunity and treatment under law have become so stark – not only among individuals but even among races – that the level of equity in this society has become an embarrassment. In talking about inequalities, we have focused considerably on the envy that ensues from a sense that there are people who resemble ourselves and yet are being given far more than we are. But such envy is only the beginning of the dynamic of inequity, as our time traveler would have realized. Today more so than ever, the lives of the rich and famous are laid bare for everyone to see – the vice, the hypocrisy, and at times, the massive head starts. We watch as corporations built on the labor of legions provide virtually all the spoils to a select few, and as politicians, many of whom rule over us for literally decades, write laws limiting the taxes of those who have more money than they could possibly spend. Inevitably, envy turns into indignation, resentment, and a sense that the society that makes this possible is fundamentally unjust. And when people find themselves born to a so-called “underclass” and ashamed of their race because it too has become associated with that underclass (all the while knowing that deep down, they are no different than the children of privilege), this is not exactly a formula for societal stability. Our time traveler would have immediately diagnosed all these symptoms simply by noting a failure to prioritize social equity.

And then, finally, we turn to the notion of fraternity. Here, as our time traveler would have noticed, the cupboard is almost completely bare. You can hear it by watching cable TV or listening to political talk radio. In these outlets, every day is an opportunity for one group of Americans to snidely attack another. And you can see the lack of fraternity in how even the institutions that used to bring us together, like spectator sports, no longer serve that capacity – for they too are becoming politicized and ever so divisive. It would be difficult to deny that this country has come to epitomize the kind of polarized, faction-dominated state that our time traveler simply could not possibly imagine lasting. He may find common hopes, fears or desires to avenge some harm – but they are not common to the entire society, only to certain factions. And our time traveler would recognize that the same passionate individualism that caused us to work so hard to preserve liberty is also pushing us in a factionalized direction – because we do seem to be fighting a controlled war of all against all, and in such a fight, it is difficult to consider the entire society as allies, and more natural to develop affection for certain groups and enmity for others.

For me, the primary takeaway after taking this deep dive into Spinoza’s politics is that the polarization we experience in America today is not a mere annoyance but more like a lethal cancer. Our national motto of *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one), cannot be merely aspirational, let alone ironic; it needs to be real. We had better identify ways to become a single country again – with a unified national spirit and all the pageantry that entails.

For those of us on the political left, maybe the next time we celebrate athletes who kneel during the national anthem, we might also consider making our own statement about the flag – like displaying one, proudly, in front of our homes. That flag belongs to all of America, and the fact that it has become a divisive symbol associated primarily with political conservatism does not mean that it needs to remain that way forever. We also might want to watch the way in which we practice identity politics, lest we create the impression that people ought to define ourselves primarily on the basis of race, gender or sexual preference – in short, by what divides us and not by what unifies us as human beings living in the same society. Further, we on the left may also wish to join forces with many of our conservative compatriots in seeking term limits for legislators and judges – thereby working for the principle that a healthy, equitable society requires a profound commitment to diffusing power among the citizenry, rather than allowing a small number to dominate us over long periods of time.

As for those of us on the political right, we can no longer pretend that a new day has dawned, systemic racism can be ignored, some families’ net worth deserves to approach a million times that of others, climate change can be brushed off as a hoax, and the economic marketplace can be trusted to distribute wealth, income, status and even the right to healthcare. Also, if we don’t want people insulting our flag, we had better take responsibility for their frustration – because as long as there is massive injustice and inequality there will be hatred, envy, and a desire for vengeance. To think otherwise (e.g., to consider this nation color-blind and equitable) is to be like the philosophers lampooned at the beginning of the *Political Treatise*, whose political theory Spinoza called “a Fantasy, possible only in Utopia, or in the golden age of the Poets, where there’d be absolutely no need for it.”<sup>71</sup> Moreover, what is especially scary that is coming from the political right these days is the idea that as long as we are a republic – a nation governed by laws and elected representatives – we no longer have to be a democracy. We now, it appears, have tens of millions of people who are thrilled that Wyoming has as many Senators as California, or that winning the popular vote for President means nothing. In short, much of America has happily forgotten that the whole justification for democracy is, as Spinoza put it, a decision to transfer ultimate power over conduct to the “greater part of the whole Society” – not to some minority who has a perpetual advantage over others by virtue of geography, skin color, or family money.

In the end, Spinoza has left me with a single prescription for uniting our society: common hopes. As indicated, I don’t know that we have any such hopes right now. Yes, we have liberty and large pockets of affluence. But we do not share a love for the same heroes of yesteryear, and we have lost trust in the amount of equity in our law enforcement system, the selection of our

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<sup>71</sup> PT I.1



legislators, or in our the labor and capital markets. So how are we supposed to come together on behalf of a common set of hopes for the future? This is our challenge. It may be met in part by reclaiming many of our common heroes from the past rather than canceling whoever proved themselves to be deeply flawed. After all, the writer of the Black Page was obviously deeply prejudiced and ignorant about women, even though the great progressive supporter of women's rights, Bertrand Russell, once wrote that Spinoza "is the noblest and most loveable of the great philosophers ... ethically he is supreme."<sup>72</sup> Also, we must clearly demand justice for the present – not half-measures but the Full Monty. Otherwise, we will continue to be dominated by factions and be relegated to fighting in an endless civil war, cold though it may be.<sup>73</sup>

In short, my search for the elusive common hopes would begin by reclaiming a love for at least some of the symbols and heroes that have inspired American patriotism since our nation was founded, combined with committing ourselves to becoming a far more just and equitable society in the very near future. Stonewall Jackson and George Washington are two very different people. Yes, they both had slaves, but one fought primarily for slavery, whereas the other fought primarily for liberty – the polar opposite. Let us not forget that distinction. In addition, rather than giving up on this country and half of its current residents, perhaps we can envision doing away with overpowering factions and becoming, more than ever before, one society – a society known for its liberty, equality and fraternity. In such a society, we could come to expect agenda-less narratives from earnest reporters, who are taken seriously by one and all; integrity from our politicians, perhaps because they are term limited and not always obsessed with re-election;<sup>74</sup> compassion from our electorate, who seek out statesmen interested in caring for the environment, the poor, and whoever else is not likely to be protected by the economic marketplace; and finally, generosity and affection from our neighbors, all of whom view us as part of their beloved American family.

Is this a fantasy? A utopia? Perhaps. But there's beauty in utopian, Messianic thinking. It allows our hopes to conquer our fears. In fact, if Spinoza hadn't been excommunicated by his people and mine, maybe he would have come to appreciate that even philosophers need Jerusalem every bit as much as they need Athens.

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<sup>72</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1972), p. 569

<sup>73</sup> As Spinoza himself explicitly recognized, the state is always in greater danger from its own citizens than from its external enemies. See TTP XVII.3.

<sup>74</sup> Opponents of term limits would respond that when term limits are imposed, politicians tend to be more inexperienced and therefore more likely to defer to lobbyists, whose knowledge on the relevant subject matter would dwarf their own. It is debatable whether that factor would outweigh the benefits to the public of being represented by statesmen who are not seeking re-election and are therefore free to vote their conscience without regard to offending voters, donors or party leaders. What is *not* debatable, however, is that term limits would diffuse power among a greater number of citizens, which ought to be one of the hallmarks of any democracy.