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*Politically Mediated Affects. Envy in Spinoza's 'Tractatus Politicus'*

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**(Further notes. Where we regard someone as superior to ourselves it's not only envy which is affected. See veneration at EIII52s `nxthe ret of p52. Also p55)**

**I. Introduction**

One of the psychological habits that has always interested philosophers is our disposition to compare ourselves with other people. We humans, it seems, are alert to the ways in which we are and are not alike, and our sensitivity to our similarities and differences grounds some of our most consequential passions. We envy people who have qualities that we ourselves would like to have, and are proud of qualities of our own that we think others would like to possess. This is an age-old concern. Augustine, for instance, is alive to the affective implications of our perceptions of the similarities and differences between ourselves and others, and there is a hint of disapproval in his observation that, when a man cannot converse with those around him, he is liable to take more pleasure in his dog than in other people (Augustine 1998, XIX.6). The lack of a common language blocks a sense of affinity among human beings that is the ground of some of our most powerful feelings and, at its strongest, is manifested in the kind of friendship that Montaigne describes as 'equitable and equable' – equitable as to its sharing of burdens and benefits, and equable in its trust and affection (Montaigne, 1958, 139). Early modern writers take up this strand of thought, but explain the comparative basis of our passions in an unprecedented range of ways. Malebranche, for example, perpetuates the well-established view that our responses to the similarities and differences between natural things are an expression of divine benevolence (Malebranche, 1980, 351). Spinoza, by contrast, defends the theologically unorthodox claim that the operations of divine power are indifferent to human needs (*E I App.*). His question is how, in an uncaring environment, we can create and sustain patterns of similarity or agreement that will enable us to live joyfully.

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In his *Ethics* Spinoza offers a philosophical answer. Only insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, he contends, must they always agree in nature (*E* IVp35), and ‘only insofar as they agree in nature are they consistently useful to one another’ (*E* IVp31c). But according to the opening paragraphs of the *Political Treatise*, anyone who thinks that this is a sufficient basis for creating a harmonious way of life is dreaming of a golden age. Humans are far from rational; rather, they are ‘so constituted that they pity those whose affairs are going badly and envy those who are prospering; they’re more inclined to vengeance than mercy; moreover, everyone wants others to live according to his mentality, so that they approve what he approves and reject what he rejects. Since everyone wants to be first, they fall into quarrels and try as hard as they can to crush each other. Whoever turns out to be the winner prides himself more on harming the loser than on doing good for himself’ (*TP* 1.5). If we are going to be useful to one another we therefore need to compensate for these antisocial impulses by learning how to bring it about that we agree in nature.

The *Theologico-Political Treatise* looks to religion to provide a partial solution. Religious practices, it claims, can strengthen our capacity to agree with one another. However, by the time Spinoza came to write the *Political Treatise*, his faith in this strategy seems to have drained away. For modern citizens, he now argues, religion does not provide an effective antidote to conflict. ‘It is strong, of course, at the point of death, when illness has conquered the affects and the man lies wasting away. It is strong, also, in houses of worship, where men conduct no business. But it has no weight in the marketplace or the court, where we need it most’ (*TP* 1.5). To create agreement in our natures we should rather follow the lead of people with practical experience of politics, who have already identified the types of *civitas* in which it is possible to live harmoniously and the means by which such harmony can be maintained (*TP* 1.3). The resolution of the problem from which we set out is therefore fundamentally political. Only by living in well-designed states can we achieve the kind of agreement that makes for a satisfying way of life.

The constitutions outlined in the *Political Treatise* are intended to show how monarchies, aristocracies and democracies can generate levels of agreement within a community that are sufficiently high to remove the threat of internal resistance, and secure them so far as possible against external attack. His aristocracies, Spinoza boasts, are ‘everlasting’, and ‘can’t be destroyed by any inherent defect’ (*TP* X.9). But this buoyant claim raises a problem. In all three types of constitution, many

groups of subjects are excluded from any part in political life. In what sense, then, do they and the class of citizens whose privileges they are denied agree in nature? What sort of agreement serves to reconcile them to their political status and prevents them from resisting inequality?

These questions loom particularly large in the closing pages of the unfinished *Political Treatise*, where Spinoza attributes the purported fact that women have never ruled over men to a difference in their natures. Women, he claims, differ in nature from men and are necessarily subject to them. By implication, then, men and women cannot agree in nature and, as Spinoza duly insists, cannot enter into equal political relationships. ‘... Men and women can’t rule equally without great harm to the peace ...’ (TP XI.3). As many eminent commentators have pointed out, several of Spinoza’s arguments for these conclusions fly in the face of his other commitments (Matheron, 1977; Lloyd, 1994; Gatens and Lloyd, 1999; Gatens, 2009, Sharpe, 2011). For example, he argues that women are not fit to rule because they do not have as much strength of mind (*fortitudo animi*) or ability (*ingenium*) as men, whilst also allowing that men, who *are* fit to rule, often lack these very qualities. The same air of contradiction surrounds the two statements I have singled out – that men and women differ in nature and that women are necessarily subject to men – which appear to conflict with the *Political Treatise*’s assertion that ‘everyone shares a common nature’ (TP VII.27). Incoherences such as these, together with the tone and structure of the passage, suggest that something psychologically complicated is going on, and that Spinoza is doing more than offering a philosophical argument. Nevertheless, I think it is possible to read his claim about men’s and women’s natures in a way that is compatible with his broader conception of the natures of individual things, and in the final section of this chapter I shall suggest how this can be done.

My main interest in this interpretative exercise is not, however, to show that it offers a way to rescue Spinoza’s attack on women rulers, an argument that seems to me irretrievably flawed. Rather, I shall suggest, it enables us to address Spinoza’s treatment of political inequality more broadly by alerting us to the fact that he regards many groups as unfitted for citizenship, thus raising the question of whether their members also differ in nature from the members of ruling elites. Is the case of men and women unique, as it is easy to assume, or are differences in nature between social groups relatively commonplace? If so, how do these differences bear on the political

status of the groups concerned? For example, can the enduring political exclusion of a group always be attributed to the nature of its members?

Since successful societies are in Spinoza's view built on agreement, these questions take us back to the underlying issue of what it is for the members of a community to agree with one another. Does agreement obtain between people who differ in nature? And if so, how? In the next section of this chapter I shall therefore consider what kind of agreement Spinoza is concerned with. In the third I shall ask how far this sort of agreement is compatible with political inequality. And in the fourth I shall draw on these discussions to show how, in his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza is able consistently to claim that men and women differ in nature.

Securing co-operation among individuals who have divergent and often incompatible desires and aspirations is clearly a complicated task, and states have various tools for dealing with it. They can, for example, scare people into compliance by threatening to punish those who disobey the law. The model states of the *Political Treatise* all rely on this technique, and Spinoza regards it as an essential aspect of government (*TP* IV.4). But he acknowledges the disadvantages of terrorising populations, and also advocates a gentler approach (*TP* V.4). As far as possible, states should create circumstances in which subjects view obedience as beneficial, and want to do what the law demands of them; but in order to manage this, legislators need to take account of human nature. In particular, they must devise laws sensitive to the psychic dispositions that bind us together and drive us apart, and use these to create ways of life in which co-operation is sustained (*TP* VII.2). If they succeed in doing so, they will create circumstances in which people are, as Spinoza puts it, like one another, and agree with one another. However, as I shall show, these forms of likeness and difference, agreement and disagreement, are primarily manifested in our affective powers. To see how agreement can be encouraged by political means, we therefore need to begin by examining the various affective dispositions on which agreement rests, and in which it is manifested.

## **II. Commonality and Agreement**

To know whether we are like one another we first have to recognise that we are distinct individuals, and according to Spinoza we come to know ourselves through the passive affects that we experience when external things affect us (*E* IIp23). In some cases these affects give us a fantastical sense of the difference between ourselves and

other things, as when a baby fails to distinguish itself from its mother, or a tortured Christian is convinced that she is inhabited by the devil. But even when we have a comparatively realistic grasp of our own boundary, the affects that constitute it remain to some extent confused. For example, even when I know that I am distinct from the frightening dog biting at my heels, my fear of the dog is liable to reflect a partial misunderstanding of what it is about me that enables the dog to affect me as it does. Lacking this self-knowledge, I may, for instance, overrate its aggressiveness and underrate my own timidity (EIIIp25).

Misunderstandings of this kind are, in Spinoza's view, an endemic manifestation of the *conatus* that constitutes our individual essence or nature. As human beings, we strive to persevere in our being (E IIIp6). We try to increase and stabilise our capacity to deal resiliently with the external things we encounter, and the patterns of our success and failure are manifested in our affects. When our striving is successful, we experience joyful affects such as hope, gladness or self-esteem, and when we fail we experience forms of sadness (E IIIp11). Moreover, because joyfulness is inherently pleasurable, we find it desirable. Each of us strives to satisfy our desires by bringing about pleasurable states of affairs and avoiding those that we find saddening. But the striving itself can also lead us to misconstrue the way we are affected by external things, as when I blame the dog for being frightening rather than acknowledging my own lack of courage. We often protect our joyfulness by misinterpreting what we and the external world are like, and by doing so block the path to fuller understanding.

The process by which we come to distinguish ourselves from other things is therefore an affective one. Rather than starting out with an idea of ourselves and encountering aspects of the external world, we derive this idea from the way things affect us, so that my idea of myself is an idea of the many ways in which I have been affected. Furthermore, we experience other things affectively. Rather than encountering patches of colour or tables and chairs, we encounter objects of desire or aversion and distinguish them from one another on this basis. Someone who finds, for example, that artichokes are delicious and beetroot is disgusting learns to differentiate between the two vegetables, but also learns something about themselves, namely how each vegetable affects them.

Part III of the *Ethics* contains an elaborate classification of the ways in which we experience external things. But as Spinoza warns, no schema can capture all our

affects. This is partly because they vary with their objects, as when a man's love for his wife differs from his love for his children, parents or friends (*E IIIp56s*), and partly because our affects reflect our individual constitutions and histories. Cities, for example, may excite me but depress you, and as Spinoza remarks, human lust differs from equine lust (*E IIIp57s*). Nevertheless, since the ways that human individuals strive to persevere in their being or live joyfully are on the whole more similar than the respective strivings of humans and horses, we can generalise about the characteristic ways in which we humans exercise our *conatus*, and about our roughly similar responses to particular types of things. While each of us has their own desires and strives to realise them, we have many pleasures, desires and sadnesses in common, and these inform our sense of what we are. Our conception of ourselves as members of the human species is therefore rooted in a shared style of affective responsiveness to external things, which not only grounds our sense that we are like one another, but also informs the way we compare ourselves. "When we compare one person with another", Spinoza explains, 'we distinguish them only by a difference of affects', as for example when we call some intrepid and others timid (*E IIIp51*). For Spinoza, then, this is the significant sense in which we are like one another, and it is this affective commonality that makes us mutually useful. The fact that other people respond to external things with a repertoire of affects resembling our own creates a crucial form of similarity between us, and our recognition that we are alike in this respect in turn shapes our efforts to live joyfully. Consciously and unconsciously, it inclines us to strive to increase our own joyfulness by imitating other people's affects.

According to Spinoza, this overarching disposition to imitate the affects of others is manifested in a range of specific responses. For example, 'from the mere fact that we imagine someone to enjoy something, we shall love that thing and desire to enjoy it' (*E IIIp32*). When you recognise that, because another person is somewhat like you, the things that give them pleasure are likely to give you pleasure as well, you will want what they want. Or to take another case, 'we pity a thing ... provided that we judge it to be like us' (*E IIIp22s*). If you come across a melancholy stranger and recognise that she is suffering what you would suffer if you were melancholy, her sadness will arouse an answering sadness or pity in you. Or again, 'we favour him who has benefited someone like us' (*E 3p22s*). When we observe someone else feeling grateful to a third person who has benefited them, and recognise that we

would feel gratitude in comparable circumstances, we too feel love or favour for the giver (*E* III, Definition of the Affects XIX).

These examples illustrate a one-sided process in which individuals who recognise that they share a range of affective dispositions independently imitate the others' affects. However, while Spinoza holds that this style of response is characteristic of human beings, he implies that there is something immature about it. It is, as it were, a residue of the way that small children laugh just because others laugh and cry merely because others cry, without knowing why they do so (*E* IIIp32s). Among adults, the one-sided imitation of the affects is complemented by more complex patterns of mutual accommodation, in which individuals strive for collective empowerment and satisfaction. Some of these patterns surround our desire for esteem. Suppose, for example, I hanker for your esteem. I know that you approve of people who give money to charity and, by imagining the satisfaction that their actions give you, I come to want what you want. I too admire people who give to charity. Suppose also that, acting on this affect, I start to give money to charity myself. By doing so I give you the double pleasure of esteeming me and seeing your affect more widely shared; but I also increase my own self-esteem, both because my own action gives me satisfaction and because I know it pleases you. Each of us therefore increases the pleasure of the other, and underlying our exchange is our mutual recognition of our affective commonality. Each of us wants the esteem of the other, and each of us accommodates our affects to those of the other in order to satisfy our own desire.

These relationships are particular instances of a more encompassing form of imitative exchange that is also based on our recognition of affective similarity. 'When we love a thing that is like ourselves', Spinoza tells us, 'we strive as far as we can to bring it about that it loves us in return' (*E* 3p33). To love someone, according to this account, is to try to make oneself lovable to the beloved by imitating their affects (for instance by wanting what they want, favouring those who benefit them and fostering their self-esteem), and to be loved is to be the recipient of this pattern of feeling. Friends or lovers strive to co-ordinate their affects so that each makes the other more joyful. To some extent, their relationships are grounded on affective similarity in the straightforward sense that people who love one another usually have some traits in common; they may, for example, share an interest in history, a sense of humour, or a preference for living tidily. But the commonality with which Spinoza is concerned is a



mutual capacity to enhance the joy of others by accommodating and responding to their affects, symbolised by images of lovers united in perfect harmony, and by communities bound together in unalloyed concord (*E* III, Definition of the Affects VI). This is what it is for individuals to become like one another, and the more stably harmonious their relationships become the more they agree with one another. Likeness or agreement between people is therefore not an end state. Rather, it is a measure of their on-going power to maintain a co-operative and joyful form of life.

To illustrate agreement in its fullest form, Spinoza imagines a group of people who ‘so agree in all things that they compose, as it were, one mind and one body ... and seek for themselves the common advantage of all’ (*E* IVp18s). Each wants for the others what they want for themselves and unfailingly treats the rest with justice and kindness. However, as he also insists, such a level of harmony is in practice beyond us. Agreement is always limited, because the same patterns of imitation that enable us to co-operate also work, in two distinct ways, to undermine co-operation and generate discord (*E* IIIp32). As we have seen, the recognition that we are affectively like one another prompts us to imitate others people’s desires; but while this can increase our joyfulness it can also generate envy (Girard, 2004). Some of our desires are for things that cannot be shared, and when two people want something that only one of them can enjoy, each will envy the other (*E* IIIp32). Moreover, because envy of an individual tends to mutate into envy of the group to which they belong, its poisonous effects are liable to spread throughout a community. In addition - and here the second destructive form of imitation comes into play - our efforts to live joyfully by cultivating relationships of love and esteem are often damaged by a form of ambition. Instead of striving for mutual accommodation with others, we strive to create relationships that benefit us more than them, by getting them to share our desires and do what we want (*E* III p31s). Rather than accommodating ourselves to the world, we try to form it in our own image.

Each of these patterns of imitation rests on an inadequate understanding of the satisfactions that agreement brings and the processes through which it can be cultivated. Envy arises among people who strive to empower themselves by satisfying specific desires, such as a desire to be exclusively loved, and are unable to adapt in the light of others’ aspirations. This way of exercising one’s *conatus* generates conflict because it fails to take account of the commonality of our imitative dispositions; like us, others want to be exclusively loved, and like us, they resist those

who threaten the realisation of their desires. The same type of misunderstanding afflicts people whose ambition prompts them to try to induce others to imitate their affects. They manifest an inability to combine forces with other people in a mutually empowering fashion, and thus an inability to cultivate agreement. However, since these antisocial affective dispositions are aspects of human nature and part of what we have in common, we cannot simply wish them away. To create enough agreement to live together harmoniously we must become more alike by enlarging our affective capacity to co-operate. Moreover, as the *Political Treatise* reminds us, it is no good leaving this task to individuals. Only by living in the state can we create patterns of affect that are resilient enough to offset our destructive imitative impulses (*TP* VII.2).

### **III. Creating Agreement**

To live in the state is essentially to live under laws made and enforced by a sovereign. Rather than encountering other individuals one by one and striving in each case to incorporate them into a joyful way of life, citizens and subjects confront a more impersonal system of legal rules, designed to inhibit affective disagreement. The precise content of such rules will vary from one state to another, but Spinoza is confident that monarchical, aristocratic and democratic constitutions can all be organised in such a way that rulers and ruled are able to live together harmoniously and securely (*TP* VI.3, VII.2).

Embedded in his defence of this view, we find a number of strategies for sustaining the internal cohesion of states by limiting the development of envy between citizens. First and most obviously, a state can remove some causes of envy by endowing citizens with equal rights that are immune to the threat of competition. As long as I have the same rights as you, and am not in danger of losing them, I have no reason to envy you. This strategy for blocking one of the most destructive aspects of affective imitation is at work in Spinoza's monarchical and aristocratic constitutions. In his model monarchy, for instance, citizens are divided into *familiae* or clans, subject to a single set of laws. Each clan contributes an equal number of members to a Grand Council that proposes legislation to the king, and because membership of the Council rapidly rotates, many clan-members have the opportunity to stand for office. By preventing political power from falling into the hands of a faction, and by enabling many citizens to play a part in government, these arrangements prevent the growth of envy between clans, and also between those who do and do not hold office. The same

process is at work in Spinoza's absolute aristocracy, where laws are enacted by a large council of senators. Complex rules ensure that all members of the patrician class have 'an equally great hope of achieving senatorial rank' (*TP VIII.30*).

As well as making access to political power comparatively open, the monarchical constitution outlined in the *Political Treatise* institutes another form of equality; ownership of land is forbidden, and the entire territory belongs to the state, which rents land and dwellings to individuals on an annual basis (*TP VI.12*). This measure, which surely owes something to the law of the ancient Hebrew Republic (*TTP, XVII. 84*), is designed to prevent people envying one another's land holdings, although it is clearly not enough to prevent them from envying property of other kinds. Merchants, for example, may still covet one another's goods. Nevertheless, Spinoza argues, it is particularly important to prevent competition for land, because the state's territory symbolises the common life of the citizenry and is, as it were, the material manifestation of the agreement that the state is designed to maintain. This arena of envious competition therefore needs to be controlled with particular care.

Alongside equal rights, Spinoza uses two further strategies to limit envy, the first of which reduces the desirability of privilege. In monarchy, for instance, where only the members of the royal family possess noble status, the king's male relatives are subject to restrictive laws; they are expected to serve the state, they are forbidden to marry, and their sons are classed as illegitimate. In these circumstances, noble status is more likely to be regarded as a burden than a benefit worth coveting. A second strategy uses political means to direct envy along constructive paths. Since, in Spinoza's view, we are so desirous of *gloria* or esteem that we can hardly bear disgrace, rulers can shape our patterns of desire by esteeming us for actions that enhance commonality (*E3p29s, E4p52s*). In aristocracy, for example, the esteem in which counsellors are held will encourage citizens to stand for office (*TPVII.6*).

Drawing on traditional methods such as these, Spinoza indicates how states can create environments in which the envy that flows from the imitation of the affects is diminished. However, a problem remains. The constitutions described in the *Political Treatise* also confront the tougher challenge of building agreement between groups who have rights of citizenship and groups who do not. Like everyone else, the latter groups will tend to imitate the affects of others, and will be prone to envy those whose privileges they would like to possess. Moreover, if everyone would rather rule than be ruled, as Spinoza claims, envy is liable to fix on those who possess civic

rights (*TP VII.5*). Non-citizens will envy citizens, and this will in turn undermine the agreement on which the security of the state rests.

This problem arises in all Spinoza's model constitutions. In monarchy, citizenship is denied to mutes, the insane, those who follow servile occupations, and notoriously wicked individuals (*TP VI.11*). In aristocracy, the members of a large class of plebeians (which includes men under fifty (*TP VII.4*), people born outside the state, newly-conquered peoples, criminals, men with foreign wives, and those engaged in servile occupations such as wine-sellers and pub-owners, (*TP VIII.14*)) are debarred from serving as counsellors and from voting, and are regarded as *peregrini* or foreigners (*TP VIII.9, 10*). And in democracy the range of exclusions grows to encompass women and servants, children and pupils, and those who have been disgraced, for example by committing a crime (*TP XI.3*). How, then, are these various excluded classes to be prevented from envying the privileges of citizenship and trying to acquire them for themselves?

In the *Political Treatise* Spinoza emphatically rejects the view that ordinary subjects are by nature less virtuous than ruling elites. On the contrary, he claims, there are no systematic differences between social groups. 'Everyone has the same nature. Everyone is proud when he's master; everyone terrorises when he's not cowed by fear; and everywhere it's common for enemies and servile flatterers to bend the truth' (*TP VII.27*). To put the point in more general terms, we all strive to persevere in our being in broadly the same way and, as we have seen, this gives us an affective commonality that distinguishes human beings from things of other kinds. Lions, for example, differ from us in nature. The manner in which they strive to maintain themselves differs from ours, and insofar as we recognise this, we do not try to increase our own joyfulness by imitating their desires or entering into their joys and sorrows (*E IVp37s*). The differences in nature between members of their species and members of our own inhibit affective imitation between us, and this is why, as Spinoza remarks, we do not envy lions their strength (*E IIIp55s; E III p57s*). Moreover, while humans as a group resemble each other more than they resemble lions, there are also differences in nature between one human being and another. We do not all strive to persevere in our being in exactly the same way. Our overarching orientation to other human beings is also shaped by fine-grained estimations of likeness and difference, and these, too, are expressed in our imitative affects;

‘everyone is so constituted by nature that he wants to be reckoned as belonging to his own kind, and distinguished from the rest by his origin’ (*TP* VII.18).

Spinoza draws on this view to argue that, when we regard another person as so different from ourselves as to possess a different nature, we do not envy them. ‘A man neither strives to do, nor desires, anything unless it follows from his given nature. So no man desires that there be predicated of him any power of acting or (what is the same) virtue, which is peculiar to another’s nature and alien to his own. Hence his desire is restrained and ... he cannot envy him’ (*E* IIIp55c). The gulf between the ways in which people persevere in their being is manifested in their affects, and the divergence between two people’s desires, joys and sorrows can make it difficult or impossible for either of them to want what the other wants, and thus to envy them. The affective commonality among human beings is therefore thinned or thickened by variations in our individual natures, and when it is sufficiently thinned, the difference between two human natures becomes comparable to that between humans and lions. Just as we do not envy lions their strength, so we do not envy humans whose desires and virtues are quite different from our own. But while the gap between humans and lions is so great that there is no realistic possibility of bridging it, differences in nature between one human and another may sometimes change. A philosopher who steadily enlarges her understanding may become more like a colleague whom she had initially regarded as incomparably superior, and as they become more alike in nature they will imitate one another’s affects in different ways. Envy may enter the picture, but so may friendship. To some extent, then, the similarities and differences between our individual natures come and go as we lose or acquire qualities that bring us into agreement.

These instabilities in our relationships pose a political challenge. Successful states must be able to withstand their fluctuations by creating a peaceful way of life that can endure, even as our patterns of affect alter. But the malleability of our individual natures also makes it possible for states to counteract envy by encouraging the idea that the members of one group are in some respect significantly different in nature from the members of another, or by simply taking advantage of the fact that such an idea is already prevalent. Citizens, Spinoza reminds us, are not born but made (*TP* V.2). The constitutions set out in the *Political Treatise* are among other things designed to create groups of subjects whose members possess different powers: on the one hand, they train a class of citizen patricians by providing them with the

kind of experience and acculturation that fits them for government; on the other hand, by denying this training to plebeians, they bring it about that plebeians are in some respects less well equipped to rule than their patrician counterparts. While the members of the two groups share powers and dispositions that constitute them as humans, some of the more specific ways in which they strive to persevere in their being are shaped by their political status, so that members of one group tend to become somewhat different in nature from members of the other. Forming their desires in the light of their political circumstances, plebeians may as a general rule come to want somewhat different things from patricians, and this may weaken their disposition to envy the privileges of citizenship. Insofar as this process is effective, it will blunt non-citizens' sense of entitlement to inclusion and reconcile them to their relative lack of political power.

One of the criteria Spinoza uses to justify exclusion from citizenship derives from the traditional republican view that one cannot be a citizen if one does not live under one's own power, but is instead subject to the arbitrary power of someone else (*TP X.3*). When women are subject to their husbands, servants to their masters or mistresses, and children to their parents, they are not in a position to act as they wish; and even when no one actually coerces them they remain vulnerable to coercion, so that a servant whose master is benign, for example, is formally speaking no less vulnerable than one whose mistress punishes her every move. Among theorists of republicanism, simply being dependent in this sense is regarded as enough to unfit one for citizenship. Citizens, it is assumed, must possess a sufficient degree of financial and social independence to act on their own judgment without fear or favour, and people who are beholden to others for their livelihoods or protection lack this power. They are easily bought or otherwise corrupted, and if active in government are liable to foster faction and injustice. In addition, so some republicans argue, members of dependent groups tend to adjust their desires and expectations to their circumstances. In areas where they do not have the opportunity to act on their own judgment, they lose the confidence and courage to do so and become timid and servile. Moreover, by internalising this way of striving to persevere in their being, they become comparatively ill-suited for citizenship. The social and legal divide between independent and dependent individuals therefore serves to create a difference in nature between the two groups (a somewhat systematic difference in the way the members of each group strive to persevere in their being), and brings it about that one

group is less well-endowed than the other with the qualities that qualify one for citizenship.

Spinoza agrees that, when these consequences of dependence are internalised, freedom is destroyed. The subjects of the Ottoman Emperor, for example, ‘will fight for slavery as they would for their survival’ (*TTP* Preface 10; *TP* V.4). Their dependence on their rulers so shapes their affects that they prefer slavery to freedom, and this desire will in turn be reflected in their patterns of affective imitation. They will tend, for example, to establish friendships with individuals who share their outlook, and will reinforce their own preference for servitude by wanting what these people want. In standard republican style, Spinoza condemns such slavery as antithetical to the freedom and understanding that states are meant to nurture (*TP*10.5), but this very form of disempowerment appears to afflict at least some of the groups who are excluded from citizenship in his model constitutions. We should expect, for example, that wives who are dependent on their husbands, or servants who are dependent on their masters, may come to see themselves as inferior in nature, at least insofar as they lack some of the qualities prized in citizens. In addition, we should expect this difference to be manifested in their affects. For example, women and servants who view themselves as ill-equipped for political life may not envy the privileges of citizens, and feel relatively little hunger for political inclusion.

Although unequal relationships of this kind fall far short of the ideal of agreement described in the *Ethics*, the *Political Treatise* does not resist the implication that states can uphold agreement among politically unequal classes by creating and exploiting the way their members imitate one another’s affects. Furthermore, the fact that Spinoza excludes so many groups from citizenship, whilst claiming that his constitutions are so ingeniously structured as to be everlasting, suggests that he has considerable faith in this strategy. Socially sustained differences in nature between one group and another can play a significant part in the process of reconciling people to political exclusion and inhibiting their desire to resist it.

#### **IV The Case of Women**

It remains to be seen whether the argument we have traced can help us to make sense of Spinoza’s contention that men and women differ in nature in a way that makes women less fit than men to rule, or cast light on his claim that women are necessarily subject to men. A first point worth noting is that, although he does not deny that states

can create and sustain variations in nature between one group and another, Spinoza does impose limits on the ways in which these variations are used. For example, states sometimes try to make their subjects servile by deceiving them into believing that they are only fitted to obey, as for example when counsellors set out to persuade a populace that their ruler is divine. However, encouraging delusion and superstition in this fashion is, Spinoza claims, so dangerous to the state that wise constitution-builders will avoid it (*TTP* Preface). The differences in nature that statesmen rely on to institutionalise political inequality must be, as far as these actors can tell, existing features of the communities in question, and sufficiently enduring to underwrite stable political arrangements.

It is also important to remember that, however robust a particular difference in nature between two groups may seem, it can never be impervious to change. Since, as Spinoza reminds us, human nature is everywhere the same, the divergent ways in which specific groups persevere in their being do not derive from unalterable differences between them. Rather, they are to be explained by the fact that the members of a given group have been affected in similar ways, and as a result have developed similar patterns of affective response. It remains true, however, that traits created in this fashion may strike deep roots. For example, nothing in the antecedent nature of a community makes it better suited to thrive in an aristocracy than in a monarchy; but once its members have lived in an aristocratic society for some time, Spinoza warns, they will find it difficult to adapt to another political system (*TTP* XVIII.28). Sub-groups will have acquired the variations in nature that aristocracy requires, together with the affective dispositions that accompany them. They will have become people of particular kinds, so that although the possibility of constitutional change is not ruled out, it will be difficult to achieve. By contrast, other differences between the affective inclinations of groups may be comparatively ephemeral. Market forces, for example, may quickly change a group's tastes and aspirations, thus altering the manner in which its members strive to persevere in their being, and enhancing or undermining its agreement with the groups around it. The variations in nature that distinguish the members of one group from those of another therefore range along a continuum. At one end are differences that are relatively deeply ingrained and hard to change. At the other end are differences that are easily malleable.



Philosophy, as Spinoza envisages it, can tell us that such a continuum exists, and provide a general account of its effects. It allows us to infer, for instance, that differences in our natures are reflected in the patterns of envy we feel for other people. But it cannot tell us what particular forms of envy have persistently shaped the natures of specific political groups, or how far they have undermined agreement between them. To formulate the detailed provisions of his constitutions, Spinoza therefore supplements philosophical generalisations with historical ones, turning for inspiration to political authorities whose claims are based on experience. ‘The men who’ve discussed and established the common laws and public affairs were very acute (whether cunning or shrewd). So it’s hardly credible that we can conceive of anything potentially useful for society as a whole which circumstances or chance haven’t suggested, and which men – keenly attentive to their common affairs and looking after their own security – haven’t seen’ (*TP* I.3). History not only provides the nuts and bolts that enable a philosopher to conceive model states – the empirically-tested strategies that make it possible to construct agreement. It also provides evidence about the circumstances in which these strategies have been effective. For example, as we have seen, Spinoza offers a philosophical argument for the view that, when groups perceive one another as differing somewhat in nature, their mutual envy is diminished. But he needs the historical record to tell him how this disposition can be effectively put to work and used to uphold agreement. When, for example, the historical evidence indicates that states have habitually excluded servants from citizenship on the grounds that they are dependent on their masters, and have done so without significantly undermining agreement, Spinoza will regard himself as justified in advocating the same policy. When it indicates that monarchical election tends to generate conflict, he will steer clear of it.

The strength of Spinoza’s commitment to this approach is perhaps most evident in his discussion of the political status of women, where the conclusion that women are not fit to rule is defended on historical grounds. ‘Whenever we find men and women living together’, he claims, ‘they have never ruled together. What we see is that the men rule and the women are ruled, and that in this way both sexes live in harmony. ... If women were by nature equal to men, both in strength of character (*fortitudo animi*) and in native intelligence (*ingenium*) – in which the greatest power and consequently human right, consists – surely among so many and such diverse nations we should find some where each sex ruled equally, and others where men

were ruled by women.... But since this has not happened anywhere, we can say that women do not, by nature, have a right equal to men's, but that they necessarily submit to men' (*TP* XI.4). Philosophy can of course help us to interpret the first part of this claim, that men and women differ in nature and therefore do not have an equal right or power. If differently-placed groups are likely to develop somewhat different natures, it is not unreasonable to assume that, in societies where women habitually persevere in their being by submitting to men, and tend to internalise the requirements of their position, there will be a sense in which men and women differ in nature. Moreover, because the manner in which men and women imitate one another's affects will be somewhat coloured by these differences, it is possible that women will not envy men's political privileges enough to fight for them.

To make space for the second part of Spinoza's claim - that women necessarily submit to men - we need to return to the continuum between deeply-etched and more superficial differences in nature. Since even the most deeply-etched differences between one group and another are not entirely impervious to change, differences in nature between men and women are not necessary in the sense that the power relations between the two groups could under no circumstances be other than as they are. On the contrary, as circumstances change we should expect the affective relationships between men and women to alter, and should expect this alteration to put pressure on the gendered division of power. Perhaps, then, the language of necessity to which Spinoza resorts is designed to remind us of his view that, since every event follows necessarily from its causes, no case in which a woman has submitted to a man could have been otherwise. The supposed fact that there has never been a case where women ruled over men suggests that, while differences in nature between men and women are not strictly speaking beyond change, they are nevertheless about as deeply entrenched as such a difference can be. So much so, that for political purposes we should regard them as necessary.

To accept these readings is to accept that, in this passage and arguably throughout much of the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza gives history priority over philosophy. While philosophy acknowledges that our natures can undergo radical change as we learn to persevere more effectively in our being, the *Treatise* argues that the best way to build strong political constitutions is to pay attention to the generalisations that have emerged from centuries of political experiment. Instead of conceiving philosophically attractive but politically distant ways of life and setting

out to realise them, we should be guided by experience and stick to what it recommends. Where history can show us how to cultivate agreement by limiting envy, we should take advantage of its advice; and where it suggests that, in order to control envy, we need to cultivate differences in nature between one group and another, we should not shrink from doing so. As we have seen, history teaches us that people can live together without conflict in monarchies, aristocracies and democracies, and that, on the whole, communities are wise to stick with the constitutions they have inherited. At the same time, it tells us that, in stable constitutions of all these types, groups of subjects have been denied the political rights of citizenship. Since it would be rash to fly in the face of this traditional wisdom, one of a constitution-maker's tasks is to work out which groups should be excluded and why. In some cases the answer will depend on aspects of the particular situation in hand; but in other cases history itself makes the decision by providing overwhelming evidence for inclusion or exclusion. If, as Spinoza claims, there has never been a state in which women rule over men, history counsels against giving women this right. The safe course is to exclude them, while reconciling them as effectively as possible to their unequal political status.

## **V. Conclusion**

By focusing on Spinoza's analysis of the kind of agreement that enables people to live harmoniously, and tracing its implications for the model states he outlines in the *Political Treatise*, we have confronted an uncomfortable issue. In all Spinoza's constitutions, many groups are excluded from political participation, and their acceptance of their inferior status is largely taken for granted. But since Spinoza holds that we are by nature envious of other people's benefits and are liable to compete for them, he needs to explain how such inequality can be sustained. By appealing to differences in nature between individuals, and to the effects that these differences have on our patterns of envy, he outlines a strategy for upholding co-operation in the face of political inequality. Somewhat like modern theorists of relative deprivation, he takes it that our strongest affects are reserved for those whom we regard as similar in nature to ourselves, and that as this sense of similarity diminishes, so our affective engagement weakens (Runciman, 1966). We do not envy people who are morally, geographically or socially distant from us as much as we envy those with whom we

identify. Furthermore, states can take advantage of this disposition to deny some of their subjects the privileges of citizenship.

Because the differences on which this strategy trades are not fixed, there is always the hope (or fear) that they will change, and that, in order to maintain a viable level of agreement among the members of a community, states will become more egalitarian. But in the *Political Treatise* Spinoza sets such hopes aside. Successful states, as he portrays them, cultivate patterns of affect that reconcile much of the population to political subordination and thus to a comparatively limited form of freedom.

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