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Eve's Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)Equality

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IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT AMONG SPINOZA'S last written words were those justifying women's exclusion from political office on the grounds of their natural inferiority. The last extant paragraph of his unfinished *Political Treatise* maintains that "one is fully entitled to assert that women do not naturally possess equal right with men and that they necessarily give way to men."¹ His argument for sexual inequality is both surprising and unequivocal. He treats female inferiority not as an effect of a poorly organized commonwealth, but rather as an outcome of women's innate and insuperable weakness. He does not claim that women have been, as he allows in the case of the masses,² prevented from exercising their intellects, but that women are, by nature, "necessarily" inferior to men.³ In her analysis of the equality of women in Spinoza, Margaret Gullan-Whur notes that this claim is surprising for biographical as well as for philosophical reasons. Given the relatively progressive environment of the Netherlands and the importance of several female interlocutors, especially Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, to Descartes's philosophy,⁴ Spinoza must have known of educated and intelligent women.⁵ Philosophically, moreover, his denial of sexual equality is unexpected given his doctrine of "common notions," which affirms the universal capacity for reason in human beings.⁶

¹Spinoza, *Political Treatise* (henceforth, *TP*), Chapter 11, section 4 (G III.360/S 753). The Latin text reads, [A]ffirmare omnino licet, foeminas ex natura non aequale cum viris habere jus, sed eas viris necessario cedere.

²Although interpreters typically see Spinoza's view of the *vulgus* to be dim, in the *TP* he blames "power and culture" for rendering the masses ignorant and volatile through the institution of servile conditions (*TP* 7.27 [G III.319/S 719]).

³*TP* 11.4 (G III.360/S 753). See Gullan-Wuhr, "Spinoza and the Equality of Women," 94.

⁴Descartes's respect for Elisabeth's mind is clear in a number of places, including the dedication to his *Principles of Philosophy*, which Spinoza studied and "translated" into geometric form. See René Descartes, "Dedicatory Letter to Elisabeth," in CSM I.190–94/AT VIII.A.1–4.

⁵Gullan-Whur observes, for example, that Spinoza was tutored in Latin by Clara, the daughter of Francis van den Enden ("Spinoza and the Equality of Women," 92). We might also wonder what he thought of Queen Christina, or the queens who ruled with kings in his epoch.

⁶Spinoza, *EIP* 38c. Cf. Gullan-Whur, "Spinoza and the Equality of Women," 102. (I adopt the following abbreviations for the *Ethics*: Roman numerals refer to parts; 'p' denotes proposition; 'c' corollary; 'def' definition; 'd' demonstration; 's' scholium; 'pref' preface; 'post' postulate; and 'app' appendix.)

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Even if he were to acknowledge the inequality of capacity among the men and women of his day, his denial of the potential for sexual equality is perplexing given that his ethics recognizes the plasticity of human abilities⁷ and staunchly advocates the education of others as the practical manifestation of our “worth.”⁸ According to Gullan-Whur, Spinoza violates the unambiguous foundations he provides for intellectual egalitarianism with his lamentable remarks on sexual inequality, which have justifiably come to be known as “the black page.” She concludes that this “embarrassingly feeble philosophical aberration” must be a consequence of his “need, at a time of violent European upheaval, to show himself a useful political pragmatist.”⁹

Through an examination of his remarks on Genesis, chapters 2–3, I will demonstrate that Spinoza’s argument for sexual inequality is not only an aberration, but a symmetrical inversion of a view he propounds, albeit implicitly, in his *Ethics*. In particular, “the black page” of his *Political Treatise* ignores, along with the intellectual capacities of women, the immeasurable benefits of affectionate partnership between man and woman that he extols in his retelling of the Genesis narrative.¹⁰ If the doctrine of the black page maintains that it is the dependency of wives upon their husbands that explains their weakness and justifies their exclusion from formal roles in politics, his unusual narrative of the Fall illustrates that it is precisely Adam’s lack of appreciation of his need for his wife that accounts for his imbecility.¹¹

Many questions naturally arise about the status of Spinoza’s illustrations in the *scholia*, as well as his treatment of Scripture. My point is not to expose Spinoza as an esoteric champion of sexual equality. I hope to show only that in the *Ethics* we find an assertion directly opposed to the notorious claims that mar the black page. Moreover, the assertion arises within a very similar context of considerations about the character of human desire. My view is that the multifaceted mind of Spinoza entertained a vision of sexual equality and clearly viewed affectionate community between man and woman as a potential source of strength and vitality, mental and corporeal. Whether this was the most potent idea in his mind,¹² and therefore a representation of his true view, is a matter of speculation. We must acknowledge that he provided a considered argument to the contrary, and thus he appears to have been of two minds on the question of sexual equality. Nonetheless, the egalitarian impulse that is otherwise visible throughout his texts lends plausibility to the notion that his recognition of sexual equality may not be a peripheral ele-

⁷Captured in the phrase “they do not know what a body can do” (*E* IIIp2s), among others (e.g. Spinoza, *EV*p39s). Moira Gatens (*Imaginary Bodies*, 134) likewise refers to his argument as “perplexing,” especially given the caution he recommends against “treating entire classes of people as possessing intrinsic class-based traits or qualities” (*Theological-Political Treatise* [*TTP*], Chapter 17, section 26 [G III.217/IS 225]).

⁸Spinoza, *EIV*appIX.

⁹Gullan-Whur, “Spinoza and the Equality of Women,” 110.

¹⁰Spinoza, *EIV*p68s.

¹¹I refer to “the Fall” in a kind of shorthand, since it is a common cultural reference. However, since, in Spinoza’s retelling, which I consider here, what is lost is recovered by the patriarchs, the spirit of Christ, or the idea of God, it is hardly the radical transformation that many notions of “the Fall” suggest.

¹²Consider Della Rocca’s portrait of ideas as live, active forces, of which some are more powerful than others; see Della Rocca, “The Power of an Idea,” 212.

ment of his account of Genesis. Indeed, the countervision of sexual equality and the virtues of marital cooperation cohere better with his broader principles than does his categorical denial of women's equality.

In this paper, I begin with an outline of the argument for female inferiority in the *Political Treatise*. I proceed to analyze Spinoza's account of the story of the Garden of Eden in *Ethics* IVp68s, with some reference to his other discussions of the same proof-text. I find several points of evidence that, despite the almost total absence of Eve from each of his accounts, he implicitly takes a position in the debates surrounding her role in the Fall. This position consistently holds Adam, rather than Eve, accountable for the loss of human freedom and intellectual perfection. Given that most biblical commentators known to Spinoza did not consistently treat man and woman as equals in the story of the Fall, it is significant that Spinoza maintains his heterodox interpretation on the matter of sexual equality. Moreover, in the *Ethics*, he alters the story notably so as to explain the Fall by way of Adam's failed identification with his "wife who agreed completely with his nature." I will not argue that Spinoza's objective, in his retelling, is to promote sexual equality. Spinoza is likely concerned only to emphasize human fraternity in general (community of 'adam), the supreme utility of man to man,¹³ but an analysis of his treatment of Genesis reveals that, contra his words at the end of the *Political Treatise*, he was certainly capable of imagining relations between woman and man as a source of agency (*potentia*) rather than as a barrier to human unity and rationality.

I. SEXUAL INEQUALITY IN DEMOCRACY

Spinoza has been celebrated as the first canonized modern philosopher to advocate democracy,¹⁴ yet the precise character of his democratic politics remains a subject of scholarly debate.¹⁵ I will provide here a brief account of democracy as it is presented in the unfinished *Political Treatise*, solely in order to contextualize his defense of the exclusion of women. Spinoza's *Political Treatise*, as we know, trails off soon after he begins his account of democracy as the third and best form of political organization.¹⁶ Spinoza begins the unfinished chapter by referring to democracy as "the completely absolute state [*omnino absolutum imperium*]."¹⁷ I take the aspirant "absoluteness" of the democratic regime to mean that, in its fully actualized form, it is independent, immune to the corrosive effects of "external," or hostile forces operating within it. In general, the institutional design that Spinoza proposes in his *Political Treatise* is guided by the view that "the more there are to share in the government, the weaker the factions will be."¹⁸ Thus he advocates the greatest amount of civic involvement that a particular form—monarchic, aristocratic, or

¹³Spinoza, *EIV*p18s.

¹⁴Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*.

¹⁵For an analysis of the diverse treatments of Spinoza's democracy, see Steinberg, "Spinoza on Civil Liberties."

¹⁶There is a minority view that Spinoza comes to prefer aristocracy in his final work, but I take it to be clear that Spinoza is a democrat. For the contrasting view, see Prokhovnick, *Spinoza and Dutch Republicanism*, and Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*.

¹⁷*TP* 11.1 (G III.358/S 752).

¹⁸*TP* 8.1 (G III.324/S 723).

democratic—can accommodate and remain the kind of government that it is. Spinoza envisions democracy as the least fractured form of political organization, which is thereby most absolute in the same sense that Nature, or substance, is absolute. As Spinoza maintains in his *Ethics*, Nature is an indivisible constellation of diverse powers (*potentiae*).¹⁹ It is absolutely unlimited because there is nothing external to it; it is not subject to anything else. At the same time, Nature's power is expressed in an infinite multiplicity of modes, an inexhaustible ability to exist and act in unique ways.²⁰

Aristocracy and monarchy, by contrast, entail fixed, internal divisions between citizens and subjects bearing different juridical statuses. These modes of organization can encourage fracture, as Machiavelli teaches Spinoza, when the interests of the elite differ dramatically from those of the people.²¹ Spinoza may have Machiavelli's worry about the coagulation of opposed humors in mind when he declares that his primary concern in structuring monarchy is to "ensure that the king's power [*potentia*] is determined only by the power [*potentia*] of the multitude and depends on the multitude for its maintenance."²² If the monarch is not dependent on the elite, but can bind his interest to those of the many, the body politic is at least risk of rupture. Yet Spinoza warns in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that no one has "succeeded in devising a government that was not in greater danger from its own citizens than from foreign foes, and which was not more fearful of the former than of the latter."²³ Democracy avoids this anxiety of regicide, and approaches absoluteness insofar as it is able to coordinate the power of the many into a coherent project of diverse but mutually enabling powers.²⁴ We lack an account of most of the institutional conditions that Spinoza would have prescribed for the *omnino absolutum imperium* called democracy, but we know that they excluded citizenship for a large portion of the population, including women and propertyless servants. If Spinoza's concern throughout his *Political Treatise* is to institute the most robust

¹⁹*E* Ip12.

²⁰Spinoza, *E* Ip16. Although I cannot defend this point here, consideration of the *Political Treatise* sheds new light on Spinoza's claim in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that democracy is "the most natural" form of government (*TTP* 16.11 [G III.195/IS 202]), which is typically interpreted to support a doctrine of individual liberty. If it is natural because it is absolute, Spinoza's notion of individual liberty, in my view, must be seen as conditioned by the coherence of the commonwealth. The alignment of democracy with Nature anticipates Hegel's view in the *Philosophy of Right*, in which the freedom of individuals is made possible by the rational order of institutions, along with the freedom of mind engendered by enabling relationships among friends and intimates (e.g. *E* IVappXII and XX). For the standard interpretation of democracy as most natural because it preserves individual liberty, see Smith, "Spinoza's Democratic Turn."

²¹Spinoza cites Machiavelli favorably in the *Political Treatise* (5.7 [G III.296–97/S 700]), and is arguably thinking of him when he mentions "that statesmen have written about political matters much more effectively than philosophers" (*TP* 1.2 [G III.274/S 680]). For further discussion of the relationship between Spinoza and Machiavelli, see Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*.

²²*TP* 7.31 (G III.323/S 722; translation modified).

²³*TTP* 17.4 (G III.203–4/IS 211).

²⁴Cf. Negri, "Reliqua Desideratur," 237: "My hypothesis is that the Spinozan democracy, the *omnino absolutum democraticum imperium*, must be conceived as a social practice of singularities that intersect in a mass process—better a *pietas* that forms and constitutes the reciprocal individual relations that are established among the multiplicity of subjects that constitute the multitude."

and harmonious form of sovereignty, in which the commonwealth is guided as much as possible by “one mind,”²⁵ why exclude a vast majority of the population from the business of running the state and determining its representatives?

Spinoza begins his institutional recommendations by noting that an aristocracy with a large assembly might be an ideal form of government if patricians could be trusted to seek “the best men,” those of great intellectual power guided by “zeal for the public good.” Yet this is far from the case, since in practice patricians fear the best men, preferring those colleagues who will be subservient to themselves.²⁶ In other words, Spinoza maintains, even with decent institutions men typically strive, through overt and subtle means, to render others subject to their authority and thereby prone to carry out their will. Whereas monarchy and aristocracy encourage sycophancy, democracy’s relative lack of restrictions on participation in government entails that participation does not depend on remaining within the good graces of the elite. Moreover, democracy accommodates a greater number of citizens who might participate in the legislative process, and Spinoza maintains throughout his institutional recommendations that the sheer volume of representatives guarantees a significant number of men with mental gifts.²⁷ Democracy is preferable, then, insofar as its institutions might allow more people to remain *sui juris*, within their own right and power, and thus executors of their own wills.²⁸ The lack of restrictions on participation reduces the kinds of power relations that force people to balance their own interests with the interests of those on whom they depend. Within democracy, there is greater institutional support for each to think and act from his own resources. Only when each person thinks and acts as much as possible from his own powers and those he shares with others does he act rationally.²⁹

Spinoza notes that, whatever the form, “[I]t is impossible for a multitude to be guided as if by one mind . . . unless its laws are prescribed by reason.”³⁰ In order to be rational, ideas must not be externally imposed, but must emerge from those properties that the multitude has in common. Since a deliberative body produces laws, and laws produce the conditions in which subjects become citizens, in the best case scenario there is a virtuous circle in which good laws generate good lawmakers, who institute good laws. A commonwealth perseveres insofar as its constituents desire what is conducive to its well-being. That is, a commonwealth with rational laws is such that its constituents, if they grasp their own interests adequately, understand them to be directly implicated in the public good. Within a rationally ordered commonwealth, following the law does not subject constituents to an alien authority, but each remains *sui juris*, in command of his own right. Where the abil-

²⁵See e.g. Spinoza, *TP* 3.5 (G III.286/S 691).

²⁶Spinoza, *TP* 11.2 (G III.358–59/S 752–53).

²⁷*TP* 8.2 (G III.324/S 723–24). In addition, Spinoza seems to believe that a large deliberative assembly is simply unlikely to agree on an absurdity (*TTP* 16.9 [G III.194/IS 200–201]).

²⁸Where ‘will,’ of course, is not understood as unconstrained, or free in the Cartesian sense. Agents remain executors of their wills insofar as they can understand the causes of their desires.

²⁹Spinoza, *EII*p38. I preserve the male-gendered pronoun here, consistent with Spinoza’s discussions of “the free man,” in order to avoid prejudging the question of sexual equality.

³⁰*TP* 2.21 (G III.283/S 688).

ity to think and act is fostered by the social and political institutions, doing those things that preserve the being of each, concomitantly, enhances life in common.³¹

Students of Spinoza will recognize in the institutional concerns of the *Political Treatise* an intimation of his description of virtue: “The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men.”³² Good laws, Spinoza urges throughout his *Political Treatise*, depend upon the institution of large deliberative assemblies in which men communicate with one another so as to generate enabling ideas, which are those ideas that grasp as clearly and distinctly as possible the conditions of everyone’s mutual benefit.³³ Aristocracy and monarchy fall short of democracy insofar as they tend to undermine the conditions by which each can develop his own power, and thereby perceive and produce the genuine advantages of life in common. If we recall Spinoza’s assertion that “when each man most seeks his own advantage [*suum sibi utile*] for himself, then men are most useful to one another,”³⁴ we see that the inability to apprehend and pursue one’s good as his own results in less virtue, understood as less power to think and act.³⁵ Insofar as institutions prevent individuals from cultivating an understanding of their genuine advantage and pursuing it on their own behalf, they amputate their capacity to become virtuous citizens who might learn to desire the good for themselves and other men. If we cannot learn our true good, we cannot grasp the implication of our own power in the powers of others.³⁶

Spinoza’s democracy is meant to be the regime that is least divided, most “determined by the power of a multitude that is guided as though by a single mind.”³⁷ At the same time, it is the regime in which men “do not think of themselves as being governed but as living freely by their own decision.”³⁸ As he begins his chapter on democracy, he stipulates that he will not discuss every type of democracy, but

only that kind wherein all without exception who owe allegiance only to their country’s laws and are in other respects in control of their own right and lead respectable lives have the right to vote in supreme council and undertake offices of state. I say expressly, “who owe allegiance to their country’s laws” so as to exclude foreigners, who are deemed to be subject to another government. In addition to owing allegiance to the laws of the state, I added, “and are in other matters in control of their own right” so as to exclude women and servants who are under control of men and masters, and also children and wards as long as they are under the control of parents and guardians. Lastly, I said, “who lead respectable lives” so as to exclude especially those who are in bad repute for their crimes or for a dishonorable way of life.³⁹

³¹Spinoza, *TP* 3.10 (G III.288/S 693).

³²*E* IVp37.

³³Spinoza, *TP* 9.14 (G III.352/S 746).

³⁴*E* IVp35c2.

³⁵Spinoza, *E* IVdef8.

³⁶As Spinoza writes, “Men who are governed by reason—that is, men who, from the guidance of reason seek their own advantage—want nothing for themselves which they do not want for other men” (*E* IVp18s).

³⁷*TP* 3.7 (G III.287/S 692).

³⁸*TP* 10.8 (G III.356/S 750).

³⁹*TP* 11.3 (G III.359/S 753).

Spinoza's exclusions are guided by his principles of virtue.⁴⁰ He denies citizenship to those who cannot live freely by their own decision. Such an inability is a form of servility, which prevents them from being able to form a "single mind" with their fellows.⁴¹ Foreigners have conflicting allegiances and thus cannot be single-minded in their desire. Criminals have shown themselves by their own actions to be unable to endorse the collective good. These exclusions pose little problem, and even if the exclusion of women and servants is conventional for his time, it is not, on Spinoza's part, unreflective. In Spinoza's estimation, women and servants cannot desire freely in the first place, and thus cannot, through participation in democratic institutions, help produce those laws that enable each to practice virtue.⁴² Simply put, Spinoza maintains that if you cannot desire the good for yourself, you cannot desire it for other men. Spinoza proceeds at some length to justify his claim that women are not masters of their own desire and power, but are invariably subject to masculine authority.

Earlier in the text, Spinoza delineates several ways in which an individual can be subject to another's right (*ius*) or authority (*potestas* or *imperium*). "One man has another in his power [*alterum sub potestate habet*]" (a) if he is physically bound by that person, (b) if he has no power of self-defense or escape, (c) if he is "terrorized," or (d) if he is "so attached . . . by the benefit conferred that the man would rather please his benefactor than himself and live as the other would wish rather than at his own choosing."⁴³ In the case of women and servants, he is likely especially concerned with the fourth way of being constrained by another, though perhaps he has the other forms of more express domination in mind as well. He has already suggested that aristocracy lends itself to populating the assembly with those who lack the integrity of their own authority and thus act *alterius juris*, in the fourth sense. He worries about filling offices with those beneficiaries and lesser men who would rather preserve the system of kickbacks and favors than think for themselves, let alone for the public good. Democracy can only avoid an analogous danger, Spinoza implies, by excluding those who lack the power to think and act on their own behalf by virtue of their bondage to their benefactors (or perhaps captors, depending on how you understand the sex/gender system in the seventeenth century). Women and servants so depend on their fathers, husbands, or employers that they are unable to desire except in accordance with the will of their superior.

⁴⁰Although I do not adequately defend the strong connection I am positing between Spinoza's ethics (virtue) and politics, I agree with Steinberg's argument that Spinoza's politics aims at human perfection and is not confined to securing the conditions for individual liberty. See Steinberg, "Spinoza on Civil Liberties."

⁴¹"This union of minds" that comprises a free and rational polis "could in no way be conceived unless the chief aim of the commonwealth is identical with that which sound reason teaches is for the good of all men" (*TP* 3.7 [G III.287/S 692]). Without citizens able to grasp and pursue their good in concert with others, neither the lawmakers nor the laws will accord with "the most essential feature of human nature," which is "the universal striving in all men to preserve themselves" (*TP* 3.18 [G III.291/S 695]). Although this point is not important for the current discussion, it is interesting that this most essential feature of human nature is the "actual essence" of any thing whatsoever (*EIII*p7).

⁴²For an analysis that examines the exclusion of servants in as much detail as the exclusion of women, see Matheron, "Femmes et serviteurs dans la démocratie Spinoziste."

⁴³*TP* 2.10 (G III.280/S 686).

Such an analysis of women's positions within early modern institutions of family and marriage may not be wildly at odds with reality. It is arguably to Spinoza's credit that he recognizes how relationships of domination and submission constrain desire and preclude acting in accordance with full self-affirmation.⁴⁴ Spinoza presses the point, however, by contending that such subjection is not merely a phenomenon of convention, but a transhistorical expression of feminine weakness. Let us look at the black page directly.

Perhaps some will ask whether it is by nature or by convention [*instituto*] that women are subject to the authority of men? For if this has come about simply by convention, there is no reason compelling us to exclude women from government. But if we look simply to experience, we shall see that this situation arises from their weakness [*imbecillitas*]. For nowhere is there an instance of men and women's ruling together; wherever in the world men and women are to be found, we find men ruling and women's being ruled and both sexes living in harmony. . . . Now if women were naturally the equal of men and were equally endowed with strength of mind [*animi fortitudine*] and ability—qualities wherein human power and consequently human right consists—then surely so many and such a wide variety of nations would have yielded some instances where both sexes ruled on equal terms or other instances where men were ruled by women, being so brought up as to be inferior in ability. But as such instances are nowhere to be found, one is fully entitled to assert that women do not naturally possess equal right with men and that they necessarily give way [*cedere*] to men.⁴⁵

Spinoza's argument is fairly simple and clear. If men and women were equal, there would be some examples of women and men ruling together, or women ruling men.⁴⁶ There are none. Thus, women are naturally inferior.⁴⁷

Given his other views, it is hard to accept that Spinoza could categorically deny women's equality.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Genevieve Lloyd may be seen to let Spinoza off the hook too easily when she observes that, for Spinoza, "*in the state of society* [women's] capacity does not match that of men."⁴⁹ Lloyd insightfully maintains that it is perfectly consistent for a Spinozist to affirm that women will tend to have weaker minds within social structures that systematically disadvantage them, for "female minds are formed by these socially imposed limitations on the powers and pleasures of female bodies."⁵⁰ Yet, with Gullan-Whur, I do not think that we can attribute to Spinoza the view that women's inferiority can be explained entirely by "social conditioning."⁵¹ When analyzing subjection in general, Spinoza observes that as soon as hope and fear are removed, individuals rendered subject to the control of others regain their proper power (*potentia*).⁵² Yet he makes no such al-

⁴⁴Cf. Pateman's indictment of Hobbes and Locke for failing to recognize this point, in "Women and Consent."

⁴⁵TP 11.4 (G III.359–60/S 753–54).

⁴⁶As I mentioned above, I do not know what Spinoza thought of the examples in his own time of kings and queens, or of Queen Christina of Sweden, who never married.

⁴⁷See Gullan-Whur's more detailed analysis of this disturbing "syllogism," "Spinoza and the Equality of Women," 93–97.

⁴⁸Indeed, several Spinoza scholars express confusion and dismay at these remarks. See for example Nadler, *Spinoza*, 348.

⁴⁹Lloyd, *Part of Nature*, 163; my emphasis.

⁵⁰Lloyd, *Part of Nature*, 162.

⁵¹Gullan-Whur, "Spinoza and the Equality of Women," 94.

⁵²TP 2.10 (G III.280 / S 686).

lowance in the case of women, who can arguably be understood to be subject to men due to a temporary state of captivity, benefit, or terror rather than by virtue of natural weakness.

Spinoza's reasoning for excluding women is not entirely coherent. The initial basis for it is that women are "under the control of men"; Spinoza uses the term '*potestas*' for "control," which suggests a reversible condition in which one's *conatus*, or "desire," is managed by another through the imposition of hope and fear. It is possible for one, for example a child, to be subject to another without being servile. If the figure of authority guides the desire of the subject in accordance with the subject's interest rather than the commander's, the subject can still act in accordance with reason and thus be free: the *liber* can still be *libera*. Ideally, the regulations of families and commonwealths bend the wills of their subjects toward those activities that develop their capacities for eventual self-direction. If, however, one is "obliged to obey commands from a master which look only to the advantage of the master," then one is a slave and "useless to oneself." Finally, "one who is drawn by his own pleasure, and can neither see nor do anything advantageous to himself, is most a slave."⁵³ The aristocratic assemblyman who desires only what his benefactor commands or does only what will secure him ephemeral pleasures may be just as much a slave as the terrorized wife of a violent man. Yet structures of authority in themselves are not incompatible with the affirmation and amplification of one's own striving, in Spinoza's account.⁵⁴ Thus the fact that women are under the authority of men does not by itself imply that they can never be free and capable of reasoning, desiring, and acting with a view to their own advantage. Yet he insists that women are not "naturally the equal of men . . . [and] equally endowed with strength of mind and ability,"⁵⁵ which is why they remain and ought to remain under masculine authority (*in potestate virorum*).⁵⁶ He concludes that "it is not possible for both sexes to have equal rule, and far less so that men should be ruled by women."⁵⁷ With his insistence that women are naturally subject to men, he implies that women cannot desire freely, or act in their own best interest, independently of men. Therefore, women cannot exercise virtue. As his doctrine of virtue maintains: (1) one must be able to desire what is genuinely good (*utile*) for oneself in order to be able to desire it for all others; without this ability to desire well for themselves, (2) women cannot guide the desires of men to the benefit of men, or toward the common good.⁵⁸ Thus, women ought not to have any part in ruling. Q.E.D.

Spinoza's final transcriptions, which Matheron examines thoroughly, concern not feminine weakness, but male imbecility.⁵⁹ Women in power threaten the peace

⁵³*TTP* 16.10 (G III.194/ IS 201; translation modified).

⁵⁴See also *TP* 3.10 (G III.288–89/S 693).

⁵⁵*TP* 11.4 (G III.360/S 753).

⁵⁶*TP* 11.3 (G III.359/S 753).

⁵⁷*TP* 11.4 (G III.360/S 753).

⁵⁸That is, women do not, according to the argument of *TP* 11.3–4 (G III.359–60/S 753–54) have the virtues of the paradigmatic citizen. This citizen, according to my view, is "a man who is guided by reason," who "can show best how much our skill and understanding are worth by educating men so that they can live according to the command of their own [*proprio*] reason" through good laws and institutions (*EIV*appXII).

⁵⁹Matheron, "Femmes et serviteurs," 197–200.

because “men generally love women from mere lust,” estimate women’s intelligence based on their beauty, and become jealous and competitive with one another to win the favors of women.⁶⁰ The last thoughts expressed in the unfinished text concern the inability of men to establish fraternity effectively in the presence of women. Spinoza envisions politics devolving into a theater of sexual competition over beautiful women, rendering men “useless to themselves,” mere servants of their passions.⁶¹ In other words, women threaten the ability of men to desire well, to desire what will genuinely increase their power, and by extension that of the commonwealth. Although Spinoza’s concern is putatively the inability of women to desire anything other than what their husbands or fathers command, his last words decry the arbitrariness of masculine desire when men are inflamed by feminine beauty and anxious to secure the favors of women in the face of male competition. Even the least astute psychologist becomes suspicious when the argument defending sexual inequality ultimately discloses masculine fear of feminine pollution and masculine rivalry. But to avoid duplicating Spinoza’s errors, I must admit that “I have said enough.”⁶²

The themes of the black page reappear in Spinoza’s considerations of the first chapters of Genesis. As in the account of democracy, at issue in Genesis is the ability of human desire to affirm and cultivate the conditions of genuine freedom. Spinoza implies that, by virtue of being “under the control of men,” women do not desire for themselves and thereby do not meet the requirements of citizenship. The dependency relationship between the sexes is such that women cannot be expected to desire freely, or to make decisions on their own behalves. Thus they are not good candidates for political assembly, which requires members to discuss, debate, and listen to one another, until “their wits are sharpened,” and “something meets with the general approval that no one had previously thought of.”⁶³ Good political institutions are those that allow us to appreciate that undivided we are strongest, and yet our indivisibility must not be the kind that subtracts viewpoints and subjects us to the control of those who inspire the most hope or fear. Spinoza’s politics aims at virtuous unanimity, but he also views inequality and abject dependency to be incompatible with mental harmony. In what follows, I will examine the lessons that Spinoza’s account of the Fall affords for relations of dependency and power.

2. SEXUAL EQUALITY IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Spinoza discusses the “history of the first man” in several places, and with regard to several issues. As far as possible, I will restrict my analysis to what is relevant for the question of sexual equality. Spinoza mentions Eve only briefly, and never by name, but only as the “wife” (*uxor*) of “the first man.” Moreover, he accords her little role in his several discussions of the Fall. Based on Spinoza’s assertions in

⁶⁰ *TP* 11.4 (G III.360/S 754). Spinoza worries about the stupefying effects of lust also in the *Ethics* (e.g. *EIV*appXIX).

⁶¹ *TTP* 16.10 (G III.194/IS 201). A student of mine remarked that the candidacy of Sarah Palin threatens to prove Spinoza correct.

⁶² *TP* 11.4 (G III.360/S 754).

⁶³ *TP* 9.14 (G III.352/S 746).

his *Political Treatise*, one might expect him to endorse Calvin's remarks on Genesis 3:16: "For this form of speech, 'Thy desire shall be unto thy husband,' is of the same force as if he had said that she should not be free at her own command, but subject to the authority of her husband and dependent on his will; or as if he had said, 'Thou shalt desire nothing but what thy husband wishes.'"⁶⁴ Calvin interprets the divine declaration to Eve after the Fall as instituting the very condition that Spinoza cites to deny women full citizenship. Because women cannot desire their own advantage,⁶⁵ they do not have the requisite freedom of mind to legislate. Yet Spinoza's characterization of the first woman does not ally with Calvin's. His rendition of Genesis, I will argue, consistently faults Adam for failing to appreciate that his companion was "flesh of his flesh," the being "who agreed completely with his nature," such "that there could be nothing in Nature more useful [*utilius*] to him than she was." In his peculiar retelling, we find that "the first man" desires what erodes his power because he partners imaginatively with beasts rather than with his wife. Without desiring her, the most enabling companion in the garden, he cannot be virtuous and "desire for other men the good he desires for himself."⁶⁶ As I interpret it, Spinoza's rendition of the Fall contains not only a view of sexual equality, but of affectionate partnership as the foundation of human freedom. Importantly, for the question of sexual equality, this empowering partnership may be enjoyed not only by man and man, but also by man and woman.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza discusses the Garden of Eden once, in the note to the proposition that reads, "If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free."⁶⁷ He notes that because we cannot bring it about that we are not part of nature,⁶⁸ "the hypothesis of this proposition is false." That is, men were not born free, and thus are constrained by their bondage to form a concept of good and evil. He proceeds,

This and other things I have now demonstrated seem to have been indicated by Moses in that story of the first man. For in it the only power of God conceived is that by which he created man, that is, the power by which he consulted only man's advantage. And so we are told that God prohibited man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that as soon as he should eat of it, he would immediately fear death, rather than desiring to live; and then, that, the man having found a wife who agreed completely with his nature, he knew that there could be nothing in Nature more useful to him than she was; but after believing the beasts to be like himself, he immediately began to imitate their affects (see IIIp27) and to lose his freedom; and that afterwards it was recovered by the patriarchs, guided by the spirit of Christ, that is, by the idea of God, on which alone it depends that man should be free, and desire for other men the good he desires for himself.⁶⁹

We know that Spinoza was familiar with Midrashic biblical commentary, and was at least acquainted with Protestant interpretations of the first books.⁷⁰ My view is

⁶⁴Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 280.

⁶⁵'Advantage' is Curley's translation of the word '*utile*,' which Spinoza uses in the Latin text.

⁶⁶Spinoza, *E IVp68s*.

⁶⁷*E IVp68*.

⁶⁸See *E IVp4*.

⁶⁹*E IVp68s*.

⁷⁰See Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*.

that his treatment of this parable is continuous with the Rabbinic tradition in some ways, but takes a decidedly more egalitarian stance on the position of women, albeit implicitly. If we carefully dissect the passage, it will become clear that with his claim that the first woman “agreed perfectly” with the nature of the first man, along with his treatment of the Fall as Adam’s failed identification with his female partner, Spinoza implicitly endorses sexual equality, in direct contrast to his view in the *Political Treatise*. His view in the *Ethics* amounts to a symmetrical contrast not only because the answer to the question of sexual equality is an emphatic yes rather than a considered no, but also because it concerns the precise problem of (a) whether women can desire virtue and (b) whether their presence interrupts the virtuous potential of men.

Spinoza treats the parable of human creation as a representation of God’s power insofar as it pertains exclusively to “man’s advantage [*utilitati*].” In addition to “advantage,” the term ‘*utilitas*’ is sometimes translated as “utility” or “interest,” and is defined by Spinoza as what enables the body to affect and be affected in increasingly many ways,⁷¹ which enables the mind to become increasingly perceptive.⁷² The preservation and enhancement of the human body (and mind) depends on its being able to undergo many changes and to be disposed in a great many ways by other bodies.⁷³ The creation story, through the lens of Spinoza, is an imaginative, but not thereby false, depiction of what best preserves and enhances the powers of man. It is a fictional portrait that accessibly conveys “man’s advantage,” or to use more traditional language, the human good.⁷⁴ The human good is what enables the mind and body to develop affectively so as to become increasingly resilient and strong.⁷⁵ This parable delivers one of the key lessons of *Ethics* IV: namely that human agency, mental and corporeal, is engendered by joining forces with those with whom we most agree in nature. Yet while in Spinoza’s own words nothing is more useful to man than man,⁷⁶ the story of the Garden of Eden illustrates that this most enabling and liberating relationship may also be had between man and woman.

In the first chapter of Genesis, it is narrated that God creates a series of elements and organizes them into light, seas, vegetation, and so on, affirming repeatedly,

⁷¹*E* IVp38.

⁷²*E* IIp14.

⁷³Spinoza, *E* IIp13postIV.

⁷⁴Spinoza’s view of scriptural claims to truth and authority is controversial and complicated. Without entering into arguments about the proper authority of Scripture, I do not think it is tendentious to claim that he interprets the story of the first man to be, as far as possible, aligned with his naturalism and thereby draws lessons that “agree with reason,” even if they do not take rational form. According to one commentator, Fraenkel, at the time Spinoza wrote the *Ethics* he believed Scripture to contain all of the teachings of reason. Although this view would lend even greater force to the argument for sexual equality, I am only committed to the view that Spinoza’s interpretation of the parable does not contradict reason. See Fraenkel, “Could Spinoza Have Presented the *Ethics* as the True Content of the Bible?” For diverse, but helpful discussions of Spinoza and Scripture, see Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, and Levene, *Spinoza’s Revelation*.

⁷⁵ See Spinoza, *E* IVpref: “I shall understand by good what we certainly know is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves.” Also *E* IVdef1: “By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful [*utile*] to us.”

⁷⁶*E* IVp18s.

“And God saw that it was good.”⁷⁷ God creates “humankind [*'adam*] in his image”⁷⁸ and “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”⁷⁹ Many have noted that, in contrast with Genesis 1, where God seems to be happy with his creation, in chapter 2 “the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man [*ha 'adam*] should be alone.’”⁸⁰ Midrashic commentator Nahmanides observes, in a proto-Spinozist vein, that

the point of the words “It is not good that he is alone” is that it cannot be said of him “that it is good” when he is alone, because in this way he will not be preserved, for in the work of creation good means preservation, as I have explained on the words “and God saw that it was good.”⁸¹

Nahmanides suggests that solitude threatens the preservation of humanity, a sentiment that Spinoza echoes throughout his work.⁸²

Scripture presents the observation that humanity is not well supported in solitude as the impetus for God to “make him a helper as his partner.”⁸³ In this version of the story, rather than creating humanity after the animals, we see God parading a series of nonhuman animals before Adam as potential companions; “but for the man [*ha 'adam*] there was not found a helper as his partner.”⁸⁴ It is not until God brings a deep sleep onto Adam and forms from his flesh and bone a true partner that, out of generic humanity (*'adam*), woman (*'ishah*) and man (*'ish*) come into being.⁸⁵ The first man, upon seeing her, recognizes the perfect agreement of their natures: “This at last is bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh; / this one shall be called Woman [*'ishah*], / for out of Man [*'ish*] this one was taken.”⁸⁶ And, finally, this is to explain why “a man [*'ish*] leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”⁸⁷

In Spinoza’s version, he affirms “the man having found a wife who agreed completely with his nature, he knew that there could be nothing in Nature more useful to him than she was” (*EIVp68s*). Yet the man did not get to enjoy this perfect agreement, the one creation that arose from the exclusive consideration of

⁷⁷Citations of the Bible are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, edited by M.D. Coogan.

⁷⁸Gen. 1:27.

⁷⁹Gen. 1:31.

⁸⁰Gen. 2:18.

⁸¹Nahmanides, *The Commentary of Nahmanides on Genesis Chapters 1–6*, 124.

⁸²For example: “[A]s long as human natural right is determined by the power of each single individual and is possessed by each alone, it is of no account and is notional rather than factual, since there is no assurance that it can be made good” (*TP* 2.15 [G III.281/S 687]). Also: “[S]ince fear of isolation is innate in all men inasmuch as in isolation no one has the strength to defend himself and acquire the necessities of life, it follows that men by nature strive for a civil order, and it is impossible that men should ever dissolve this order” (*TP* 6.1 [G III.297/S 700–701]).

⁸³Gen. 2:18.

⁸⁴Gen. 2:20.

⁸⁵For feminist commentators, it is often important that humankind in *Genesis* 1 is not necessarily sexed, and only later is divided into man and woman. For example, Mieke Bal contends that since the Hebrew word *'adam* is related to the word for *'adamah*, for the earth out of which humanity was made, it should be translated as “earthling.” See Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler, *Eve and Adam*, 27.

⁸⁶Gen. 2:23.

⁸⁷Gen. 2:24.

human advantage. Spinoza's treatment of the story, even if his language is atypical, is not especially unconventional. It is not unusual to interpret this part of Genesis to imply equality between woman and man. Maimonides, for example, insists that rather than woman's having been formed from Adam's rib, we should understand the division of humanity into two sexes in a more Aristophanic vein. He chastises commentators for ignoring the literal meaning of the term '*mi-zal'otav*,' which in his view clearly signifies "of his sides."

Understand in what way it has been explained that they were two in a certain respect and that they were also one; as it says, *bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh*. This has received additional confirmation through the fact that it says both of them had the same name: *for she is called 'ishah [woman] because she was taken out of 'ish [man]*. It also confirms their union by saying: *And he shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh*. How great is the ignorance of he who does not understand that all this is necessary with a view to a certain notion.⁸⁸

Since *'ishshah* and *'ish* are distinctive modifications of the same human flesh and bone, Maimonides considers them to be equals.

Spinoza notes that the first man and woman "agreed completely" with one another, by which, I will proceed to argue, he must mean that they shared a power to reason. Thus, when Spinoza notes that Adam "knew" that nothing could be more useful to him than Eve, he is likely alluding to the moment of recognition in the story when he joyfully declares her to be "flesh of my flesh." A Spinozist, then, might consider the shared flesh and origin of man and woman to be an imaginative representation of the common notions that he calls the "foundations of our reasoning."⁸⁹ If reason, or mental freedom, follows from the structural features of our bodies that are identical with those of some or all other bodies in nature,⁹⁰ biblical narrative might be seen to offer a glimpse of the idea that our shared corporeal features are the basis of our mental power and physical perseverance. Moreover, mental perfection is increased to the extent that our bodies have "many things in common with other bodies."⁹¹ By sharing the same flesh and bone, Adam and Eve have a great deal in common and thus potentially serve as the foundations of reason for one another.

In his account of virtue, Spinoza observes that it is manifestly not good for the human mind to be solitary, reflecting upon itself alone, and thus "there are many things outside of us which are useful to us." He continues,

[W]e can think of none more excellent than those which agree entirely with our nature. For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful [*utilius*] than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree [*convenient*] in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being;

⁸⁸Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:356.

⁸⁹*E* IIp40s1. I plan to develop in a companion paper the suggestion that what is shared between man and woman might be understood along the lines of common notions.

⁹⁰*E* IIp38–39.

⁹¹*E* IIp39c.

and that all, together, should seek the common advantage of all [*omnesque simul omnium commune utile sibi quaerant*].⁹²

Steven Barbone finds Spinoza's assertion that another's nature might agree perfectly with one's own to be quixotic, given the absolute singularity of each essence (or nature).⁹³ Without going into the controversy about the uniqueness of essences, we can acknowledge at least one instance in which Spinoza describes two people as having natures in perfect agreement: Adam and Eve, or, as they are called before the Fall, *'ish* and *'ishah*.

Man and woman emerged from the same human material and had the same requirements to persevere in being. If man had not overlooked his "wife who agreed [*conveniebat*] perfectly with his nature" by virtue of his belief that the beasts were similar to him, he might have joined with her to "compose an individual twice as powerful as each one." That is, although there was one being in the garden of Eden who was most apt to enhance his perfection and preserve his power, he instead "lost his freedom" by imitating the affects of beasts.⁹⁴ Many implications follow from this somewhat peculiar account of the Fall, and I discuss elsewhere Spinoza's vivid concerns about the human attraction to a life of savagery in communion with beasts.⁹⁵ For my purposes here, it is important to note that there is nothing incompatible within the bodies of man and woman in this account. Spinoza notes that "insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to agree in nature," or power,⁹⁶ and they can be contrary to one another.⁹⁷ But they are not necessarily contrary to one another: "[O]nly insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, must they always agree in nature."⁹⁸ In order for man and woman to agree perfectly in nature, they must both live according to the guidance of reason, which means, for Spinoza, that each must "seek his advantage for himself [*suum sibi utile*]," and concomitantly be maximally useful to others.⁹⁹ By maintaining that their natures agree perfectly, Spinoza asserts that woman, in the Garden of Eden, is able both to desire for herself—that is, to seek her good on her own behalf—and to live according to the guidance of reason, at least as well as man can. The bodies of man and woman are structurally fully compatible, and, had man pursued his true good, he would have become one in flesh with her, exponentially increasing his power and freedom, rather than absorbing the debilitating affects of beasts.

Genevieve Lloyd hesitantly suggests that this episode may describe Spinoza's understanding of women in the state of nature, but that it does not describe them in civil society.¹⁰⁰ In this view, we might understand the garden of Eden to represent idealized rather than actual historical conditions in which women

⁹²*E* IVp18s.

⁹³Barbone, "What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?", 101.

⁹⁴*E* IIIp27.

⁹⁵Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, chapter 6.

⁹⁶*E* IVp32.

⁹⁷*E* IVp34.

⁹⁸*E* IVp35.

⁹⁹*E* IVp35c2.

¹⁰⁰Lloyd, *Part of Nature*, 163.

and men are both rational and equal, capable of “joining forces,” and maximally enhancing one another’s power to persevere in being. The relationship between husband and wife ought to be liberating, but in actual society marriage is typically so debilitating for women that Spinoza finds sexual inequality to be ineradicable. Lloyd’s is a plausible and sympathetic way of understanding Spinoza’s contradictory representations of sexual equality. Within the practical context of the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza cannot affirm the ability of women to seek their own advantage and thus to act according to reason and be virtuous citizens. Yet when considering human advantage as such, in the abstract, he asserts that affectionate partnership between equals is the greatest good, and nothing better can be imagined than that liberating synergy of beings who desire one another, not for superficial reasons, but because they preserve and enhance one another’s powers of mind and body. There are a few reasons, however, to consider Spinoza’s assertion of perfect sexual equality to be something other than an ideal, and thus to be a stronger claim on behalf of women’s actual possibilities for virtue and freedom. First, the discussion of the Garden of Eden story is not the only place where Spinoza acknowledges sexual equality. Elsewhere in the *Ethics*, as Moira Gatens also observes,¹⁰¹ Spinoza claims that women may enjoy freedom of mind, and that marriage can be an enabling partnership proper to a rational life.¹⁰² This suggests that Spinoza sees in the institution of marriage the possibility of shared freedom, in contrast to his claim in the *Political Treatise*. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Spinoza does not treat the Garden of Eden as a state of nature, if by state of nature one means either a state of perfect freedom or a condition without the institution of law. He explicitly notes that Adam does not enjoy perfect freedom of mind before the Fall.¹⁰³ And however mistaken Spinoza finds him to be, Adam acts as though God is a lawmaker who has laid down a set of dictates that ought to be obeyed.¹⁰⁴ Third, Spinoza frequently treats Scripture as an imaginative representation of what is genuinely beneficial human conduct. Since the third point is more controversial, I will discuss it further.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise* and elsewhere, Spinoza treats Scripture as a set of human stories that are often useful for moral instruction.¹⁰⁵ The particular lessons Spinoza draws from them might even be understood to shed light on what he writes *more geometrico*. It has been argued that “Spinoza’s reading of original sin may be seen as . . . a heretical allegory,”¹⁰⁶ and this reconstruction supports his teachings in the *Ethics* and elsewhere. Spinoza, in reading the Bible through a naturalistic lens, unsurprisingly departs from many theological doctrines concerning Scripture, and the specific character of these departures points toward the messages he aims to glean from it. For example, Spinoza denies the theological view that man was perfect before the Fall.¹⁰⁷ He refutes Maimonides’s contention that

¹⁰¹Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 132.

¹⁰²*EIV*appXX.

¹⁰³*EIV*p68d; and *TP* 2.6 (G III.278/S 684).

¹⁰⁴*TTP* 4.9 (G III.63/IS 62–63).

¹⁰⁵E.g. *TTP* 15.10 (G III.188/IS 194).

¹⁰⁶Grassi, “Adam and the Serpent,” 146.

¹⁰⁷The traditions vary a great deal in their representations of human perfection (for example, whether it was Adam’s intellect or will) and thus of what was lost in paradise, but they tend to portray the original man as, in some important respect, perfect. See Levene, “The Fall of Eden.”

Adam was perfectly rational until he sinned, asserting that “like us, he was subject to passions.”¹⁰⁸ Thus even if Spinoza treats Genesis as a stylized representation of the human good, *pace* Lloyd, he does not idealize “the first man” in the way that many interpreters before him did. If Adam can be said to have lost his perfection upon the Fall, it never consisted in perfect rationality but, I submit, in *the conditions for perfecting his rationality*. That is, the freedom that Adam lost upon imitating the affects of beasts consisted in the perfect accord between the bodies of *’ishah* and *’ish*, the possibilities for mental perfection following from the *convenientia* of their bodies.¹⁰⁹ In Spinoza’s account, the diminishing of human power followed from Adam’s inadequate idea that he was like the brutes and not so much like his wife, the flesh of his flesh.

Spinoza exhibits repeated anxiety about the human desire to retreat from human community toward a fantasy of beastlike freedom.¹¹⁰ Without developing this point now, we can observe that the key problem he identifies in his account of the Garden of Eden is man’s failure to grasp in woman the true conditions of human freedom, which Spinoza explicitly links to his inability to practice virtue, or “desire for other men the good he desires for himself.”¹¹¹ Moreover, it is significant that he breaks with a history of interpretation of the story by refusing, in every instance of his retelling, to blame the Fall upon woman’s relative weakness and increased susceptibility to evil. Even though Maimonides insists on the unity of *’ish* and *’ishah*, he notes that “the *Serpent* had in no respect direct relations with *Adam* . . . it was through the intermediation of *Eve* that *Adam* was harmed and the *Serpent* destroyed him.”¹¹² Similarly, Martin Luther affirms that Eve’s mental gifts were equal to Adam’s and inveighs against those who see her as irrational. Nevertheless, despite his repeated assertion of her equality, Luther interprets the animal degradation of man as passing through woman.

Because Satan sees Adam is the more excellent, he does not dare assail him; for he fears his attempt may turn out to be useless. And I, too, believe that if he had tempted Adam first, the victory would have been Adam’s. He would have crushed the serpent with his foot and would have said: “Shut up! The Lord’s command was different.” Satan, therefore, directs his attack on Eve as the weaker part and puts her valor to the test, for he sees that she is so dependent on her husband that she thinks she cannot sin.¹¹³

For Luther, as for Spinoza in the *Political Treatise*, woman’s dependency renders her unable to discern the requirements of her well-being.¹¹⁴ Even if it was not

¹⁰⁸TP2.6 (G III.278/S 286). Raven provides an illuminating analysis of the relationship between Maimonides’s and Spinoza’s accounts of the garden of Eden in “The Garden of Eden.”

¹⁰⁹EIVp31, p35.

¹¹⁰EIVappXIII.

¹¹¹EIVp68s.

¹¹²Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:356.

¹¹³Luther, “Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5,” 137.

¹¹⁴I acknowledge that there is a great deal of ambiguity with respect to sexual equality in the remarks of Maimonides as well as those of Luther, to which I cannot do justice here. They both point to a certain genuine symmetry between the first man and woman, in mind and body. Yet they see animal attraction and feminine weakness as part of the explanation for the serpent’s seduction of Eve. Moreover, we must admit that even if Genesis does not explain why the serpent approaches the woman, Maimonides and Luther tell a more recognizable version of the story than does Spinoza. Scripture clearly presents the human-animal encounter as one between the woman and the snake, while the man

uncommon in the traditions to remark upon the symmetry and complementarity between man and woman before the Fall, it was heterodox to avoid attributing greater responsibility to woman for the fragility of the human condition.

Spinoza alters the story to avoid imputing the act of sin to Eve. He discusses only Adam's failing in several places, including his exchange with Blijenburgh, the *Ethics*, and the two political treatises. Only in the *Ethics* is the event precipitated by man's affective imitation of beasts; elsewhere it is explained by his misunderstanding of God's nature and command.¹¹⁵ While woman is fairly invisible in his account, aside from the mention of her perfect agreement with man, she is never portrayed as the weaker vessel, and Spinoza presents Adam's excuse-making and accusation of her before God as confused and somewhat pathetic.¹¹⁶ His refusal to treat Eve's weakness as an excuse for Adam's not only takes an unorthodox stand within his historical context, but also contradicts the position he outlines in his *Political Treatise*. While any number of interpreters read Genesis to show that feminine weakness causes or at least contributes to male stupidity, and we know Spinoza to be capable of similar kettle logic, he avoids that route in his representations of the parable.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza suggests that a single hermeneutic principle could explain the "whole history" of the first man. With respect to what Scripture "teaches about the natural light of reason," he observes the following:

The first thing that strikes us is the history of the first man where it is narrated that God forbade Adam to eat of the fruit of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," which seems to mean that God instructed Adam to do good, and to seek it under the aspect of good and not as the opposite of what is bad, to seek good for the love of good rather than from the fear of harm. For as we have already shown, he who does good from a true knowledge of good, acts freely with a constant purpose, but he who does good from fear of suffering injury, is simply driven to avoid what is bad, like a slave, and lives at the command of another. Hence, this one prohibition laid by God on Adam entails the whole divine law and agrees fully with the dictate of the natural light of reason. It would not be difficult to explain the whole history, or parable, of the first man on this basis, but I prefer to let it go.¹¹⁷

For Spinoza, the prohibition that defines the divine decree in Genesis is not the one Scripture clearly states: avoid eating from the tree of good and evil, "lest you die."¹¹⁸ The Fall, if there is one for Spinoza, is not from immortality to mortality. If we recall the retelling from the *Ethics*, Spinoza alters what is unambiguous in the Hebrew to say, "[A]s soon as he should eat of it, he would immediately *fear death*, rather than desiring to live."¹¹⁹ In other words, the story of the Fall presents the

eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at her urging. Yet Spinoza represents the animal affection as passing through Adam.

¹¹⁵For more thorough discussions of Spinoza's treatment of divine command and the relationship between good and evil, see Deleuze, *Spinoza*, chapter 2.

¹¹⁶*TTP* 2.14 (G III.37/IS 35). A number of biblical commentaries fault Adam for his attempt to evade responsibility for the Fall, when he says before God, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12).

¹¹⁷*TTP* 4.11 (G III.66/IS 65).

¹¹⁸Gen. 3:3.

¹¹⁹*EIV*p68s; my emphasis.

human condition as one of bondage. To be human (*'adam*) is to be, like Adam, constrained, at least much of the time, to seek the good under the compulsion of fear of pain, suffering, injury, and mortality, like a slave. The dictate to seek good for its own sake, to meditate on life rather than death,¹²⁰ “entails the whole divine law and agrees fully with the natural light of reason.” The famous parable, above all, presents a fundamental precept of virtue in an imaginative way: pursue and desire the good directly. The good is what enables us to live and enhance our powers to the greatest extent that our natures allow. Spinoza’s retelling of Scripture imaginatively conveys the human good that Adam ought to desire directly in the shape of his wife. Thus even if, for Spinoza, nothing is more useful to man than man, and the *sine qua non* of the human good is the human bond, this special affinity may also be enjoyed with and by woman.

3. CONCLUSION

In juxtaposing Spinoza’s case for sexual inequality with his assertion of Eve’s perfection, we see not only contradictory assertions regarding the status of women, but parallel examinations of the fragile ability of humanity to keep our desire trained upon the good, understood as the genuine conditions of freedom. Spinoza’s paternalistic concern in the *Political Treatise* is that women depend on men to such an extent that they cannot desire their own advantage because they are constrained to reflect the desires of those on whom they rely to survive. If this is grounds for excluding them from the commonwealth, it is because this dependency obscures in women an adequate knowledge of what is genuinely good for them, and thus what is good for all. Likewise, Spinoza notes that male rationality is undermined by female presence, and men, too, are prone not to desire the genuine conditions of freedom, but instead to pursue the parochial pleasures of feminine favor. Spinoza seems concerned that men and women legislating together would result in an inability to live by the divine and rational precept that is imaginatively conveyed in the history of the first man: “He who does good from a true knowledge of good, acts freely with a constant purpose, but he who does good from fear of suffering injury, is simply driven to avoid what is bad, like a slave, and lives at the command of another [*sub imperio alterius vivit*].”¹²¹

Citizenship and the exercise of one’s power in constructing the conditions of absolute democracy require that one be capable of acting *sui juris*, and thus freely desiring the good for its own sake. Acting within one’s own right (or power) is not a matter of inoculating oneself against the influence of others, but of joining with those others with whom one can agree in nature and forming an increasingly greater power of mind and body. Genesis illustrates humanity’s search for a partner and helper to assist in preserving it. The Hebrew word *'kenegdo*,’ which describes the complementarity sought by God on Adam’s behalf, is used only once in the Bible and has generated interpretive controversy. The word *'ezer*,’ for “helper,” is taken to imply symmetrical as well as asymmetrical relations: “helper,” in the

¹²⁰E IVp67.

¹²¹TTP 4.11 (G III.66/IS 65).

case of servants, suggests inferiority; whereas in the case of God and kings who help their subjects, being the assistant follows from being in the superior position with respect to resources, power, and knowledge; and finally, helpers can be equals who are especially suited to enable one another toward a particular end.¹²² Spinoza clearly treats the partnership between *'ishah* and *'ish* to be one of equality. Indeed, the notion of dependency, even mutual dependency, does not adequately describe the relation between this husband and wife. Their perfect agreement, their corporeal *convenientia*, could synergistically “compose an individual twice as powerful as each one.”¹²³ The perfect structural compatibility of their bodies might have furnished common notions to direct their desires immediately toward the good (*utile*), and to live for the joys and powers of which they were capable rather than fearing death.

Spinoza usually represents community among free men (*homines liberi*) as the most enabling condition of virtue, self-satisfaction, and freedom. Because it is hardly possible to be rational or free living among those with whom we do not agree in nature,¹²⁴ “nothing is more useful to man in preserving his being and enjoying a rational life than a man who is guided by reason.”¹²⁵ I am not arguing that in Spinoza’s retelling of the Fall we find a unique complementarity between men and women that makes their union into a source of exceptional power. Spinoza is probably, in my view, more Greek than that. He likely viewed homosocial relations among men to be the most enabling for living a virtuous and rational life. Nevertheless, Eve’s womanhood is not a barrier to her being an equal partner in the pursuit of virtue, and there is evidence that Spinoza maintains compatible views elsewhere in the *Ethics*.

To review briefly, Spinoza maintains that Adam’s affective imitation of the beasts explains the Fall. Spinoza holds that the affects of beasts are “different in nature from human affects,”¹²⁶ and thus do not agree with human nature (i.e. power).¹²⁷ In the final words of the *Political Treatise*, he presents women as provokers of irrationality, and thereby, like beasts, contrary to the nature of men. He observes that feminine beauty arouses passions in men such that they become changeable, inconstant, and contrary to one another and even to themselves. While Spinoza also expresses concern in the *Ethics* that sensual love (*amor meretricius*) can drive men insane and degrade their powers of mind and body,¹²⁸ he also notes that union between men and women can agree with reason and follow from freedom of mind. The relationship between Adam and Eve is not merely an exceptional instance of sexual equality, since Spinoza explicitly maintains that marriage agrees with reason when “the love of each, of both the man and the woman, is caused not by external appearance only, but mainly by freedom of mind.”¹²⁹ That a woman can desire

¹²²Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler, *Eve and Adam*, 28–30.

¹²³*E IVp18s*.

¹²⁴*E IVappVII*.

¹²⁵*E IVappIX*.

¹²⁶*E IVp37s1*.

¹²⁷*E IVp32d*.

¹²⁸*E IVp44s, IVappXIX*.

¹²⁹*E IVappXX*.

a man from freedom of mind and not merely from fear of death (or interest in material survival or cultural acceptance) indicates that she, too, can pursue virtue for its own sake, and thus join with other free beings to enjoy a rational and joyful life. Adam saw the potential for synergistic combination in the garden: “He knew that there could be nothing in Nature more useful to him than she was.” Yet he began to imitate the affects of those who did not agree with his nature, who were not able to desire virtuously with and for him. Adam saw the better, but he did the worse.¹³⁰ He knew the true good,¹³¹ but he found himself desiring the apparent one.¹³² Adam was just “like us,” subject to affects.¹³³

The parable shows how each of us so often lives as a slave, at the command of another, even if that other is only our own pleasure, provoked by titillating encounters.¹³⁴ Each of us is often unable to perceive the divine law as a regularity of nature, rather than as a moral imperative from an imagined ruler to be obeyed out of fear. For Spinoza, nature reveals that nothing is more to our advantage than one another: “[M]an is a god to man.” Yet in one another, maybe even especially in women, we see the affects of beasts, respond in kind, and treat one another as wolves.

I suggest that we see Spinoza’s account of Adam not only as an account of “the everyman,” but as applicable to every man, including Spinoza himself.¹³⁵ Although it is tempting to see Spinoza as the master of his words, I suspect that, for example, Gullan-Wuhr’s explanation for his incongruous views on women resists seeing him as a finite mode, like Adam, subject to affects. Although we cannot know whether Spinoza’s exclusion of women from the democratic polis was a conscious bow to convention, other remarks suggest that he was not at all invulnerable to the sexism of his day. Spinoza was a bold and iconoclastic thinker, and it is notable that he was capable of seeing the better in Eve’s perfection, but when he composed the last paragraphs of his *Political Treatise*, for whatever reasons, he did the worse.

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¹³⁰Spinoza cites Medea’s utterance—*video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor*—from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* several times as emblematic of the human condition (e.g. EIVp17s).

¹³¹EIVdef1.

¹³²EIVp8.

¹³³TP 2.6 (G III.278/S 684).

¹³⁴TTP 16.10 (G III.194/IS 201).

¹³⁵EIVp4. Cf. Grassi, “Adam and the Serpent.”

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