

‘Disempowered by nature’: Spinoza on the political capabilities of women

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In the unfinished final chapter of his unfinished *Political Treatise* we find Spinoza’s unfinished thought about the exclusion of women from the democratic polity. Spinoza says that women are deprived of citizenship in a democracy because they are ‘under the control of their husbands’ and, furthermore, ‘women do not naturally possess equal right with men’.¹ The two paragraphs in which Spinoza discusses women’s exclusion from democratic citizenship have provoked both anger and puzzlement: anger because Spinoza’s reasoning here is so poor, and puzzlement because Spinoza’s position seems to run counter to what can be inferred from his *Ethics* about political community. The basis of human communities, as stated in the *Ethics*, is that we join together with others who ‘agree in nature’ with us. There is no indication there that this agreement of nature cannot include women as well as men; in fact, as we will see, there is evidence to the contrary. The best communities are formed on the basis of what we have in common, not in terms of our experiences, backgrounds, beliefs, or feelings, but in terms of what human beings essentially are and what we truly know. Our essence is to strive to preserve our being – to carry on being human beings – and to build the ‘common notions’ that are the basis of true knowledge of ourselves and nature. Common striving, common essence, and common notions bind us together to work for our mutual benefit regardless of our differences.²

At first, it looks as if Spinoza’s texts follow a familiar pattern: the ‘universal’ claim he makes for all human beings in one text is revealed in another to be restricted to men. We see this pattern in Rousseau and Kant, for instance, in the shifts from their ‘theoretical’ to their ‘practical’ texts. While their political theories can show that

reason, freedom, and citizenship extend to all human beings, their practical guides to the right workings of society state that at least half of human beings are excluded from attaining those goods.³ Following decades of feminist philosophical critique, it is now widely acknowledged that the detail of these practical texts must lead us to re-interpret the universal claims for humanity of the theoretical texts as, in fact, claims for male humanity.⁴ This seems to me the right strategy in the cases of Rousseau and Kant, where the practical texts shed light on the hidden assumptions of the theoretical ones. However, there is no parallel distinction for Spinoza between what ‘theoretically’ holds for all humanity, and what actually holds in practice (TP 1.1). We cannot distinguish the position of the *Ethics* from that of the *Political Treatise* in these terms. Instead, these two texts of Spinoza’s differ in their relation to truth and knowledge. Whereas the *Ethics* prompts readers to build true understanding of nature, the *Political Treatise* invites them to imagine political formations that have the status of ‘fictions’ that are neither true nor false. It would therefore be wrong to reinterpret Spinoza’s claims for humanity in the *Ethics* in terms of what he says about women in the *Political Treatise*. Instead, as I will show, the remarks about women in the *Political Treatise* must be interpreted in terms of the truth that Spinoza unfolds in the *Ethics*.

The general conclusion I reach will be familiar to feminist readers of Spinoza: that women, in Spinoza’s system, are deprived of freedom and political participation not by their essential natures, but by their social and historical circumstances. The originality of this paper is not in that conclusion, which I share with Genevieve Lloyd, but in the detail and method of my argument, which take a different trajectory from Lloyd’s.⁵ In the first section, I look at the *Political Treatise* and the *Ethics* as texts with different critical functions to show why we need not be puzzled or perturbed by

Spinoza's remarks in the *Political Treatise*. I also indicate how, for Spinoza, we must formulate the question of women's capabilities. In the second section, that question is developed through looking at the 'natural right' of women in comparison with others who are similarly not 'free men'. In the third section, I show that women's equal capacity for political participation must be grounded, for Spinoza, in the compositional similarity of men and women. I argue, finally, that Spinoza offers an explanation for women's disempowerment through his account of marriage: as long as women are economically dependent on their husbands, they cannot share power either in the micro-community of marriage or in the political community at large. I aim to show that Spinoza's remarks on women must be taken as prompts for critical consideration of the place of women in the progressive democratic polity.

Truth and Fictions

The *Political Treatise*, begun around 1675, is Spinoza's mature work on political organization. It is not only less polemical than the censored and vilified *Theological-Political Treatise* of 1670; it is also less concerned with the promotion of human freedom. Instead, its purpose is to determine how to preserve peace and harmony in different types of civil state. While these two purposes are not at odds (for Spinoza, 'security and liberty are so closely intertwined that one cannot exist without the other'⁶), the *Political Treatise* takes the perspective of the state becoming better organized rather than that of the individual becoming more free. Following several sections on the rights and aims of a society, Spinoza explains how best to uphold stability in a monarchy, an aristocracy, and a democracy. The section on democracy,

intended to be the culmination of the treatise, was left unfinished when Spinoza died in 1677. It is in this unfinished section that the question of women arises.

Spinoza states that he will discuss only one type of democracy: the kind where voting and undertaking offices of state are exclusively the privilege of ‘those who owe allegiance only to their country’s laws and are in other respects in control of their own right and lead respectable lives’ (TP 11.3). The purpose of these restrictions seems to be to exclude foreigners, women, children, servants, and criminals from democratic participation.⁷ Whereas the exclusion of foreigners, children, servants, and criminals is not questioned, Spinoza accepts that one might reasonably question the exclusion of women. He asks whether it is by nature or convention that women are under the control of men, ‘for if this has come about simply by convention, there is no reason compelling us to exclude women from government’ (TP 11.4). Drawing on empirical examples, however, Spinoza concludes that women’s disempowerment is natural and ‘arises from their weakness’.

If women were naturally the equal of men and were equally endowed with strength of mind 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 and other instances where men were ruled by women, being so brought up 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 to men. (TP 11.4)

This seems to be an example of a classic bad argument for denying women rights: if women were truly equal to men, then in all of human history all over the world, there

would be some examples of women holding power over men; since there are no such examples, women cannot be truly equal to men.⁸ What the bad argument fails to consider, above all, are the historical conditions that determine the distribution of power according to sexual difference.

It is this point that Moira Gatens, in particular, levels at Spinoza. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd were among the first to critically discuss Spinoza in terms of contemporary feminist philosophy, and, with Susan James, remain the most important feminist philosophers working on Spinoza today.⁹ In her 1996 book *Imaginary Bodies*, Gatens notes Spinoza's remark that if there were a society ruled by women, men would be 'brought up to be inferior in ability'. That is, for women to maintain power over men, men would need to be conditioned through culture and education to neglect their abilities to act and to think, to consider themselves less active and less rational than women, and to internalize ideas that reinforce their inferiority. But while Spinoza acknowledges this, Gatens says, he fails to see 'that this is arguably the historical situation of women: that is, that women have been so brought up that we can make less use of our abilities' (134). A blindness to women's historical situation does appear to follow from Spinoza's denial that women's inequality is purely conventional. Conventions, for Spinoza, are the cultural practices that we are trained to repeat by associating them with certain images and affects. They vary according to custom, religion, education, and upbringing (E IIIApp.XXVII). But women's subjection to men's power does not vary with culture or history, according to Spinoza's brief survey. In all cultures at all times 'we find men ruling and women's being ruled and both sexes thus living in harmony' (TP 11.4). It is not merely that certain cultures have associated an image of 'women' with an image of subjection,

Spinoza suggests: the difference in power between men and women is natural and harmonious.

In a more recent interview, however, Gatens has suggested that Spinoza's work includes the possibility for considering women as constrained by their social and historical conditions.¹⁰ This forms part of Gatens' important rehabilitation of Spinoza's concept of imagination for feminist thought. Women's subjection may be natural and real – it is part of nature, as all power relations are – but nevertheless 'imaginary'. The fact that women's subjection is found throughout human culture highlights the insidiousness of particular systems of images concerning sexual difference. Spinoza acknowledges that complex image-systems, such as those of religion, can overpower reason: they can be so deeply ingrained in our practices as to be invisible, even to the rational person, and impossible to shake off with an act of will. In *Collective Imaginings* Gatens and Lloyd use Spinoza's concept of imagination to diagnose the 'imaginings' of individuals and cultures: the collective fictions and passions that determine and often constrain individuals' capabilities. In *Part of Nature*, Lloyd suggests that Spinoza can explain the disempowerment of groups of individuals through his account of fictions. On this interpretation, Spinoza understands that women's inferiority is not essential to their nature, but the result of historical and social conditions that bind (and blind) human beings to power relations that are imaginary, yet deeply ingrained.

If Gatens and Lloyd are right – and I believe they are – then there is no *essential* reason for Spinoza why women should be excluded from the polity. The reasons do not stem from women's essence, but from the conditions of their existence.¹¹ Because of the distinction between what is true and what is real but imaginary, the fact that the gendered power relation is real and natural does not mean,

for Spinoza, that it is an absolute truth embedded in our essence as human beings. We need to be careful, therefore, in how we read Spinoza's claims about women's 'natural' disempowerment. Despite appearances to the contrary, I believe that no claim is being made about women's essential nature or capabilities in the *Political Treatise*. That is because the *Political Treatise* is not the kind of text that can make those claims. Spinoza does not even intend us to understand his statements about women as *true*. His remarks about women form part of a fiction, and as such, they are valid only insofar as they cohere with a system of images that is, as a whole, neither true nor false.

For Spinoza, 'fictions' are more or less coherent systems of images based on experiences, memories, and affects which, when shared by members of a community, are fundamental to religion, politics, and culture. Because images are inadequate ideas, fictions are systems of partial and confused truths. Their connection may be coherent, but the fiction itself will not be a clear and distinct true idea. Yet while fictions are not true, nor are they strictly false, because fictions are not assented to; they include our awareness of their inadequacy. Fictions concern 'possibilities' – a term which must be qualified. According to Spinoza's metaphysics, there are no 'possible' things or events: all being that can exist does exist, and exists necessarily (E IP29, IP33S1). From God's eternal perspective there is no 'possibility'. However, we do speak of possibility from the human perspective, because we do not perfectly understand the necessary order and connection of events. Nor do we fully understand whether a set of causes is determined to produce a certain thing or not (E IVD4). Fictions, then, are 'possibilities' from a human perspective only: they amount to ideas whose necessity or impossibility we do not yet know. They have the status of hypotheses, uncertainties to be held up for scrutiny until the truth is known.¹² Fictions

are not merely illusory, for they have real power and cause real effects, as Gatens and Lloyd explain:

The imagination may create fables, fictions, or collective ‘illusions’, which have ‘real’ effects, that is, which serve to structure forms of identity, social meaning and value, but which considered in themselves, are neither true nor false. ... Socially shared fictions play a constitutive role in binding a group of individuals together. (123)

For Spinoza, political organization is always to some extent fictional, for it is a system of imagined rules for managing human life. That the rules are imagined does not make them illusory or false. These systems are coherent and powerful, but they are inadequate because they are based on a partial and confused understanding of human nature, not on perfect knowledge of what human beings essentially have in common. Even the best political systems are ‘possibilities’ held out for us to work with and scrutinize as we strive to understand ourselves better.

The best political system is one that promotes this striving amongst the largest proportion of its members, so that its organization becomes progressively less fictional and more grounded on rational true understanding. The best state seeks to preserve itself, not as a static thing, but as this progressively rational and harmonious entity. The peace and security of the state depend on the state’s always *striving* for more reason and virtue, just as the happiness of a human being does (‘Freedom of spirit or strength of mind is the virtue of a private citizen: the virtue of a state is its security’, TP 1.6). The purpose of the *Political Treatise* is to show how monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy should be organized in order to maintain their being *as* thus progressing, as far as that is possible within their own systemic constraints, and to prevent their regression into tyranny. In other words, it is to provide us with those

fictions which best allow states to progress towards reason and virtue. Just as the *Ethics* promotes a model of humanity which we should follow as we work towards greater virtue (E IV Preface), the *Political Treatise* offers three models of good political organization for societies to look to as they progress.¹³ These models are schemas, or fictions. The *Political Treatise* is entirely concerned with presenting and sharing organized systems of images.

If we understand the *Political Treatise* in this way, we can make better sense of the bad argument of chapter 11. To prove that women have no natural capacity to hold political power, Spinoza appeals to the fact that women have never held such power and have always been ruled by men. This is a bad argument by any lights, but particularly by Spinoza's. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza shows that every individual has unique capabilities for acting and thinking, capabilities that are specific to its body and mind and that are engaged to varying degrees depending on the situation. Our capabilities are not fixed; they develop as the body and mind are more active (E IIP13-14). What an individual is *capable of* cannot be inferred from what that individual has or has not done in the past, because new situations may lead new capabilities to be realized: 'experience has not yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone' (E IIIP2S). Furthermore, an individual's capabilities cannot be adduced from the supposed capabilities of 'women' in general, because 'women' is a universal term based on generalization from experience.

Universals are images of images, and involve very little truth:

Those notions they call *Universal*, like Man, Horse, Dog, and the like, have arisen ... because so many images (e.g. of men) are formed at one time in the human body that they surpass the power of imagining – not entirely, of course, but still to the point where the mind can imagine

neither slight differences of the singular [men] (such as the colour and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body. For the body has been affected most [forcefully] by [what is common], since each singular has affected it [by this property]. And [the mind] expresses this by the word *man*, and predicates of it infinitely many singulars. For as we have said, it cannot imagine a determinate number of singulars.

But it should be noted that these notions are not formed by all [men] in the same way, but vary from one to another, in accordance with what the body has more often been affected by, and what the mind imagines or recollects more easily. ... Each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body. (E IIP40S1, interpolations Curley's, ellipses mine)

Spinoza teaches us to be wary of universals: since they cover over specific differences and vary according to our experiences and affects, they 'signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree' (E IIP40S1).¹⁴ Any universal statement about 'women' will reflect only those qualities of women that have happened to affect the speaker most forcefully. Spinoza certainly knows that empirical examples of what people do (or do not do) in general, are no proof of what individuals are specifically capable of.

If Spinoza is offering an argument for women's natural disempowerment in chapter 11, it is a spectacularly bad one. However, I believe it is mistaken to think that Spinoza is offering an argument at all. When Spinoza says that women are subject to men's power by nature, he means that women's disempowerment is not illusory.

Men's power over women is real: it is a fact, and it is observable in nature. But that does not mean that 'women are subject to men's power' is a *true idea* that could be deduced and rationally known. In fact, Spinoza's rhetorical strategy here indicates that this is *not* a true idea. A true idea can be adequately demonstrated, in the sense of being deduced from adequate understanding of its cause (E IIP32-40). If Spinoza were trying to argue for the truth of this idea, he would need to demonstrate how it follows necessarily from another true idea. Spinoza does not even attempt such a demonstration here. Instead, he says that the fact of men's power over women can be seen in experience, and infers that this situation cannot be merely a matter of linguistic or cultural convention. This statement, as Spinoza would surely admit, is highly confused: it relies, first, on his own generalizations of 'men' and 'women' and whatever affects accompany those confused images, and second, on an inference, which is a move of the imagination. The statement is an imagined belief, not a rationally known truth.¹⁵ This is why Spinoza offers us empirical examples in the place of a good argument: that women are under the control of their husbands is his own empirical observation, not a true idea. Spinoza imagines, but does not know, that women are subject to men's power; accordingly, his belief is supported not by arguments, but by stories.

As Gatens and Lloyd say, we must 'maintain a distinction between those statements, ideas or imaginings which are meaning-generating and those which are true or false' (123). The statements and stories of the *Political Treatise* are meaningful and meant to cause effects, but as fictions, they are neither true nor false. Spinoza does not intend us to read his remarks about women as true ideas because, put simply, the *Political Treatise* does not deal in true ideas. It deals in hypotheses which we must critically and rationally examine before accepting them as necessary,

rejecting them as impossible, or continuing to entertain them as possibilities. As James remarks, the model of the democratic state ‘holds out an image of perfectly inclusive polity that is ... beyond human reach, but in spite of this, it serves as a means of thinking critically and creatively about politics’.¹⁶ This makes the *Political Treatise* a very different kind of text from the *Ethics*, which does not invite critical examination of fictions, but draws us into the performance and affirmation of true ideas. The *Ethics* is written with the purpose of helping us to enhance the activity of thinking which is equivalent to true understanding (E IID3, IIP43S). The reader builds his or her true understanding through performing the activity of thought prompted by the words on the page. It is written in adequate demonstrations, according to the geometrical method, so the reader may unfold the truth in the best order.¹⁷ The *Ethics* is written and read according to the second type of knowledge, reason, whereas the *Political Treatise* is written and read according to the first type: imagination. Where the *Political Treatise* aims to engage us in a shared imagining of what the state can be, the *Ethics* aims to increase our knowledge and virtue.

It would be inappropriate, then, to treat the *Political Treatise* as if it purported to offer true statements about women. It may well give us an accurate reflection of Spinoza’s *beliefs* about women, but Spinoza would be the first to insist that beliefs – even those that turn out to be true – are not true ideas as long as they are not truly understood (TIE 69). Spinoza does not truly understand why women are weaker and have less natural right than men; nor does he intimate that he does. However, Spinoza suggests that as no political discord has ever followed from this difference in power, it can continue to form part of the fictional democracy that states use as a model for seeking greater security and harmony. Gendered power difference is a poorly understood idea that forms part of a coherent fiction. That women are subject to

men's power is a 'part of nature' that appears to pose no threat to the harmony of human communities: Spinoza sees no reason why this situation should be challenged in a model for stable democracy.

Women, servants, children, and animals

What true ideas can we draw from Spinoza's philosophy concerning women's capacity for political participation? It is the role of the *Ethics*, not the *Political Treatise*, to lead us to true understanding of human nature and human communities. If we want to understand the truth about women in Spinoza's universe, we must turn to the *Ethics*.¹⁸ All hangs on whether women are 'men', and therefore 'like us', the term Spinoza uses for political co-participants in *Ethics* Part IV. If women are 'men', then the *Ethics* demonstrates that there are no essential reasons why women should not be rational and free, and therefore democratic participants. But as with nearly all Enlightenment thinkers, the question is precisely whether 'men' means human beings, or whether 'men' means men.

Let's take the case of a male servant as a point of comparison. In the *Political Treatise* Spinoza says that servants, too, are naturally disempowered because they are under the control of their masters.¹⁹ Spinoza defines freedom in terms of self-determination. Servants are deprived of freedom in that they are constrained by another 'to exist and to produce effects in a certain and determinate manner' and are not 'determined to act by themselves alone' (E ID7). While the master-servant relation is, like the gendered power relation, found everywhere in human history, it is not embedded in the essential nature of the male servant, for whom greater self-

determination is a fundamental capability. The servant can become more free by gaining greater power over his own acting and thinking, perhaps building reason and overcoming his affects by reading the *Ethics*. This may be possible only once he is released from servitude, or once employment legislation gives him more rights; the point is that what excludes the servant from freedom and citizenship is his existential situation in relation to other finite modes, not his essential nature. Because he is a 'man', capable of building reason, the servant is essentially capable of becoming more free, in the sense of having greater power over his own acting and thinking. As long as he is a servant, he cannot be free enough to be a citizen, but when conditions allow it, he ceases to be a servant and becomes a free man.

We might think that the same should be true for women: once they become more free, through a combination of rational self-improvement and societal change, they will have fulfilled the requirement for democratic participation that they be 'in control of their own right'. However, women are different from male servants in that their bodies differ from men's bodies. For Spinoza, the mind is the idea of the body and their activities are strictly parallel: mind and body are 'one and the same thing, explained through different attributes' (E IIP7S). Women's minds must therefore differ from men's to the same extent, and in the same ways, as their bodies differ.²⁰ Whereas the differences between masters and servants are largely social (or 'conventional') for Spinoza, the differences between men and women are physical and mental.²¹ Unlike the male servant, who ceases to be a servant when he becomes a free man, a woman who becomes more free does not cease to be a woman. If women's bodily constitution is fundamentally different from men's, then women do not have the same bodily or mental capabilities as men. Note that for Spinoza – notwithstanding his imagining of women's natural weakness – this means women

have different, not necessarily lesser, capabilities than men. Their power is different from men's power; what they are able to do and think is different. If women's essential power differs from men's, then it must be that their virtue differs too (E IVD8). Since a being's essence is its striving to preserve its being (E IIP7), and since virtue is what is good for that striving (E IIP9S), beings with different essences also have different virtues. As Spinoza says of men and horses: 'the gladness of the one differs in nature from the gladness of the other as much as the essence of the one differs from the essence of the other' (E IIP57S). If there is a fundamental difference in essence between men and women, then we strive for different goods and become virtuous and free in different ways. A woman who increases her virtue and freedom becomes not the 'free man' of *Ethics* Parts IV and V, but a free woman. Are women's capabilities, power, and essence so different from men's that women could not become 'free men' and participate in democracy, even under optimal social circumstances?

This seems to be what Spinoza affirms when he says that women and men do not possess equal 'natural right'. In chapter 2 of the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza explains that 'every natural thing has as much right from Nature as it has power to exist and to act. ... The natural right of every individual is coextensive with its power' (TP 2.3-4). The same definition of natural right is used in the *Ethics*, where Spinoza says it is our natural right to do what follows from the necessity of our nature (E IVP37S2). An individual has a natural right to do everything that it *can* do from the laws of its own nature; what it does from the laws of its own nature is necessarily good for it, and for the other individuals with which it shares the same nature (TP 2.4; E IVP35C2, IVP37). An individual's natural right is determined by his or her bodily and mental capabilities, and 'forbids nothing which is desired and possible'.²² Natural

right is, however, limited by the circumstances the individual finds itself in. In any given situation, an individual will not be able to do everything it *can* do. What it can do, bodily and mentally, is always determined by physical, environmental, social, and relational conditions. As Etienne Balibar puts it, ‘the individual’s right includes all that he is effectively able to do and to think in a given set of conditions’.²³ We have the natural right to do only what we have the power to do, given the specific circumstances we are in.

For Spinoza, no two individuals have exactly the same natural right, or power; indeed, no one individual has exactly the same natural right from moment to moment, given that conditions and capabilities are always changing. However, we can make general claims about the natural right, or power, of groups of individuals based on their shared bodily constitution: what a given kind of body is typically able to do. That means we can distinguish the natural right of human beings from the natural right of other animals. ‘Because the right of each one is defined by his virtue, or power, men have a far greater right against the lower animals than they have against men’ (E IVP37S1). Non-human animals lack the relevant capabilities to participate in the polity: their bodily differences mean animal and human essences, desires, and virtues are different, and they would not agree with us on common goods (E IVP37S1, IIP57S). But it is not only animals that lack the relevant capabilities for political participation. Infants, generally dismissed by Spinoza as useless, have very limited power and natural right, and virtually no freedom. An infant may grow up to become a free man and a citizen, but there is no certainty about this transformation. A horse who became a free man could presumably also become a citizen: Spinoza suggests that it is only our experience that babies have become men, whereas horses have not, that makes this implausible, given that a baby differs from a free man as

much as a horse does (E IVP39S). As long as a child is a child – and as long as a horse is a horse – both are excluded from citizenship on the grounds of bodily and mental incapacity.

The question is: are women more like servants, who are capable of building their power and thereby regaining their natural right to become citizens when social conditions allow it, or more like children and horses, who essentially lack the power and therefore the natural right to be citizens? If the former, then all that is required for women to become citizens is social change; if the latter, then women will not become citizens without undergoing a profound transformation of their nature. In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza groups women, servants, and children together since none are in control of their own right. As Sacksteder points out, a person who is in another's power is dependent on that other person's rights: his own natural right and power will be diminished (124). But, as we have seen, there may be different reasons for the relative weakness of these individuals. An individual's weakness may be explained by his essentially having lesser bodily and mental capabilities than others, or by the power-diminishing conditions of her existence.

Others like us

We need to ask whether Spinoza's philosophy implies that women's bodily and mental differences make them essentially incapable of political participation. To determine an individual's essential capabilities and natural right, we must look at what their body is capable of doing, and what their mind is correspondingly capable of thinking. This varies between individuals, so no general statement about 'men' or

‘women’ will be accurate. Nevertheless, we can say that women’s bodily capabilities are different from men’s in some respects, and their desires and affects are different from men’s in some respects too.²⁴

When we seek our own advantage, we seek also the advantage of others like us (E IVP37). But who are these ‘others like us’? What appears to be a simple claim for the joint endeavours of human beings turns out to be more complicated. All finite modes are ‘like us’ in the sense that they are modes of substance in the attributes of extension and thought. All extended bodies form one body, and all the ideas, or minds, of those bodies form one idea: ‘the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual’ (E IIP13L7). There is no finite mode with which we have nothing in common because ‘all bodies agree in certain things’ (E IIP13L2). However, bodies are distinguished from one another according to their rate of motion (E IIP13L1), and it is in terms of motion and rest that they find their similarities: bodies are like one another in what they are capable of doing. Other finite modes are ‘like us’ to varying extents, but they are more ‘like us’ as our bodies (and, in parallel, our minds) have common capabilities.²⁵ I have *most* in common with other people whose bodily capabilities are most similar to my own, and progressively less in common with other humans, other mammals, other animals, and other things in nature as we share fewer and fewer capabilities. These circles of commonality indicate the different degrees of ethical and political relevance other beings have for us. Beings who are most ‘like us’ are most useful to us, and it is best for us that we preserve their being and promote their flourishing. As James argues, human freedom, social harmony and political stability are grounded in our becoming more alike, and in the overcoming, to some extent, of our individual differences.²⁶ Importantly, our utility to one another depends

on similarity of bodily constitution – what the body does and how it moves – and not on similarities in appearance, background, ethnicity, or culture.

If similarity of bodily constitution is what matters, perhaps women are more useful to women, and men are more useful to men, than either sex is to one another.²⁷ Indeed, a group of women might be of greater utility than a mixed-sex group in addressing problems, pursuing goods, and building knowledge specific to what women bodily have in common. But a human political community must address the problems and goods specific to human commonality, and women and men certainly have the bodily similarity to join together in this. Differences between the sexes are less significant than the bodily similarities that bind us together as members of the same species. ‘Nothing can agree more with the nature of any thing than other individuals of the same species. And so nothing is more useful to man in preserving his being and enjoying a rational life than a man who is guided by reason’ (E IVApp.IX). The appeal to ‘individuals of the same species’ suggests that ‘man’ means a human being, not a specifically male one. Of course, ‘species’ here does not refer to scientific classification, and means something more like ‘kind’. Since men and women have bodies that are structurally very similar, and since their differences are complementary for the capability to reproduce, men and women must be individuals of the same kind, and useful to each other. Other humans are the beings most useful to us, particularly rational human beings, since people who are dominated by passions have diminished capabilities and are bound to differ (E IVP32). When we live according to the guidance of reason, we maximise our human capabilities and act according to the laws of a shared human nature. We have, as James puts it, achieved a degree of uniformity that enhances our power.²⁸ ‘It follows that insofar as men live

according to the guidance of reason, they must do only those things which are good for human nature, and hence, for each man' (E IVP35).

However, being human is not sufficient for being 'like us'. As we have seen, human babies are not 'like us', for their bodies are capable of only a very small proportion of what adult bodies are capable of, and they are wholly unable to live according to the guidance of reason. Nor is the drunk of E IIIP57S 'like us'; determined almost entirely by passions, he strives for different goods and feels different affects. 'There is no small difference between the gladness by which a drunk is led and the gladness a philosopher possesses'. Spinoza suggests here that the difference between the drunk and the philosopher is of the same order as the difference between a horse and a man. Indeed, we can imagine cases where a horse or a dog might be more 'like us' than another human: a farmer and a dog may share certain bodily capabilities by virtue of herding sheep together for years. There is a sense in which the farmer has more in common with his dog than he does with an infant, a drunk, or a person in a coma, none of whom are rational or useful to him. While animals may be useful to us, however, Spinoza is clear that we should not seek their company in preference to human society, for animals do not agree with our nature. If we attempt to form societies with individuals who do not agree with our nature, we will suffer a profound transformation due to our natural tendency to imitate the affects of those with whom we associate (E IIP27, IVApp.VII and XIII). It is best for humans to associate with other humans mutually to promote rationality. 'Apart from men we know no singular thing in Nature whose mind we can enjoy, and which we can join to ourselves in friendship, or some kind of association' (E IVApp.XXVI).

Spinoza provides us with a fiction that supports this idea at E IVP68S. The fiction is that of 'the first man', Adam, who was supposedly born free, but began to

lose his freedom when he started to imitate the affects of the animals in paradise. IIP27 tells us that ‘if we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect’. The problem with Adam is that he imagines that the animals are ‘like him’, and he begins to feel the affects they feel (the basis of pity and emulation). Misled by his belief that he has found a being with common desires and goods, Adam emulates the snake’s desire for the fruit. His freedom, reason, and virtue diminish; he begins to fear death and to form concepts of good and evil. The cause of Adam’s downfall, in Spinoza’s strange retelling of this story, is an imagining that overpowers an important piece of true knowledge. Adam imagines that animals are like him. In truth, only one other individual is like him and capable of helping him build reason and freedom: his wife, Eve.

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 he believed the lower animals to be like himself, he immediately began to imitate their affects and to lose his freedom. (E IVP68S)

As Gatens has remarked, Spinoza’s story of the fall is peculiar in attributing no responsibility to Eve.²⁹ Perhaps Spinoza believes Eve was even more determined by imagination than Adam and had no freedom to lose. Yet Eve is said to agree completely with Adam’s nature and to be the most useful thing to him in nature, implying that she is a human being with the ability to reason. Adam neglects the community he has with Eve, the community which would have enabled both to build their rational knowledge and freedom.

According to this fiction, women and men agree *completely* in nature. We are so much alike, it seems, that nothing in nature can be more useful to us than a human being of the opposite sex. A man and a woman can form a community in which reason, virtue, and freedom are developed: the family. Spinoza upholds marriage between a man and a woman whose love is caused by ‘freedom of mind’ and maintained by the common love of ‘begetting children and educating them wisely’ (E IVApp.XX).³⁰ This is a marriage not of passion, but of reason, where husband and wife feel a love arising from the individual freedom of each and relating to their common rational natures. In a rational relationship, the differences between the participants are overcome and their fundamental sameness highlighted.³¹ In such a marriage, a woman is as free and powerful as her husband, and both pursue understanding together. Such a woman would surely be capable of democratic participation too. But this model of marriage is an ideal, as impossible to achieve as the perfect human community. In a perfect community, where all members are fully rational, laws and constitutions are unnecessary because every individual always does what is best for all humanity. A real community, however, requires imaginary laws and structures to manage the passions of its members. And so a real marriage – if, for Spinoza as for other republican thinkers, the family is the microcosm of the state – requires imaginary rules and structures too. No marriage is perfectly rational, since no individual is free of passions. Every marriage involves love ‘which has a cause other than freedom of mind’, and this sensual love ‘easily passes into hate’. Furthermore, differing desires and feelings are a source of conflict. Real marriages involve vacillation between love and hate, and are ‘encouraged more by discord than by harmony’ (E IVApp.XIX).

Where people are at odds with each other, imaginary rules are required to manage their behaviour and bring about harmony. It is not that Spinoza advocates suppressing passions in marriage altogether, for this is neither possible nor desirable.³² Instead, it is a matter of managing affects through the use of stronger affects, usually fear (E IVP7). In the state, people refrain from harming others out of fear of the greater harm threatened by the sovereign power (E IVP37S2). Since marriages exist within states, their regulation is the responsibility of the state, at least in terms of legal restrictions on actions causing harm. Matheron argues that Spinoza sees states regulating the 'ownership' of women like that of land, 'in order to attenuate [male] envy'.³³ I think, with Richardson, that Matheron is mistaken to attribute to Spinoza a view of either persons or land as property. But furthermore, Matheron is wrong to suggest that marriages are governed primarily by states from the outside. For Spinoza, marriage itself is a political community with its own internal mechanism for managing the passions. Marriages are special micro-communities in which specific affects must constantly be managed: strong passions of love, hatred, lust, and jealousy must be restrained lest conflict arise. Specific rules are needed to maintain a peaceful and secure marriage in the face of these passions, and some 'sovereign power' internal to the marriage must enforce them. The partners in a rational marriage will together decide and enforce rules based on their common natures. In a less rational marriage, the rules will be set by the more powerful partner. Marriage, like the state, distributes power in the way that most effectively manages affects within given circumstances, and a weaker person is less capable of managing affects (his own or someone else's).

It is not impossible, for Spinoza, that a wife should be the sovereign power in a marriage, and it is not impossible that husbands and wives should share power

equally. The worst marriages, like the worst states, will be tyrannical, and the best wholly democratic. Most marriages, however, fall between these two poles and will involve the unequal distribution of power in favour of the more powerful partner: the person who has the greater ability to persevere in his being. This does not relate only, or even primarily, to physical and mental ability. The partner with more power will be the person who is capable of doing and thinking more, but more importantly, it will be the person on whose power the other's flourishing depends. Both partners must feel that their survival and happiness are threatened if they disobey the rules and threaten the harmony of the micro-community. In this situation, the more powerful partner will be the one who is not only stronger, better educated, and more active, but the one who *could* survive and flourish independently, without the other. That person is better able to preserve himself than the one who is dependent on him. In a society in which women are economically dependent on men, and could not easily flourish independently of them, women will necessarily be subject to the power of their husbands. Women, in these circumstances, are effectively prevented from striving for their own self-preservation except through submitting to the power of men.

Perhaps Spinoza's presentation of marriage as a political community, in which passions are managed through a social contract, strikes us as false. But it is hardly unusual for a seventeenth-century thinker to consider marriage the microcosm of the state; in focusing on this aspect of Spinoza's account of marriage, we see that he takes women's disempowerment to be caused by their economic position. Women are essentially capable of building reason and freedom, and of joining men in communities that strive for those goods. Women and men are alike and maximally useful to one another, especially when they are more rational, and can work together to build reason in the family. Why, then, should women not work with men to build

reason as democratic participants? Because women's economic dependence causes them to be less free than they might otherwise become. Like servants, they rely on others for their survival and flourishing. In that position they cannot become free enough to be citizens. When social conditions change such that women need not be dependent on men in order to preserve their being, then women too can become 'free men'. The key, for Spinoza as for Simone de Beauvoir, is economic independence.³⁴

Spinoza recognizes another crucial factor for women becoming more free. Men's perceptions of women need to change, such that men see women not merely as women, but also as 'free men'.

If ... we consider human emotions, that men generally love women from mere lust, assessing their ability and their wisdom by their beauty and also resenting any favours which the women they love show to others and so on, soon we shall see that rule by men and women on equal terms is bound to involve much damage to peace. But I have said enough. (TP 11.4)

This statement, on which the *Political Treatise* ends, has been subject to much criticism for appearing to exclude women from politics on the grounds that men's sexual desire for them would cause discord in the debating chamber. But read another way, Spinoza is decrying men whose passions obstruct a rational assessment of women's abilities and wisdom, and prevent them working together to build rational communities. Like Adam, their imaginings lead them to ignore the individuals with whom they have most in common. As long as men continue to be blinded by lust and jealousy, political cooperation between men and women will indeed lead to conflict.

The solution, as ever for Spinoza, is to help men to overcome their passions. As they become more rational, men will be less blinded by these passions and

understand that a rational woman is as useful as a rational man. Reason alone, however, will not be enough to change the socio-economic circumstances that make women dependent on their husbands, and Spinoza, unlike other Enlightenment thinkers, truly understands this. Reason is not always strong enough to overcome the practices we are accustomed to or the deeply ingrained fictions of the imagination. And Spinoza is no less susceptible to these fictions than anyone else of his society. He understands that under different circumstances, different capabilities may emerge for different individuals. Where Spinoza fails is that he cannot see a way of changing these circumstances in order to maximize the capabilities of the disempowered half of humanity. As James points out, this is literally a failure of imagination: a failure to foresee the social changes that are necessary for women to be free.³⁵ But a failure of imagination is preferable to a failure of reason. Spinoza does not argue that women are *essentially* weak or *absolutely* subject to men's control. His problem is that, in pointing to the social reality of women's weakness, he cannot imagine acting to change it.

Conclusion

With the words 'But I have said enough', the *Political Treatise* was left unfinished in 1677. Though it is often taken as Spinoza's final word on politics, we must be wary of assuming that any unfinished text fully expresses its author's intentions. Instead of taking Spinoza's claims at face value, we can, and I think should, address the unresolved problems of the *Political Treatise* through Spinoza's major work, the *Ethics*. Furthermore, the *Ethics* must shed light on the *Political Treatise*, and not the

other way around, because the texts differ in their relation to truth. Whereas the *Ethics* is written as an exercise in performing and building true understanding, the *Political Treatise* sets out and shares with us fictions that are neither true nor false, but hypothetical. Spinoza's societal models are held out for critical scrutiny and judgment, and the tools with which we must exercise critique are the true ideas and rational thinking that we have built up by reading the *Ethics*. If, therefore, we want to think critically about the place of women in Spinoza's democracy, we must use the *Ethics* to find true ideas that can help us to do so. It would be wrong, on Spinoza's terms, to take as true what he expresses about women in the *Political Treatise*, or to accept those remarks uncritically.

The *Ethics* shows us that women and men are alike capable of building reason and freedom, and are capable of building rational communities together. It also shows that, under social and economic conditions that favour men's seeking their advantage and preserving their being, these communities will necessarily be constrained by unequal power relations. The primary communities between men and women, marriages, will be dominated by husbands as long as wives depend on them for their self-preservation. A more rational marriage, in which the passions are largely overcome, involves more natural cooperation and mutual freedom, but even women in these marriages will be excluded from political participation as long as they are economically dependent and their natural right to preserve their being depends on the power of another. It is in this context that we must interpret the remarks of the *Political Treatise* that women are 'naturally weak'. Women, for Spinoza, are disempowered by 'the order of nature' – the way the actual world is organized – not by their own essential natures. It is not women's bodies or minds but their circumstances that render them incapable of political participation.

I arrive at a similar conclusion to Lloyd: in Spinoza we find a strand of thinking that recognizes women's political capabilities while acknowledging that they are constrained by social and historical circumstances.³⁶ However, I arrive at that conclusion by a different route, which is valuable in helping us to assess the relative value of Spinoza's claims in his different texts. We need not be troubled by Spinoza's claims about women in the *Political Treatise* if we understand them through the true ideas of the *Ethics*. It is not that we should not take the claims of the *Political Treatise* seriously, but we must take them seriously in the right way: not as assertions of truth, but as hypotheses for rational critical consideration. Through the sharing of fictions, the *Political Treatise* poses challenges to readers, to imagine different political futures together. According to that text, the disempowerment of women is 'part of nature'. Spinoza does not seek to justify or condemn that fact, but he does seek to explain it. And having explained it in the *Ethics* – as a socio-economic reality rather than an eternal necessity – he enables us critically to consider the model of stable democracy provided in the *Political Treatise*. A stable and harmonious democracy can exist, Spinoza says, in which half its people are subject to the power of others. Can we, together, imagine a democracy that is also more equal?³⁷

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¹ Benedict de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Hackett, 2002), Chapter 11, paragraphs 3-4, pp. 753-4. Hereafter TP with reference to chapter and paragraph numbers.

² Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley, in *A Spinoza Reader*, ed. Curley (Princeton, 1994), Part IV, Propositions 31-37, pp. 214-21. Further references to the Ethics (E) will follow Curley's abbreviations: part number in roman numerals, followed by proposition (P), corollary (C), scholium (S), definition (D), or lemma (L) number, or appendix (App.) section.

³ Compare Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* (Penguin, 1968) to his *Emile* (J. M. Dent, 1933) and Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge, 1997) to his *Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft is the first to analyze this discrepancy, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Dover, 1996), but for more recent views see, for instance, Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (Routledge, 1993) and Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman* (Polity, 1998).

⁵ Lloyd's arguments for this point are most strongly developed in chapter 5 of her book *Part of Nature* (Cornell, 1994).

⁶ Susan James, 'Democracy and the Good Life in Spinoza's Philosophy', in *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. C. Huenemann (Cambridge, 2008), 128-46, here at 130.

⁷ Warren Montag remarks that Spinoza thereby excludes the very multitude whose power he elsewhere upholds. See Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power* (Verso, 1999), 83-4.

⁸ Spinoza explains the apparent anomaly of the Amazons by noting that these women were able to overpower men only by killing them at birth.

⁹ In addition to Lloyd's *Part of Nature*, see Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies* (Routledge, 1996) and Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings* (Routledge, 1999). Gatens has recently edited an outstanding collection of essays on Spinoza and feminist philosophy, *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza* (Penn State, 2009). Two examples of Susan James' work on Spinoza are 'Democracy and the Good Life in Spinoza's Philosophy' (cited above) and 'Power and Difference: Spinoza's Conception of Freedom', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 4 (1996) No. 3: 207-28. James interviews Gatens and Lloyd in 'The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions', *Hypatia* 15 (2000) No. 2: 40-58. For a feminist interpretation of Spinoza's political theory, see chapter 3 of Janice Richardson, *The Classic Social Contractarians* (Ashgate, 2009).

¹⁰ James, 'The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions', 40-58.

¹¹ For the view that Spinoza does take women's incapacity for citizenship to be part of their essential natures, see Richardson and Montag (both of whom stress the inconsistency of this position with Spinoza's other work).

¹² See Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Hackett, 2002), paragraphs 51-66, pp. 14-19. Hereafter TIE with reference to paragraph numbers. On fictions, see also Gatens and Lloyd, 34-40.

¹³ A similar point is made by James in 'Democracy and the Good Life'.

¹⁴ See also TIE 55. Note that universals are very different from common notions, which reflect *true* understanding of what our bodies *essentially* have in common.

¹⁵ On the difference between imaginative and rational knowledge, see E IIP40S2. Briefly, all knowledge from empirical sources is 'imagination'. Rational knowledge is truly known and arrived at either directly or deductively from a common notion.

¹⁶ 'Democracy and the Good Life', 138-9.

¹⁷ As Gilles Deleuze puts it, 'the aim is not to make something known to us, but to make us understand our power of knowing'; *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (City Lights, 1988), 83. For a useful discussion of the type of book the *Ethics* is, see chapter 1 of Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza's Book of Life* (Yale, 2003).

¹⁸ We should turn only to those parts of the *Ethics* where Spinoza relies on rational thinking. The proposition on sexual jealousy (E IIP35S), where images and affects cloud Spinoza's reason, would obviously be the wrong place to look for true ideas of women's capabilities.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the 'servant' of the TP in relation to slavery, see Montag, 97-9.

²⁰ As Lloyd puts it, 'sexual differences can reach right into the mind' (*Part of Nature*, 161).

²¹ This is not to deny that the master-servant relation has very often been determined according to physical differences between groups of humans. Questions of race and class are important here. But it is worth noting that, for Spinoza, a male master and a male servant have essentially the same bodily constitution, and are therefore essentially alike, regardless of differences in appearance, family background, ethnicity, and culture. For Spinoza, it appears that sexual difference is more significant than racial or class difference, because men and women differ in what their bodies can do.

²² William Sacksteder, 'Spinoza on Democracy', in *Spinoza: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. M. Mandelbaum and E. Freeman (Open Court, 1975), 124.

²³ Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (Verso, 1998), 59.

²⁴ Gatens and Lloyd (separately) stress this point about desires and pleasures; see Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*, 130-3, and Lloyd, *Part of Nature*, 161-2.

²⁵ I follow Deleuze in understanding similitude in terms of common bodily composition. For further discussion of the ethical and political dimensions of similitude in Spinoza see James, 'Power and Difference', and Alexandre Matheron, 'Les fondements d'une éthique de la similitude', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 99 (1994) No. 4: 475-91.

²⁶ 'Power and Difference', 221-6.

²⁷ Matheron, considering this possibility, concludes that similitude may be based on either identity or complementarity. See 'Spinoza and Sexuality', trans. S. Duffy and P. Patton, in *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*, ed. Gatens, 87-106, here at 95-6.

²⁸ 'Power and Difference', 223.

²⁹ For discussion of Spinoza's various uses of the story of Adam, see Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 95-100, and Paola Grassi, 'Adam and the Serpent: Everyman and the Imagination', trans. T. Fitzpatrick, in *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*, ed. Gatens, 145-53.

³⁰ For a different interpretation of Spinoza's remarks on marriage, see Matheron, 'Spinoza and Sexuality'.

³¹ James, 'Power and Difference', 223.

³² Spinoza 'in no way continues the tradition' of declaring 'that the sexual life is good on the condition that it is regulated by reason' (Matheron, 'Spinoza and Sexuality', 102).

³³ 'Spinoza and Sexuality', 101.

³⁴ See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (Vintage, 1989), especially Part VII.

³⁵ James similarly argues that Spinoza provides an example of the lack of imagination that prevents the development of more representative democracies ('Democracy and the Good Life', 146).

³⁶ 'If our natural powers are enriched by the operation of good forms of social organization, which foster the collective pursuit of reason, it is only to be expected that groups excluded from full participation in that shared pursuit of reason will miss out on the flourishing of their natural powers and pleasures, leading distorted, mutilated lives. If human powers are enriched by the operation of good forms of social organization, it is to be expected that they will be impeded by bad ones, and this state of obstruction is of course the actual position of women, even amidst the good forms of social organization he outlines... Being female in the conditions of that society sets severe restraints on human powers, pleasures, and virtue' (Lloyd, *Part of Nature*, 163-4).

³⁷ A version of this paper was presented at *Republicanism I: Marrano Views on Empire and Democracy* at the University of Aberdeen in May 2009. I am grateful to Alberto Moreiras, the Centre for Modern Thought, and the Hispanic Studies Department for inviting me to speak at this event, and to its participants, particularly Javier Espinosa and Warren Montag, for their helpful comments.