

# ONTOLOGY AND THE POLITICAL ABSOLUTE: A CRITICAL READING OF SPINOZA ON WOMEN

---

EYLEM CANASLAN

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6121-8781>

*Kırklareli University*

*Department of Philosophy*

*Kırklareli*

*Turkey*

[canaslaneylem@gmail.com](mailto:canaslaneylem@gmail.com)

## Article info

CDD: 199.492

*Received: 27.11.2022; Accepted: 05.02.2023*

<https://doi.org/10.1590/0100-6045.2023.V46N1.EC>

## Keywords

Spinoza

Women

Ontology

*Sui juris*

Political absolute

**Abstract:** The “black page” in Spinoza’s *Political Treatise* has been much discussed and interpreted. These can be roughly divided into three groups: Approaches that see the “black page” as an extension of Spinoza’s theory of the passions and imagination; approaches that maintain that Spinoza excluded women from politics not because of their innate weaknesses but because of their social conditions; approaches that maintain that he excluded women because he saw them as weaker beings, but this contradicts his certain accounts, especially in the *Ethics*. In this paper, I take the latter view. My contribution is to argue that this contradiction is not unique to the *Ethics*. I pursue my reading

along two lines, one ontological and one political. In the first, I focus on the continuity between the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise* and show that the “black page” is also inconsistent with the ontology and methodology of the *Political Treatise* itself. In the second, I argue that the exclusion of women also contradicts the concept of the political absolute developed in this last work, since this concept problematizes any kind of exclusion and provides for political stability the strategic principle of increasing the number of decision-makers as much as possible.

In her general preface to the monumental *Re-Reading the Canon* series (1994-2016), in which each volume offers feminist interpretations of a selected philosopher, Nancy Tuana notes that one of the ongoing tasks of feminist philosophy is to critically re-read the male-dominated history of philosophy and re-evaluate the canonized texts of major philosophers, with particular attention to the ways in which gendered assumptions are constructed in their theories (Tuana 2009, p. viii).<sup>1</sup> After long years of struggle and effort, feminist philosophical scholarship now has a distinctive and flourishing repertoire. Within and from different perspectives, feminist scholars have developed their own methods and concepts to draw attention to concerns long neglected in the history of philosophy. In reconstructing the politics of canonization, they have conducted extensive historiographical research on forgotten women philosophers

---

<sup>1</sup> For all volumes in the series, see [https://www.psupress.org/books/series/book\\_SeriesReReading.html](https://www.psupress.org/books/series/book_SeriesReReading.html).

and edited comprehensive anthologies.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it remains the case that traditional philosophical discourse on women has still much to be reinterpreted. Since reshaping the present and the future always requires questioning the past, the self-affirmation of feminist philosophy should always be accompanied by a critical engagement with the tradition that has been handed down. We should still examine the canonical texts to find out what can be drawn from them from a feminist perspective and what should be left behind. The main motivation for this paper, then, is to offer a new response to Tuana's still urgent call to re-read the canon.

To this end, I will focus on Spinoza and critically discuss his negative discourse on women's intellectual and political capacities. In doing so, I will distinguish between his exclusionary ideas against women and his all-encompassing philosophical system, highlighting the tensions and inconsistencies between the two. My reading method will be a kind of immanent critique based on two conceptual lines: One relates to Spinoza's singularist ontology and his nominalist theory of imagination, the other to his unconventional account of the political absolute based on a high degree of numerical participation in the process of political decision-making. I will illustrate that his exclusion of women from politics has no philosophical basis in any of his works, including the *Political Treatise*, and remains merely a personal prejudice.

---

<sup>2</sup> For now-classic works, see Waithe (1987-1995) and Atherton (1994). For a more recent work, see O'Neill and Lascano (2019).

## The Nature of Woman Before the *Political Treatise*

I must concede at the outset that with a philosopher like Spinoza, things become somewhat more complicated, or perhaps more difficult, for a critical reading. As is now well known, Spinoza was a rather “anomalous” or “subversive” figure (Negri 1991, 2004) compared to other “founding fathers” of modern philosophy. His ideas about God and revealed religion provoked strong reactions both in his Jewish community and in Christian philosophical circles. Not only was he excommunicated from the Amsterdam synagogue, but he was also accused of atheism by many of his opponents and received severe theological-philosophical rebuttals. During the turbulent times of monarchical restoration in Europe, he advocated democracy as the most stable form of government, without invoking the classical solution of the mixed constitution. Moreover, in line with his unorthodox theological and political ideas, he rejected mind-body dualism, the cornerstone of hierarchical forms of thought that exclude femininity from philosophical dignity, and the doctrine of free will, a must for Catholic dogma.<sup>3</sup> He considered human emotions and their causes as worthy of knowledge as metaphysical truths. For the mainstream, his thoughts were always difficult to digest. Finally, Spinoza shared in some ways the fate of the women philosophers of earlier times: Although he was read in secret and had a profound influence on shaping later philosophical debates, he was banished from overt patterns of knowledge for many years and could hardly hold a recognized place in the traditional canon of philosophy.

But despite his common fate with women in philosophy, Spinoza himself never engaged in feminist or proto-feminist

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Aquinas (2004, question 104, 3).

concerns. On the contrary, he had a strikingly negative discourse about women in his writings. I hold that this is the case not only in his unfinished *Political Treatise*, which I will discuss in more detail in the following sections, but also in the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*.<sup>4</sup>

Spinoza is one of the modern philosophers who most often uses derogatory descriptions of women, even in his ordinary analogies or comparisons. It seems that for him women are mostly sentimental and weak-minded, more prone to feeble compassion and superstitious beliefs that are basically contrary to the guidance of reason. While in the *Ethics* he sets forth the social merits of his doctrine of the identity of will and intellect, he writes:<sup>5</sup>

This doctrine contributes to social life, insofar as it teaches us to hate no one, to disesteem no one, to mock no one, to be angry at no one, to

---

<sup>4</sup> I cite Spinoza's works from *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, 2 vols., Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985, 2016). I will use the following abbreviations: E for *Ethics*; KV for *Short Treatise*; TTP for *Theological-Political Treatise*; TP for *Political Treatise*. Roman capital letters denote either parts (E and KV) or chapters (TTP and TP); Roman small letters denote chapters (KV); Arabic numerals denote either paragraphs (TTP and TP) or sections (KV). In *Ethics*, 'def' stands for definition; 'p' for proposition; 'dem' for demonstration; 'c' for corollary; 's' for scholium; 'L' for lemma; 'pref' for preface; and 'app' for appendix. In parentheses I also give the volume and page numbers of Gebhardt's standard edition (*Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols., Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925). Interpolations and omissions in brackets are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> In the following quotations, instead of Curley's 'unmanly' and 'make unmanly,' I prefer 'womanish' for *muliebris* and 'make effeminate' for *effeminare*.

envy no one; and also insofar as it teaches that each of us should be content with his own things, and should be helpful to his neighbor, not from womanish compassion, partiality, or superstition, but from the guidance of reason, as the time and occasion demand. (EIIp49s [II/136])<sup>6</sup>

The *Theological-Political Treatise* is no different in this respect:

We see that the men most thoroughly enslaved to every kind of superstition are those who immoderately desire uncertain things, and that they all invoke divine aid with prayers and womanish tears, especially when they are in danger and cannot help themselves. (TTP preface, 4 [III/5])<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, Spinoza concedes some power to women, but when he does so, it turns out that he has only the sexual or reproductive kind in mind. While discussing in general the transformation of love into hate, and in particular the love of a man for a woman into hate, he writes the following:

He who imagines that a woman he loves prostitutes herself to another not only will be

---

<sup>6</sup> See also EIVp37s1 [II/236] for the contrast between “empty superstition and womanish compassion” and “sound reason.”

<sup>7</sup> See also TTP III, 55 [III/57]: “Indeed, if the foundations of their religion [Judaism] did not make their hearts effeminate, I would absolutely believe that some day, given the opportunity, they would set up their state again, and God would choose them anew.”

saddened, because his own appetite is restrained, but also will be repelled by her, because he is forced to join the image of the thing he loves to the shameful parts and excretions of the other. To this, finally, is added the fact that she no longer receives the Jealous man with the same countenance as she used to offer him. (EIIIp35s [II/167])<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, in EIVappXX [II/271-2] he says something more positive and moderate than the above quote suggests:

As for marriage, it certainly agrees with reason, if the Desire for physical union is not generated only by external appearance but also by a Love of begetting children and educating them wisely, and moreover, if the Love of each, of both the man and the woman, is caused not by external appearance only, but mainly by freedom of mind.

This passage has been taken by some commentators as Spinoza's affirmation of the possibility of intellectual freedom for women (see, e.g., Krop 2011, p. 216; Matheron 1977, pp. 199-200). But, in my opinion, even this passage cannot save Spinoza. It seems to me that the issue here is the social utility of marriage as an institution, and Spinoza's

---

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Macherey calls attention to the unusual harshness of the language Spinoza uses in his description of male sexual jealousy (1995, pp. 268-9). The same theme ("the inconstancy and deceptiveness of women") is found in EVp10s [II/289] and TP XI, 4 [III/360].

question is not whether and how a woman can be intellectually free as an *individual*, but how this institution can be established on a durable basis for the benefit of society. In other words: In these lines, Spinoza is talking about *wives* and *mothers* and their rational social roles, but not about rational *women*, regardless of whether they are married or have children.

Last but not least, Spinoza mentions some “simple women” beyond the carnal type of potency who were given the “gift of prophecy”: “On the other hand, countryfolk, without any education, and even simple women, like Hagar, Abraham’s handmaid, were granted the gift of Prophecy” (TTP II, 1 [III/29]). However, it is clear from the context that, in Spinoza’s eyes, these were women who, in a sense, did more than was expected of their gender. Moreover, if we recall Spinoza’s account of prophecy (TTP I), the gift in question is the power of imagination, not the power of reason.

In short, throughout the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza relies heavily on the long-standing opposition between effeminate sentimentality and masculine rationality. He says, “Men, women, children, everyone in fact, is equally able to obey on command. But not everyone is equally able to be wise” (TTP XIII, 16 [III/170]). It is not surprising, then, that strength of character, the ethical equivalent of rationality, is for Spinoza primarily a masculine virtue.<sup>9</sup> After a close examination of his writings, it is

---

<sup>9</sup> “If we must do something to bring the thing about, and [can] make no decision about the thing, then the soul acquires a form we call Vacillation. But if it decides in a manly [*mannelijk*] way to bring the thing about, and this can be done, then this is called Strength of Character [*Moed*]” (KV II ix, 5) [I/71]). Here I concur with Curley’s conjecture that *moed* stands for *fortitudo* in the *Short Treatise*. The first interpolation in brackets is from Curley.

unfortunate to note that, apart from the lines about the universal ability to obey orders, the only occasion on which Spinoza considers the male and female sexes to be of equal value is to be found in one of his correspondences with Hugo Boxel, in which he openly expresses his mocking doubts about the gendered image of God and the existence of spirits:<sup>10</sup>

On the one hand, you don't doubt that there are spirits of the male gender; on the other, you doubt that there are spirits of the female gender. This seems to me to be more a whim than a doubt. For if this is your opinion, it would seem to me to be more like the imagination of the common people, who suppose that God is male, not female. I'm surprised that those who've seen spirits naked have not cast their eyes on their genitalia. Perhaps they were afraid to do so; perhaps they didn't know about this difference. (Letter 54 [IV/251])

---

<sup>10</sup> Hasana Sharp (2012) argues for a different reading, pointing to the extraordinary tone of the account of the Fall in EIVp68s, in which Eve and Adam are recognized by Spinoza as equals. I will discuss Sharp's view in detail later.

## The Exclusion in the *Political Treatise* and Being *Sui Juris* as Being Powerful

Spinoza's gender bias becomes even more evident and theoretically profound in the *Political Treatise*. Before explicitly excluding women from political participation in the final chapter on democracy, he argues in his treatise on monarchy that under no circumstances should the king's daughters receive a share of the reign as a dowry or inherit the throne. He argues that "there should be one King, of the same sex" (TP VII, 25 [III/318]; VI, 37 [III/306]). In these lines, which can also be read as an implicit polemic against Hobbes, who thinks otherwise,<sup>11</sup> Spinoza's main concern seems to be the indivisibility and stability of sovereignty. Since there can be only one ruler in a monarchy, the rejection of the first case (division of power) can be seen as plausible. However, as for the second case (outright prohibition of succession to the throne for royal daughters), Spinoza's real motivation is not yet so clear. It is difficult to understand in the chapters on monarchy the connection between the required indivisibility and uniformity of state power and the gender of the ruler. Therefore, the reason why he denies the king's daughters (or, in a more general sense, women) the right to rule remains unexplained in these chapters, and to understand it, one must wait until the last chapter, where he discusses in more detail the reasons for his exclusion:

I don't plan to discuss each one [kinds of Democratic state], but only one in which absolutely everyone who is bound only by the laws of his native land, and who is,

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hobbes (1983, p. 128; 1996, 130).

furthermore, his own master [*sui juris*] and lives honorably, has the right to vote in the supreme Council and to stand for political offices. I say, explicitly, *who is bound only by the laws of his native land*, to exclude foreigners, who are counted as under someone else's control [*sub alterius imperio*]. I added, furthermore, that *apart from the fact that they are bound by the laws of the state, in other things they are their own masters* [*sui juris*], to exclude women and servants [*servos*], who are under the 'power of their husbands and masters, and also children and pupils [*pupillos*], so long as they are under the 'power of their parents and tutors. Finally, I said, *and who live honorably*, to exclude especially those who are disgraced on account of a crime or some shameful kind of life. (TP XI, 3 [III/359])<sup>12</sup>

With this passage, his rationale seems obvious: women must be excluded from political participation because they are not their own masters (they are not *sui juris*). According to an earlier explanation of the term *sui juris* by Spinoza, women cannot be granted the right to rule, because they cannot "live according to [their] own mentality," decide, or act according to their own judgment.<sup>13</sup> In the civil state, everyone is subject

---

<sup>12</sup> Curley translates *potentia* as power and *potestas* as 'power.

<sup>13</sup> "Moreover, it follows that each person is subject to someone else's control so long as he is under the other person's 'power, and that he is his own master so long as he can fend off every force and avenge an injury done to him, as seems good to him, and absolutely, insofar as he can live according to his own mentality." (TP II, 9 [III/280])

to the control of the state and bound by the laws. In this respect, no citizen is *sui juris* in the absolute sense or as assumed in the state of nature. But while men in the civil state are subject only to sovereign power, women are also subject to the power of their husbands. In this situation they are doubly subject, first to the authority of the state and second to their husbands. They are deprived not only of absolute independence, but also of the relative and civil independence that “free and honorable” male citizens can enjoy. Therefore, it seems, they must be excluded from rule and from citizenship, which in Spinoza’s political theory involves active and direct participation. The picture seems clear enough: Someone who cannot even govern her own life cannot govern the state.

At this point, one might ask: Why is the exclusion of women of particular importance, given how large the excluded portion of the population is? What makes the exclusion of women from the democratic polity particularly problematic? Of the others, the exclusion of foreigners is most understandable because they are assumed to be citizens of another country. The exclusion of criminals may also be acceptable –at least from the perspective of Spinoza’s philosophy– because, as Sharp insightfully explains, criminals prove by their own actions that they do not respect the polity and do not pursue the common good (2012, p. 565). Then come those who are not *sui juris*: Children, pupils or wards, women, and the serving classes. Since the situation of the first two is obvious, there is no need to discuss them further. This leaves women and the serving classes as the most problematic subjects. Neither exclusion is acceptable, but there is a significant difference between them that requires special attention. Women are not like servants (or rather, not like male servants), the dynamic that these two groups are not *sui juris* is quite different. Spinoza explicitly points out that the reason for women’s exclusion is not

socially constituted but naturally given. They are by nature or essence<sup>14</sup> subject to the power of men, not by institution or existentially. This means that unlike other dependents –children grow up, pupils graduate, and male servants can be liberated–, women’s subjection cannot be changed or abolished:<sup>15</sup>

But perhaps someone will ask whether women are under the ‘power of their husbands by nature or by custom [*ex naturâ, an ex instituto*].<sup>16</sup> If this has happened only by custom, then no reason compels us to exclude women from rule. But if we consult experience, we’ll see that this occurs only because of their weakness. Wherever we find men and women, they have never ruled together. What we see is that there the men rule and the women are ruled, and that in this way both sexes live in harmony. (TP XI, 4 [III/359-60])<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Spinoza uses “nature” and “essence” mostly synonymously. For examples in the *Ethics*, see EIp36dem, EIIIp57dem, and EIVp33dem.

<sup>15</sup> For a contrary view, see Lord (2011, pp. 1097, 1102).

<sup>16</sup> The framework for this discussion was originally set by Hobbes. In contrast to Spinoza, Hobbes holds that there is no natural difference in power between men and women and that the right of paternal dominion is determined by civil law (Hobbes 1983, pp. 122-3; 1996, p. 133).

<sup>17</sup> Immediately after these lines, Spinoza makes a remark about the Amazons: “On the other hand, the Amazons, who according to tradition once ruled, did not allow men to remain on their soil, but raised only the females, and killed the males they bore.” Edwin Curley and Wim Klever suggest that a possible source for Spinoza’s account of the Amazons is Quintus Curtius Rufus

It is important to note that the so-called weakness here is in line with Spinoza's other disparaging remarks about women's mental abilities, which I have already quoted from the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* in the previous section. And he elaborates on this view a few lines later in the *Political Treatise*: "women [are not] by nature equal to men, both in strength of character [*animi fortitudine*] and in native intelligence [*ingenio*]—in which the greatest human power, and consequently right, consists." Here another meaning of the term *sui juris* becomes clear, one that is not particularly emphasized in the republican tradition, but rather peculiar to Spinoza. This term, which literally means "of one's own right" and whose roots go back to Roman private law, denotes in the early modern republican tradition the ability of a person to decide and act according to one's own discretion. If someone is free and independent in matters not prohibited or restricted by law, that person is called *sui juris*. Otherwise, she or he is *alieni juris* (in Spinoza's terms, *alterius juris*), that is, someone who is under the control of another person. Although this usage is found in Spinoza's political phraseology, *sui juris* also has another philosophical meaning

---

(Spinoza 2016, p. 603, translator's note 6; Klever 1992, as cited in Gullan-Whur 2002, p. 94). But in Quintus Curtius' version, Thalestris, the queen of the Amazons, speaks of keeping a female child for her kingdom and giving a male one to his father (Rufus 1984, p. 128). As Moira Gatens notes, a more likely source for Spinoza's account is Justin's *Histories*, which paint a very clear picture of infanticide among the Amazons (Justinus 1863, book II, 4; Gatens 1996, p. 134). Indeed, it was Hobbes who adopted the more moderate version of Quintus Curtius (Hobbes 1996, p. 133). Can this minor but crucial difference in narrative preference regarding the Amazon myth be read as a symptom of Spinoza's misogyny? The Amazons as murderers of their own male children! Considering the violence of this image and its unquestioned adoption by Spinoza, I think this is not a trivial question.

for him, as Justin Steinberg points out.<sup>18</sup> In Spinoza's ontological-ethical system, to be *sui juris* is to be powerful, and real human power consists primarily in understanding and reason. In the *Ethics*, the equivalence of being powerful and being *sui juris* is hinted at only once, but very clearly: "Man's lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call Bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself [*sui juris non est*], but of fortune" (EIVpref [II/205]). It is repeated in the *Political Treatise* with direct reference to reason:

a Mind is completely its own master [*sui juris*] just to the extent that it can use reason rightly. Indeed, because we ought to reckon human power not so much by the strength of the Body as by the strength of the Mind, it follows that people are most their own masters when they can exert the most power with their reason, and are most guided by reason. (TP II, 11 [III/280])

The same connection between *sui juris* and reason and power applies to the state:

Just as [...] in the state of nature the man who is guided by reason is the most powerful and the most his own master, so a Commonwealth will also be the most powerful and the most its

---

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed comparison of the differences between the Spinozian conception of the *esse sui juris* as being powerful and the republican conception of the *esse sui juris* as being independent, see Steinberg (2008).

own master, if it is founded on and directed by reason. (TP III, 7 [III/287])

In Spinoza's account, women lack "the greatest human power," namely the right use of reason. Since right is coextensive with power (TTP XVI, 3 [III/189]), they "do not, by nature, have a right equal to men's, but [...] they necessarily submit to men" (TP XI, 4 [III/360]). It is important to see that Spinoza argues not only that women cannot rule because they are dependent on their husbands, but also that their dependence is the consequence of their having inherently less power. For he expresses very clearly that women, by their very nature, have less power, they are mentally weaker than men. Therefore, "if we consult experience," it is not surprising to see that men rule as the stronger party and women are ruled as the weaker party. In other words, men have a natural right to rule over women. The subjugation of women takes place not only in the civil state, but already in the state of nature. And since, for Spinoza, the natural right must be preserved in the civil state (Letter 50 [IV/239b]) –or, in Genevieve Lloyd's words, since there is a "continuity between the natural body and the socialized body" (2009, p. 36)– the natural right of men over women must be preserved in all forms of state, including a democratic form.

Based on all this, I would like to venture an unusual analogy: for Spinoza, the condition of women is in some ways comparable to that of animals. Although Spinoza rejects the Judeo-Christian anthropocentric view that animals were created for the benefit of humans, he is somehow very clear about the natural hierarchy between humans and animals in terms of power and right –which, by the way, is another inconsistency in Spinozian ontology:

The law against killing animals is based more on empty superstition and womanish compassion than sound reason. The rational principle of seeking our own advantage teaches us the necessity of joining with men, but not with the lower animals, or with things whose nature is different from human nature. We have the same right against them that they have against us. Indeed, 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. Not that I deny that the lower animals have sensations. But I do deny that we are therefore not permitted to consider our own advantage, use them at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us. For they do not agree in nature with us, and their affects are different in nature from human affects. (EIVp37s1 [II/236-7])

I believe that in Spinoza's eyes women are to men, in a sense, what animals are to human beings: In terms of power and right, women are "lower" than men. For men, then, the rational principle of seeking one's own advantage is to join politically with other men, not with women. One might object that humans and animals do not agree in nature, but that is not true of male and female humans. I argue that, in Spinoza's understanding, there is only relative agreement in nature between men and women. Compared to animals and in the absence of other male human beings, female and male human beings do indeed agree in nature. Therefore, it is more reasonable for a man to be with a woman than to be alone or to be with animals, but this does not necessarily mean that this woman is or should be *equally* capable of reason.

## Criticism Beyond Interpretation

Several prominent scholars from different perspectives have already discussed Spinoza's exclusion of women from the political community. One of the earliest commentaries is by Alexandre Matheron. By analyzing the last sentence of the notorious last paragraph of the *Political Treatise*,<sup>19</sup> he concludes that Spinoza's exclusion is not a prejudice or aversion unrelated to his philosophical principles (especially his theory of the passions), but a "cruel" consequence of them. Spinoza considers this exclusion necessary precisely because of "passional alienation" or "sexual conflicts between men." Since women are the main object of these conflicts, they are kept out of the assembly in order to make the state governable (1977, pp. 198-200). Françoise Duroux, who holds a similar view but is more feminist in her concerns, writes that women are politically excluded "more because of the passions they arouse than because of their intrinsic incapacity." The remarkable observation she makes is that for Spinoza the main task of the marital institution is to make women manageable and to defuse the danger of their becoming the object of men's excessive fantasies. Duroux claims that Spinoza's rationalist "utopia" contains a "dystopian" element: In order to liberate men, it must control women (1994, pp. 130, 132, 137-8). Genevieve Lloyd

---

<sup>19</sup> "Furthermore, if we consider human affects, namely, that for the most part men love women only from an affect of lust, and that they judge their native intelligence and wisdom greater the more beautiful they are, and furthermore, that men find it intolerable that the women they love should favor others in some way, etc., we'll have no difficulty seeing that men and women can't rule equally without great harm to the peace." (TP XI, 4 [III/360])

interprets Spinoza's claimed discrepancy between the capacities of men and women as a socially conditioned outcome and concludes that his exclusion of women from the body politic results from his emphasis on the social aspects in the emergence of reason. Viewed through Lloyd's lens, "sexist though this may appear from our perspective," Spinoza excludes women from political participation not because of their essential weakness, but because of their social and historical conditions (1994, p. 166). In a more recent work, Beth Lord agrees with Lloyd's conclusion but chooses a different method by elaborating on the different functions of the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise*. For Lord, while the *Ethics* aims to improve the thinking faculty and its ability to form true and adequate ideas, the *Political Treatise* deals with real but neither true nor false fictions (2011 pp. 1093-4, 1103-4). The tools of the *Ethics*, then, are reason and demonstration whereas those of the *Political Treatise* are imagination and empirical observation. Based on this distinction, Lord concludes that Spinoza's point in the *Political Treatise* is not to make a deductive argument about the essential weakness of women, but to call attention to the fact that women's subjection to men is real (pp. 1090, 1092-3). Finally, Steven Barbone, while acknowledging Spinoza's "misogynistic" position and his imaginary ("prophetic") way of thinking about gender, comes to this questionable<sup>20</sup> conclusion:

When a prophet tells us that there are men and women and that the former are more fit by nature to rule over the latter, we might understand now that while this cannot be

---

<sup>20</sup> "A useful myth" for whom, "freedom" for whom?

philosophically true, it could have been a useful myth by which the civil state helped to promote order and freedom given the circumstances and conditions of the time. There may have been a time when the civil order –in order to promote human freedom– required us to function under this imaginative way, but that time now seems long past. (2017, pp. 353, 355)

What else can we do with the “black page”<sup>21</sup> of the *Political Treatise*? Can we, in order to explain it away, abandon the inner integrity of Spinoza’s works and separate the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise*? If we can, what are we to do with his sexist comparisons in the *Ethics* itself, which I quoted in the first section? More importantly, how then are we to interpret Spinoza’s statements in the *Political Treatise*, which clearly refers to the *Ethics* and its theory of *conatus* as the basis of his political conclusions?<sup>22</sup>

My view is that Spinoza makes it sufficiently clear that he regards women as inherently, i.e., essentially weaker than men. This is why he says that women “*necessarily*”<sup>23</sup> submit to men.” To prove this, he draws on nothing more than experience (“Wherever we find men and women, they have never ruled together”). In doing so, he mistakenly refers to a possibility he had previously ruled out: the subjugation of women could be “by custom,” that is, by long-established practices of human communities. If he fails to provide a solid

---

<sup>21</sup> Gullan-Whur informs that this nickname was first used by contemporary Dutch scholars (2002, p. 96).

<sup>22</sup> I will address this last point in the next section.

<sup>23</sup> The emphasis is mine.

philosophical demonstration for his exclusion of women, it is because there is no basis for such a demonstration in his conceptual system as a whole. Instead, he arbitrarily inserts his personal ideas about women into his political treatise, primarily, I think, to challenge Hobbes, to whom the discussion of “by nature or by custom” is indebted. We need not explain away Spinoza’s personal sexist remarks or try to reconcile them with the rest of his philosophical and political thought. As I pointed out in the second section, Spinoza does not exclude women from rule simply because they are under the control of their husbands. He also suggests that this subjection is due to their natural weakness. Spinoza is not content with the classical republican meaning of the term being *sui juris* as socially and economically independent. In Spinoza’s political ethics, the connection of *sui juris* with the possession of intellectual power and the use of reason is very strong. As for the ontological basis of his ethics, it can be said that Spinoza builds his theory of liberation on the concept of interdependence or interconnection rather than independence. Yet he arbitrarily excludes women from this liberating political interdependence without any philosophical basis for doing so. Finally, I also have some concerns about the implications of the interpretation that the exclusion of women from the polity is the result of Spinoza’s theory of the passions or imagination, which I believe is in principle gender-neutral (his typical examples are not, of course). Such an interpretation would unintentionally imply that Spinoza’s philosophical system, in which the theory of affects and imagination occupies a large place, inherently produces discriminatory ideas. But if that were the case, one might even wonder what Spinoza’s philosophy could offer us today, apart from its relevance to learned studies of the history of philosophy.

Instead, I argue that it would be more correct to admit that Spinoza’s ideas about women are indeed sexist. First, we

need to acknowledge not only the existence of the “black page” about women in the *Political Treatise*, but in a broader context the “woman problem” in Spinoza’s writings as a whole. Rather than merely explaining or interpreting this problem by resolving it in his philosophical system, we should look for ways to separate his sexist thoughts from his philosophical system and criticize the former. Unlike Susan James, who believes “it is pointless to criticize Spinoza for advocating” the exclusion of women, I nevertheless believe it is important to criticize him for the very purpose of, as James herself puts it, “restoring a past to feminist philosophy” (2008, p. 129; 1998, p. 12).

So in the next sections I will try to do this. But how exactly does one criticize a philosopher, especially a philosopher whose liberating and democratic ideas are of great contemporary importance? Here one should be careful to avoid an unphilosophical reading or an anachronistic projection of the contemporary concern for women’s liberation onto a seventeenth century male philosopher. I will not attempt this. Instead, I will adopt an immanently critical method and focus, as Margaret Gullan-Whur (2002), Hasana Sharp (2012), and Reyda Ergün (2011) have previously done by following different paths, on the tensions or inconsistencies between his negative ideas about women and his all-encompassing philosophical framework. In other words, I will critique Spinoza’s prejudice against women through his own philosophical principles. Throughout this process of critical reading, my point of reference is Tuana’s general question: are “a philosopher’s socially inherited prejudices concerning woman’s nature and role [...] independent of her or his larger philosophical framework” (2009, p. 9)? I firmly believe that the answer to this question for Spinoza, unlike many other philosophers, is positive. His prejudices are not only independent of his philosophical framework, but even contradict it considerably. Spinoza can

and should be criticized immanently, especially because of this contradictory attitude.

In such a critique, which I prefer to call “immanent,” one can draw on various themes. Some of these are Spinoza’s theory of *conatus*, which postulates no essential hierarchy among beings; his denial of the dualism of mind and body, a dualism considered by many feminists to be the philosophical root of patriarchal structures; and his methodological error of referring to an essence (the nature of woman) through to the lowest kind of knowledge (experience). This last point, to be sure, has already been emphasized by Matheron. Although he does not attach much importance to the tensions between Spinoza’s negative views on women and his philosophy, Matheron insightfully captures the methodological inconsistency in his argument.<sup>24</sup>

More critical commentaries on the problem of women in Spinoza, however, have been presented by Gullan-Whur, Sharp, and Ergün. Unlike Matheron, these scholars tend to deny that Spinoza’s political exclusion of women can be derived from his philosophical premises. Unlike Lloyd and Lord, they maintain that the exclusion also cannot be explained solely by Spinoza’s recognition of social and historical conditioning. They all insist that there is indeed a significant inconsistency between his view of women and his philosophical ideas, and they explain this inconsistency in their own way. I fully agree with this approach, but I will develop it in a different way than they do. My paper will focus more on the ontological and political aspects and will also trace the philosophical and methodological continuity

---

<sup>24</sup> “Without knowing the essence of woman, [Spinoza] derives one of her properties by applying a universal truth to a particular case” (Matheron 1977, p. 195).

between the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise*. But let me first briefly discuss and distinguish the claims of these scholars with whom I agree that a more critical approach is needed.

Margaret Gullan-Whur is not the first scholar to address this problem, but to my knowledge she is one of the first to develop a substantive and clearly critical account of it. As she writes in her 2002 article, until then “Spinoza’s indictment of female rationality in *A Political Treatise* [had] received little serious criticism” (pp. 92-3). In line with this observation, she notes an inconsistency between the last paragraph of the *Political Treatise* and the ontological-epistemological principles of the *Ethics*, which she calls the “principle of the mind as the idea of the body,” the “principle of common notions,” the “principle of implicit adequate ideas,” and the “principle of mental bondage by passion” (pp. 97-109).

As Genevieve Lloyd (1994) notes, Spinoza’s doctrine of the unity of mind and body, in contrast to Cartesian dualism, allows for the simultaneous recognition of both the sexual difference between female and male bodies/minds and their commonality. For Spinoza, “the Mind and the Body are one and the same thing,” “which is explained through different attributes” (EIIIp2s [II/141]), Ellp7s [II/89]). Each mind, as a mode of the attribute of thought, thinks a particular body, i.e., its affections. In Spinoza’s words, “The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else” (EIIp13 [II/96]). Accordingly, each mind differs from other minds as the idea of a particular human body, just as bodies differ sexually or otherwise. However, Spinoza also adds that “All bodies agree in certain things” (EIII2 [II/98]) and “Those things which are common to all [...] can only be conceived adequately” (EIIp38 [II/118]). And it is precisely this bodily commonality that forms the basis for a conception of rationality that is common to all human beings: “there are certain ideas, *or* notions, common to all

men. For (by L2) all bodies agree in certain things, which (by P38) must be perceived adequately, *or* clearly and distinctly, by all” (EIIp38c [II/118]). In Gullan-Whur’s view, Spinoza sets aside this universalist perspective of the *Ethics* and turns to a more politically engaged concern in the *Political Treatise* to distinguish himself as a “useful political pragmatist” (2002, pp. 105, 110).

Hasana Sharp, on the other hand, focuses on the contrasts between Spinoza’s argument for the weakness of women in the *Political Treatise* and his account of the Fall in the *Ethics*. She argues 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*” (2012, p. 560). After referring to the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden story and also to some authoritative commentaries on it, Sharp carefully analyzes Spinoza’s retelling of the story in EIVp68s, highlighting his implicit yet sufficiently surprising equalitarian stance on the natural abilities of the first woman, which is hardly compatible with his claims in the *Political Treatise*. Sharp notes that in Spinoza’s unorthodox version, Adam, not Eve, is responsible for the Fall because he failed to recognize the benefits of communion with Eve. And Eve is described by Spinoza as a being who perfectly corresponds to Adam’s nature in terms of virtue, i.e., intellectual power and freedom (pp. 569-76).

Finally, Reyda Ergün contends that there is a sharp contrast between Spinoza’s view of women in the *Political Treatise* and his general philosophical framework, which Ergün believes is best expressed in the metaphysically equalitarian reasoning of the *Ethics* and the politically liberating arguments of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. For Ergün, the contrast arises from a larger and more significant incongruity in Spinoza’s work: in his final, but unfinished, political text, Spinoza disappointingly tends toward a more

conservative discourse informed by security concerns (2011, pp. 144-8).

In the remaining sections, I will now take a different path from these three critical scholars and follow two other conceptual lines in Spinoza. The first line is familiar to readers of Spinoza and has already been discussed at length with reference to the *Ethics*.<sup>25</sup> My contribution will consist in extending this discussion to the *Political Treatise*, assuming that there is a strong philosophical and methodological continuity between the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise*. From this standpoint, I will argue that Spinoza's generalization about the nature of women conflicts not only with his singularist ontology and his nominalist theory of the imagination in the *Ethics*, but also with the *Political Treatise* and its ontological premises. The second political line, on the other hand, has hardly been discussed so far, and the most original contribution of this paper lies in this line. Here I will develop the idea that Spinoza's exclusion of women also contradicts his prudential and strategic principles, especially his understanding of the political absolute in the *Political Treatise*.

## Ontology and Imagination

First, what Spinoza says about the nature of women is incompatible with his singularist ontology and his nominalist theory of the imagination. In Spinoza's ontology, there exist only singulars whose essences are constituted by their own powers of striving (EIIIp7 [II/146]). Generic notions or

---

<sup>25</sup> Two of the most important works on this subject can be found in Lee Rice (1994) and Gatens and Lloyd (1999).

universals, on the other hand, are generated by the imagination. More precisely, they arise from the fact that the mind is not able to distinctly imagine every thing and every particular at the same time. Therefore, the abstract notions of imagination cannot convey the true knowledge of the essence of a thing, that is, what that thing is, what it does, and what it can do by virtue of its essential power. From this perspective, in reality there exists no Woman, no Man, no Human Being, but only singular beings or individuals. Depending on the degree of power they contain in their essence, some of them may be mentally weaker and some of them may not. Some of them may be stupid and superstitious, others not. As Spinoza makes clear in the *Ethics*:

The human Mind will be able to imagine distinctly, at the same time, as many bodies as there can be images formed at the same time in its body. But when the images in the body are completely confused, the Mind also will imagine all the bodies confusedly, without any distinction, and comprehend[s] them as if under one attribute, viz. under the attribute of Being, Thing, etc. [...] Those notions they call *Universal*, like Man, Horse, Dog, etc., have arisen from similar causes, viz. 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] [...] 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 [NS:

forcefully] by [what is common] since each singular has affected it [by this property]. And [NS: the mind] expresses this by the word *man* and predicates it of infinitely many singulars. (EIIp40s1 [II/121])<sup>26</sup>

When Spinoza generalizes that women are mentally weak, he is speaking only of an abstract being, not of real beings. He contradicts his own ontological principle, on which his entire political philosophy is based. One might object that, given the paragraph quoted above, it is still possible to *imagine* that women have less power than men. Since the imagination is most affected by what is common to a species or class of individuals, one could argue that there is no contradiction between his theory of the imagination and his view of women. To this objection I would prefer to respond in Spinoza's own words:

But it should be noted that these notions are not formed by all 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. For example, those who have more often regarded men's stature with wonder will understand by the word *man* an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men –e.g., that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal. And similarly concerning the others –each will form

---

<sup>26</sup> The last five interpolations in brackets are from Curley.

universal images of things according to the disposition of his body. (EIIp40s1 [II/121])

Like everyone else, Spinoza makes a universal image of women, according to the disposition of his own body.<sup>27</sup> That is why I said that his view of women is a personal prejudice and not the consequence of his philosophical ideas. Of course, this prejudice is not unique to Spinoza and has certain causes involving various social, cultural and psychological aspects. But my goal in this study is not to examine these but to separate Spinoza's ideas about women from his larger philosophical framework. And according to this framework, "men are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from true knowledge of those things" (EIVpref [II/206]). As the well-known phrase from the *Theological-Political Treatise* states, "nature creates individuals, not nations, individuals who are distinguished into nations only by differences of language, laws, and accepted customs. Only the latter two factors, laws and customs, can lead a nation to have its particular mentality, its particular character, and its particular prejudices" (TTP XVII, 93-4 [III/217]). It is really strange to see that the same philosopher who wrote these proto-antiracist lines also argues in a sexist way that women are disempowered by nature, not by custom.

Spinoza's singularist ontology, based on the concept of *conatus* is also prevalent in the *Political Treatise*, which I believe essentially follows the philosophical method and principles

---

<sup>27</sup> Our conclusions are different, but this point has already been made by Lord: "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." (2011, p. 1093)

of the *Ethics*, but in a different form of presentation, this time not geometric. Certainly, the functions of these works differ in their development because the scope of their subjects is different, but their methodology and ontological principles are the same. Spinoza himself points out the continuity between his mature works as follows:

In our *Theological-Political Treatise* we treated both Natural Right and Civil Right, and in our *Ethics* we explained what sin, merit, justice, injustice, and finally, human freedom are. But so that the readers of this treatise won't need to look elsewhere for the things which most concern it, I've resolved to explain them again here, and to demonstrate them rigorously [*apodicticè demonstrare*]. (TP II, 1 [III/276])<sup>28</sup>

Just as in the *Ethics* Spinoza examines the human mind and emotions in the context of the causal relations that determine them, so in the *Political Treatise* he examines all forms of government, including monarchy, in the context of their respective causal relations that determine them. In both works, he employs a method that treats things in terms of their necessary determinacy and aims to understand “certain” (EIIIpref [II/138]) or “definite” (TP I, 4 [III/274]) causes from which these things follow. This common method is called apodictic demonstration (*apodicticè demonstrare*) or deduction. For a philosophical deduction about politics to be apodictic, it must be done in the proper

---

<sup>28</sup> See also the explicit references in the *Political Treatise* to the theory of affects in *the Ethics*: TP I, 5 [III/275]; TP II, 24 [III/284]; TP VII, 6 [III/310].

order from the beginning. For Spinoza, this order begins with God and its power. In both the *Ethics* and his later political treatises, Spinoza applies the same etiological inquiry, moving from causes to effects. Since the first and immanent cause is God and its power, he also starts from the power and right of God itself in the *Political Treatise* and deduces from it the power and right of individual things (TP II), finally arriving at the power and right of *imperiums*. In this rigid chain of deductions, the theory of *conatus* and its singularist ontology serves as a unique conceptual bridge in the transition from the metaphysical ground (God's power) to the political conclusions:

I want to warn that I've demonstrated all these conclusions from the necessity of human nature, however it may be considered. That is, I've demonstrated them from the universal striving all men have to preserve themselves, a striving in all men, whether they're wise or ignorant. So however we consider men, whether as guided by an affect or by reason, the result will be the same. For the demonstration, as we've said, is universal. (TP III, 18 [III/291])<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> See also TP I, 7 [III/275-6]: "Finally, because all men everywhere, whether Barbarians or civilized, combine their practices and form some sort of civil order, we must seek the causes and natural foundations of the state, not from the teachings of reason, but from the common nature, *or* condition, of men, which I've decided to do in the following chapter." Here Spinoza does not abandon reason and demonstration as a philosophical method, but he rejects the idea that the foundations of the state depend on the teachings of reason, which for him can only be the ultimate goal of the state.

Spinoza's main concern in the *Political Treatise* is to find an answer to the question of "what the best condition of each state is" (TP V, 2 [III/295]).<sup>30</sup> Using the political terminology one would expect from an author of a political treatise, he argues that the answer can be derived from the main goal of the civil state, which is none other than "peace and security of life." Then he arrives at the following general conclusion: "that state is best where men pass their lives harmoniously [*concorditer*] and where the laws are kept without violation" (TP V, 2 [III/295]). But how? How can one live a harmonious life, without violating the laws? Through a kind of pure obedience and fear, as is the case in Hobbes' defense of monarchy? In fact, the uniqueness of Spinoza's view in the *Ethics* is very clear: "Harmony [*concordia*] is also commonly born of Fear, but then it is without trust. Add to this that Fear arises from weakness of mind, and therefore does not pertain to the exercise of reason" (EIVappXVI [II/270-1]). It turns out, however, that his view in the *Political Treatise* is equally clear and consistent with the *Ethics*:

When we say, then, that the best state is one where men pass their lives harmoniously, I mean that they pass a *human* life, one defined not merely by the circulation of the blood, and other things common to all animals, but mostly by reason, the true virtue and life of the Mind. (TP V, 5 III/296)

As Charles Ramond points out, Spinoza's main question in the *Political Treatise* (What is the best condition of each state?)

---

<sup>30</sup> See also TP V, 1 [III/295] and VIII, 31 [III/338].

does not quite coincide with the classical problem of the best order (2006, pp. 175-176). Rather, it is a search for philosophical ways to extend his singularist ontology and ethical theory to civil life. For Spinoza, a political body reaches its best condition when it promotes the true virtue of citizens and ensures that laws are obeyed not out of fear but out of reason and freedom. And this can only be achieved through democratization. Reason as the best condition of *human* striving and democracy as the most absolute form of government are, so to speak, “one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways”, one is ethical-epistemological, the other political. All of Spinoza’s recommendations for government in the *Political Treatise* are guided by this monistic principle. In accordance with the constitution of commonality in reason (the theory of common notions) in the *Ethics*, the *Political Treatise* sets in motion a movement toward democratization that leads from the constitution of a moderate monarchy to that of absolute democracy as the most accelerated, but not completed, step of this movement.

In such an ethical-political democracy, however, there is no land for women. What is this but a philosophical inconsistency of Spinoza? I do not mean that the inconsistency is simply that he excludes women, for we know that this was a common opinion and practice in his day. Rather, I mean that there is something in the last paragraph of the *Political Treatise* that goes beyond historical convention and is philosophically worth a closer look. There Spinoza gives an explanation for his exclusion and attempts to justify his opinion by alluding to his concepts of power and essence (nature). But the broader philosophical framework in which these concepts belong does not permit such a move. This is the point where the inconsistency occurs. And I argue that this is evident not only through the lens of the *Ethics*, but also in the context of the *Political*

*Treatise* itself. If there is indeed a philosophical and methodological continuity between these two works, as I have tried to show, then it becomes clear that we cannot get rid of the “black page” simply by separating the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise*.

### The Political Absolute

Another philosophical inconsistency, of greater political significance and not addressed in earlier commentaries on this topic, arises from Spinoza’s conception of the political absolute in the *Political Treatise*. Spinoza is the philosopher who calls democracy the “most natural” (TTP XVI, 36 [III/195]) and “completely absolute” (*omnino absolutum*) (TP XI, 1 [III/358]) form of government. Certainly, he is not the first philosopher to characterize democracy as the most natural form of government,<sup>31</sup> although he uses this designation in an unusually affirmative sense, backing up his claim with the phrase “the one which approach[e]s most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone” (TTP XVI, 36 [III/195]). Nevertheless, *philosophically speaking*, it is quite unique for Spinoza to refer to democracy as the completely absolute form of government.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Manfred Walther (2008) identifies Francisco Suárez as the primary source for the view that democracy was the most natural form of government in the early modern period. For Suárez, however, democracy is not the best form of government and the original democratic will of the multitude should be mediated in monarchical institutions (in this view Hobbes follows Suárez).

<sup>32</sup> Spinoza’s uniqueness derives precisely from the fact that he constructs the absolute quality of democracy within an ontological system. For an overview of other Dutch political theorists of republican absolutism, see Ernst Heinrich Kossmann (2000).

What does it mean to call democracy absolute rather than monarchy, as is usually done? It is generally and usually tacitly assumed that there is a parallelism between Spinoza's metaphysical absolute and his political absolute. This is, of course, a reasonable approach given the particular integrity of his philosophy. But apart from this, Spinoza also gives a very specific formula for the absoluteness of political bodies in the *Political Treatise*, and it is around this formula that the discussion in the rest of the paper will revolve.

In a metaphysical context, the term "absolute" (adjective or adverb, but nowhere in the noun) is usually used by Spinoza in connection with the essential power of God to exist, think, and act without encountering any finitude, contingency, relativity, externality, limitation, or restriction –for example, the definition of God as "a being absolutely infinite" but "not infinite in its own kind" (EIdéf6 and its explanation [II/45-6]) or the synonymization of God's absolute nature and his infinite power (EIapp [II/77]). Consistent with this metaphysical meaning in the *Ethics*, the absolute in the *Political Treatise* can be said to indicate that a political body is absolute when it is powerful, autonomous, stable, everlasting, and little susceptible to internal conflict and external contingency. On the other hand, the realization of this situation depends on some conditions. While God's absoluteness is spontaneous and inherent, human beings must take certain additional steps to make their states politically absolute.

For Spinoza, a political regime can be more or less absolute, depending on the structure of its decision-making process. More precisely, the more the will of the ruler coincides with the will of the state, that is, with its laws, the more the state becomes absolute (TP VIII, 3-4 [III/325]). In

the background of this formula are two central ideas: one is his earlier equation of power and right (“the natural Right of the whole of nature, and as a result, of each individual, extends as far as its power does” (TP II, 4 [III/277])), and the other is his definition of the right of the state by the power of the multitude (TP II, 17 [III/282]). Just as for the metaphysically democratic Spinoza “the universal power of the whole of nature is nothing but the power of all individuals together” (TTP XVI, 3-4 [III/189]), so for the politically democratic Spinoza the power and therefore the right of the state has no other source than the power of the multitude.

Spinoza warns that a ruler alone, contrary to what is usually assumed, cannot make his rule absolute (TP VI, 5 [III/298]). The reason is that, in practice, his own will does not fully coincide with the will of the state. Apart from some possible physiological incapacities (he may be underage, old, or ill), a ruler’s will is “quite variable and inconstant” simply because of his human nature (TP VIII, 3 [III/325]), and such a ruler cannot always know and control everything that goes on in his country. He practically needs “commanders or counselors or friends” to make the best decisions for himself and his people. That is, “a state thought to be an absolute Monarchy is really, in practice an Aristocracy. Of course, it’s not openly an aristocracy, only covertly one” (TP VI, 5 [III/298]). Moreover, state power vested in a single person can easily fall into the hands of another person or a small group through coups and conspiracies (TP VII, 14 [III/313-4]). Spinoza, in the first chapter on monarchy, prescribes certain military, economic, legal, and political regulations so that the monarchical state can be more stable against such risks. Most of the political regulations aim to limit the king’s power and balance it with an open and legitimate council of counsellors, composed of a large number of citizens and having a high authority in state affairs.

Spinoza's political measures to save the monarchy from one-man precarity and to make it more stable and constitutional, however, reveal a paradox inherent in this form of government: the king has the last word, that is, he is the ultimate sovereign, but he always needs counsellors to make the right decision. Thus, his own will and the will of the state are not really one and the same, so the monarchical form of government cannot be *completely* absolute. In order to ensure the stability of the state, the following distinction should always be maintained: "in a Monarchic state, every law is indeed the King's will made explicit; but not everything the King wills ought to be law" (TP VIII, 3 [III/325]). And because of this asymmetry of wills, monarchy ultimately remains the least absolute regime compared to aristocracy or democracy, even with the structural reforms proposed by Spinoza.

An aristocracy, or rather the aristocracy organized as Spinoza describes it in chapters VIII and IX, on the other hand, does not need such an advisory body. If the sovereign is a sufficiently large council composed of patricians, then the state becomes more absolute, for it no longer needs counsellors and all deliberations are carried out by a "sufficiently large" number of people within the sovereign council itself (TP VIII, 3-4 [III/325]). Accordingly, whatever the council decides can become law and the will of the patricians coincides with the will of the state. At this point, the specific meaning that Spinoza attributes to the word "patrician" (*patricius*) and his expression "sufficiently large" (*satis magnum*) play a crucial role. First, he understands patricians not as noble elites of high birth, but as citizens who have acquired this right by selection (TP VIII, 1 [III/323]). Thus, his aristocratic model is not hereditary, nor is his supreme council a council of nobles; rather, membership in the patriciate depends on certain constitutional criteria and selection by existing members of

the supreme council. Second, in his model the number of patricians is determined by the size of the population of the multitude –Spinoza’s criterion is 1 patrician for 50 plebs (TP VIII, 13 [III/330]). For if this number remains somewhat below the required quota, there occurs a danger of factionalism and corruption, and the existing aristocratic regime could more easily degenerate into a monarchy (TP VIII, 1-2 [III/324]). For the Spinozian polity, the number of people participating in deliberative processes is as important as these processes themselves. The principle of multiplicity, the recommendation to always create sufficiently populated councils, is constantly present in the *Political Treatise*, both for the monarchical council of counsellors (TP VII, 4-14 [III/309-14]) and for the aristocratic supreme council (TP VIII, 1, 3 [III/324-5]). The main reason for this preference seems not to be a praise of political rhetoric or the virtue of active citizenship per se, but the natural weakness of a single human mind and its constant need for other minds to find the best solutions. The Spinoza of the *Political Treatise* gives much weight to deliberative processes, but precisely because he takes human nature and the natural weakness of a single mind as the basis for his political conclusions:

Some will remind us of the saying “while the Romans deliberate, Saguntum is lost”. On the other hand, when the few decide everything, simply on the basis of their affects, freedom and the common good are lost. For human wits are too sluggish to penetrate everything right away. But by asking advice, listening, and arguing, they’re sharpened. When people try all means, in the end they find ways to the things they want which everyone approves, and no one had ever thought of before. (TP IX, 14 [III/352])

Another important reason why the aristocratic form of government is more absolute is that once the power of the state is transferred from the multitude to a sufficiently large council, it never returns to the multitude. Kings can die, but councils are eternal (TP VIII, 3 [III/325]). Spinoza claims that in a monarchy, the right of the multitude originally passes to only one person, and when that person dies, the right to rule essentially reverts back to the multitude. To prevent this great and “most dangerous” change, which is really a return from the civil to the natural order, some legal measures must be taken to make the original transfer permanent and to establish the procedures that determine who becomes the new king after the death of the king, not according to the personal will of the king, but according to the laws in force and within the constitutional framework (TP VII, 25 [III/318-9]). However, since the aristocratic supreme council does not depend on the lifetime of its members, it remains in possession of the original power and right it receives from the multitude.

Despite these advantages over monarchy, the aristocratic council consists only of “certain men selected from the multitude” and the rest remain excluded from rule (TP VIII, 1 [III/323]). Since the excluded part still possesses a certain natural power that does not belong to the body politic, that is not expressed internally and politically within it, and that can therefore only manifest itself as indignation or sedition, it poses a potential threat to the aristocratic council itself and its claim to absolute rule. The excluded “multitude is terrifying to its rulers” (TP VIII, 4 [III/326]). Spinoza firmly believes that the aristocracy, even if considered absolute in theory, remains fragile in practice, and cannot maintain this characteristic unless some structural measures are taken. According to his political logic, which attaches great

importance to the conflicts of power<sup>33</sup> and to the ways of balancing these conflicts without ignoring them, the basic concern of the measures that would enable the aristocratic government to come closest to absoluteness in practice should be to make the multitude a source of as little unrest as possible by eliminating the causes of sedition (TP VIII, 7 [III/326]).

Spinoza's most important step in this direction, as I mentioned earlier, is his refusal to recognize aristocracy as an innate and inherited privilege. Second, he builds a state structure that subordinates the personal interests of officeholders to the interests of society, especially the preservation of peace (TP VIII, 24 [III/333]). Third, he calls for a state body, namely the council of syndics, to hear the complaints of the plebs and their secret accusations against judges and officials and to do what is necessary (TP VIII, 28 [III/335]). It seems that winning "the hearts of the multitude" (TP VIII, 41 [III/343]) by upholding the law and establishing justice is the best way to ensure the stability of the aristocracy, which remains an inherently exclusionary regime because in it everyone is considered a "foreigner" except the patricians themselves (TP VIII 9-10 [III/328]). Therefore, the establishment of a permanent control mechanism that monitors the supreme council and the officials, as well as the implementation of the laws, is a must for the Spinozian reformed aristocracy (TP VIII, 20-25 [III/332-4]). A final important measure, which can be interpreted especially as a counterargument against the exclusion of women, is to increase the number of patricians in proportion to the increase of the population and, more

---

<sup>33</sup> On the meaning of political-historical conflict in the *Political Treatise*, see Del Lucchese (2018).

importantly, to preserve as much as possible the hope of being elected from the multitude to the supreme council.

Of course, this does not mean that all subjects can have the honor of being patricians. To be included in the registry, candidates must be over thirty years of age –otherwise, Spinoza argues, certain families might gain too much influence (TP VIII, 15 [III/330])–, be born within the borders of the country, speak the native language, not be married to a foreigner, not be “disreputable or servile,” and not earn their living by servile activities (TP VIII, 14 [III/330]). In addition, newly elected patricians must pay a large sum of money to the syndics (TP VIII, 25 [III/333]), who, as I mentioned earlier, form a kind of constitutional oversight body and a balancing authority between the state and the multitude. From all this it is clear that Spinoza’s aristocracy allows only propertied men over thirty to become patricians. However, the following point should be emphasized: Spinoza is strictly against the idea that patricians should come only from certain clans or families, since he sees in this the danger of degeneration into monarchy. It is also important to note that he takes a relatively inclusive measure by reducing the proportion of the excluded in order to reduce the causes of possible discontent in the multitude. I think that this pressure of inclusion and expansion exerted on the class of decision-makers and officials plays a fundamental role in Spinoza’s understanding of the political absolute. We should also not forget that numerical enlargement, being numerous, is also the main warning he gives against the danger of corruption.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> For example, the number of senators “ought to be enough that they can’t easily be corrupted” (TP VIII, 35 [III/339]), or “there should be more judges than can be corrupted by any private man” (TP VIII, 38 [III/341]), or the members of the council of syndics

Spinoza believes that aristocracies with a capital, or better with several cities, will become more immune to internal defects if these major political measures<sup>35</sup> and the other minor economic, military, legal and urban measures he proposes are implemented. In this respect, then, he places the aristocracy above the monarchy (the existence of a legitimate consultative body in the monarchy did not fully resolve its internal paradox). He also asserts that the aristocracy, in which, as he proposes, a kind of ombudsman institution and constitutional council (syndic council) exists in perpetuity, cannot be destroyed by an internal cause or “by its own defect” that human prudence can avoid, but “only by some inevitable fate” (TP X, 1 [III/353]).

Spinoza does not explain what this “some inevitable fate” is in chapter X, where he deals with the downfall of aristocracies. The first thing that comes to mind is certainly foreign intervention or occupation by other countries, but in my opinion this also has a direct connection with the way the right to a seat in the aristocratic council is determined, and also an indirect connection with the excluded multitude. As Spinoza says, the main difference between aristocracy and democracy is selection. In aristocracy, the new patricians are chosen by those who are already patricians. Although Spinoza proposes structural reforms to strengthen the

---

should be “so numerous that they can’t divide the state among themselves or agree in any crime” (TP X, 2 [III/354]).

<sup>35</sup> Other important political measures that Spinoza considers essential for an aristocratic state to approach absoluteness as much as possible are the protection of equality among patricians in all circumstances and the absence of a presidential position in the supreme council in accordance with this measure (TP VIII, 18-19 [III/331]).

aristocratic form in the preceding chapters, he does not fail to show his principled distrust of this form of government in the incomplete chapter on democracy by pointing out that the patricians in council will always tend to elect the rich, their relatives and friends, rather than the truly best. By referring to “actual life,” he reminds us that most people act out of their affect rather than their reason and pursue self-interest rather than the common good (TP XI, 1-2 [III/358-9]). Because of this “natural” tendency of patriarchs, the component of the aristocratic council would remain rather weak, despite all the structural measures Spinoza proposes. This tendency itself can also be interpreted as the “inevitable fate” of the aristocratic form, because the measures can control human nature to a certain degree, but not change it completely, as it is obvious.

Second, no matter how broadly Spinoza conceives the circle of patrician candidates, the right to participate in the council is not an innate right, as it is in democracy. Therefore, in aristocracies it is very likely that a subject will never become a patrician, even if he fulfills the conditions for candidacy established by law. As I mentioned earlier, anyone who is not a patrician remains a foreigner, in other words, an external element in that form of government. To be a taxpayer, to suffer hardship in times of crisis, to be subject to the constraints of the law, and at the same time to remain essentially a foreigner inevitably creates great tension in this system. However widespread the hope of becoming patricians may be among subjects, in practice these “foreigners” will continue to pose a potential threat to the aristocratic council and weaken its absolute will from without. I believe that in light of these two points, Spinoza is inclined to say, “if there’s any absolute rule, it’s the rule which occurs when the whole multitude rules” (TP VIII, 3 [III/325]).

Democracy, the rule of all, is for Spinoza the only absolute regime, both in theory and in practice. As his understanding of the political absolute shows, in order to ensure the stability of the state, there should always be a sufficient number of decision-makers. More precisely, there should be as little numerical asymmetry as possible between the group of decision-makers and the group of those affected by the decisions. These two groups should overlap quantitatively as much as possible.<sup>36</sup> Since democracy is the only form of government that allows this overlap not only in theory but also in practice, it is defined as the “*completely absolute state*”<sup>37</sup> (TP XI, 1 [III/358]). Yet, as we know, Spinoza insists that women, who constitute almost half of the population, should remain excluded from such an absolute democracy.

What final conclusion about the situation of women can be drawn from Spinoza’s account of monarchy and aristocracy, which I have discussed on the axis of the concept of the political absolute? In my view, there is a clear contradiction between his exclusion of women and his conception of the political absolute, which is based on an unconventional logic of numerical inclusion of the multitude in government.<sup>38</sup> This means that the “black page” about women in the *Political Treatise* contradicts not only the *Ethics*, but also the *Political Treatise* itself. In light of this last work, it also becomes clear that his exclusion is not only theoretically inconsistent, but also politically harmful to democratic councils. If half of the population does not participate in

---

<sup>36</sup> As Rainer Keil puts it, “in a democracy the rulers and subjects coincide” (2019, p. 128).

<sup>37</sup> The emphasis is mine.

<sup>38</sup> Certainly this applies to servants as well. But as I have already noted, they are not excluded per se as women.

deliberative processes, the council will have quantitatively less power. Even if we provisionally accept Spinoza's claim that women have less power than men, it by no means follows that they should be excluded from political participation. As Spinoza posits in his *Ethics*, "to be able to exist is to have power" (EpP11dem [II/53]), and it is certain that women exist. Therefore, they do have a certain amount of power that, according to the philosophical-political logic of inclusion as expressed in the *Political Treatise*, must be politically included in the democratic council for its own sake.

The basic precaution Spinoza recommends for any kind of major political problem is the participation of numerous members in deliberation and decision-making. This runs through every page of the chapters of the *Political Treatise* devoted to forms of government. Spinoza considers government by a few to be fundamentally dangerous. In his treatise on aristocracy, he repeatedly seeks ways to prevent rule from "gradually falling to the lot of fewer men" (TP VIII, 11 [III/328]). This is not simply because Spinoza sides with the "oppressed" multitude on the stage of history. Rather, he considers numerical inclusion a precautionary measure that best serves the interest of the rulers and is the only realistic way to protect the state and absolutize its rule in direct proportion to that interest. In the aristocracy, patricians should never be too few to rule the multitude (TP VIII, 39 [III/342]), but in a more general context, it is also clear to Spinoza that the "too few" can never "govern the multitude and overcome powerful opponents" (TP IX, 14 [III/352]). He believes that the best way to protect the freedom of rulers and the state, and thus ensure the absoluteness of the state, is to distribute that freedom among *more* people. This is the main reason why he favors aristocracies with several cities over aristocracies with only one city: "In this state freedom is common to more men. For

where one city alone rules, the good of the others is considered only insofar as it serves the interests of the ruling city” (TP IX, 15 [III/353]). It goes without saying that this situation leads to a political imbalance that Spinoza does not welcome at all.

And this view can also be applied to the situation of women. For what the multitude, deprived of the right to speak and to vote, is to the patricians, to the aristocratic council, women are to the republic of men: a potential threat or confusing and fearful dissidents ready to be outraged. If, as I have tried to show, numerical inclusion is the only effective political solution Spinoza offers in the *Political Treatise* to the risks of corruption, degeneration, outrage, and sedition, then from the Machiavellian perspective of this book, men should recognize the equality and rights of women, not out of altruistic considerations, but to protect both their own interests and rights and the interests and rights of the state. As experience teaches and the philosopher Spinoza knows well, no matter how resigned and docile they may appear, “the hardest thing for [people] to endure is being subservient to their equals, and being governed by them” (TTP V, 22 [III/74]).

## References

- AQUINAS, Thomas (Thomas d’Aquin). *Somme théologique*. Volume I. Translated by Aimon-Marie Roguet. Paris: Cerf, 2004.
- ATHERTON, Margaret, ed. *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett, 1994.

- BARBONE, Steven. "Spinoza and the Problem of Women." In *Spinoza y la Antropología en la Modernidad*. Edited by María Luisa de la Cámara García and Julian Carvajal Cordon, 349-356. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2017.
- DEL LUCCHESI, Filippo. "The Revolutionary Foundation of Political Modernity: Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Constituent Power." In *Spinoza's Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*. Edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Hasana Sharp, 190-203. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- DUROUX, Françoise. "Puissance et utopie au péril de la différence sexuelle." In *Spinoza: Puissance et Ontologie*. Edited by Myriam Revault D'Allonnes and Hadi Rizk, 127-138. Paris: Editions Kimé, 1994.
- ERGUN, Reyda, "Spinoza'da Kadın ve Kadınların Spinoza'sı." In *Spinoza Günleri 2: Yeni Dünyadan Eski Dünyaya*. Edited by Reyda Ergün and Cemal Bâli Akal, 135-148. Istanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2011.
- GATENS, Moira and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings. Spinoza, Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- GATENS, Moira. *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- GULLAN-WHUR, Margaret. "Spinoza and the Equality of Women." *Theoria* 68 (2002): 91-111.
- HOBBS, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by J. C. A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- HOBBS, Thomas. *De cive, The English Version*. Edited by Howard Warrender. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

- JAMES, Susan. "Democracy and the Good Life in Spinoza's Philosophy." In *Interpreting Spinoza*. Edited by Charlie Huenemann, 128-146. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.
- JAMES, Susan. "The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions. Susan James Talks to Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens in the third of a series of WPR Interviews." *Women's Philosophy Review* 19 (Autumn 1998): 6-28.
- JUSTINUS, Marcus Junianus. *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*. Translated by John Selby Watson. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853. <https://www.forumromanum.org/literature/justin/english/trans2.html>.
- KEIL, Rainer. "Spinoza's Theory of Absolute Democracy (TP, Chapters 7/5, 8/1, 11; TTP 16)." In *Naturalism and Democracy*. Edited by Wolfgang Bartuschat, Stephan Kirste, and Manfred Walther, 123-148. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019.
- KOSSMANN, Ernst Heinrich. *Political Thought in the Dutch Republic: Three Studies*. Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2000.
- KROP, Henri. "Femina / Mulier." In *The Continuum Companion to Spinoza*. Edited by W. van Bunge, H. Krop, P. Steenbakkens, and J. van de Ven, 216-217. London/New York: Continuum, 2011.
- LLOYD, Genevieve. "Dominance and Difference: A Spinozistic Alternative to the Distinction Between 'Sex' and 'Gender'." In *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*. Edited by Moira Gatens, 29-41. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2009.

- LLOYD, Genevieve. *Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics*. Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 1994.
- LORD, Beth. "‘Disempowered By Nature’: Spinoza on The Political Capabilities of Women." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 6 (2011): 1085-1106.
- MACHEREY, Pierre. *Introduction à l’Ethique de Spinoza*. Volume 3. Paris: PUF, 1995.
- MATHERON, Alexandre. "Femmes et serviteurs dans la démocratie spinoziste." *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 167, no. 2 (1977): 181-200. JSTOR.
- NEGRI, Antonio. *Subversive Spinoza. (Un)contemporary variations*. Edited by Timothy S. Murphy. Translated by T. S. Murphy, M. Hardt, T. Stolze, and Ch. T. Wolfe. Manchester/New York: Manchester UP, 2004.
- NEGRI, Antonio. *The Savage Anomaly. The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*. Translated by Michael Hardt. Minneapolis/Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- O’NEILL, Eileen and Marcy P. Lascano, eds. *Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women's Philosophical Thought*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019.
- RAMOND, Charles. "Sens et projet du *Traité politique*." In *Lectures de Spinoza*. Edited by Pierre-François Moreau and Charles Ramond, 171-183. Paris: Ellipses, 2006.
- RICE, Lee C. "Le Nominalisme de Spinoza." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (1994): 19-32.
- RUFUS, Quintus Curtius. *The History of Alexander*. Translated by John Yardley. London: Penguin Books, 2004.

- SHARP, Hasana. "Eve's Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)Equality." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 50, no. 4 (2012): 559-580.
- SPINOZA. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985, 2016.
- SPINOZA. *Spinoza Opera*. Edited by Carl Gebhardt. 4 vols. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925.
- STEINBERG, Justin. "Spinoza on Being *Sui Iuris* and the Republican Conception of Liberty." *History of European Ideas* 34, no. 3 (2008): 239-249.
- TUANA, Nancy. "Preface." In *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*. Edited by Moira Gatens, vii-ix. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2009.
- WAITHE, Mary Ellen, ed. *A History of Women Philosophers*. 4 vols. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987-1995.
- WALTHER, Manfred. "From *potestas multitudinis* in Suárez to *potentia multitudinis* in Spinoza. The foundation of democracy inverted." *Studia Spinozana* 16 (2008): 129-152.

