Introduction

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If it is no longer possible to call Benedict de Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* "a neglected masterpiece," such a description of the *Political Treatise* remains quite justified. Editors of various critical editions praise the *Tractatus Politicus* as Spinoza's most developed analysis of civil life, containing the most mature and systematic expression of his political thought. In the recent publication of the second volume of *The Collected Works of Spinoza,* Edwin Curley contends that the *Political Treatise* "offers us the materials for a *much deeper* understanding of Spinoza's political philosophy than we could glean from his other works."[1] In the French edition, Pierre-François Moreau goes further. He declares that we find in Spinoza's final work the most "autonomous" expression of his first principles as well as his politics. According to Moreau, we find in the *Political Treatise* Spinoza's philosophy freed at last from both the conceptual constraints of Cartesianism and traditional perspectives on natural law and right.[2] Yet, very few scholars, especially among those writing in English, examine the TP in any detail. How is it that a major work by such an influential and controversial philosopher has been virtually ignored?

Although we do not know precisely when Spinoza began composing his *Tractatus Politicus*, he was working on it intensively from the second half of 1676 up until his untimely death in February 1677.[3] In contrast to a number of his other works, Spinoza likely did not circulate the manuscript among his friends and correspondents. The only reference to it is in a copy of a letter, the original of which is lost. We know neither the date nor the addressee of the letter, though it served as the preface to the

[1] Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza,* vol. 2, 491. Emphasis added.
[2] Moreau, *Oeuvres,* tome V, 79.
[3] Curley argues that Spinoza must have begun the work in late 1675, while most other editors suggest that he wrote it only in the several months prior to his death. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, 488, n. 245.

Political Treatise, included in his *Opera Posthuma* (1677).[4] The letter apologizes for a lapse in communication, but expects that his friend will be pleased since it was by virtue of this very friend's urging that he had been occupied composing the *Political Treatise.* He describes the first six chapters, and notes that he is currently drafting the seventh on monarchy. He announces his intention to proceed to an analysis of "Aristocratic and Popular Governments, and finally to Laws and other particular questions concerning politics."[5] Spinoza succumbed to illness after authoring only four paragraphs of what was projected to be one of two chapters on democracy, or popular government. Thus, what was planned but never written includes the remainder of chapter 11, another on democracy, as well as chapters on "laws" and "other particular questions concerning politics." The fact that his last work was incomplete and uncirculated among his friends serves as partial explanation for its relative obscurity.

Unlike the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Ethics*, the TP did not attract much attention for the first two centuries following Spinoza's death. It would be fair to conjecture that the *Political Treatise* simply disappeared in the controversies surrounding the *Ethics* and *Theological-Political Treatise*. Small batch printings of the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, the *Ethics*, and especially the *Theological-Political Treatise* were frequent in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Between 1670 and 1694, the TTP was printed many times, often under disguised titles, and distributed in various translations: French, English, and Dutch. The eighteenth century saw many printings of the *Ethics* and the TTP as well as a translation of the entire *Opera Posthuma* into German.[6] To appreciate the significance of Spinoza's influence in the history of modernity, scholars point to Pierre Bayle's widely read *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697), which dedicates its longest entry to Spinoza. Besides Bayle's dictionary, the other primary introductions to Spinozism for the wider, educated European public was Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751–1759). Neither mentions the *Political Treatise* at all. So while Spinoza is widely considered among the most influential philosophers of the modern period, his final words were not among those that preoccupied either his critics or his acolytes.

[4] The addressee is thought to be Jarig Jelles. Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, 372.
[5] Ep 84| IV/ 334/5.
[6] B. de Spinoza, *Philosophische Schriften* (Gera: Chr.Fr. Bekmann, 1787–93. See Van Bunge, et al. *The Continuum Companion to Spinoza*, for a complete list of printings and translations, 50–52. Van Bunger errs, however, in identifying the 1785 *Über die Aristokratie und Demokratie* as a translation of the TTP. It is, in fact, a translation of the *Political Treatise*.

The history of Spinoza's reception focuses heavily on the first part of the *Ethics*, in particular on the relationship between substance and modes, along with significant attention to (and, of course, alarm at) his critiques of teleology, providence, miracles, and free will.[7] His contemporaries and successors were most concerned to determine the theological and metaphysical implications of Spinoza's insistence that modes inhere in Substance, such that particular things ought to be understood as those infinitely many ways that God exists. Even if his political philosophy was original and radical, most shocking and exciting were Spinoza's denials of any real distinction between the creator and its creations, the teleological order of the universe with man at its center, and the portrait of a God who might intervene prudently in worldly affairs. Spinoza's apostasy – fantastic and real – overshadowed the portrait we have only recently begun to draw of Spinoza as a political scientist: a thinker striving to make sense of human affairs "with the same freedom of spirit" proper to mathematics or meteorology (TP, ch. 1| III/273/34).

Today, although scholarship on Spinoza is flourishing, very little of it develops the concepts and arguments of his final work.[8] While we can only speculate about why this is the case, the fact that the *Theological-Political Treatise* primarily discusses democracy while the *Political Treatise* only does so before examining the form of government that most preoccupies twentieth- and twenty-first-century political philosophy in the west is surely part of the explanation. The *Theological-Political Treatise* likewise concerns issues – such as the relationship between religious pluralism and political freedom – that remain at the center of geopolitical struggles today. Yet, if we can hope to find in the *Political Treatise* a "much deeper understanding of Spinoza's political philosophy" and the most "autonomous" and original expression of his thinking, we risk missing a great deal by ignoring it. Without the *Political Treatise*, we not only lack a more complete picture of Spinoza as a political thinker, but we are also deprived of many of his insights into the dynamics of power and social life.

This volume brings scholarly attention to this least studied of Spinoza's major works. Since so little has been written on the *Political Treatise*, independent of Spinoza's other work, we aim to begin rather than conclude discussion of the text. It is intended as an invitation to deeper

[7] A useful, brief overview of his early reception is in *The Continuum Companion to Spinoza*. A detailed examination of his reception can be found in Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment*.

[8] This is particularly true of scholarship written in English. The most notable exception among influential Spinoza scholars is the work of French philosopher, Alexandre Matheron. See *Individu et Communauté chez Spinoza* and *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l'âge classique*.

exploration of the many problems and analyses we might find in the *Political Treatise*. Since the essays included in this volume and those to come will likely produce interpretations no less diverse than those of the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, we do not want to foreclose debate about the message or meaning of the *Political Treatise* in this introduction. Nevertheless, we will say a few words about the work's global ambition.

In his editorial preface, Curley announces that the "central thesis of Spinoza's moral and political philosophy is that nothing is more useful to us than living in community with other people, and binding ourselves to fellow citizens by such ties as are apt 'to make us one people" (E4app12| II/269/9–10).[9] The *Political Treatise* does not deviate from this central thesis, declaring repeatedly that the commonwealth operates to the extent that "the multitude is guided as if by one mind." Moreover, the civil order is more coherent, harmonious, and unified to the extent that it agrees with the dictates of reason (TP, ch. 2| III/283/10–20). Like the virtuous person in the *Ethics*, the commonwealth is powerful and rational to the extent that it does those things that truly enhance and contribute to its perseverance (TP, ch. 4| III/292).

Just as the first part of the *Ethics* arouses no end of interpretive problems by claiming that modes have their being in substance and are freer to the extent that they are conceived through the necessity of their flow from the essence of God, the *Political Treatise* likewise invites us to puzzle over the precise relationship of the many to the one. If a state operates only by securing some kind of mental harmony, what is the minimum threshold for unity? If we are more or less "one" depending on how well our actions agree with reason, do we cease to be distinct individuals to the extent that we exercise our power effectively? Or does the "one mind" of civic rationality yield some kind of dialectical paradox such that each of us is increasingly individuated *and* united to the collective to the extent that the civil order encourages the free exercise of our powers? The *Political Treatise* reveals the practical dimensions of age-old metaphysical questions concerning the identity of particulars that together compose larger unities. Likewise, it takes the constitution of unity to be a social problem that might be solved politically. It elaborates an institutional program that promises to coordinate an inevitably diverse populace, subject necessarily to affects, into an effective unity (*animorum unione*).

[9] Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, 491.

The express aim of the *Political Treatise* is to outline the conditions under which a commonwealth's affairs may be "so ordered that, whether the people who administer them are led by reason or by an affect, they *can't* be induced to be disloyal *or* act badly" (TP, ch. 1| III/275/21–25. Italics added). This aim is much more ambitious than the TTP, where Spinoza stresses: "I do not intend to show how a state could be formed so that it might, in spite of everything, always be preserved securely" (TTP, ch. 17| III/203/5). In the TP, Spinoza's concern is less with the susceptibility of subjects to irrationality than with the temptation of rulers to abuse. He insists everywhere that it is folly to count on the virtue of the state's ministers for an enduring commonwealth. Whether the constitution is monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic, it is necessary to appoint judges who will "practice justice without giving special consideration to anyone, not even the King, if he commands something to be contrary to the established law. For Kings are not Gods, but men, who are often captivated by the Syrens' song" (TP, ch. 7| III/308/1–2). The first word of the *Political Treatise* is *affectus*, in whose bondage each of us remains necessarily. The problem is not only that any one of us is susceptible to illness, greed, or vengeance. It is that a poorly ordered commonwealth provides nearly irresistible temptations for those in power to undermine the fabric of social life. When affairs are so ordered that it is all too easy for a powerful few to seek private gain or to use the police or military as a vector for revenge, even the strongest of souls may be compelled to do so. For reason "has no weight in the marketplace or the court, where we need it most" (TP, ch. 1| III/275/13–15).

One of the important features of the TP is the appearance of the notion of a "free multitude" (ch. 5 [III/296–7], and ch. 7 [III/319]). While in the TTP and the *Ethics* Spinoza's attitude toward the multitude is typically negative, the TP promotes the establishment of a community of free men. The reader will also discern in the TP passages in which Spinoza criticizes his own, early negative attitude toward the multitude (compare TP, ch. 7 [III/319/27] with E4p54s). The result is that the *Political Treatise* appears more universalistic, evincing an ambition to maximize the proportion of a commonwealth's subjects who might benefit from institutionalizing liberating forms of association. Rather than blaming some segment of society for civil unrest, the *Political Treatise* aims to understand how natural beings, subject necessarily to passions, can be enabled and constrained to animate and preserve the common interest. It treats the virtue and vice of rulers and ruled as the creatures of the commonwealth. If rulers are good, the credit lies with the State's organization. If subjects violate the

law and threaten social security, the State must be disordered (TP, ch. 5| III/295–96). Spinoza's political program is predicated on the universality of our finitude. It appreciates the vulnerability of each and every one of us to vice. Nevertheless, the vice of statesmen is of particular concern because it is especially consequential. Thus, the focus of the *Political Treatise* is upon those forms of political order that breed vicious ministers of public affairs whose disdain for law and the common interest threaten to "turn the civil order into a state of hostility" (TP, ch. 4| III/293/22).

At the same time, our finitude justifies the relative optimism and ambition of the *Political Treatise*. Because we are so deeply shaped by how political and social life is ordered, by how others act and feel, and by civic participation, a State organized to engender a free multitude rather than slaves (instruments of pleasure and power for the rulers) will yield enduring power for itself *and* its constituents. He thus outlines the institutional arrangements that support the greatest possible exercise of reason, for as many – male – citizens as possible. Representatives of government ought to be involved in different trades, hail from diverse regions, and have different forms of expertise. Transparency and participation, he suggests, will enable as many as possible to govern and be governed in accordance with their own interests. In addition to an uncompromising critique of political abuse, Spinoza's commitment to realism exudes hope for the possibility of a free republic.

Although the *Political Treatise* conveys a deep appreciation for human plasticity and the possibilities of shared virtue, Spinoza famously excludes women and servants (as well as foreigners and criminals) from the category of subjects who might share the duties of democratic government. This exclusion is at odds with several currents of his argument in the TP as well as the philosophical anthropology of his *Ethics*. If, as he contends repeatedly, we reason better, the more actively diverse members of the commonwealth contribute to the process of deliberation, why exclude the vast majority of constituents? If a preponderance of vice is owed to a poorly ordered commonwealth and not to any innate defect in human beings, why not order the society to maximize the political intelligence of the whole populace? These and other problems concern contributors to this volume, but critical debate will surely not be settled here. Spinoza's *Political Treatise* is both incomplete and imperfect, but its study provides an undeniably richer and perhaps more controversial portrait of his political philosophy.

The first two chapters address the relationship of Spinoza's *Political Treatise* to his other major works. **Michael Rosenthal's** essay asks four questions about Spinoza's political theory. First, what is the nature of

Spinoza's so-called realism about politics? Second, what is the ideal civil order or constitution? Third, what does it mean for a realist about politics to speak of ideal constitutions? Fourth, what is the relation of the TTP to the TP? Some have argued that Spinoza's account in the TP is more "scientific" than in the TTP and eliminates artifices like the social contract and narrative. Rosenthal claims that the TP still depends upon them in crucial ways. He argues the same tri-partite structure of explanation is found in both the TTP and the TP: the descriptive or sociological (third-person); the juridical or normative (second-person); and the narrative (first-person). The goal of this chapter is to provide answers to the first three questions concerning how realism is compatible with idealization in terms of this tri-partite account.

A commitment to method, argues **Julie Cooper**, is one of Spinoza's philosophical signatures. Yet surprisingly little has been written about Spinoza's method for the study of politics. In this context, the *Political Treatise* emerges as a crucial text for understanding Spinoza's method, because it is the lone text in which Spinoza opines on proper approaches to the study of politics. In this chapter, Cooper examines the techniques that Spinoza employs in the *Political Treatise*. When compared to the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, the *Political Treatise* is notable for its abstraction, for the negligible work performed by history and experience, according to Cooper. She highlights Spinoza's abstract turn in an effort to temper some of the revolutionary fervor that surrounds Spinoza's unfinished work. In the *Political Treatise*, dispensing with an abstract theory of right does not usher in a permanent revolution. Rather, it licenses abstraction from historical contingency in a quest for modes of argument – whether deductive or empirical – powerful enough to forestall controversy and dissent.

The next four contributions, each in its own way, pay particular attention to affects, social passions, and virtue. They address the relationship of these human phenomena to the formation or durability of a commonwealth. **Moira Gatens** examines what Spinoza means when he commits to developing his political theory from the point of view of "human nature . . . as it really is." She maintains that the *Political Treatise* treats human nature and its powers of action as they are revealed in recorded history and through everyday experience and observation rather than in an idealized or *a priori* way. Spinoza's ambition is to refrain from mocking or bemoaning human folly and instead to try to *understand* the causal ground of human action. Following the method deployed in natural philosophy, he vows to consider human affects not as malfunctions of human nature but as necessary and integral parts of its mode of being. But does this stated aim

of the TP indicate an inconsistency or conundrum in Spinoza's philosophy? Given his explicit critique of universals and abstractions, and his doctrine of the singular essence that defines each individual thing, is it permissible for him to posit a conception of human nature at all? If it can be shown that Spinoza does not have a robust notion of an actually existing human nature, then in what sense can the TP claim to show human nature as it really is?

Running through Spinoza's work – argues **Susan James** – is the venerable view that human beings have more in common with each other than with any other kind of thing, and that, as they become more rational, their commonality increases. James's chapter begins by considering the kinds of commonality that are at stake in Spinoza's argument. At first glance it seems that people become more like one another as reasoning leads them to shared knowledge claims, but this, she suggests, is not all that Spinoza has in mind. The differences that interest him are above all differences in our affects, and the commonalities with which he is concerned are commonalities of desire. This view is worked out in his doctrine of the imitation of the affects, a psychological mechanism that both makes us interdependent and inclines us to envy. One of the tasks of the state is therefore to contain the envy that underprivileged groups are liable to feel for those whose political rights or privileges exceed their own. But how can political communities ensure that envy does not directly or indirectly generate faction and conflict? In particular, how is it meant to be limited in the model constitutions set out in the *Political Treatise*, which all contain significant levels of political *in*equality? James identifies a solution to this problem and applies it to Spinoza's notorious defence of political inequality between men and women.

Chantal Jaquet examines Spinoza's claim in TP, ch. 6, that a multitude unites to form a political body prompted not by reason but by some common affect: fear, hope, or desire to avenge a common injury. This chapter examines the possibility, realizability, and legitimacy of such a paradoxical and problematic form of unity. It demonstrates the originality of Spinoza's thesis, which has not been recognized by commentators. It proceeds to examine the problems a foundation of revenge involves, such as durability, susceptibility to violence, and legitimacy. It concludes with a definition of the "correct use" of revenge by distinguishing carefully, as Spinoza does, a passion for revenge that derives from *desiderium* rather than from *cupiditas*. It illuminates the precise kind of vindictive affect that can ground a multitude's agreement, and thus sovereign law and common justice.

Hasana Sharp develops the implications of Spinoza's invocation in chapter 6 of the traditional analogy between the *oikos* and the *polis*. Careful attention to this analogy reveals a number of interesting features of Spinoza's political theory. Spinoza challenges the perception that absolute monarchy offers greater respite from the intolerable anxiety of the state of nature than does democracy. He acknowledges that people associate monarchical rule with peace and stability, but asserts that it can too easily deform its subjects. Unchallenged monarchy may be credited with a certain order, "but if slavery, barbarism, and desolation are to be called peace, there can be nothing more wretched for mankind than peace." This is all familiar to friends of Spinoza, but what kind of democracy is the alternative to those monarchies that tend toward despotism? It is a form of association that, he suggests, resembles a bitterly quarrelsome but nevertheless virtuous family. Thus, he admits that democratic, or popular, rule is typically turbulent and disorderly, but urges his reader to view contentions and disputes as a kind of salutary discord that preserves rather than threatens virtue.

The proceeding three essays consider matters specific to the distinctive regimes of government. The first two examine the question of national religion in aristocracies. The third considers Spinoza's remarks on the relative advantages of aristocracy versus democracy. The chapter by **Mogens Lærke** takes a closer look at Spinoza's conception of a "national religion" in chapter 8 of the TP, in connection with another text that it is explicitly and closely related, namely chapter 19 of the TTP, dedicated to the "right concerning sacred matters" (*jus circa sacra*). Lærke argues that we should not see Spinoza's call for a national religion to reflect straightforward Erastianism, or the subjection of all religious matters to state control. Instead, on Spinoza's view, state administration of sacred matters is a delicate balancing act between both promoting and curbing religious diversity within the state, drawing the benefits from it while avoiding its inherent dangers. Lærke's argument is that the conception of a national religion in TP, ch. 8, is Spinoza's practical guide to how to perform this balancing act.

Daniel Garber's contribution examines Spinoza's recommendation that all the patricians in an aristocracy "should be of the same Religion, a very simple and most Universal Religion, such as we described in that Treatise." What does Spinoza mean here by the "very simple and most Universal Religion," he asks. Garber argues against the view that Spinoza intends the dogmas of the TTP outlining a religion of reason to replace traditional religions. Religion for Spinoza, Garber argues, is practice, not

faith, and it involves imperatives to be followed and not dogmas or beliefs to be held. The "very simple and most Universal Religion," he argues, consists only of the imperative to love one's neighbor as oneself, and to love God above all. The dogmas of Universal Faith are needed only for those not capable of attaining religion through reason: For the rational agent, the imperatives are not laws, given by a divine lawgiver, but eternal truths.

In "Spinoza on Aristocratic and Democratic Government," **Theo Verbeek** makes a compelling case for special attention to the neglected chapters of the *Political Treatise* on aristocracy. He demonstrates the novelty of Spinoza's claims about aristocracy, which contain an implicit critique of his own country. In addition, he maintains that Spinoza's celebrated preference for democracy is less a spirited defense of egalitarian principles than a resignation to the impossibility of sustaining the best government in principle: aristocracy. Verbeek argues that the events of 1672 depleted Spinoza's hope of modeling politics on the rational morality he advances in the *Ethics*. His advocacy of democracy, then, signals the loss of faith in the self-correcting mechanisms of reason, and the inevitability of the instability democracy promises.

The concluding three chapters examine the question of political power – its character and its sources of durability and vulnerability – in the TP. **Yitzhak Y. Melamed**'s chapter begins with the observation that Spinoza is commonly perceived as suggesting that any empowerment is *essentially* good. In his chapter, Melamed discusses Spinoza's assertion in chapter 7 of his *Political Treatise* that "the most stable state is one which defends only its own possessions, and cannot seek those of others." Melamed shows that Spinoza develops a view according to which having *too much power* is likely to bring about the destruction of the state. Thus, it is a matter of luck (i.e. of having just the right amount of power) that determines the fate and survival of the state. Melamed then attempts to explain how these claims of Spinoza's can be reconciled with his general view of power as virtue, and what can we learn about Spinoza's understanding of power from the surprising passage in the seventh chapter of the TP.

Spinoza's treatment of absolute sovereignty raises a number of interpretative questions. According to **Justin Steinberg**, Spinoza seems to embrace a form of absolutism that is incompatible with his defense of mixed government and constitutional limits on sovereign power. And he seems to use the concept of "absolute sovereignty" in inconsistent ways. Steinberg offers an interpretation of Spinoza's conception of absolutism that aims to resolve these concerns. Steinberg argues that Spinoza is able to show that, when tied to a proper understanding of authority, absolute

sovereignty is not only compatible with, but actually necessitates, power-sharing and constitutionalism. His treatment of "absolute sovereignty" in the political works is akin to his treatment of "substance" and "God" in the *Ethics*: he transfigures the concept from within a common framework. This interpretation renders intelligible and consistent the various claims that Spinoza makes about sovereign absolutism in the *Political Treatise*.

Filippo Del Lucchese focuses on the relationship between Machiavelli and Spinoza, using the concept of constituent power to analyze their contribution to the foundation of modern political thought. Both authors ground the stability of the State and its freedom on the *popolo* (Machiavelli) and the *multitudo* (Spinoza); this is not the generic people of modern constitutionalism, but rather the *demos*, the specific group inside the *civitas* whose power is exercised on, and sometimes against, other political subjects. Both authors aim at keeping alive the conflictual and constituent force that creates the juridical space of the State by recognizing the prominent role of social and political conflict. While Machiavelli explicitly argues for social conflict as the ground of political freedom, Spinoza develops his conflictualist approach through more implicit examples. Considering them together allows one to identify a radical democratic and revolutionary ground for the foundation of political modernity.