ABSTRACT: Spinoza’s concepts of wonder, the imitation of affects, cheerfulness, and devotion, provide the basis for a Spinozist aesthetics. Those concepts from his *Ethics*, when combined with his account of rituals and festivals in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and his *Political Treatise*, reveal an aesthetics of social affects. The repetition of ritualized participatory aesthetic practices over time generates a unique *ingenium* or way of life for social group, a singular style which distinguishes them from the general political body. Ritual and the imitation of affects explain why specific styles of art are associated with consistent styles of bodily modifications, clothing, and affects. This paper claims, not that already similar people flock to the same art, but rather, that immersion in the same art is what produces their similarity. Art (especially in the immersive, festival-like experience of live performance) can generate the affect of devotion, which intensifies in-group love, temporarily blocks affects of sadness, and focusses one intently on the aesthetic experience due to devotion’s connection to wonder. Cheerfulness shows that, through variation of aesthetic objects, art can cause pleasure without risking excess. In addition, while politics’ central affect is sad fear, aesthetically-united groups are bound by joyful affects.

# INTRODUCTION

This essay treats art as a social practice by using Spinoza’s analysis of ceremonies. Specifically, ritual and ceremony bind groups of people together through affect, eventually making more similar those who were initially dissimilar. This explains why groups of people who repetitively participate in performance rituals specific to a distinctive style of art tend to resemble one another not just in their preference for a genre, but in dress, habits, bodily modifications, and affects. Repetition of artistic ceremonies can have relatively durable effects, impacting what Spinoza calls the group’s *ingenium* (character, temperament, genius, habits, or mindset). Our account of aesthetic social life in Spinoza begins with the imitation of the affects in the *Ethics*. Further, the specific affects of devotion (derived from the imaginative idea of wonder), love, and cheerfulness described in the *Ethics* are necessary to fully understand the aesthetic phenomena of the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise*. Spinoza’s discussion of festivals will conclude the paper. Ceremonies and festivals rely on aesthetic means to relay their social affects, if we understand by ‘aesthetic’ how one is affected, especially at the level of the body, by uncommon bodily sensations. Both the festival and group aesthetic performance use a combination of music, costume, group participation, leisure, spectacle, and variety in order to generate novel, rare, and intense affects.[[1]](#endnote-1)

# IMITATION OF AFFECTS

For Spinoza, the human mind is inherently associative. We rarely have ideas in isolation since thinking is a dynamic activity: our mind automatically is determined to think of any other object or idea that seems to us to connect to our current idea. Our mind is defined by its ideas in their interconnection (2p15).[[2]](#endnote-2) The term ‘idea’ in Spinoza covers all manner of ‘inner’ life, including rational or adequate ideas, affects, memory, desire, sensation, and so on. As Spinoza argues, every interaction with an external body affects our own body which causes some kind of idea in the mind, and if repeated often enough (2PostV), these impacts with external bodies will leave long-lasting traces and imprints upon us (2p17): memory, yes, but also the development of habitual linkages which determine the mind to connect many ideas and affects together in associative chains. For instance, having experienced two different things simultaneously, if one later experiences just one of them, the mind ‘immediately passes to the thought of another, which has no likeness to the first: as, for example, from the thought of the word *pomum* a Roman will immediately pass to the thought of the fruit [viz. an apple]’ (2p18). Spinoza then speaks of a farmer and a solider, whose different ways of life have produced in them different associative traces. These traces can determine one to feel affects. For instance, a farmer, upon seeing a horse’s hoof print, typically would think of horses, and then of hauling joyful harvests by horse, while a solider likely associates the print with horses, and then with the fears of riding a horse into battle. Our associations can call up entire affective chains: if a current object is associated by me with a second object, any affections (any ideas including affects of love, hate, or fear) which I experienced simultaneously with that second object will also be currently experienced. This may go on in the background of the mind but it surely is happening, in traces within the delicate folds of bodies, or in the complexities of barely registered affects.

One important way that association influences our lives is that each person associates other people with their own self; specifically, to the extent that one takes oneself to resemble another person, one then experiences affects similar to that person’s. This is called ‘imitation of affects’ by Spinoza. At the simplest level, this means one undergoes a degree of an affect which one imagines that others feel. As with general association above, mere perceived likeness is an initial cause. ‘From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have some likeness to an object that usually affects the Mind with Joy or Sadness, we love it or hate it’ (3p16). Spinoza says that we have a love towards ourselves, and that we perceive a resemblance between ourselves and other human beings—and here imitation proper begins. ‘If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect’ (3p27), which Spinoza names ‘imitation of affects’ (3p27Sch). For instance, if we think that a thing like us experiences love toward its benefactor, we too (imagining a like benefit done to us) will love the benefactor (3p27Cor1).

Further, imitation can exponentially increase affects. ‘If we imagine that someone loves, desires or hates something we ourselves love, desire, or hate, we shall thereby love, desire or hate it with a greater constancy’ (3p31) since ‘there is added to the Love a new cause, by which it is further encouraged’ (3p31Dem). Imitation thus generates new affects, and deepens existing affects, as when one laughs after, or laughs more heartily because of, hearing others’ laughter in a theatre.It is important to note that imitated affects are not disinterested judgments about how others feel: they are co-affections in which one really undergoes the affects. Imitated affects are not separated from the mind affected: they are not ‘feelings’ that one ‘has about’ someone or something. Thus, group similarity is not feigned, or an attempt to conform to peer pressure, but produces affects as real as any others.

It is very important to note that affects contain an element of desire, or striving, which determines one to behave in a certain way. Thus, imitation of affects is more than just believing what others believe or sadly pitying another’s suffering: desire strives to do something in response to imitated affects (3p9). In short, desire acts to preserve or increase things that cause it joy, and eliminate or decrease things that cause it sadness. Since one thing that causes joy is the joy of those one imitates, imitation draws individuals together in group behaviours. Every individual is irreducibly different for Spinoza, but, imitation smooths out some of these differences as we imitate the affects (and so too the desires, and hence behaviours) of those around us. Imitation of affects is a condition of possibility for social life, since maintaining a group requires a certain degree of similar behaviour. Imitation of affects is thus constructive of the social body: it leads to the production of political and social groups. Already we can gesture to distinctive styles of life attached to specific styles of art: all other things being equal, to spend significant time with a group of people immersed in one kind of art will lead one to an increased incidence of the desires generated by it. It is not the case that one already e.g. ‘is a punk’ or was born destined to love abstract expressionism, then finds others like oneself. Instead, one is exposed to others and then grows to approximate the group affect to a greater degree over time, as greater exposure sinks initial one-off imitation into deep grooves, akin to muscle memory for affects.

Imitation is not only individual mimicry of what others have done or are doing. It also leads an individual to proactive attempts to win the group’s approval or ‘love.’ ‘Love’ in Spinoza simply means associating one’s present joy with another as the cause of that joy (3p13Sch), benefit, or pleasure. Spinoza defines ‘ambition’ as the desire to behave in ways that others will love, that is, will see as benefitting them (3p29). Through ambition, we also try to draw the group toward our own desires. Spinoza says that ‘each of us strives, so far as he can, that everyone should love what he loves, and hate what he hates… [which] is really Ambition’ (3p31). One is just as likely to be imitated by others as one is to imitate others. In the imitation of affects, all parties are engaged in striving to gratify others, are pleased by the joys that those around them experience and hence have an increased desire for those same joys, and pursue mutually gratifying actions which can increase the similarity of their actions which again reinforces imitation. The dynamism and multiple causes of imitation firmly bind individuals into groups.

I have highlighted the role of love in imitation since love (i.e. joy associated with a cause) is key for defining artistic styles of social living. Not only do the pleasures of art lead to bonding through imitation of joyful affects, but love and joy will sharply distinguish the operation of aesthetically-produced group affects from the theological-political use of fearful group affects. Political unity is often bought at the high cost of fear, while art can bind us in more beneficial affective ways. Further, since politics requires relative generic uniformity under the law, artistic communities create the opportunity to join a smaller group whose distinctive way of life is better suited to one’s unique particularities.

If Spinoza is correct about the prevalence and power of the imitation of affects, we ought to take great care with the styles of people and art in which we are immersed. Perhaps the lukewarm bath of whatever art is most easily accessible in our immediate environment does us little good. If so, we should avoid surrounding ourselves with the mediocre standard. We could instead cultivate our tastes alongside those with the healthiest, most vivid, most complex affects possible—people whose tastes are close enough to our own to be imitated but also different enough that they will push us to strive for new affective heights. In addition to an individual imitating the existing affects of others, in the group, group affects are also produced by social practices (our next central point). So we should look not only to the affects of those we surround ourselves with, but also the social practices which produce their affects. To repurpose Spinoza’s paraphrase of Romans 9:21, ‘we must always remember that we are in God’s hands as clay in the hands of the potter, who from the same lump makes some vessels unto honour and others unto dishonour’ (TP 2.22),[[3]](#endnote-3) which is to say that some external social practices will shape us beneficially, while others will not.

Spinoza says that there are many advantages in life that one will not realistically be able to procure alone. I am not a cobbler, but I avoid many pains if I have shoes: thus, it is to my benefit to interact with someone who makes shoes. Sadly, I can only sing badly, but I am brought joy when I can hear others who can sing well. In many such ways, living with others can be so beneficial that Spinoza reminds us that ‘man is a God to man’ (4p35Sch). In theory, to live together under the guidance of reason would be best. However, groups living according to reason exist only ‘in Utopia or in that golden age of the poets’ (TP 1.1), so in practice, most of social life requires guiding people through affective modes, mainly through threats of punishment and promises of rewards, that is, by playing to hope and fear (4p35-37). Similar points are made in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (chapters 16-17): if people are to benefit from living together, their behaviour must be made relatively consistent and uniform. Fear is the standard political means to do so, since it provides consistent motivation for almost everyone. Hope is also important, since people will only compromise and sacrifice for others in the present if they have hope for a greater future reward (TTP 16.6). However, even hope inevitably involves fear, as common people “fluctuate wretchedly between hope and fear” (TTP Preface 1): fear of a bad outcome is simultaneously hope for a good outcome and vice versa (3DefAffXIIIexp). Both hope and fear contribute to superstition and the control which it gives to rulers, but especially fear (TTP Preface 4-7). At the level of the political republic, fear and hope are necessary affects—but neither typically leads to exponential, proactive increases of joy and love, and instead of creating new desires they compromise and limit existing desires. While politics requires relatively strong similarity that realistically involves compulsion via fear, our social lives do not require uniformity for all. Thus, smaller groups united by artistically-produced affects can use a variety of affects other than fear. The variety of affects used leads to distinctiveness rather than uniformity, and the absence of fear allows for great joy. Communities are possible, indeed already exist, which unite some through gratifying similarities, while avoiding sad, disempowering fear and generic uniformity. Since repetition will be key to maintaining a degree of consistency and developing virtue, these smaller groups must forge a somewhat consistent style supported by ritualized practices.

# PRACTICES MAKE PEOPLES

Imitation of affects happens automatically. But through certain techniques (ceremonies, rituals), imitative forces focus on particular affects and have cumulative effects though repetition. Some of these techniques are good or useful: e.g. communities centred around healthy and joyful aesthetic affects. Some are dangerous or harmful, centred on sad affects: e.g. superstition or authoritative regimes. Spinoza clearly thinks ceremonies are important since he devotes chapter 5 of the *Theological-Political Treatise* to them, as well as significant portions of chapters 3 and 17.[[4]](#endnote-4) Explaining ceremonies through his *Ethics* gives aesthetic content to some of his ethical affective concepts. That is, the detailed description of concrete practices (rituals, festivals, patterns of clothing, and so on) in the TTP can be linked, through a comparison of shared terms, to the conceptual foundation of the affects elaborated in the *Ethics*.

Spinoza’s *Ethics* demonstrates that each thing exists and is defined through its causes: that is, an individual object is nothing other than the result of what creates it. In his political works, Spinoza applies the same idea in terms of groups. A nation—which in Spinoza’s 17th century usage does not mean ‘a nation state’ but something closer to ‘a people’—does not simply exist, but was made and is continually reproduced. Spinoza’s incomplete last work, the *Political Treatise*,insists on this point: ‘it is certain that rebellions, wars, and contempt for or violation of the laws are to be attributed not so much to the wickedness of subjects as to the faulty organisation of the state. Men are not born to be citizens, but are made so’ (TP 5.2). We can theorize all we want about how humans should be, but effective social theory must account for the practices which make us as we actually are: ‘the main task is to show how it can be brought about that men, whether led by passion or by reason, may still keep their laws firm and sure. If the right of the state, or public freedom, rests only on the feeble support of laws, not only can the citizens have no assurance of its maintenance… but this will even prove their ruin’ (TP 7.2). That is, laws are feeble without support at the level of desire. Specific mechanisms, including ritualized social practices, produce specific desires, which support (or undermine) specific laws. Spinoza’s first published work, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, argued the same, and gave a great many examples. ‘Nature certainly does not create peoples, individuals do, and individuals are only separated into nations by differences of language, law and morality. It can only be from these latter factors, namely law and morality, that each nation has its unique character, its unique condition, and its unique prejudices’ (TTP 17.26). We are made to be what we are though social practices and customs, in addition to strictly legal punitive mechanisms.

The production of a people goes right to the foundations in Spinoza. Social practices do not shape what a people already were; they form the people that eventually is made. Even the love of freedom and the people’s tolerance for authority are not fixed desires, but can be increased or diminished by accustoming the people to either. What one is ‘accustomed to’ is what one desires and can tolerate. Under a monarch, ‘unless people have been raised from the outset to be subservient to the ruler’s every word, he will find it difficult… to take away the people’s liberty once it has been granted’ (TTP 5.9). That is, if a people is accustomed to freedom, they will demand it; if a people is accustomed to subservience, they will not demand freedom. Indeed, those accustomed to servitude cannot handle freedoms they are unaccustomed to (TTP 5.10). People accustomed to one style of rule cannot simply adopt another, regardless of how good those laws might be, either in general or for another kind of people: ‘a people accustomed to a different form of government will not be able to tear up the traditional foundations of their state, changing its entire structure, without great danger of overthrowing the entire state’ (TP 7.26; see also TP 7.30). Even on so fundamental an issue as the desire for freedom, the *ingenium* of each people differs, based on its institutions.

It is not only the legal constitution which constitutes the *ingenium* of a people, however: customs, rites, and ceremonies do as well. There is nothing particularly aesthetic about most legal punishments; however, ceremonies are designed to have maximum aesthetic-affective impact. Spinoza puts a great deal of emphasis on the Jewish practice of circumcision. He attributes the surprising durability of the Jewish people, who had no country of their own and had much antagonism directed their way, in part to the ritual of circumcision. In part, they are maintained by social, extra-legal

external rites which are contrary to the rites of other nations, but also by the sign of circumcision which they zealously maintain.... I think that the sign of circumcision has such great importance as almost to persuade me that this thing alone will preserve their nation forever… We also have an excellent example of this among the Chinese, who likewise zealously retain a kind of topknot on their heads, by which they distinguish themselves from all other men, and have preserved themselves in this distinctive manner (TTP 3.12).

By associative visual continuity, imitation of affects is increased, making support within the group reciprocal and cumulatively increasing.

Notably, Spinoza is speaking of Chinese people under the rule of the Tatars, and Jewish people under the rule of various governments. That is, aesthetic modifications of one’s body operate within a larger political group, but in an extra-legal or social fashion, making some unique through marks of distinction. These rituals found, support, and enhance sub-group differences within a larger political entity which requests obedience of all in the same manner. Rituals exert great force: to maintain oneself without a state or under foreign authoritarian rule is no small feat. And this thing alone, Spinoza said, is nearly enough all by itself to maintain the group.

It would take time to switch from one group and its way of life to another, but through the imitation of affects, it can be brought about, though only over an extended period of time. Spinoza says that after moving to a new country, ‘foreigners… *gradually* adopt the national customs until *finally* they are not distinguishable by any difference [emphasis added]’ except those imposed by law, such as citizenship restrictions (TP 8.12). Similarly, if you change the customs and laws, the people retain their affective ways for some time (e.g. TP 5.2), presumably due to a combination of deep traces from prior repetition and some continuing echoes of imitation. Because what makes a group unique is the product of practices and customs, and these customs take some time to become established, an individual will only slowly become integrated in the group. Significant similarity to the group does not pre-exist exposure to the group. As a style of art and the practices which typically attend that art are revealed, a neophyte slowly comes to resemble the group. Those practices are a necessary step toward possessing affects and loves similar to the group’s. Prior to exposure to the practices and style of life associated with it, one would inevitably be a poseur, but, one sheds that status slowly but surely (to the extent that the practices are maintained). Just as we are all immigrants if we trace our family lines back far enough, we were all initially poseurs or neophytes, foreign to the group until its customs are adopted, after which time we became indistinguishable from existing members of the group.

Spinoza’s strong emphasis on bodily modifications, with all their aesthetic import, is difficult to comprehend without his concepts of imitation, association, and repetition. Common, sensible, shared social signs increase imitation since it rests on perceived commonalities. A distinctive hairstyle, and certainly the one-time act of circumcision, are not ‘repetitive’ in the typical sense of the term, but are ‘repetition’ in our sense of the bodily trace. Every time one sees the same distinctive marks, an affective image is impressed, yet again, deepening the trace it leaves upon our mind. Ideas and affects associated with marks on one’s own body, that one also sees consistently on others, are nearly unavoidable due to their constant presence. That is what justifies Spinoza’s remarkable claims. Not only is this facet of social life borne out by experience—anthropology, psychology, and sociology attest to these shared marks which unify *this* group while distinguishing it from *that* group—but it can be explained through Spinoza’s discussions of ritual and customs.

Groups of people distinguished by their tastes and styles also have their distinctive patterns of body modifications. Patterns of body modifications are commonly correlated with styles of living: specific ways to wash one’s hands or body before praying; tattoos and long hair, often dyed dark, for acolytes of heavy metal; ritual cutting of hair in coming-of-age ceremonies; pompadours for rockabilly enthusiasts; shaved heads and bare feet for monks; boldly coloured or spiked hair and facial piercings in unusual places for punks; specific hairstyles paired with traditional folk dances. These patterns of body modification are not merely tokens of a type, ‘representations’ to be ‘recognized,’ because they also cause affects—affects being defined, in Spinoza, as a modification of one’s body (2p19, 2p23, 2p26). Surely, these modifications do not give us adequate ideas; they change us, though, in ways which Spinoza seems to think are non-negligible. Sceptics might account this as mere faddishness in contemporary groups, or conversely, mere hidebound traditions for religious, ethnic, or national groups—but they would still need to explain the causes of fads, or why some of these traditions have lasted centuries. We also should acknowledge contemporary capitalism’s proliferation of distinct demographic groups through marketing—but the process of distinguishing also seems to be prevalent in so-called traditional societies and it existed among the Ancient Hebrews. This incomplete list of body modifications could be purely anecdotal, from random experience (*experientia vaga*)—but Spinoza provides causal mechanisms by which it could be produced, and which we find in all functioning societies. Thus, examples such as these seem to require just the kind of explanation which Spinoza supplies.

Perhaps of some importance are other aesthetic phenomena which Spinoza notes in passing in the *Political* *Treatise* when discussing the virtue of individuals and groups. In an aristocratic form of government, Spinoza says that the patrician class should have ‘a mark of honour conferred on them, this being permission to wear a particular ornament, granted only to them as a mark of distinction and prestige’ (TP 8.25). This prestige must be linked to virtue, not birthright, however, for it to have advantageous affective results. After establishing the most fundamental legal structures of aristocratic states, Spinoza mentions ‘a few others, less essential but still of considerable importance. Patricians should appear in public designated by a particular style of clothing or dress… But if it is established that [a patrician] has wasted his fortune through extravagance, luxurious living, gaming, debauchery, and so forth… he should lose his status and be regarded as unfit for any office or honour’ (TP 8.47). All that we said above regarding reciprocal love and proactive ambition apply to clothing styles, too. Clothing fits naturally into important themes of this chapter, e.g. the affects of esteem and emulation which drive the elite to use their power in ways which benefit the society at large (TP 8.2, 8.6, and 8.24).

Further, Spinoza implies a second relation of virtue and marks of distinction: one ought to lose distinction when one loses virtue, but also, if one turns away from the distinctive practices (including traditional dress), one risks losing the virtues these rituals support. As social practices change, there is often a ‘proliferation of vices… when [people] have too much leisure and which not infrequently lead to the collapse of the state… [as] they gradually become… soft and sluggish… Hence they begin to despise the ways of their ancestors and to adopt foreign ways; that is, they begin to be slaves’ (TP 10.4). These words might seem hopelessly outdated, trivial, or elitist if one forgets the overall point: virtuous behaviour is instigated by desiring affects and, conversely, whatever beneficial effects such rituals generate are eventually lost if the rituals cease. Reducing the number of times a ritual is repeated diminishes the ritual’s performative power. However, ‘they will never covet foreign style of dress nor disdain their native style if it is ordained by law that patricians and candidates for office are to be distinguished by a particular form of dress…. And in each state additional measures can be devised that conform with… the character of the people, always having as their main concern that subjects should do their duty willingly rather than under constraint of the law’ (TP 10.7). The general point is applicable beyond aristocratic polities, if we ignore the specific patrician content which is separable from the general technique: wrapping one’s body in certain colours, shapes, patterns, and styles allows one to inhabit or embody a style and marks one out in ways which can have long-lasting social-affective results.

A few general remarks on the above points can now be made. First, putting this in context of another political topic, it is important to note that Spinoza does not establish a split between civil society and the political sphere, nor a dichotomy between private and public life. Despite this paper’s emphasis on the difference between aesthetically-bound “social” groups and legally-bound “political” groups, Spinoza analyses the two alongside each other. That is, laws are one mode of securing a group and extra-legal means are another mode; their real differences make one better suited than another for specific situations, but for him, no absolute demarcation separates law from other ways of shaping the people. Law and practices have similarities worth underscoring: they both cause group affects, lead to reciprocal imitation of affects, modify the group’s habits slowly over time, and are necessary for any group. Though this paper separates out certain differences (i.e. law’s central reliance on fear contrasted with the arts’ use of multiple joyful affects, and law’s obligatory modification of the whole nation’s affects contrasted with the optional aesthetic modifications of a smaller group) in order to emphasize the most distinctive and beneficial aspects of aesthetic group formation, laws just as much as customs work on desires through affective mechanisms, give shape to a people, and (as affect-driven) carry certain risks and certain benefits. Rather than assuming or establishing a social/political division, Spinoza’s analysis of affects acknowledges that both laws and customs shape us as individuals and in groups, and often they do so in similar fashions. While one typically relies more on love and the other tends toward employing fear, for instance, that difference can be understood as a general tendency of, or a quantitative variance between, various techniques at the same social-political level, rather than as an essential, qualitative division between different spheres.

Second, Spinoza’s example of aristocratic clothing and marks of distinction could be productively linked to Aristotle’s virtue ethics, the republican political tradition, or Foucault’s ethical aesthetics of existence, which would illuminate the specifically ethical dimensions of these social-aesthetic practices. Virtues of a specific *ethos*, the good life, or a beautiful form of subjectivity, are developed over time through specific practices. To change those practices will lead to changed virtues, and to abandon the practices altogether would weaken whichever virtues or localized modes of living the prior practices engendered. Customary patterns can emerge which give a relative consistency to a group and allow individuals to flourish ethically by engaging in the group’s way of life—but one can only flourish if the new way of life would be an improvement on one’s old way of life, and so a detailed ethical analysis would be needed to determine if this would be the case.

Third, a related point: practices may also support groups which are dangerous or harmful. While the paper below focusses on practices’ positive aspects, we must acknowledge the ambivalence of small-group bonding facilitated by aesthetic means. Criminal gangs from Mexico to Russia to Japan have distinctive tattooing practices; Neo-Nazi groups with paramilitary and separatist aims have distinct styles of dress; violent football hooligans have chants for their side; and in Spinoza’s analysis, the ancient Hebrews’ rituals simultaneously produced in-group devotion and a most intense hatred of outsiders. By no means are aesthetic practices which bind groups entirely innocent in every case. However, even harmful groups such as these serve to reinforce how widespread aesthetically affective practices are for group formation. Further, the specificity of the problems with each of these groups is not an inherent feature of the general process of aesthetically-produced group love and imitation. Instead, such groups employ that process for other, violent, non-artistic ends. Fear, on the other hand, is inherently problematic for Spinoza, while groups bound exclusively through the arts (as means and end, rather than violent groups’ use of aesthetic affects for non-aesthetic ends) rarely have recourse to fear or violence, relying instead on love and joy.

# CEREMONIES AND RITUALS

Before pulling out important details of the chapter devoted to ceremonies, I will now summarize its general contours. Much like the *Ethics*, the chapter on ceremonies in the *Theological-Political Treatise* states that society ‘is extremely useful… for acquiring many advantages of life’, including cultural products such as ‘the [mechanical] arts and sciences’, but these benefits require ‘mutual assistance’ (TTP 5.7). However, mutual assistance is not easily forthcoming, because people are not ‘so constituted by nature’ that they typically follow reason. Thus, an artificial constitution of our nature is required: compulsion, i.e. laws backed by fear (TTP 5.8). However, fear alone is not a steady social support, since it also stirs up hatred of those feared (TTP. 5.9). Moses understood this general truth, and further, he understood the specific ‘character’ of his people. On the one hand, they were ‘obstinate’ (i.e. they rebelled against any coercion by fear); on the other hand, since they were ‘down-trodden by the miseries of slavery’, ‘they were not fit in any way to make laws wisely or organize a government in a collegial manner’ (TTP 5.10). On Spinoza’s terms, this means they were not unified into a people in any way—they were effectively in a state of nature, individuals without significant compatible desires. Thus Moses sought to ‘encourage’ them by means in addition to ‘force alone’ (TTP 5.10).

Moses thus had to create a new people from nothing. ‘This is why Moses… introduced religion into the commonwealth, so that the people would do their duty more from devotion than from fear’ (TTP. 5.11). The examples Spinoza gives of this religion include ritual prescriptions regarding oft-repeated physical activities (‘to plough or sow or reap’), further modifications of their bodies (to ‘eat or dress or shave their heads or beards’), visual and tactile symbols (to have ‘certain symbols on their doorposts, in their hands and between their eyes’), and even when they would ‘rejoice’ –all had a ritualized consistency visible on the bodies of oneself as well as others, serving to ‘remind them continually of their obedience’ or duty to the entire social body (TTP 5.11). These rituals were effective because they were distinctive to this unique community, appropriate at that exact time in their history—they are neither required of others nor would they be beneficial for others (TTP 5.12-13) so they are not universally required.

Chapter 17 extends these themes. ‘Thus the love of the Hebrews for their country was not simple love but piety, which... was so nourished and inflamed by daily worship that it must have become second nature. For their daily worship was not only completely different (which made them altogether unique and utterly distinct from others)’ but when combined with their particular laws, loves, and hates, their ‘unique system of morals and worship… served to harden the minds of the Hebrews in bearing all things with singular constancy and courage’ (TTP 17.23-24). I would like to highlight that ceremonial affective repetition created a group, then became second nature, and especially that it supported distinctive virtues or powers. With an entirely different set of ritualized affects, relatively consistent within a specific style of art, what other virtues might become second nature?

Spinoza lists other factors that strengthened the Hebrews, including a burning hatred for all of their neighbouring countries which supported them in times of war.‘Other significant factors helped… obviate civil wars and remove causes of conflict… But the most potent factor was the strong discipline of obedience in which they were brought up’ (TTP 17.25), and at this point Spinoza points the reader back to the rituals surrounding ploughing, sowing, and reaping of chapter 5. Spinoza refers to ceremonies repeatedly when he accounts for the strength of this unique people, and here even calls it the most potent factor. If we can decouple that potency from hate and fear, and link it to joy, devotion, and cheerfulness, while retaining its ability to implant unique new powers in a group—as art can do—we gain all the affective potencies of religious ceremonies and law, without their sad shortcomings. Importantly, one does not need significant similarity amongst individuals from the start: the ‘rebelliousness’ and statelessness of the post-slavery Hebrews shows exactly this. Spinoza shows us the genetic causes of becoming, for the first time, an affectively united group: not how one recognizes already like-minded people, but how we come to be ‘as if of one mind’ (TP 6.1).

Ritual does not consist only of regulated actions, for the actions are consistently charged with unmistakable aesthetic resonance: the quiet but weighty sound of dozens of bodies simultaneously moving to initiate and to end prayer, music accompanied by participants singing in unison, attendant sensations like the scent of incense, a distinctive pattern of clothing for congregants and another for officiants, congregant greetings such as ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ to break down distancing social roles (to increase imitation of affects). All of this is typical of religious ritual—and all have equivalents found in various forms of aesthetic festivals and participatory art. The reader can no doubt proliferate her own examples. The crowd pressing to the front as one when the musicians take the stage, audience sing-alongs or call-and-response, lights and other visuals, costumes for performers and widely shared fashions of dress amongst the audience, alcohol to break down inhibitions (to increase imitation of affects).

In music performance, in theatre, and performance art (though to a significantly lesser extent in most visual or literary arts), many of these affective techniques are simultaneously experienced by the crowd, rendering imitation of affects instant and comprehensive. Architecture, especially in major thoroughfares, guides the bodies of many people at once, and may be experience as repeatedly as the daily commute. Murals similarly combine simultaneity of exposure with repetition. Songs, especially well-known songs such as national anthems, allow the masses to easily sing along, in a literal imitation of all other singers and embodiment of the song. All of this is prevalent in native or local folk music and in certain strains of popular music (i.e. non-‘high art’ forms of ‘vernacular’ music), especially the prevalence of similar aesthetic markers and group affect. Regional and ethnic groups commonly combine dance, food, costume, music, and public spaces in rituals and seasonal celebrations. I think it is no coincidence that musical styles, whether traditions of an ethnic group or a new teenage fad, are commonly linked with identity. Musical forms which are ‘popular,’ can be sung along to, involve public performance, and are accompanied by visuals such as dress, are fundamental to forging (not discovering) an identity.

# FESTIVALS: WONDER, DEVOTION, CHEERFULNESS

We have already seen that group rituals enhance the imitation of affects, are crucial for bringing a group together, produce new virtues, and that this occurs also in particular modes of publicly performed art. Now we advance to specific affects (devotion and cheerfulness) produced in what Spinoza calls the ‘festival’, the singularity of which causes wonder. Finally, we note that group aesthetic experience also produces these joyful affects.

Laws, through fear, make a docile body, which is politically necessary if we are to *all* get along *generally*. But—if *some* of us are going to get along in more *specific* ways—more is needed. Acting from fear alone prevents one from reaching one’s full power or strength. Instead of fear, greater power comes from acting from ‘a virtue which comes from strength of mind’ (TP 5.4). Affects of fear are ‘signs of a mind lacking in power’ (4p47) and lead to reduced striving in a sad timidity. A community based only on fear ‘depends on the sluggish spirit of its subjects who are led like sheep to learn simply to be slaves [and] can more properly be called a desert than a commonwealth,’ says Spinoza in a paraphrase of Tacitus. Joyful affect, not only fearful sadness, can be produced at a social scale: ‘the former seems to engage in living, the latter simply to avoid death’ (TP 5.6).

Beyond the general power of ritual to produce widely shared affects, Spinoza singles out a specific kind of ritual as extremely powerful and beneficial: the festival. Chapter 17 of the TTP gives a short description of festivals’ role in strengthening the Ancient Hebrews, the full import of which will become clear when linked to passages of the *Ethics*. ‘Another key factor seems to have been that at certain times of the year they were under obligation to devote themselves to leisure and *cheerfulness* [*laetitiae*]…. when *honest enjoyment* and feasting were not so much allowed as prescribed… Nothing *captivates men’s minds more effectively* than the cheerfulness arising from *devotion*, i.e., from love and *wonder* together (TTP 17.25; emphases added). All this sounds quite pleasant—but it is more than that, as an analysis of the technical terms used here (cheerfulness, honest enjoyment, captivates minds effectively, devotion, and wonder) will show. First, effectively captivating minds is opposed to fear’s sluggish lack of power. Fear always vacillates between multiple conflicting desires: fear and hope, or fear of punishment for doing something and a desire to do that very thing (3p17Sch, 3p18, 3DefAff XIII, TTP 17.1-4). However, when one desires from love, there is not necessarily vacillation: one could be moved only from ‘strength of mind’ (TP 5.4) instead of divided desires, acting ‘willingly’ (TP 10.7) rather than grudgingly (see also 3p59 and 5p10).

Wonder is our reaction to something unexpected, something novel, something truly striking. Spinoza defines singular wonder in opposition to the experience of a common object.

As soon as we imagine an object we have seen with others, we shall immediately recollect the others… And the reasoning is the same concerning the object we imagine to have nothing but what is common to many things…. But when we suppose that we imagine in an object something singular, which we have never seen before… when the Mind considers that object,… it is determined to consider only that… This… is called Wonder’ (3p52 and 3p52Sch).

That is, the association of ideas we previously discussed is arrested in wonder: one is captivated or fascinated solely by this object. Typically, wonder is not ideal—one cannot think adequately of the order and connection of things if one wonders at a single thing. However, the focus and attention that wonder places on the object will heighten one’s experience of it by blotting out all other potentially distracting ideas.

Spinoza argues that, in the abstract, ideas would always be felt as if they were present, even if they were of hypothetical or past events (3p18). To think an idea is to affirm it, purely and vividly. However, in the concrete, this rarely happens: with most thoughts, an image of a desired hypothetical future calls up other ideas which remind us that this desire is not yet realized and may never be. This checks any desires associated with that thing, rendering them less powerful (3p18Sch). However, in wonder, other ideas are, by definition, excluded. Ideas that would highlight that an image is hypothetical, fictional, or that it happened long ago, are excluded as one focusses only on the wondrous object. Desires are felt vividly, and joys are affirmed as fully real and fully present. All one’s joy is concentrated into this present moment. Art often captivates us in this way: time’s passing is ignored, we are indifferent to the unreality of it, the impossibility of the desires it evokes simply does not occur in our minds.

Further, any joys that the wondrous thing causes will cause a love all the more intense: ‘if we wonder at… a man we love, the Love will thereby (by P12) be greater and this Love joined to Wonder, or veneration, we call Devotion’ (3p52Sch). Schematically, if one feels joy and imagines it has two causes, one loves each one of them half as much as the joy felt. That same joy attributed to a typical single thing would already be loved twice as much. However, due to the association of ideas, any typical thing immediately makes me think of other, similar things, and my love begins to be dispersed across all of them. The love of a singular object of wonder, though, does not disperse to any other things. Finally, typical ideas, even if joyful, can be associated with another idea of sadness (3p17); wonder again blocks this type of association. If one feels joy and love toward a wondrous spectacle, one’s mind is blocked from recalling sad ideas. One’s love is then unmixed with pain and is more intense: hence, this love warrants the special name of ‘devotion.’ Desires prompted by joy contribute to ‘strength of character’ (3p59Sch) and increase one’s power of acting.

No surprise, then, that devotion leads to worship or to becoming a fan (which is short for ‘fanatic’) of a style of art which one sees as notably distinct from others’ styles and which causes one the greatest joy. Art in general grabs the attention, and some aesthetic events grab it so tightly that they are experienced as singular, producing affects of intense devotion. The Ancient Hebrew festivals were rare days of leisure, which set workaday concerns out of the mind, and combined spectacles of colour, motion, sound, and massive throngs of people: a singular spectacle that would necessarily evoke wonder. Today, festivals live on, often justified aesthetically rather than religiously, retaining the holiday atmosphere, the spectacle, the costuming, and a rare bodily amalgamation of food, sound, people, costume, all of which often occurs in a unique location. Notably, none of this requires a hermeneutics focussed on the meaning of one great piece of high culture: instead, variety and intensity of affect are the keys.

I must admit that Spinoza is often ambivalent towards wonder and devotion, much as he is wary of religious ceremonies in general. In religion and politics, wonder is often used to support superstition through miracles (Appx1), establish pseudo-prophets (TTP Preface), or cow a populace through dread of the tremendous violence of their leader (3p52Sch). Other examples of Spinoza’s ambivalence toward wonder can be found throughout the TTP; it should not surprise the reader that each involves aesthetic events. Ritual sacrifices can increase devotion (TTP 5.5), and in battle the ark of the covenant, i.e. the ‘king virtually present’ before the Hebrew army, caused them to ‘fight with all their strength’ (TTP 17.13). Religious pomp is effective for obedience, but it tends toward deception and reduced freedom (TTP 17.6). Triumphal processions and statues for heroes are warned against because, while they do spur people on to glory, they can also lead to jealousy if given out to the undeserving (TP 10.8). Narratives about ‘strange and unexpected events’ (which evoke wonder) capture the masses’ attention, but often this distracts them from the narratives’ ‘salutary’ messages (TTP 5.18-19). Even in his ambivalence, each of these instances reveals the power of aesthetic objects to work up powerful affects through wonder—and in the festival, art is able to harness the positive aspects of imitation of affects, institutionalized repetition, and wonder, without their risks.

This last example reveals a criterion of ethical-aesthetic judgment, as well. Judging cultural products by their fruits, any ‘narrative’, whether from the ‘Bible… Koran or the dramatic plays of the poets’, is worthless if it does not lead to good works (love of the neighbour), while if it assists any individual in ‘amending his life’ then it is valuable (TTP 5.19). Any means to group cohesion—whether reason for the rare wise, fear for the general political body, affects other than fear for some smaller groups—is generally fruitful. However, some works of art are better than others. Spinoza rejects common aesthetic criteria such as beauty, order, perfection, or harmony (see *Ethics*, Appendix to Part 1), but offers here another standard by which to evaluate art: whether it is useful in terms of improving one’s life. ‘It is due to the salutary opinions that follow from them that [some] narratives… are superior to others’ (TTP 5.19). We should think of our art consumption as a practice of living, as an ethics of self-improvement. Discussions of art should cover not only individual pieces’ ‘artistic merit’ but also give due consideration to whether a style or genre fosters positive affects in oneself and those around oneself. The festival, Spinoza says, is especially worthwhile since it is especially good at producing positive affects.

Festivals today are typically paired with hedonist excess, but that is not essential to the festival. By definition the festival carries the mark of rarity and spectacle which renders it wondrous. Excess is excluded from the Spinozist festival, and from the pleasures of art in general, through the concept of cheerfulness. Love and desire, Spinoza says, can be bad if they are excessive (4p44): they are excessive or imbalanced whenever they affect one part of our body or mind so greatly that others are diminished. That is, a single part of oneself is attended to while one neglects other parts and their powers, weakening one’s total power. Cheerfulness (*hilaritas*), on the other hand, is defined as a joy in which all of one’s parts are proportionally benefitted (‘*Hilaritas… est laetitia, quae quatenus ad corpus refertur, in hoc consistit, quod corporis omnes partes pariter sint affectae*’, 4p42), and so it is always good and can never be bad. Pleasure itself is not directly bad: its risk of badness only comes indirectly through excessive imbalance, rather than through pleasure as such. Cheerfulness consists in ‘pure joys’ (4p45), the ‘honest enjoyments’ (TTP 17.25) the religious festival enjoined.

As Spinoza says,

laughter and joking are pure joy. And so, provided they are not excessive, they are good through themselves… Nothing forbids our pleasure except a savage and sad superstition… It is the part of the wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind… For the human Body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole Body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the Mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things (4p45Sch).

This passage fits, in each detail, with the aesthetics developed from the festival of the TTP: variety empowers our many parts without excess and all pains are absent.Returning to the festival passage quoted above, we see the emphasis on variety linked to devotion and cheer. Nothing, he says, ‘is more effective than this for swaying men’s minds. Nothing captivates minds more effectively than the cheerfulness arising from devotion, i.e., from love and wonder together. They were unlikely to become bored with it all through familiarity, as the worship reserved for festival days was exceptional and varied’ (TTP 17.25). Paralleling claims in the *Ethics*—but in the *Theological-Political Treatise* explicitly given a positive value and applied to group aesthetic affects—the festival’s wonder (lack of familiarity) and cheer (overall pleasure caused by many different objects and thus not localized in one part) are the very heights of empowering affects. Not all art has this effect, but, all of these points are found in participatory, multi-media, or performance-based arts: a mass spectacle which involves variety, pleasure, and many other people (whose affects are imitated and intensified), while blocking temporarily other sad ideas, avoiding impotently vacillating fear, and powerfully determining one to act. In these respects, the aesthetic festival is a wondrous path to cheerfulness and positive social affects.

1. An earlier version of this research was presented in 2016 and subsequently has been published. The themes of the two papers are now quite different: the older paper focussed on art’s role in preserving health and preventing melancholy and compared prophetic imagination to that of artists. I mention this not to draw attention to my other work but to acknowledge this essay’s genesis. Christopher Davidson, ‘An Affective Aesthetics in Spinoza and Its Political Implications,’ in *The Concept of Affectivity in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Gàbor Boros, Judit Szalai, and Olivér István Tóth, Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University Press, 2017 (185-206). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. References to the *Ethics* follow this convention: 2p18Sch refers to the scholium to proposition 18 in Part 2. The *Theological-Political Treatise* is abbreviated as TTP and cited by chapter and section, e.g. TTP 3.13 is chapter 3, section 13. Similarly, the *Political Treatise* is abbreviated as TP, with TP 5.10 referring to section 10 of the fifth chapter. Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Volume I, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Benedict Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, ed. Steven Barbone and Lee Rice, trans. Samuel Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Benedict Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)