

## 14. Born in Bondage: Slavery, Freedom, and Enlightenment in Spinoza

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**Abstract:** This chapter considers the fact that Benedict de Spinoza does not begin with the standard Enlightenment premise that all human beings are born free and equal. By maintaining that we are all born in bondage, Spinoza treats freedom as a fragile social accomplishment rather than an inalienable right. Nevertheless, by universalising bondage and considering right in terms of power, Spinoza's philosophy offers avenues for claiming freedoms that differ from the standard model. This chapter concludes by reflecting on various interpretive efforts to think with Spinoza about resistance to oppression, domination, and colonial slavery.

**Keywords:** Spinoza; freedom; slavery; bondage; Enlightenment; colonialism

### Introduction

It was commonplace amongst Enlightenment thinkers to recognise freedom as a universal attribute of human beings and, at the same time, to accept or ignore the reality of slavery. For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau opens his famous *Du contrat social* (1762) with the declaration that 'man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains', but he inveighs against moral and political rather than chattel slavery (Rousseau 1997, 41). For Rousseau, like Descartes, the natural freedom of human beings consists of our given ability to exercise our wills, to act in contradiction to our impulses and passions. For them, mechanical, physical laws – including the mechanical, physical laws of our own bodily processes – do not constrain our volition. Therefore, we can become independent legislators of our own wills, responsible for ourselves, and co-authors of the laws by

which we live.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, people are everywhere ‘enslaved’ to custom, adapting themselves to the expectations of others, and thereby increasingly alienated from their autochthonous desires. Social and political dependence so habituates us to the demands, norms, and requirements of others that, Rousseau fears, natural freedom ceases to animate and attract us. ‘Slaves lose everything in their chains, even the desire of escaping from them: they love their servitude, as the comrades of Ulysses loved their brutish condition’ (Rousseau 1997, 43). Rousseau’s criticism of moral subservience to custom and his contempt for submission to tyrants was uncompromising. Yet, he commits not a word against the colonial slavery of Africans.<sup>2</sup> We are familiar with this widespread paradox of Enlightenment thought, which ‘upholds slavery even as it condemns it, maintains servitude even as it ridicules it, extols submissiveness yet glorifies revolt, crushes liberty at the same time as it celebrates it’ (Sala-Molins 2006, 30).

What happens, however, when the premise changes? What does the promise of universal freedom look like if we affirm, with Spinoza, that we are all born into bondage? What if freedom is fragile, a ‘difficult and rare’ accomplishment rather than a given feature of human nature? Louis Sala-Molins (2006, 30), in his powerful critique of the French Enlightenment, suggests that, despite its murderous neglect of enslaved African people, the commitment to universal freedom and equality marks a decisive step beyond Spinoza. According to the ancient anthropological hierarchies, some do not belong to themselves by nature and are thus born slaves (Aristotle 2013, 1.1254a14–16). Descartes (1985) breaks from this view, maintaining that all souls share the same power of free will and an equal capacity for self-mastery.<sup>3</sup> For Sala-Molins (2006, 53), Enlightenment thinkers shrank from the practical implications of their own principles, which were only realised when Toussaint and Dessalines led their fellow enslaved Africans in a revolt to claim their birth right. Nevertheless, the *philosophes* provided a necessary alternative to Spinoza’s anthropology of the passions, which, for Sala-Molins (2006, 30), is too beholden to the ancient conviction that people enjoy only ‘gradations’ of self-determination. Freedom and equality,

1 Rousseau’s notion of freedom is notoriously complex. I refer to him only for illustrative purposes. For further reading, see McDonald and Hoffman (2010); and Neuhouser (1993, 2011).

2 For a provocative effort to bring his thinking to bear on chattel slavery, see Klausen (2014).

3 Descartes’ doctrine of free will is a common feature of various Enlightenment doctrines, developed differently in the philosophies of, for example, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel. See his fourth *Meditation* (Descartes 1985, vol. 2). He is clear in the *Passions of the Soul* that anyone can, through habituation, arrive at perfect self-mastery (Descartes 1985, vol. 1, article 50).

in Spinoza, are not absolute, unadulterated, given properties of the human being. They are precarious and reversible social accomplishments that come only in degrees. The inspiring declarations of the Enlightenment insist that we are 'born free', but Spinoza roots his ethical and political philosophy in the reality of profound natural dependency: we are born 'capable of very few things, and very heavily dependent on external causes, [...] conscious of almost nothing of [ourselves], of God, or of things' (E5p39s).<sup>4</sup>

Several interpreters, including myself, have disagreed with Sala-Molin's assessment, arguing that the ostensible liability of Spinoza's ethical and political thought – the fact that freedom and equality are not universal, identical, and metaphysically guaranteed in all humans – is its strength (Gatens 1996; Montag 1999; Sharp 2011). Spinoza, in contrast to Rousseau, does not commit himself exclusively to democratic or popular rule. Likewise, he (arguably) offers a weak metaphysical basis for universal rights and freedoms. Yet, numerous thinkers have found resources in his context- and power-sensitive analyses, his demanding call for social transformation, and his 'revolutionary' approach to collective power (despite Spinoza's own caution with respect to revolutionary practice). Spinoza's understandings of bondage and freedom have been mobilised and celebrated by thinkers to understand a range of phenomena, including (but by no means limited to) capitalist domination (Althusser and Balibar 1975; Lordon 2014); mass fascism (Deleuze and Guattari 1977); globalisation (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004, 2009); feminist concepts of liberatory embodiment (Gatens 1996); and the climate crisis (Ruddick 2020). Freedom, for Spinoza, is the power to think and act in a way that preserves and enhances our being. 'Right' is not grounded in an aspect of the human being that calls for respect. Rather, right is coextensive with power (*TTP*, 16.1–5; *TP*, 2.3–4).<sup>5</sup> Our right, as an expression of our particular power, is highly variable, contingent on circumstances, and not equally enjoyed by all people. Yet it is precisely because freedom and equality are not given properties of human nature that must be recognised and enshrined in 'the rights of man' that they need to be established, achieved, and sustained through institutions and ways of life.

Although he does not share the metaphysical view of human freedom of many Enlightenment thinkers, Spinoza shares their silence with respect to chattel slavery. Despite his antithetical starting point, and despite his

4 Citations of Spinoza's *Ethics* will be from Spinoza (1985), and use standard notation (E = *Ethics*; followed by part number; p = proposition; s = scholium; etc.).

5 Citations of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (*TTP*) and *Political Treatise* (*TP*) are all from Spinoza (2016). They refer to the chapter number, followed by the paragraph.

criticism of ethical and political servitude, Spinoza, like Rousseau, had nothing to say about those human beings subject to chattel slavery. His radical interpreters who liberally evoke the language and imagery of slavery (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1997; Lordon 2014) do not draw upon Spinoza to grapple with the realities of colonial slavery, even as they do not hesitate to bring Spinoza's thinking to bear on problems quite remote from his own concerns.<sup>6</sup> If Sala-Molins was too quick to dismiss Spinoza's ethical and political thought, we would be well-served to consider forms of servitude beyond subjection to superstition, charismatic authority, or the imperatives of capitalist production. Why have those who find radical resources in Spinoza's account of human bondage to explore issues of more recent concern largely declined to reflect upon the violence of colonial slavery? Admittedly, when Spinoza is mostly silent on such questions, they are not easily posed. I will not arrive at answering these questions here, although I am undertaking this (daunting) task elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Here, I will restrict myself to exploring his notion of bondage and to identifying some interpretive approaches that may be useful for reading Spinoza in light of colonialism and slavery, thereby acknowledging 'the facts of power' that 'informed and enabled' thinking in the seventeenth-century Netherlands (Said 1993, 195).

### *De Servitude Humana*

Best known for advocating the freedom to philosophise and the liberty to develop and communicate one's ideas independent of dogma, tradition, and political authority, Spinoza ostensibly fits into an understanding of Enlightenment that relies on our natural reason, universal amongst human beings, to arrive at true beliefs.<sup>8</sup> *Sapere aude!* Yet, on Spinoza's account, we do not equally or easily enjoy intellectual independence. If most of us struggle to conform our minds to the demands of authority and custom, this is not typically a mark of rationality and integrity on Spinoza's account. Rather, we tend to go our own way by virtue of idiosyncratic passion. Neither the state nor religion can hope to master our minds, for the simple reason that we are not masters of our own minds (Steinberg 2010). The state should not try to restrict and command our thinking, because, even if we wanted to, we could not think as we are commanded (*TTP*, 20). For Spinoza, there is

6 For exceptions, see Ford (2017), Goetschel (2016), and Taylor (2021).

7 I am completing a manuscript on Spinoza and slavery.

8 On Spinoza's notion of freedom to philosophise, see Laerke (2021).

nothing unknowable in principle. Mystery, miracles, and the occult have no place in his philosophy. Likewise, all human minds – indeed, all minds – include the foundations of reason (the common notions; E2p38–p40). However, the consistent exercise of reason, such that we might live a life guided by it, is something for which only few of us can hope, with practice and luck, to enjoy in maturity. Moreover, rationality and independence remain precarious and vulnerable to reversals of fortune. In a well-ordered, flourishing commonwealth, virtue, the power to think and act from our natures, might be relatively widespread (*TP*, 5.2–3). However, we generally depend upon these external circumstances, largely outside of our power, to enjoy ethical freedom, understood as knowingly living in a way that empowers our minds and bodies. This is because each of us is a tiny part of nature, ‘always necessarily subject to passions’ (E4p4c), and thus ‘heavily dependent’ on the power of external things.

One strategy for refuting a picture of humanity as unequal and divided into those who can grow up to be free and those condemned to remain dependent is to insist, like Descartes, that, if we have minds at all, we have the same faculty for freedom and an identical potential to learn to use our freedom well (see *Discourse*, Descartes 1985, vol. 1). This view has the virtue of appreciating all human beings as capable of reason, naturally free, and worthy of respect. At the same time, a failure to learn to use our wills well and an inability to effectively command our passions and exercise our reason represents a moral failure, a weakness of the soul. Although he aspired to a scientific study of the passions *en physicien*, Spinoza suggests that Descartes’ analysis does not sufficiently depart from Stoic or theological views that understand human *pathos* in moralistic terms as disgraceful and contemptible. As long as there have been slavery and domination, ‘slavish’ susceptibility to passion has been considered a sign that someone (or entire groups) need to be controlled, mastered by another (Davis 1966).

Spinoza, however, universalises human servitude as the condition into which each of us is born, and which continues, by necessity, to contour our entire lives. Vice, for Spinoza, is not sin or deficiency. Vice is merely the lack of strength to do that which is most conducive to preserving and enhancing one’s mental and physical life (E4p18s). Virtue and freedom, in contrast, are nothing but the power to knowingly – rather than accidentally – do that which is most conducive to one’s mental and physical vitality (E4def8). Spinoza explains human vices – such as hatred, a desire for vengeance, or excessive ambition – as externally imposed and, therefore, as phenomena ‘to be imputed to the commonwealth’ (*TP*, 5.3). A widespread inability to act in accordance with one’s true advantage (vice) indicates that a commonwealth

has not alleviated our natural human bondage to fortune, to those passions that move one to 'do the worse', even if one sees the better (E4pref). Certainly, a civil order can be structured to systematically and harshly command subjects, or a portion thereof, in contradiction to their good. In this case, Spinoza will say that it imposes 'slavery' and should be called a 'desert rather than a commonwealth' (*TP*, 5.5). What is important for my purposes is that freedom or servitude must be explained, for Spinoza, by recourse to a wider constellation of causes. However, since we are 'always necessarily' determined by that wider constellation, we cannot – *pace* the Stoics and Descartes (as Spinoza interprets them) – hope to insulate ourselves from fortune or command our passions absolutely (E5pref). Susan James (2020) thus remarks that 'slavery is an inevitable part of human existence. The freedom that Spinoza recommends is not fully attainable, and the model of the good life that he holds out to us will always be offset by *servitus*' (139).

As finite beings that exist in and amongst others, we can never be causally independent. We exist and act by virtue of the powers of others. Our minds and bodies dwell within webs of causal relationships that we can never transcend (E1p28). We are parts of nature, determined by its laws, and thus our individual natures (essences, or powers) can never be the exclusive source of our thoughts, feelings, and actions (E4p4). For James (2020), 'there is something paradoxical and even sadistic about an image of the good life that will in practice always be at least in part a life of slavery' (139). Spinoza's account is only 'sadistic', however, if our servitude is something we should detest, condemn, and denounce. Certainly, Spinoza thinks that we strive, by nature, to increase our power to act, and thus to increase our freedom. And if we are dominated or suffer violence, we resist (Bove 1996; Matheron 2020, ch. 9). However, Spinoza's view is not as classical as James implies. Being compelled by forces beyond our control to do what disadvantages us is not disgraceful. Epictetus, the Stoic, highlights how humans, like caged animals, would rather die than accept slavery (Epictetus 1998, IV.1.27–28). Early modern republicans exhort those who regard themselves as free to repudiate domination, tyranny, slavery, and all forms of 'fawning' dependence (see Nyquist 2013). These views typically represent the suffering of slavery and subjection as shameful, feminine, and unbecoming of free persons. Spinoza's view, on my interpretation, does not advocate a masculine triumph over demeaning servitude.<sup>9</sup> Rather, servitude and dependence on external causes

9 His view is more complicated than I claim here, since he does repeatedly decry, for example, 'womanly compassion'. Especially when describing a phenomenon that distresses him, such as mass superstition or the abuse of political power, Spinoza violates his own commitment to considering affects with mathematical detachment.

are something no natural thing can possibly avoid. Dependency and external determination bear no disgrace, but are instead natural and inescapable.

Neither dependence nor passions are unequivocally harmful. External causes bring us into being, nourish us, sustain us, and enable us to grow and learn. Spinoza (1662), in his early *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, represents human beings as essentially, by definition, 'God's servants [*dienaars*] – indeed, his slaves [*slaven*]' (127). And 'our greatest perfection is to be such necessarily. For if we were left to ourselves, and so did not depend on God, there would be very little, or nothing, we could accomplish' (Spinoza 1985, 127). I suggest that we understand Spinoza's early embrace of the Biblical image of humanity as God's servants as an effort to deny the classical view of slavery to passions as a distinctively moral failure. His claim that we should understand our servitude to God as the source of our perfection and power appears when refuting Cartesian doxastic voluntarism. One of his earliest and most persistent philosophical commitments is his rejection of a metaphysical faculty of the will that allows us to suspend, affirm, or deny our mental representations (see Carriero 2015). Our minds necessarily affirm, be it weakly or more emphatically, all of their ideas, which are indistinguishable from their contents. To think anything, to represent something, is to 'affirm' or believe it to be the case. Such mental affirmations (P) can be displaced and overcome by ideas that exclude them ( $\sim$ P), but they cannot be entertained in an entirely neutral way. In other words, ideas and their contents have motive force, which may be amplified or depleted by other ideas (see Sharp 2011, ch. 2).

For many Enlightenment thinkers, free will is a necessity if we are to liberate ourselves from the authority of custom, tradition, and superstition. Spinoza, however, has a different intuition. He maintains that, without a robust appreciation of our limits, constraints, and lack of power, we cannot hope to know what we can and cannot do (E4p17s). By the time he wrote the *Ethics* (1677), Spinoza had a more ambivalent understanding of dependency than he does in the *Short Treatise*. Being 'in God' (nature) delivers us our power and perfection. Nevertheless, it is complicated to persist amongst those infinitely many others within God (nature). Since we are inevitably enabled and constrained by ambient others, we are also inevitably subject to passions, servitude, and fortune. Servitude becomes something to mitigate, resist, and transform. Yet, it is not something to 'bemoan' or from which to recoil in shame. It is not an index of a lesser nature, of belonging to another due to a defective power of reason. As one amongst infinitely many others, we are inevitably compelled by external forces, some of which are antagonistic to our well-being.

Passions name those changes in our power of acting of which we are only a partial cause (E3def3). By virtue of our finitude and our immersion within a vast constellation of causes, much of our experience is governed by the general laws of nature rather than by ‘the laws of our own nature’ – the particular striving by which each of us perseveres and endeavours to thrive. Spinoza describes the ‘dictates of reason’ as prudential guidance for acting in agreement with the laws of our own nature, for doing those things that preserve and enhance the powers of our minds and bodies (E4p18s). We often struggle to do so because we are determined externally in a haphazard way, according to the laws of nature in general rather than the laws of our particular natures. Furthermore, if we live in harsh circumstances, or if we are the target of violence or abuse, it becomes even more difficult to do what most nourishes the power of our minds and bodies. Even in the most advantageous circumstances, we are typically moved more by passion than by intellect.

Nevertheless, although we are always determined by causes of which we are ignorant, those causes may enable us to live, grow, learn, and develop virtue. For example, an infant can be called the cause of very few of her own thoughts and actions. The infant may influence the quality of her care with her gaze, smile, and cries, but her survival and well-being depend profoundly on the actions of others, along with the conditions of her environment. If, however, a newborn is well cared for, she will be externally determined in ways that support and enhance her nature. If she lives and grows at all, even if her care and social circumstances are poor, she is enabled to some degree by external causes, human and non-human, to persevere. If she were abandoned, or if her community suddenly lost access to potable water, she would not survive. Spinoza urges us to see that we are all more or less like children, profoundly dependent on external factors over which we have limited power. Even a heavily dependent newborn, however, is not necessarily ‘enslaved’ to fortune. A nursling is unfree because she does not knowingly do what is to her advantage. Nevertheless, hopefully, she desires milk and affection, which will enable her mind and body to grow.

### Servile Character(s)

There are, however, ambiguities in Spinoza’s account of servitude. He offers several examples of slavery to fortune, including depression, illness, and ecstasy. Similarly, he decries the harms of slavery to superstition, which can capture human hearts and drive people to sacrifice themselves to the



whims of charlatans and tyrants (*TTP*, pref). However, Spinoza reserves the highest expression of servitude for human bondage to pleasure: ‘the person who is drawn by his own pleasure, and can neither see nor do anything useful to himself, is *most* a slave. The only free person is the one who lives wholeheartedly according to the guidance of reason alone’ (*TTP*, 16.32, emphasis added). Here, Spinoza betrays the more classical sensibility informing James’s analysis. Excessive indulgence and unruly appetites are the mark of a ‘tyrannical soul’, led by *eros* rather than by *logos* (Plato 1968, Bk. IX). The identification of pleasure as the greatest source of servitude is a common feature of a rhetorical tradition that Mary Nyquist (2013), following Kurt Raaflaub, calls ‘anti-tyrannicism’. The tyrant who does as he pleases, indulges every lust without regard for the cost to others, and is wholly ignorant of any costs to himself, may be politically powerful, but he is not self-determined. This anti-tyranny tradition represents the tyrant as someone who respects only the law of self-gratification and is therefore the ‘real slave’, even though his social status is highest. Anti-tyranny discourse insists that someone who is advantaged materially and politically is often more servile, morally speaking, than the subjects he terrorises and deprives (see Paijmans, this volume). Albeit with a ring of falsity, exaggeration, and moralisation, this discourse is calculated to encourage collective indignation and inspire resistance to domination.

If we reflect on Spinoza’s critical reconstruction of freedom in the *Ethics*, we will notice that he targets those who equate the experience of being unconstrained with freedom. We may feel like the masters of our fates, but it is only because we are ignorant of the causes that move us to wanting and willing (Elapp). However, who feels like a master of his fate? It is not those whose lives are precarious and deprived, or those who live in constant fear of a tyrant, master, boss, or authorities. Spinoza’s objection to standard ideas of freedom is aimed, first and foremost, at those who boast of a liberty that they do not actually possess. It targets those who enjoy ample advantages, which they erroneously credit to their independent agency.

Those subject to political domination or to the whims of a master are typically well aware that external forces oppose their well-being. This does not mean that servants are *actually* freer than their masters, as thinkers of moral slavery like to argue. Rather, their consciousness is not characterised by the same kind of delusional freedom. Those who encounter few insuperable obstacles to their pursuit of pleasure, who experience nature as if it were organised in service to them, are ignorant of their natures and their true good. They are dangerous to themselves and to others, imagining they are free when they are, like a ship, tossed about by the waves on the sea.

By emphasising how unfree even the most powerful remain, Spinoza demonstrates how universal human servitude is. Everyone will benefit from looking to their circumstances, their causal environment, and trying to better understand the extent to which their affects encourage and impede the power of their minds and bodies. Those who are forced to work by masters, prison guards, or bosses are acutely aware of their constraints, although they may not grasp every element of the vast network of relationships that hold dominating power in place. With his universalist anthropology of the passions, Spinoza strives to show how vice, weakness, delusion, and ignorance are not confined only to the ‘vulgar’ – those with low social status. It is not only women, as the misogynist stereotype of Spinoza’s day suggests, who cannot hold their tongues: ‘Not even the wisest know how to keep quiet’ (*TTP*, 20.8). It is not only servants and the enslaved who deceive. Political order is typically arranged to hide its own operations (*TP*, 7.27) and punish those who speak their minds (*TTP*, 20.34). The result is a picture of humanity with a highly variable capacity to exercise virtue, or freedom. Because our constraints and circumstances vary so widely, so does our power. Variations in our power to think and act do not imply different natures, but rather different contexts which remain open to transformation, albeit with great effort and no guarantees.

Thus far, we have surveyed Spinoza’s view that we are all subject to fortune – those external forces that can move us to our disadvantage. On the standard model we are all, by nature, free and capable of learning to use our wills well and in accordance with rational judgments. We are free and equal by nature, but we may live in virtuous or slavish ways, depending upon factors such as our habits, education, or temperaments. With great practice and discipline, even the weakest souls, Descartes (1985, 348) promises in his *Passions of the Soul*, can enjoy the exercise of their freedom. However, for Spinoza, in the quest to perfect ourselves, self-discipline cannot get us very far:

It is impossible for man not to be a part of nature and not to follow the common order of nature. But if he lives among such individuals as agree with his nature, his power of acting will thereby be aided and encouraged. On the other hand, if he is among such as do not agree at all with his nature, he will hardly be able to accommodate himself to them without greatly changing himself. (E4app7)

We must, instead, change the commonwealth within which we live. Thus, as Steinberg (2018, ch. 5) argues, Spinoza’s response to fortune is one of

civic activism. Fortune and external circumstances can be transformed with great effort, which can be sustained through institutions sensitive to human nature 'as it really is', more often subject to bondage than guided by reason (*TP*, 1.1). Rulers and ruled alike are prone to short-sighted reactions and need support – and constraint – to establish conditions conducive to thinking and living well.

## Emancipations

Yet what about those – women, physical labourers, and servants – excluded from the *civitas*? And if the commonwealth is the source of both vice and virtue, both the threat and support to our intellectual and physical power, is it not unlikely, according to Spinoza's model, that the most oppressed will have the resources to produce a more empowering social and political order? Do not dominated minds and bodies reflect (and compose) rather than transcend their circumstances? Does this not imply that when domination is at its most severe, such as under conditions of slavery or colonialism, change is immensely difficult?

Spinoza scholars interested in the problem of political freedom and emancipation have taken at least three approaches to the problem of domination. The first is what Sandra Field (2020) calls the 'constitutionalist' approach.<sup>10</sup> This approach highlights Spinoza's view that it is not in the interest of sovereign power to exclude, oppress, and abuse its subjects. If a commonwealth or a dominant group relies upon the exploitation and coercion of an underclass and fails to deliver what human beings cannot help but desire, it undermines the very source of its sovereignty. Human psychology and passions conform to particular laws, such that 'there will never be a supreme power who can get everything to happen just as he wishes' (*TTP*, 17.2). A commonwealth will enjoy greater stability, widespread willingness to adhere to its laws and norms, and thus greater right and power to the extent that it appears 'useful' and 'good' to its constituents (*TTP*, 16.20). If the ministers of power censor the population harshly, try to compel them to love what they hate, or command them to believe what appears to them to be false, they will provoke civil disobedience, inspire martyrdom, and even risk mass rebellion (*TTP*, 20). Thus, the prudential and vital interests of the commonwealth and its constituents naturally converge. Sovereignty is more

10 Field (2020, 170–71) argues that most interpreters of his political philosophy do not acknowledge the extent to which Spinoza tolerates the 'nonideal endurance' of oppressive political orders.

stable and effective to the extent that constituents experience obedience to commands to be 'useful' or advantageous to themselves.

This approach focuses on the relationship between subjects and the law. Spinoza's best-known examples centre on direct, open criticism of the laws, which would presumably be carried out by citizens rather than by women, prisoners, or servants. This approach does not tend, therefore, to address those who are excluded, let alone radically so. However, if, as Spinoza insists, right is coextensive with power, questions of formal inclusion are in no way the sole basis of political power. Social and political order relies just as much on its workers, women, and servants to function on a daily basis as it does on its citizens, lawmakers, and consiglieres. Hence, Spinoza's exclusion of the vast majority is not only illiberal and unjust. As Warren Montag (1999) argues, 'from the point of view of Spinoza's philosophy as a whole, it is absurd' (84). If there is not mass obedience, as Étienne de la Boétie (2012) famously points out, there is no commonwealth. In Spinoza's political philosophy, therefore, there is no strong distinction between citizens and subjects with respect to the right, or power of the state. Whether they are democracies or tyrannies, 'the commonwealth's right is defined by the common power of the multitude' (*TP*, 3.9).

Thus, several radical critics develop a second approach to understanding domination and servitude in Spinoza. Following Alexandre Matheron (2020, ch. 9), they point to indignation as a kind of naturalised substitute for the right of revolution (Bove 1996; Del Lucchese 2009; Sharp 2013). Whereas a classic Enlightenment thinker such as Locke ([1662] 1997) enshrines the right to revolution against illegitimate states that do not fulfil their *raison d'être* (the protection of life, liberty, and estate), Spinoza does not. Some scholars condemn Spinoza's failure to endorse revolt against violent rulers who pillage, violate, and kill their subjects (e.g., Curley 1995). Some observe that Spinoza does not seem especially optimistic about the ability of the dominated and enslaved to produce a better way of life, and therefore does not endorse revolution (Rosenthal 2013). Yet, in the *Political Treatise*, as Matheron (2020, 131) points out, Spinoza implies that political order often – even typically – emerges *against* a shared source of oppression, arising from the indignant passion to avenge a common harm. Civil order, according to the *Political Treatise*, is not the consequence of a rational agreement amongst equals to mutually restrain themselves. It is often an alliance formed for self-defence against a common threat (Matheron 2020). Affects unite people: 'a common hope, or fear, or a common desire to avenge some harm' (*TP*, 6.1). When Spinoza declares that humans 'naturally agree' by virtue of affect rather than reason to form a commonwealth, as Matheron (2020, 126) observes, he refers his reader to a passage describing not the

establishment, but the dissolution of a commonwealth. Any constituted 'power or right is diminished to the extent that it provides many people with reasons to conspire against it' (*TP*, 3.9). The genesis of political order, in other words, has something in common with the Hebrews, united by hatred of their oppression to create a commonwealth of their own to care for one another and defend themselves against those who would harm or enslave them. Or, as Matheron (2020) observes, 'under a tyrannical regime, common fear can turn into indignation and lead to an overthrow of oppression' (127). This approach pushes the constitutional approach past the principles of prudential rationality to insist that the affects themselves, including the saddest and most destructive passions, engender both human servitude and the (perpetual) collective reconstitution of 'the right of the multitude'.

Neither approach, however, reflects expressly on racial domination or colonial slavery. The first approach highlights how domination is fragile insofar as constituents cannot grasp the utility of obedience. Thus, it is not in the medium- or long-term interest of those in power – indeed, it is irrational – to rule in a way that is disadvantageous, exploitative, and harmful to subjects. The second approach places a heavier emphasis on how the affects of the multitude constitute the substance of power and right. As a result, social and political life is 'regulated' and 'constituted' by collective indignation and resentment of the harms and evils that 'civilisation' necessarily entails (Matheron 2020, 131). The production and enforcement of laws, norms, and institutions always entail a degree of evil, repression, and harm. The internal threat of collective indignation and conspiracy for revenge, therefore, always remains. It does not require much imagination to see how this dynamic has played out historically, for example, in plantation economies where violently enslaved people outnumbered their oppressors ten to one. Yet, as Matheron (2020) notes, Spinoza's claim is 'ontological' rather than historical (130) – it follows from the laws of human nature and the logic of the passions. In my view, the ontological position that Matheron describes represents an attractive alternative anthropology to the no less metaphysical claims about human rights and the right of revolution, such as we find in Locke (1998), which are understood as inalienable features of human being as such.

A third approach links Spinoza's (1985) thinking and biography to *marronage*, specifically to Palmares, one of the most enduring Maroon communities in the Pernambuco of Brazil, which lasted almost the entire seventeenth century (1605–1694).<sup>11</sup> Spinoza never writes expressly of racial

11 'Marronage' names the practice of fleeing slavery and domination. Maroons are those people who escape and form autonomous communities of refuge and mutual defense against

slavery. However, in a much discussed letter, Spinoza describes an experience of waking from a dream and being unable to shake the image of 'a certain black, scabby Brazilian' (Spinoza 1985, letter 17).<sup>12</sup> Remembering this dream from the previous winter, he describes how this apparition 'remained vividly before my eyes as if the things had been true' (Spinoza 1985, 353). He endeavoured, he writes, to divert himself from this image by training his eyes on familiar objects in his room, but 'the same image of the same Black man appeared to me with the same vividness, alternately, until it gradually disappeared from my visual field' (Spinoza 1985, 353). Several commentators connect the imagery from this dream to the expulsion of the Dutch from Brazil ten years earlier, carried out partly by Black soldiers, Maroons, and the enslaved (Feuer 1957; Ford 2017; Montag 1999, 88). However we interpret the dream, it serves as an obscure index of the fact that Spinoza could not have been ignorant of colonial slavery in Brazil.

Anyone in the Talmud Torah community in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, such as Spinoza and his family, would be more or less aware of colonial slavery, since the congregation had substantial interests in Brazil and the Caribbean (Wiznitzer 1960). The community funded and otherwise encouraged many of their members, both entrepreneurs and the impoverished (and orphaned), to establish their presence and participate in the plantation economy. Two of the four rabbis who served the Amsterdam Sephardim had strong connections to Brazil. Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca went to Pernambuco in 1641 to serve the congregation's spiritual and economic needs. Rabbi Aboab was forced by the reconquest to return to Amsterdam, which he did in time to preside over Spinoza's excommunication in 1656. Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, the junior rabbi employed by Talmud Torah at the time, had hoped to be assigned to Brazil instead of Aboab. When this failed to materialise, he sent his entrepreneurial brother Ephraim Soiero to join his brother-in-law in Brazil in pursuit of profits to support his intellectual vocation (Nadler 2018, 101). Menasseh dedicated one of his books to the directors of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), praised the dispersal of the Jews across the globe, and inspired others to understand colonial settlement as part of Jewish destiny (Watson 2014, 198). Spinoza's direct concern for the displaced settlers is documented in a charity contribution he made to the Jewish poor from Brazil (Yovel 1989, 77).

re-capture and enslavement. For an analysis of the kind of freedom that this historical practice exemplifies, see Neil Roberts (2015).

12 For a detailed discussion of this letter, see chapter 15 in this volume.

Warren Montag (1999) suggests that the Black Brazilian haunts Spinoza precisely because he both identifies with *and* excludes the outcasts and oppressed from his political thought. Spinoza was banned from his natal community, deemed a heretic to whose name 'the Jew' was nevertheless often affixed, forced to exercise extreme caution in all of his dealings, and treated as a threat to social and political stability for most of his life. Spinoza's philosophy upholds the right of the state to exclude most of the population. Yet, he shared a 'kinship with this outcast', the Black Maroon who invented and defended at all costs a community beyond – but only just barely and only precariously – the reach of domination (Montag 1999, 88). James Ford (2017) takes Spinoza beyond his own words, bypassing his political equivocations, to declare that the joyful sociality that his ethics and politics prescribes is precisely what *marronage* makes possible against all odds. Not without cost, and not without incalculable loss, Maroons make social life and establish erotic bonds, driving out slavery and social death (Ford 2017). The third approach ceases thinking only *about* Spinoza and comes to think *with* him, and perhaps even *against* him. It involves an act of imagination that brings the colonial context in which his philosophy was composed into the foreground and presses his ideas into the service of thinking about how enslaved people created something new, something unauthorised, from 'a common hope, or fear, or a common desire to avenge some harm' (*TP*, 6.1).

## Conclusion

The imaginative hermeneutics that align Spinoza with Maroon thought may let Spinoza off the hook for failing to address chattel slavery too easily. Interpretation can involve an element of wish fulfilment, yet there is no interpretation without some creativity. We do not simply uncover what is already there, but let the propositions, demonstrations, and narratives affect and move us. Even if it remains all too relevant today, readers of Spinoza need to stop imagining freedom and slavery primarily or exclusively within the framework of free-thinking and religious persecution. In the seventeenth century, human bondage did not consist exclusively in suffering from superstition, or in being a subject of corrupt monarchy. It consisted in being enslaved, trafficked, and forced to labour in the colonies. Domination was not only the suppression of the freedom to philosophise; it was also kidnapping African children, exposing them to abuse, and compelling them to work in Dutch households. It was the plantation economy upon which

several religious minorities relied to secure their relative autonomy from the Inquisition and other forms of interference. In other words, bringing Spinoza's thought to bear on the reality of colonialism and slavery would not introduce anything foreign to it. Even if Spinoza was silent on the matter, we need not remain so.

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