

Family Quarrels and Mental Harmony
Spinoza's Oikos–Polis Analogy

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In chapter 6, paragraph 4, of his *Political Treatise* Spinoza invokes the traditional analogy between the *oikos* and the *polis*. This has been overlooked by commentators, but careful attention to it reveals a number of interesting features of Spinoza's political theory. Spinoza aims in this paragraph to challenge the perception that absolute monarchy offers greater respite from the intolerable anxiety of the state of nature than does democracy. He acknowledges that people associate monarchical rule with peace and stability, but urges them to consider that such a condition deforms its subjects. Unchallenged monarchy may be credited with a certain ostensible order, "but if slavery, barbarism, and desolation are to be called peace, there can be nothing more wretched for mankind than peace."¹ This is all familiar to friends of Spinoza, but what kind of democracy is an alternative to those monarchies that tend toward despotism? It is a form of association, he suggests, that resembles a bitterly quarrelsome but nevertheless virtuous family. With such a suggestion, he admits that democratic or popular rule is typically turbulent and disorderly, but urges his reader to view contentions and disputes as a kind of salutary discord that preserves rather than threatens the vitality of the commonwealth.

Attention to the *oikos–polis* analogy illustrates the difficulty of classifying Spinoza's political thought. On the one hand, his deployment of the analogy underscores the tension between his political anthropology and the social contract tradition. On the other hand, his unusual use of the analogy, which highlights quarrels, opposition to authority, and asymmetries of power, likewise marks him off from classical republicanism's inheritance from ancient philosophy. Even as it remains difficult to insert Spinoza into an existing democratic tradition, his political theory is replete with insights into the promises and challenges proper to constituting a life in common, be it familial or political.

¹ TP, ch. 6 | G III/298/14–15.

6.1 The Family and the City in the Seventeenth Century

Seventeenth-century political theory is marked by disputes over the appropriateness of the ancient analogy between the family and the *polis*. Typically, the analogy was upheld by traditionalists interested in defending patriarchal power and natural hierarchies in human relations. The defense of the analogy often reflected the promotion of natural differences, rigid social roles, and the absolute authority of (certain) men over wives, children, and servants. Most famously, Filmer's *Patriarcha* claims that, "If we compare the natural duties of a father with those of a king, we find them to be all one, without any difference at all but only in the latitude or extent of them."² Thus, a king has the same rights with respect to his subjects as a father does over his children. Invoking both the Roman *Pater Familias* and the patriarchal rule of Adam, Filmer saw the sovereign invested with absolute power of life and death over wives, children, and subjects as the necessary condition of social order.³ Filmer takes for granted that such natural hierarchy was common sense among many if not most in the seventeenth century.

This discourse of absolute rule and arbitrary power was facing threats from many sides, however, and was eventually overturned by a contractualism that insisted on individual liberty, natural equality, and authority grounded in the consent of individuals. According to Mary Lyndon Shanley, those who shared the patriarchalist interest in asserting "The *Naturall* Power of Kinges Defended against the Unnatural Liberty of the People"⁴ exploited the threat that contractualism might pose to male authority in the household. Even if many among the reading public might have been attracted to the Hobbesian notion that no man has natural political authority over another, most could be counted upon to recoil at the implication that no man has natural authority over a woman. It was unthinkable to many that wives might be bound to their husbands only by their own volition and thus authorized, for example, to dissolve their marriage contracts. The metaphor of the *polis* as a family was thus useful to rally the interests of men around preserving their authority in the face of competing egalitarian movements and discourses.⁵

Hobbes's argument for natural equality among all human beings, regardless of sex, social station, divine election, or natural gift, posed one

² Filmer, *Patriarcha*, 12. ³ Hulliung, "Patriarchalism."

⁴ This is, of course, the subtitle to Filmer's *Patriarcha*.

⁵ Shanley, "Marriage Contract," 90. Eventually Locke emphatically rejected the symbolic association of familial and civil authority, even as he remained acutely ambivalent about the implications for natural hierarchy within the family (Locke, *Second Treatise*).

of the most powerful challenges to the notion that the city is a family on the model of *pater patria*. Rather than a society imagined as nested forms of naturally guaranteed paternal authority, Hobbes presents social order as an artifice built upon the wills of its individual members. Notwithstanding his robust preference for monarchy and absolute rule, Hobbes undermines the traditional basis for hierarchy grounded in natural differences.

Rather than rejecting any isomorphism of the family-polis, however, Hobbes seems to invert it. Instead of imagining the city along the lines of a large family ruled by a father, Hobbes treats the family as “a little city,” in which each member has consented freely to the authority that structures it.⁶ Notoriously, Hobbes insists that the relationship between an infant and her caretaker is structurally homologous to the submission of subjects in a commonwealth.⁷ Just as the parties to the social contract voluntarily transfer their right to do as they will to the sovereign in exchange for the protection of their bodies and property, an infant freely accepts the authority of whoever preserves her life. The child, then, comes to be obligated to respect the authority of the parent through the natural law of gratitude to whoever might otherwise have chosen, for example, to expose or suffocate her.⁸

Hobbes thereby provides a strong basis for natural equality, but arguably at the price of a weak foundation for human affinity. He sets the stage for a new philosophical anthropology that is no longer based in our natural desire for community, or on the Aristotelian image of “man” as a “coupling” or a “social animal.” While recognizing dependency as an inevitable feature of finitude, and human relationships as necessary for procreation and perseverance into adulthood, Hobbes treats society as the product of a *transformation* of our given nature rather than as a natural consequence of it. In his words:

That it is true indeed, that to Man, by nature . . . Solitude is an enemy; for Infants have need of others to help them to live, and those of riper years to help them to live well . . . The Vertue whereof to Children, and Fooles, and the profit whereof to those who have not yet tasted the miseries which accompany its defects, is altogether unknown; whence it happens, that those, because they know not what Society is, cannot enter into it; these,

⁶ Hobbes, *De Cive*, 39, fn. 4. (Hereafter *DC*.)

⁷ Carole Pateman (“Women and Consent”) and Virginia Held (“Noncontractual Society”) have expressed their horror at the idea that the nursing contracts away her rights to her caregiver but Soran Reader (“Maternal Moral Authority”) embraces Hobbes’s robust notion of mother-right on feminist grounds.

⁸ Hobbes, *DC*, 47–49.

because ignorant of the benefit it brings, care not for it. Manifest therefore it is, that all men, because they are born in Infancy, are born unapt for Society. Many also (perhaps most men) either through defect of minde, or want of education remain unfit during the whole course of their lives . . . wherefore Man is made fit for Society not by Nature, but by Education.⁹

Even if solitude can lead only to death, one is not by nature drawn to our fellows. Rather, many of us live out our lives unfit for human society and unaware of the many benefits it provides. Only education can transform our natural need for one another into sociability.

Thus, in the most visible seventeenth-century debates, the champions of the *polis* as family metaphor were on the side of traditional patriarchy. Earlier discourses, however, show that the invocation of the *polis* as a family may be mobilized on behalf of ideals other than absolute monarchy or natural hierarchy. In the next section, I will briefly sketch how the analogy between the family and the city operates in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. I can then return to Spinoza.

6.2 The *Oikos* and the *Polis* in Aristotle

The main source for the analogy is, of course, Aristotle, for whom the three main constitutional forms can be analogized to the relationships that compose the household. In contrast to the patriarchalists, Aristotle relates the *oikos* and the *polis* as true analogs, not as isomorphs. When analogies relate sets of terms to one another, the terms need not have anything in common. What is shared in the analogy is the relationship between the terms. Thus, to observe that a wing is to a butterfly as a leg is to a dog is not at all to say that a butterfly is a dog, or a wing a leg. Whereas Filmer claims that the authority of a king *is* the authority of a father passed down successively from the original paternity of Adam, Aristotle's analogies between the family and the household do not convey that a king is a father to his people. Rather, his many complex and nested analogies between the *oikos* and the *polis* indicate something about the relations that ought to obtain in both domains.

Aristotle analogizes the relationship between father and son to that of a king and his subjects. In general, for Aristotle, a good ruler makes decisions guided by consideration of the advantage of the ruled rather than the ruler. Thus, it is important that the ruler has virtue sufficient to prevent him

⁹ Hobbes, *DC*, 110. For further analysis of Hobbes on family, see chapters 5–6 of *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes*, edited by Nancy Hirschman.

from using his authority on his own behalf rather than for the good of his subjects. Paternal authority, the image of a virtuous father, is precisely that kind of power that is exercised reliably on behalf of someone else, for the good of the other rather than for oneself. Kingship is like paternal authority in that, when it is just, it is exercised by a “self-sufficient” agent who does not depend on his subjects for material or spiritual goods like money and honor. The just king does not need to instrumentalize or extort his subjects, and a just father will likewise not depend on his children for recognition, work, or some other material benefit.¹⁰ Paternal or kingly authority devolve into tyranny as soon as they deploy children or subjects for their private advantage. Finally, a good father rules his son so that his son can eventually rule himself. Paternity is thus a temporary rule because it is an enabling mode of acting on another. A virtuous monarch will likewise engender virtue in others in order that they can become good counsellors and ultimately replace him.

In an aristocracy, members of the ruling class, according to Aristotle, stand in relation to their subjects as husbands do to their wives. As in the previous case, the analogy conveys that the standards by which one evaluates the relationship are similar in the cases of husbands and wives and rulers in an aristocracy and their subjects. The husband, like the aristocratic ruler, occupies his role on the basis of desert, and he rules over only what is appropriate to his peculiar virtues. If the relationship is well-ordered, he recognizes those areas of the household over which his wife is owed deference and does not try to assert his power over them. If he assumes power beyond the scope that correlates with his virtue, the household relations degenerate.¹¹ Again, it is important that husbands and aristocratic rulers cultivate the virtue necessary to avoid ruling for personal gain. The family or commonwealth thrives to the extent that each fills the role for which his or her talents and wisdom are suited. If those in power undermine the ability of each to exercise their distinctive forms of competence, the whole ceases to be well-ordered. This form of rule is not temporary, but co-contributing to the common good of the *oikos* requires a measure of mutual trust and appreciation, as well as the recognition of “natural” suitability defined by sex.

Finally, Aristotle analogizes “the rule of a multitude,” in which all propertied males are equal, to a relationship between brothers. Even if Aristotle appears not to endorse a constitution structured by a relationship of equality and reciprocal limitation among peers without a common

¹⁰ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.10.1160b (Hereafter *NE*). ¹¹ Aristotle *NE*, 8.10.1160b–1161a.

authority,¹² others embrace his image of democracy as a fraternal association. This notion of democracy as an egalitarian fraternal community persists today, most obviously in the motto of French republicanism. On an Aristotelian model, an egalitarian household lacks a master but might, in its most virtuous expression, observe the core principle of justice: to each according to his virtue.¹³ For Aristotle, it remains important that different members of the household exhibit different virtues. Brothers are equal in that they are similar in status, age, and experience, but this does not mean that they are interchangeable. As social animals with a cooperative character, brothers are involved in a kinship structure that differentiates the activities and roles of its members.

Kinship structures that endure indicate a political way of life characterized by a complex social network that is not merely in the service of preserving the species.¹⁴ Aristotle analogizes the city to the household to foreground how social relations, whether or not they are hierarchical, involve a division of labor, specialization in capacities, the placement of works into common possession, and the formation of a common goal to which diverse pursuits contribute.¹⁵ Aristotle insists that the analogy between the household and the city eventually breaks down by virtue of the relative unity of the household in comparison to the city.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the household and city are both partnerships in the perception of justice. As Aristotle famously observes, what makes us “political animals” as opposed to merely gregarious animals who live together and contribute to the well-being of the group is that we, alone, have speech. Through speaking to one another, we reveal “the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust.”¹⁷ It is in this communication that we form a household and a city structured by justice.

While some construe Aristotle’s famous description of man as the most political animal to mean that the human essence is only actualized in political participation, or legislation, the household analogy foregrounds instead mutual dependency as a fact of life. The household, like the city, is a system of active cooperation, ordered by a distribution of responsibilities and a shared way of life. We might observe as well that even if the household is not the space in which human excellence is most manifest for Aristotle, it is the site for acquiring those powers necessary for human excellence. The household is the domain in which children are born,

¹² For more on this topic, see Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction*.

¹³ Lockwood, “Aristotle’s Household and City,” 6. ¹⁴ Depew, “Political Animals,” 171–72.

¹⁵ Aristotle *NE*, 8.10.1160b–1161a. ¹⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 2.2.1261a–1261b.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2.1253a.

raised, and disciplined. It is the locus of early education, the development of speech, and the inculcation of a sense of justice. Even as the family is embedded in a larger network of institutions, the household points to the profound dependency of human animals, animals that must be nurtured and educated to become either subjects capable of obeying the law or citizens capable of deliberating about and decreeing laws.

6.3 Spinoza's Quarrelsome Household

The *Political Treatise* manifests a somewhat awkward continuity with the Aristotelian tradition of politics and ethics. Spinoza invokes the Aristotelian notion of humanity as a social animal twice in the *Political Treatise* and once in the *Ethics*. In all cases, he obliquely affirms the political anthropology of “the Scholastics [who] want to call man a social animal”¹⁸ on the basis of the natural requirement of cooperation for the purpose of self-defense.¹⁹ At the beginning of chapter 6, he again observes a universal “desire” for “civil order.”²⁰ Rather than seeing sociability as an outcome of natural affection or lust, the necessity of care and love for the cultivation of our distinctively human power, he characterizes civil life as attractive on the basis of its opposite, the anxiety that is sure to accompany solitary existence. We can scarcely hope to survive in solitude and we are hopelessly vulnerable to hostile forces without others. Thus, he seems to be, at the same time, Hobbesian and Aristotelian. Close attention to the passages surrounding the *oikos-polis* analogy, however, reveal strong disagreement with Hobbes's conclusions about the benefits of absolute monarchy. At the same time, it also suggests a criticism of the Aristotelian portrait of rule through exemplary virtue. Navigating between the two options, Spinoza presents a political theory distinctively his own, according to which human virtue emerges from a discordant unity analogous to a quarrelsome family.

I will proceed in this section to draw a number of conclusions from a close reading of TP, ch. 6, section 4.

[E]xperience seems to teach that it contributes to peace and harmony when all power is conferred on one man. No state has stood as long without notable change as that of the Turks. On the other hand, none have been less lasting than popular, or democratic states. Nowhere else have there been so many rebellions.

¹⁸ TP, ch. 2 | G III/281/28–30. The translations of Spinoza are from Edwin Curley, *The Collected Works*, vols. 1–2, sometimes with minor modifications.

¹⁹ See also, E4p35s | G II/234/2–18. ²⁰ TP, ch. 6 | G III/297/20–21.

Still, if slavery, barbarism, and desolation are to be called peace, nothing is more wretched for men than peace. No doubt there are more, and more bitter, quarrels between parents and children than between masters and slaves. Nevertheless, it doesn't make for the orderly management of the household to change paternal Right into master, and treat children like slaves. To transfer all power to one man makes for slavery, not peace. As we've said, peace does not consist in the privation of war but in a union *or* harmony of minds.²¹

In considering, this complex passage we can first observe Spinoza's rhetorical strategy. He stages an opposition between absolute monarchy and popular government in order to convince his reader to be more concerned with the vices proper to the former than the latter. The risks intrinsic to despotism, he argues, are greater than those of rebellion. Thus, the first conclusion we can draw is that, according to Spinoza:

6.3.1 Domination Is a Greater Threat to Stability than Is Conflict

Like Aristotle, Spinoza presents an undesirable form of rule as tyrannical, likens it to a relationship between master and slave, and associates it with a people he expects his audience to disdain. Just as Aristotle invokes the Persians when disparaging a style of authority as tyrannical, Spinoza excites early modern prejudices by linking the peace of enduring monarchies to the oppressive rule of "Turks." He expects his audience to be deeply concerned about rebellions, but engages them rhetorically to assert that (i) quarrel and disagreements are incapable of dissolving the social bond entirely but (ii) despotism comes as close as possible to doing so. He begins his chapter on monarchy by observing a universal and irrepressible aversion to solitude and desire for civil order in all human beings.²² He proceeds to affirm that, while some kinds of association are dissolved by discord and rebellion, commonwealths can never be fully dissolved. Thus, he suggests, *pace* Hobbes, that humanity cannot be dispersed into a condition of solitude, a war of all against all, but, if we live, we necessarily live together in some form of cooperation. In Spinoza's words, "as long as human natural right is determined by each person's power, and belongs to that person alone, there's not natural human right. It consists more in opinion than in fact, since there's no way to secure and maintain it."²³

Nevertheless, Spinoza artfully suggests that solitude *can* become the human condition, not by virtue of an absence of coercive power, but

²¹ TP, ch. 6 | G III/298/14–26. ²² TP, ch. 6 | G III/297/13–22.

²³ TP, ch. 2 | G III/281/16–19.

through the presence of an excessively coercive power. In chapter 5, Spinoza observes, “A commonwealth whose subjects, terrified by fear, do not take up arms should be said to be without war, but not at peace.” When a commonwealth’s stability is owed to “its subjects’ lack of spirit – so that they’re led like sheep [*pecora*], and know only how to be slaves,” then it ought to be called a “wasteland” rather than a “Commonwealth.”²⁴ A civil association that depends not on the powers, capabilities, and vitality of the multitude but rather on the depletion and submission of a fearful populace that hopes for nothing but to avoid death, Spinoza asserts, is not a human society. Submission achieved by violent and terrifying means may suspend the right (or power) of the subjects to take up arms, rebel, or quarrel, but it renders them domesticated animals, a servile herd of sheep. The servile herd suggested by the word “*pecus*” was contemptuously applied to human beings in Roman literature that Spinoza knew well.²⁵ Although *pecora* are herd animals and thus ought to count as gregarious or social animals, according to Aristotle’s taxonomy, Spinoza represents this coercive domestication as a violent deprivation of sociability. Thus, even if the subjects of a despot dwell side by side in a herd, they reside in a “wasteland,” a suggestive rendering of the Latin *solitudo*. When compelled to obey only by the fear of violent death, they are in a state of desertion and deprivation, persevering only as a lonely collection of dominated subjects.

The association of despotism with solitude points us back to Spinoza’s insistence that the basis of social order is an irrepressible and universal fear of solitude: For each of us is implicitly aware that one lacks strength in isolation, and, thus, each and every person by necessity strives for civil society, for some stable form of cooperative association. Spinoza thereby implicitly warns despotic monarchs that their subjects have an everlasting appetite to unite in a common project of living and an inextinguishable aversion to suffering an isolating fear of death. The Hobbesian state of nature, however hypothetical it may be in the work of Hobbes, is better understood not as an original condition but rather as a violent form of institution. If we cannot but resist the anxiety of isolation, the fear of being without allies, being devoid of partners in our desire to constitute a life, our *conatus* will determine us to oppose rather than submit to absolute monarchy. Moreover, as Spinoza asserts in the *Ethics*, each thing desires to persevere in being in a “certain and determinate way.”²⁶ Thus, Spinoza insists that “human life [is] defined not merely by the circulation of blood,

²⁴ TP, ch. 5 | G III/296/3–10. ²⁵ In such authors as Horace, Catullus, and Juvenal.

²⁶ E3p6d | G II/146/10–11.

and other things common to all animals, but mostly by reason, the true virtue and life of the Mind.”²⁷ Spinoza thus argues that unyielding, absolute monarchy is not the most stable regime but is, by virtue of the universal and inalterable laws of human psychology, eternally precarious. Absolute subjection contradicts “the necessity of human nature, however it may be considered. That is . . . the universal striving all men have to preserve themselves.”²⁸ The desire to persevere in being immediately appears as a desire for community with others and an aversion to isolation. Moreover, we desire not community as such but a kind of intellectual community, a form of association that allows us to exercise and experience our physical as well as our mental power. Despotism depends on amplifying to the maximal degree the fear of death, an isolating, antisocial, and stupefying passion. We will not submit to an oppressive government that only guarantees our physical safety; we will strive for the conditions that strengthen our minds. Despotism – the suppression of contest, dissent, and genuine sociability – thus triggers the desire for conspiracy as the only apparent way to live in that “certain and determinate way” that is ours, and which we cannot but pursue by whatever means necessary.

Spinoza suggests, however, that it is not only tyrants, despots, and vicious rulers whose positions are threatened by internal scission. The chapter on monarchy makes a broader claim that puts pressure also on the picture of virtuous kingship favored by Aristotle. Thus, we can identify a second conclusion closely related to the first:

6.3.2 *Concentrated Authority Is Fragile Authority*

It may not be terribly difficult for Spinoza to convince many of his readers that the ostensible stability with which tyrants may be credited is owed not to the virtues of their constitution but to the vices of brutal domination. Yet Spinoza concomitantly argues that even the most virtuous king is highly susceptible to abuse his power unless, as he concludes his chapters on monarchy, “the King’s power is determined only by the power of the multitude, and is preserved by the multitude’s support.”²⁹ He thereby makes a case that the excellence of a ruler is far from sufficient to safeguard the subjects of a commonwealth from slavery.

Traditionally, a king’s authority is normatively associated with the kind of rule practiced by a virtuous father. As Spinoza, too, notes in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, a good father constrains and imposes rules

²⁷ TP, ch. 5 | G III/296/12–15. ²⁸ TP, ch. 5 | G III/291/22–26. ²⁹ TP, ch. 7 | G III/323/10–12.

on his son but does so only for his child's benefit.³⁰ Because a father has in mind always the good of the son, he rules the son in a way that guides him to the threshold of his own power. Paternal rule is thereby not structured by fear of punishment and death but by constraints that enable the child to cultivate strength of body and mind, and to eventually become his own master. Spinoza begins his chapter on monarchy, the first chapter in the *Political Treatise* with concrete institutional recommendations, by stipulating that "it's been necessary to set up a state, so that everyone – both those who rule and those who are ruled – does what's for the common well-being, whether they want to or not."³¹ He insists that a condition of constraining rulers and subjects to live as reason prescribes is that "nothing which concerns the common well-being is entrusted absolutely to the good faith of any one person,"³² since it is "folly to require of someone else what no one can ask of himself, that he look out more for others than for himself."³³ Thus Spinoza denies, on the basis of the inalterable rules of human psychology, that a virtuous king could be relied upon to rule on the model of a good patriarch, for the king who can consistently put the interests of his subjects before his own lives only in a "poet's golden age" or "a fairy tale."³⁴ Spinoza rejects a model of rule through virtue, embodied in a benevolently paternalistic ruler and imitated by citizens and subjects. The state must be designed to constrain the ruler at least as much as the subjects, since it is especially those engaged in public business who will be tempted to violate the laws due to greed and ambition.

Spinoza reinforces his objection to the image of a king as a good father when he observes that "kings fear their sons . . . more than they love them, and fear them the more, the more their sons are skilled in the arts of war and peace, and the more their virtues make their subjects love them. That's why they try to educate them so they'll have no cause to fear them."³⁵ If kingship perverts the relationship between father and son, how could kings be seen as benevolent patriarchs whose rule aims always at the common good? Indeed, it is the fragility of the king's power, the isolation of the seat of authority, that urges him to protect himself anxiously rather than promote the welfare of others, including his own children. He regards his son more as a threat to his power than as a being to love, one who might otherwise bring power-enhancing joys into his life. The fatherhood practiced by a king is deformed by fear into an art of debilitation.

³⁰ TTP, ch. 16 | G III/195/5–8. ³¹ TP, ch. 6 | G III/297/34–298/2. ³² TP, ch. 6 | G III/298/4–5.
³³ TP, ch. 6 | G III/298/9–10. ³⁴ TP, ch. 1 | G III/275/22–25. ³⁵ TP, ch. 6 | G III/299/13–15.

Monarchical virtue and a concern for the common welfare is such a difficult art, Spinoza maintains, because the burden of rule is simply too great for a single individual, no matter how virtuous. Like the absolute solitude of the state of nature, the solitude of monarchical rule is a fiction rather than a reality. Drawing, indeed, on Aristotle's *Politics*, Spinoza declares that "a state thought to be an absolute Monarchy is really in practice an Aristocracy. Of course, it's not openly an aristocracy, only covertly one. But that makes it the worst kind."³⁶ A concealed aristocracy is the worst because the king's counselors and the executors of his will could be anyone, and those closest to him will exert an invisible influence on him and impose untraceable threats. The more concentrated his rule is, the less involved the constituents of the commonwealth are in his decision-making and his protection. He may welcome this as a form of insulation from their criticisms and squabbles. Yet, Spinoza argues, the more disconnected the monarch is from his constituents, the more vulnerable is the seat of power.

It follows that someone entrusted with the whole right to rule will always fear his own citizens more than his enemies. So he'll try to look out for himself, to plot against his subjects, not look after their interests – especially the ones famous for their wisdom or more powerful because of their wealth.³⁷

A monarch whose authority is not constrained by large consulting bodies, Spinoza proceeds to argue, is one whose position will require him both to plot against his subjects and to oppose those who manifest extraordinary virtue, like wisdom: "From all these considerations it follows that a King is less his own master, and the condition of his subjects is more wretched, the more absolutely the right of the Commonwealth is transferred to him."³⁸ That is, the more disconnected, or absolute in a deficient sense, monarchical rule is, the less powerful it is. The more independent, isolated, and concentrated monarchical authority is, the less right it commands. Thus, the monarch's condition, like the human condition, can tend toward solitude, and thus wretchedness. The solitude of the monarch is expressed not only in his physical vulnerability but in his aversion to wisdom in his fellows, including in his own child. His solitude is both a product and producer of the suppression of wisdom. If the monarch could escape the distortions of his condition imposed by fear of his own people, including the sons in his own household,³⁹ he would strive for a richer, more enabling system of cooperation.

³⁶ TP, ch. 6 | G III/298/33–35. ³⁷ TP, ch. 6 | G III/299/9–12. ³⁸ TP, ch. 6 | G III/299/19–21.

³⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13, "Let him therefore consider . . . what opinion he has . . . of his children, and servants, when he locks his chests."

Instead of aristocracy disguised as monarchy, reason prescribes for a historically monarchical commonwealth something closer to the institution of popular government with a monarchical face. Spinoza suggests as much in his conclusion to the section on monarchy when he lays down the “only Rule” he has followed in describing the foundations of monarchy: Maximize the freedom of the multitude through conceiving the king’s power as nothing but the power of the multitude.⁴⁰ His institutional recommendations draw a portrait of a king instituted by a free people as a mechanism to convert their wisdom into laws and thereby tie each and every one to the mast of collective intelligence. To see more clearly how Spinoza builds to this conclusion, we should return to another important feature of the *oikos-polis* analogy. Spinoza contrasts despotic government that imposes a paralyzing form of peace to popular government fraught with discord. He maintains, however, that, contrary to appearances, genuine peace may very well be the fruit of such turbulent dispute between unequals, between parents and children engaged in “frequent and bitter quarrels.” Although my final point is most difficult to show, in part because it is in some tension with the account of social psychology in his *Ethics*, I want to propose that the image of mental harmony emerging from “frequent and bitter quarrels” suggests that:

6.3.3 *Mental Harmony Demands Neither Homogeneity
of Spirit Nor the Extirpation of Passions*

Chapter I of the *Political Treatise* concludes with the remark that “freedom of mind, or strength of character, is a private virtue. But the virtue of the state is security.”⁴¹ Yet the further one reads in the *Political Treatise*, the less clear this distinction becomes. As I’ve already noted, in chapter 5, Spinoza affirms that “the best state is one where men pass their lives harmoniously” and insists that by life he means a distinctively human life, characterized by “reason, the true virtue and life of the Mind.”⁴² He distinguishes a servile life of fear, even when free of war, from a life in pursuit of virtue, which is a life of peaceful and harmonious association (*concordia*). In chapter 6, he draws the same contrast – tranquility imposed by menace versus *concordia* – so as to associate oppressive monarchy with an uncontested form of slavery and popular government with peace, which, he repeats, “consist[s] not in the privation of war, but in a union, or harmony of minds.”⁴³ Thus

⁴⁰ TP, ch. 7 | G III/323/9–13. ⁴¹ TP, ch. 1 | G III/275/33–34. ⁴² TP, ch. 5 | G III/296/14–15.

⁴³ TP, ch. 6 | G III/298/24–26.

strength of mind, or human virtue, clearly animates Spinoza's political proposals. We might ask, however, whether the strength of mind of a commonwealth is precisely like the strength of mind of an individual. Students of Spinoza's *Ethics* might expect mental concord and harmony to reflect an agreement, or even an identity among the parts, yielded by a community of reason.⁴⁴ Yet the *Political Treatise* links mental harmony, or strength of mind, precisely to discord. Indeed, Spinoza's rendering of the *oikos-polis* analogy presents spirited discord as the genetic precondition of mental fortitude and the unification of minds. We might ask, then, in the spirit of Aristotle, what kind of unity belongs to the quarrelsome family and, by analogy, to the democratic commonwealth?

Although Spinoza makes no systematic argument about the unity that obtains in a virtuous commonwealth, let me propose some of its features.

- (1) A virtuous commonwealth will be structured by the dictates of reason: "a commonwealth will be the most powerful and the most its own master, if it is founded on and directed by reason. For the Right of a Commonwealth is determined by the power of a multitude that is led as if by one mind. But there is no way this union of minds can be conceived unless the Commonwealth aims at what sound reason teaches us to be useful to all men."⁴⁵
- (2) It will be so organized that the subjects will fear the solitude that follows from the absence of the state rather than the state's own isolating policies; it will encourage respect for the laws; and it will attach people to it through the shared benefits (corporeal and mental) it provides.⁴⁶
- (3) It will involve the widest possible distribution of rights and responsibilities among free men. Such a broad distribution minimizes possibilities for corruption and optimizes the kind of advice available to the sovereign power and maximizes the appearance of equality.
- (4) It will encourage rather than suppress disputes, even bitter ones.

It is the fourth characteristic of political virtue that surprises, given Spinoza's assertions that reason follows from what we have in common and expresses our agreement in nature, or power.⁴⁷ Whereas passions divide us from ourselves and each other, reason unites us.⁴⁸ The unity, or harmony of minds that Spinoza describes in the *Political Treatise*, however, appears to be genetically dependent on discord. Indeed, in his political

⁴⁴ E4p35. ⁴⁵ TP, ch. 3 | G III/287/8–11. ⁴⁶ TP, ch. 4 | G III/292–94/26–12. ⁴⁷ E2p38–39.
⁴⁸ E4p32–36.

works, Spinoza repeatedly represents reason as the result of discord rather than as the recognition of an underlying sameness.

In *Political Treatise*, chapter 9, for example, Spinoza insists that a large assembly representing many points of view, interests in different trades, and ties to different associations, clans, or traditions will help rather than hinder the collective effort to legislate effectively.

For human wits are too sluggish to penetrate everything right away. But by asking advice, listening, and arguing, they're sharpened. When people try all means, in the end they find ways to the things they want which everyone approves, and no one had ever thought of before.⁴⁹

Here, despite Spinoza's peculiar claims about stacking the assembly with as many people as possible to ensure a tiny fraction of individuals with mental gifts, reason does not flow from the virtuous to the less virtuous. Reason resides in no particular individuals prior to the conflictual engagement. What unites the group is precisely what "no one had ever thought of before," a strength of mind that is, concomitantly, the product and the producer of the group.

To re-invoke the analogy, mental harmony emerges from the kind of unity that belongs to a quarrelsome family. Parents and children are involved in an indissoluble association, like that of the commonwealth. Husband and wife may get divorced (albeit not without profound consequence in the seventeenth century), but parents and children are in some form of relationship for life. However quarrelsome they are, they remain determined by one another, as the children are flesh of the parents' flesh and mind of their mind.⁵⁰ Long after the children leave home or their parents die, the children will think with thoughts that emerged from their relationship with their early caregivers. Parents place their children in a form of subjection, they rule them, but (if they are virtuous) not so as to be slaves. Rather, parents, like well-ordered sovereign powers, constrain their children so that they may become free. Yet, Spinoza does not count on the moral virtue of the parents to guide children by example. In fact, it is the irrepressible desire of children to quarrel that ought to be credited with the enabling form of unity that a household can provide. Paternal right is best safeguarded from mutating into the right of ownership by the opposition that the children continually pose to it. As long as parents resist the passion

⁴⁹ TP, ch. 9 | G III/352/8–12.

⁵⁰ Although I cannot do so here, I would argue that, on Spinoza's model, the shared properties of body (flesh of flesh) and mind would be no less true of adopted children and their caregivers.

to smother conflict at the price of destroyed mental community, reason or strength of mind can emerge for both rulers and ruled.

In order for mental harmony to be possible, the children in this analogy may not yet be guided first and foremost by “the true principle of living,” but at least some of them are developing those powers of mind and body necessary to do so. While a just household ought to be ordered so as to discourage destructive passions like hatred and envy, it should not suppress childish eagerness to contest the rules of everyday life. Even toddlers do not passively accept the authority of their elders. And the older children get, the more effectively those who are not prevented from doing so will demand that each and every rule be accounted for and adjusted so as to be appropriate to particular situations as they arise. They may speak frequently in the mode of resistance to constraint upon their desires, but they are also striving to understand whether and how particular rules are good or bad. Like democratic subjects, children strive to understand whether and how rules enable or constrain their abilities to pursue their particular ends. Rules for living are good, according to Spinoza, insofar as they allow us to approach a model of human nature we have set before ourselves.⁵¹ Part of the exercise of strengthening the mind is opposing or demanding rationales for rules that seem to inhibit one’s desired form of life.

While parents may have a strong desire to bring about what is good for their children, it is not easy to determine what will benefit their charges. If bodies are singular and goods, like medications, must vary for different individuals, rulers cannot devise good rules without sensitivity to the perceptions, needs, and distinctive capacities of their subjects. Thus, neither rulers nor parents can avoid tyranny by the desire to benefit their children. Their own decisions will be mere doctrine, imitation, or groping in the dark, without the consistent questions, challenges, and tests with which their children will confront them. And, as any parent knows, we will be tempted regularly to impose a structure on the household that we perceive to benefit us over them. We may often be unaware of our self-serving impulses, which are easy to justify. But if we do not suppress opposition to our authority, we will become more perspicacious about whether and how our rules are working, and whom those rules serve. While it is obvious that the household exists to preserve, nurture, and educate children, it is also the case that the resistance of children to parental authority educates the parents.

⁵¹ E4pref | G II/208/15–24.

A partnership between women and men, Spinoza tells us in the *Ethics*, can be free and thus rational when it is inspired not only by lust but also by a desire to educate children.⁵² Yet, the striving to educate children can only be actualized insofar as the parents allow themselves to be educated by their children. As with the parents, it is not the case that children know what is good for them and communicate it to their parents. Spinoza's is not a case for popular wisdom as such, but rather for the virtuous effects of a community structured by affectionate conflict. Spinoza defines love as the feeling of an increase in power attributed to an external cause.⁵³ Households and cities are organizations by which we act on each other so as to become more powerful. We fear isolation because it is a condition of powerlessness, stupefaction, and vulnerability. So we respond to those who enable us with love and attachment, a yearning to persevere in community with them. Spinoza thinks that we need codes and rules by which to organize our cooperative efforts, and the more the rules succeed in activating our bodies and minds, the more solid will our attachments become. Yet, when we sadden each other with our demands and rules, and when we perceive unfairness, conflict will arise. Thus, Spinoza says we are often "envious and burdensome to one another."⁵⁴ Children frequently and bitterly object to perceived unfairness and they will ceaselessly put pressure on the rules to respond to the nuances of their needs and desires. Indeed, both parents and children may quarrel when anyone imposes something that seems external to their strivings. Yet, without the possibility of vital conflict, the wits of everyone will be dull. Without challenge and mutual opposition, a household or city might be structured by non-interfering solitudes, but it will not be able to engender the differentiated unity characteristic of true harmony. As a result, the children will lack the appropriate education to become rulers themselves, for they will perceive rule as mere domination. Likewise, the parents will not be activated by the pleasures and pains of conflicting demands and interpretations.

6.4 Conclusion

The human intellect is such that we cannot reason independently of others. Reason, power, and authority are not delivered from the hilltops of the virtuous to the valleys of the vulgar. Rather, in opposing and being opposed, we develop the powers of our minds and bodies. In arousing one another's passions, not to the point of indignation but to the point of

⁵² E4app | G II/271/25–272/4. ⁵³ E3p13s | G II/151/5–11. ⁵⁴ E4p35s | G II/234/5–6.

discovering the fallibility, maybe even the laughability, of our own prescriptions and desires, we arrive at those ideas that can only be the property of a collective. The virtuous parent, like the virtuous assemblyman, does not impose his reason on his children. This is not because he is restrained and in control of his passions, but because his reason does not preexist the conflictual process of constituting a life in common. Harmony is not pre-given by some biological or economic relationship constitutive of the household. It is the effect of the powers emerging from the tense and sometimes bitter project of living together. The strife of a life in common is the necessary precondition for the amplification of everyone's mental powers, and thus the constitution of a common good. The lesson of Spinoza's *oikos-polis* analogy, I submit, is simply that without subjects who oppose authority, however rancorously, neither reason nor peace would be possible.

This lesson, however, was not sufficiently recognized by Spinoza himself. The logic of the *Political Treatise* entails that the greater and more diverse the consulting body of lawmaking, the more rational is the commonwealth. The more the sovereign body allows for challenges and contributions from its subjects, the better it will be able to discern the means to sustaining and amplifying the common welfare. Yet, among subjects Spinoza includes only those male children of free (property-owning) men who will take their turn at popular rule. The very principles on which mental virtue and harmony depend, however, suggest that there could be no common welfare without the objections, and eventually the participation, of women and those in "servile" professions.⁵⁵ As long as the subjects and citizens of Spinoza's commonwealth exclude the vast majority of the population, the "one mind" that might be guided by reason is, indeed, counterfactual.

⁵⁵ For more on this topic, see Alexandre Matheron, "Femmes et serviteurs dans la démocratie spinoziste," and Hasana Sharp, "Eve's Perfection."