

C5

5

Spinoza on the Fear of Solitude

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- C5.P1 A man who is guided by reason is freer in a state,
 C5.P2 where he lives according to common decision,
 C5.P3 than in solitude, where he obeys only himself.
 C5.P4 – Spinoza, *Ethics* 4p73

C5.P5 In a little-discussed passage from the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza claims that ‘all men fear being alone [*solitudo*] . . . So by nature men desire a civil order’ (*TP* 6/1).¹ In a subtle but significant departure from Hobbes, Spinoza locates the civil motive in an aversion to solitude rather than an aversion to death. However, just as examples readily come to mind of human willingness to risk death, the desire for solitude is not only common but celebrated throughout the history of philosophy and literature. In what follows, I show that Spinoza, in his *Political Treatise* as well as in his *Ethics*, represents solitude as undesirable. Although extreme solitude, isolation, and helplessness may be most obviously harmful, Spinoza also calls into question the intellectual ideal of meditative and reflective solitude. By associating the withdrawal to the countryside with the cowardly retreat from the burdens of society, he urges his readers toward a socially engaged and cooperative life. However, Spinoza also acknowledges the appeal—in both political and ethical contexts—of solitude, escape, and insulation from other people. Solitude is attractive, and it is more attractive the more civil strife there is. Because human life is often such

¹ Citations of Spinoza’s *Political Treatise* (*TP*) and *Theological-Political Treatise* (*TTP*) indicate the chapter/paragraph number. Citations of the *Ethics* (hereafter *E*) follow standard notations given at the front of this volume. Quotations from Spinoza’s works are drawn from Edwin Curley’s translation (C). For the Latin, I have consulted the Gebhardt edition (G).

that solitude is appealing, whatever natural aversion we may have to it needs to be encouraged and fortified.

C5.P6 We might understand both Spinoza's description and his mobilization of the fear of solitude by way of analogy with Hobbes on the fear of death. Hobbes claims that we naturally and inevitably fear death, and yet the problem he aims to solve is our all-too-common failure to respect our mortal interests. As Sharon Lloyd has argued, for Hobbes's project of instituting a peaceful and stable sovereign regime to succeed, humans need to be educated to value their worldly interests at least as much as they cherish their transcendent ones. In order to quell human conflict and secure lasting obedience, on Lloyd's interpretation, Hobbes advises that the fear of death be socially and institutionally amplified. Early modern culture, immersed in religious debate, elevated transcendent interests over mundane ones, and this elevation was an important source of social disruption and civil conflict. At least partly to temper religious strife, Hobbes advocates greater appreciation of our mortal interests, which would lead to greater willingness to compromise on spiritual matters. If mortal interests cannot trump transcendent interests, Hobbes feared, there is little hope for enduring cooperation among human beings with appetites for glory and inevitably diverse understandings of their spiritual welfare.²

C5.P7 For Spinoza, by contrast, the failure to fear death is not a problem to be solved. Rather, Spinoza promises, in Epicurean fashion, deliverance from the fear of death: 'A free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death' (*E* 4p67). The greater a mind's power becomes in this life, the less it fears death (*E* 4p39s). Instead, I suggest, Spinoza is concerned that *solitude* is more attractive than it ought to be. Thus, even though he claims that we have a fundamental aversion to a solitary life, he thinks that we need to be persuaded that the benefits of social cooperation outweigh the costs. The analogy with Hobbes lies in the fact that both philosophers identify a fundamental civilizing passion that nevertheless needs to become a greater motivating force in most people's lives. Just as the objects of our basic fears differ

² S.A. Lloyd, *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan: The Power of Mind over Matter [Ideals]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

between the two accounts, the social visions on offer also diverge. Whereas, according to Hobbes, amplifying the fear of death promotes obedience to a common power, according to Spinoza, fear of solitude contributes to institutions of cooperation. But, just as fear of death does not automatically generate obedience, cooperation does not follow inevitably from our natural aversion to solitude. Therefore, Spinoza contributes through argument and rhetoric to deflating the appeal of solitude.

C5.P8 Spinoza's remarks on solitude are a largely overlooked part of his case for living as rationally and freely as possible through developing stable and effective modes of cooperation. Such remarks are interesting because they point to how Spinoza's political psychology, like Hobbes's, is ambivalent. Although it is true, as Aurelia Armstrong and others show, that Spinoza has a strong appreciation of 'natural community' as well as the benefits of collective activity ('the multitude'),³ social and political bonds are fragile, and our civic relations are often tumultuous. This may be partly explained, for Spinoza, by the fact that our civil appetite is not a direct expression of our attraction to uniting with others. Rather, it emerges from an aversion, a fear of being helpless and alone. Thus, in the absence of the strong support needed to realize a happy and cooperative life, we will be drawn in various directions, apprehending our fellows, at one and the same time, as Gods and as enemies.⁴ Describing the range of institutional and cultural supports required for a harmonious society is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is fruitful to reflect upon the obstacles to a free and secure life. Rather than accounting for the means by which the greatest goods can be realized, then, this essay takes a different track. It concerns the fundamental evil of solitude, which ought to be avoided despite the benefits it seems to promise. Spinoza aims, I contend, to counteract the appeal of solitude insofar as it

³ Aurelia Armstrong, 'Natural and Unnatural Communities: Spinoza beyond Hobbes', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 17 (2009), 279–305. See also Warren Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* (London: Verso, 1999), ch. 3.

⁴ Spinoza is sometimes contrasted to Hobbes by virtue of his declaration that 'man is a God to man' (*E* 4p36s). Yet, Spinoza also says that 'most of the time, [men] are by nature enemies' (*TP* 2/13). Thus, while Hobbes and Spinoza surely have different political and ethical visions, their psychologies may not be as far apart as some claim. After all, Hobbes writes 'There are two maxims which are surely both true: Man is a God to Man, and Man is a Wolf to Man.' Hobbes, *On the Citizen* [*On the Citizen*], R. Tuck and M. Silverthorne (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Epistle Dedicatory, 3.

influences both the political pursuit of power and the ethical pursuit of perfection.

C5.P9 This essay proceeds in three sections. The first outlines Spinoza's descriptive psychological claim in the *Political Treatise*: we fear solitude by nature, which animates a universal appetite for civil order. The solitude to which we are naturally and inevitably averse is the helplessness implied by physical and intellectual isolation. The second section examines solitude as an object of desire in the context of politics. Here, solitude is likewise understood as physical and mental isolation. But separateness appears desirable to those in power as a form of protection, an imaginary fortress. Spinoza likewise identifies solitude as something vicious rulers impose upon their subjects to secure their obedience. This is solitude as a political condition for subjects, achieved by undermining social ties and solidarity. Spinoza, unsurprisingly, heaps contempt upon such techniques and, in a classically republican vein, urges a more collaborative model of rule. In the third section, I consider the solitary life as an ethical ideal. Perhaps most controversially, I find that, in his *Ethics*, Spinoza rhetorically undermines the appeal of solitude. When he claims that the 'free man' is not empowered by solitude and requires the cooperative context of a *civitas*, he resists the contemplative ideal of a solitary life that may have sway among his philosophical readerships. Thus, I claim that we ought to understand these three negative representations of solitude together as adding up to a portrait of isolation as a significant obstacle to a free life. Spinoza's objections to social withdrawal and self-insulation lend rhetorical and argumentative weight to our salutary fear of solitude.

C5.S1

1. Fear as Civil Passion

C5.P10 It is commonplace to draw a distinction between Hobbes and Spinoza based on their divergent evaluations of the role of fear in securing cooperation. As Justin Steinberg remarks, 'While Spinoza acknowledges that the commonwealth must "preserve the causes that foster fear and respect" ... he seeks to diminish the role of fear in civic affairs, tellingly breaking with Machiavelli and Hobbes'. *Pace* Hobbes, 'Spinoza does not

wish simply to replace one form of fear (*metus*) with another, he wants to promote hope (*spes*) and devotion (*devotio*) to the state in place of fear.⁵ Similarly, Sandra Field observes:

- C5.P11 Among political authors in Spinoza's library, Hobbes... and Machiavelli... focus on the popular passion of fear as the preeminent lever for state power. Spinoza by contrast argues that a state's efforts to achieve absoluteness through fear will generally be unsuccessful. Fear is limited and unreliable because human behavior is much more complexly driven: not only by fear, but also by hope, hate, love, ignorance, and other passions, as well as by some degree of reason.⁶
- C5.P12 Interpreters correctly point to Spinoza's acute concern with the corrosive effects of superstition, which fear grounds and sustains.⁷ Spinoza ties freedom to liberation from fear and connects fear to phenomena he clearly disdains (*TTP* pref; 20/11). Nevertheless, it would be too strong to claim that Spinoza is 'anti-fear' *tout court*.⁸ When we examine the social and psychological effects of fear, the object of fear matters. Fear of some things can be enabling, while fear of others can diminish our power to think and act in agreement with our genuine interests.
- C5.P13 Sad passions, like fear, indicate a decrease in power by definition (*E* 3p11s). Yet, Spinoza is explicit that sad passions can be indirectly beneficial for most people. For example, humility and repentance are not virtues, and are thus useless to one who is guided only by reason. Yet, according to Spinoza, since 'men rarely live from the dictate of reason, these two affects... and, in addition, Hope and Fear, bring more advantage than disadvantage' (*E* 4p54s). While Spinoza frequently reiterates that superstitious fears (e.g. of divine wrath) are harmful,

⁵ Steinberg, *Spinoza's Political Psychology: The Taming of Fortune and Fear* [*Spinoza's Political Psychology*] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 81. Michael LeBuffe also highlights Spinoza's interest in civic devotion in contrast to Hobbesian fear, in *Spinoza on Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), ch. 4.

⁶ Sandra Field, 'Political Power and Depoliticized Acquiescence: Spinoza on Aristocracy' ['Political Power and Depoliticized Acquiescence'], *Constellations*, 27 (2020), 670–84.

⁷ For example, see Susan James, 'Spinoza on Superstition: Coming to Terms with Fear', in *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 43–57.

⁸ This was my initial impression, which this essay qualifies. Hasana Sharp, 'Why Spinoza Today? Or, A Strategy of Anti-Fear', *Rethinking Marxism*, 17 (2005), 591–608.

we should understand fear of solitude as a passion that ‘brings more advantage than disadvantage.’⁹ Given that we are highly susceptible to vicious and anti-social passions—such as envy, hatred, and melancholy—Spinoza is not above inflaming some aversion to solitude to encourage social harmony. Analogous to the fear of death for Hobbes, we ought, I suggest, to understand the fear of solitude as a fundamental passion allied with our genuine interest. Also, similarly, this basic passion cannot do its work without being amplified and reinforced by hortatory, cultural representations, and institutions.

C5.P14 Hobbes’s famous description of the ‘naturall condition of mankind’ represents the fear of death and the desire for security as rational and civilizing passions. Without an effective sovereign power to overawe each of us, human existence is ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short.’ Our extreme vulnerability in the absence of law and order is, he urges us to imagine, intolerable: we suffer that ‘which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death.’¹⁰ As the familiar story goes, the desire for self-preservation propels us to trade our natural and arbitrary freedom to do as we please for the security that obedience to a common power provides. Because we fear death and desire security as well as a commodious life, each of us authorizes a ruling power to constrain and thereby protect each of us. Thus, ‘that Mortall God’, Leviathan, the State replaces the ‘warre of every one against every one.’¹¹

C5.P15 Hobbes anchors the fear of death in human nature, representing the aversion to death as an irresistible natural force, analogous to gravity.

C5.P16 For each man is drawn to desire that which is Good for him and Avoid what is bad for him, and most of all the greatest of natural evils, which

⁹ Paolo Cristofolini refers to it as a ‘virtuous fear’ in the only essay I know of that singles out this passion for discussion: ‘Peur de la solitude’, in L. Vinciguerra (ed.), *Quel avenir pour Spinoza: enquête sur les spinozismes à venir* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2001). The essay is only a few short pages of *analyse du texte*, but it drew my attention to this topic.

¹⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan [Leviathan]*, ed. R. Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 13, 89.

¹¹ There are too many discussions to name of Hobbes on the fear of death. I find Lloyd’s analysis especially fruitful for my purposes. Another compelling argument that emphasizes Hobbes’s psychology is Arash Abizadeh, ‘Hobbes on the Causes of War: A Disagreement Theory’, *American Political Science Review*, 105 (2011), 298–315.

is death; this happens by a real necessity of nature as powerful as that by which a stone falls downward.¹²

C5.P17 Fear of death appears to be a natural and basic feature of human psychology. It is inevitable and thus reliable: ‘the Passion to be reckoned upon, is Feare.’¹³ At the same time, Hobbes provides several examples of humans disregarding their own self-preservation. The passion for glory causes humans ‘to invade’ ‘for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.’¹⁴ People risk their lives to avenge modest sleights. And surely Hobbes was concerned with how often religious controversies could arouse violent conflict.

C5.P18 Therefore, Sharon Lloyd argues that Hobbes’s political theory aims, first and foremost, to solve the problems posed by our ‘transcendent interests.’¹⁵ Our passions for divine approbation, eternal reward, and, of course, earthly glory frequently override our natural interest in self-preservation. Indeed, Hobbes observes that ‘most men choose rather to hazard their life, than not to be revenged.’¹⁶ Lloyd interprets the motivating power of the fear of death to be something Hobbes prescribes more than he describes. Cultivating an appropriate aversion to mortal risk and a robust desire for security is Hobbes’s solution to the irreconcilable, transcendent interests that threaten constant conflict. Thus, on Lloyd’s interpretation, citizens need to be educated to be moved by the desire for security and shaped to value their earthly life at least as much as they cherish their immortal souls. Hobbes’s political psychology, on this account, is not the discovery of an invariant law of human nature. Rather, it is an argument for the necessity of constructing a shared motive for obedience through political institutions and culture. In other words, Hobbes aims to persuade his readers that we have good reason to fear

¹² Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ch. 1.7, 27.

¹³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 14, 99.

¹⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13, 88. Quoted in Lloyd, *Ideals*, 264.

¹⁵ For my purposes, it is not important whether Lloyd is correct about Hobbes (I am not trying to intervene in Hobbes interpretation). I use the more familiar example of Hobbes for illustrative purposes. It helps us to see how descriptive psychological claims can also have a hortatory function.

¹⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 15, 107.

and avoid death. The hortatory character of his account does not entail that we have no natural motive to avoid death, or that death is not a natural evil. But it does mean, according to Lloyd, that the fear of death is not, as a matter of fact, the ‘dominant and overriding passion’ that reliably guides us.¹⁷ In order to overcome the causes of social disorder, fear of death and desire for security need to *become* our guiding motives. We need the institutions and cultures to make it so. Hobbes’s representation of the ‘state of nature’ has arguably become one of those elements of secular culture, contributing to the value of earthly security over heavenly reward.

C5.P19 Like Hobbes, Spinoza names a civilizing passion at the origin of political order: the fear of solitude. Spinoza declares that all humans fear solitude because each of us is helpless alone. In Spinoza’s words:

C5.P20 Men, as we have said, are guided more by affect than by reason. So, a multitude naturally agrees, and wishes to be led, as if by one mind, not because reason is guiding them, but because of some common affect...they have a common hope, or fear, or a common desire to avenge some harm. Moreover, *all men fear being alone [solitudo]*, because no one alone has the strength to defend himself, and no one alone can provide the necessary things for life. So *by nature men desire a civil order*. It can’t happen by nature that they’ll ever completely dissolve it. (TP 6/1; my emphasis)

C5.P21 Alone, we are defenseless and unable to provide for ourselves. This may sound like Hobbes in paraphrase, as if ‘fear of solitude’ were just another way to express the fear of death. Our mortality and lack of self-sufficiency arouse our fear. Because we are finite and fragile, we submit to a common set of rules by which we are each constrained.

C5.P22 Indeed, at times Spinoza sounds rather close to his English predecessor. He often observes that we cannot avoid being overpowered by others when we are isolated and without a civil order:

C5.P23 [S]ince everyone in the state of nature is his own master just so long as he can prevent others from overpowering him, and since it’s futile for

¹⁷ Lloyd, *Ideals*, 254.

one person alone [*solus*] to protect himself from all others, it follows that as long as human natural right is determined by each person's power, and belongs to that person, there's no human natural right. It consists more in opinion than in fact, since there's no secure way to maintain it. (*TP* 2/15; my emphasis)

c5.P24 Mitigating fear appears to be the natural function of society: 'civil order is naturally established to take away the common fear and relieve the common wretchedness' (*TP* 3/6). Yet, as others have not failed to notice, Spinoza's solution to the vulnerability of isolation is not to channel the particularistic fear of each and every one into the universal fear of One sovereign agency. Spinoza may be refuting Hobbes when he asserts that the aim of the State 'is not to dominate, restraining men by fear... but on the contrary to free each person from fear' (*TTP* 20/11).¹⁸ He likewise outlines the role of the State in positive terms: it must not only relieve fear but also produce collective rationality.¹⁹

c5.P25 The commonwealth is most firmly and effectively established to the extent that its people can 'be led, as if by one mind'. It is beyond the scope of this essay to establish what it means to be led by a single mind,²⁰ or to outline how a multitude may hope to get there.²¹ But we should take note of how Spinoza contrasts shared thinking with solitude. From the fear of solitude, we experience a desire to live according to 'common opinion', shared expectations, and coordinated mental agency.

c5.P26 [T]he right of nature which is a peculiar property of the human race can hardly be conceived except where men have common rights and are jointly able to claim for themselves lands they can inhabit and

¹⁸ Surely, he is also objecting to punitive practices of his own state and others in the early modern context.

¹⁹ Spinoza, for example, often prescribes large deliberative assemblies for their ability to generate more rational outcomes (e.g. *TP* 9/14; *TTP* 16/30).

²⁰ This phrase appears frequently in the *Political Treatise*. There are many discussions of this intriguing idea. See, for example, Steven Barbone, 'What Counts as an Individual for Spinoza?', in Olli Koistinen and J. I. Biro (eds.), *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 89–112; Etienne Balibar, '*Potentia multitudinis, quae una veluti mente ducitur*', in Stephen H. Daniel (ed.), *Current Continental Theory and Modern Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 70–99; and, Justin Steinberg, 'Bodies Politics and Civic Agreement', in A. Sangiacomo and K. Green (eds.), *Spinoza and Relational Autonomy: Being with Others* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 132–48.

²¹ On this see, Steinberg, *Spinoza's Political Psychology*.

cultivate, are able to protect themselves, fend off any force, and *live according to the common opinion of all*. For the more they agree in this way, the more right they have all together. If this is the reason the Scholastics want to say that man is a social animal—because in the state of nature men can hardly be their own masters—then I have nothing to say against them. (TP 2/15; my emphasis)

c5.P27 Spinoza, here, ambivalently affirms that we are social animals. Each of us has a natural appetite for the condition that would negate her fear of solitude and allow her to live according to a shared sense of rules, norms, and laws. As a sad passion, the fear of aloneness is not immediately a desire *for* social or political life. We are not born with a natural affinity for the common good. Nevertheless, from a universal aversion to being alone, helpless, powerless, and unable to protect or provide for ourselves independently of others, we are moved indirectly to desire the combination of our powers of thought and action.

c5.P28 The ‘fear of solitude’ is not a canonical feature of Spinoza’s political psychology in anything like the same way that the ‘fear of death’ is for Hobbes. Commentators are correct to observe that Spinoza does not endorse the fear-driven model of obedience associated with Hobbes. It may seem strange to interpret Spinoza as praising fear, a sad passion at the root of superstition, which is one of his best-known and central targets for criticism. Nevertheless, Spinoza presents us with a realist and ambivalent psychology: we are social animals who are pressed together from our aversions as much as from our attractions. We may not be Aristotle’s ‘coupling animals,’²² but our ambivalent sociality can be resolved with sufficient cultural and political buttressing. The natural recoil from solitude needs to be reinforced and amplified through counteracting the appeal of solitude. In the following sections, we turn to Spinoza’s efforts to undermine the attraction of solitude.

²² Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 9.7.612b33; *Politics*, 1.2.1252a26–39, in J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

C5.S2

2. The Wasteland of Solitude

- C5.P29 Spinoza's account of the motivating power of the fear of solitude is counterbalanced by his discussion of solitude as an object of desire in the realm of politics. Solitude is a condition sought and cultivated by vicious rulers, both for their subjects and for themselves. In the political context, Spinoza emphasizes that forms of isolation too often appear beneficial to those in power. Spinoza acknowledges that instituting solitude is superficially attractive for the benefits it seems to offer, but he exhorts his reader rhetorically—through scattered remarks, literary allusion, and examples—to understand it as self-destructive. He shows how isolation is harmful for both rulers and ruled.
- C5.P30 Spinoza observes multiple times that the harsh domination of an unruly or newly conquered people often appears necessary for peace. Popular government, in Spinoza's time, had a reputation for being a tumultuous hotbed of dissension. And a new ruler, as Machiavelli describes so well in *The Prince*, is not yet established and thus is insecure. The greater his fears of displacement, the greater is his tendency to be unyielding and violent rather than consultative and collaborative. When referring to a situation in which a people is pacified through harsh oppression, Spinoza twice invokes Tacitus: 'where they make a desert [*solitudo*], they call it peace'.²³ With such imagery, he aims to persuade his readers that the order and pacification despotic rule appears to bring about is not worth the cost.
- C5.P31 Spinoza acknowledges that popular rule or large deliberative bodies can appear less effective in comparison to unchecked state power. 'No state has stood so long without 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' (*TP* 6/4). Elsewhere he notes that deliberation is viewed as cumbersome, unpleasant, and even destructive. 'Some will remind us of the saying, "while the Romans deliberate, Sagantum is lost"' (*TP* 9/14). While harmonious and effective cooperation may be—like all things excellent—difficult and rare,

²³ Tacitus, *Agricola* [*Agricola*], in *Agricola and Germania*, H. Mattingly (trans.) (New York: Penguin, 2009), 30.

a government that suppresses ‘quarrels’ forecloses an especially helpful means to developing virtues of the mind and laws conducive to common welfare.²⁴ Without deliberation and dissent, citizens lack a crucial channel for ‘sharing opinion’ or developing ‘one mind’ by which they can be led. Instead, they are isolated, keeping their thoughts, concerns, and complaints to themselves. They may obey, but they do not do so as members of a coordinated body (and mind). Instead, they act as solitary agents, securing their particular preservation.

C5.P32 In what editors typically understand to be a response to Hobbes’s *De Cive*,²⁵ Spinoza makes a normative distinction between a genuinely peaceful commonwealth and one that is pacified through terror.

C5.P33 A commonwealth whose subjects, terrified by fear, don’t take up arms should be said to be without war, but not at peace. Peace isn’t the privation of war, but a virtue which arises from strength of mind . . . When the peace of a commonwealth depends on its subjects’ lack of spirit—so that they are led like sheep, and know only how to be slaves—it would more properly be called a wasteland [*solitudo*] than a commonwealth.
(TP 5/4)

C5.P34 This is one of the two allusions in the *Political Treatise* to the oft-cited line from Tacitus’s *Agricola*: ‘where they make a desert [*solitudo*], they call it peace.’²⁶ The other allusion is subtler but similar in character. ‘Experience seems to teach that it contributes to peace and harmony when all power is conferred on one man . . . Still if slavery, barbarism, and desolation [*solitudo*] are to be called peace, nothing is more wretched for mankind than peace’ (TP 6/4; translation modified). In both cases, Spinoza contrasts lack of resistance to despotic terror to genuine peace.

C5.P35 Human motivation under brutal oppression can be severely attenuated. Terrorized and deprived subjects want, first and foremost, to avoid death.

²⁴ For a discussion of Spinoza’s view that conflict contributes to rational deliberation, see Hasana Sharp, ‘Family Quarrels and Mental Harmony: Spinoza’s Oikos-Polis Analogy’, in Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Hasana Sharp (eds.), *Spinoza’s Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 93–110.

²⁵ Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ch. 1.12, 29–30. See Curley’s footnote 9 in TP 5/4.

²⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 30. The Latin reads: ‘ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant’.

They do not strive to build a life in common. When this occurs, subjects become ‘slaves’, instruments of an alien and arbitrary power, unable to live human lives (*TP* 5/6).²⁷ ‘When we say... that the best state is one where men pass their lives harmoniously, I mean that they pass a *human* life, one defined not merely by the circulation of blood... but mostly by reason, the true virtue and life of the Mind’ (*TP* 5/5). As we know, our civil appetite is aroused by fear of solitude and motivated by the ‘desire to be led as if by one mind’. Solitude refers at the same time to physical helplessness and to mental isolation, which is a condition of being prevented from sharing a mind, barred from joining with others to ‘cultivate life’.²⁸ Subjection to oppressive rule radically narrows our affective life. Confined by terror to the tunnel-vision of self-preservation, subjects in such a state do not share a horizon of hopes, expectations, and ideas: they suffer a barely tolerable and inhuman *solitudo*. To the ruler whose greatest concern is to quell opposition and maintain his rule for as long as possible, such a city appears peaceful. And perhaps from the perspective of a subject who has suffered protracted civil strife, law and order imposed brutally may appear better than the vagaries of political conflict. But from the point of view of true peace—which Spinoza defines as mental harmony (*TP* 6/4)—it is an inhuman wasteland, a desert of isolation.

c5.P36 The reference to solitude as a condition of deprivation imposed through brutal conquest is not obscure in the early modern period. It is frequently cited from Tacitus, who likely borrowed it from Livy.²⁹ In Tacitus, it is excerpted from a speech given by a leader of the Britons, describing the Roman thirst for conquest as a nihilistic indulgence of base lusts: ‘Neither East nor West has served to glut their maw. Only they, of all on earth, long for the poor as they do the rich. Robbery,

²⁷ Steinberg discusses the relationship in these passages between slavishness and ‘unwillingness’ in *Spinoza’s Political Psychology*, ch. 6.

²⁸ As one who endured American chattel slavery, Frederick Douglass remarks, ‘I remained with Mr Covey for one year (I cannot say that I *lived* with him)’. *My Bondage, My Freedom* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 157.

²⁹ ‘As far as the Latins are concerned, you can procure peace for yourselves in perpetuity either by savagery or by forgiveness... You may destroy the whole of Latium and make of it vast deserts [*solitudo*].’ Titus Livy, *History of Rome* (Bk. 8, 13.14–15). Woodman, in his introduction, finds the origins of the famous line in Livy. A. J. Woodman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1, n. 2.

butchery, rapine, these liars call “empire”: they create desolation [*solitudo*] and call it peace.³⁰ He proceeds to describe this wretched condition of *solitudo* as a consequence of the conqueror’s assault on kinship: ‘Our children and kinsmen, by nature’s law, we love above all else. These are torn from us by conscription to slave in other lands.’³¹

C5.P37 *Solitudo*, then, is not just a poetic rendering of a conquered people’s psychic landscape. It is a technique by which a multitude that shares a way of life and thought is transformed into servants of a civil order antagonistic to their well-being. The technique severs the ties of affection, cooperation, and kinship that bind people to each other. Children are taken, partners are separated, and bonds are violated. Isolation is an imperial tactic to replace the motive of hope with dread. Human history, sadly, suggests that ‘natal alienation,’ the dissolution of kinship, was and continues to be a common strategy for subduing, conquering, and enslaving peoples.³² Despotism produces solitude through social disintegration.³³

C5.P38 It is crucial to grasp the intimate connection between *solitudo* as a miserable political condition, imposed by vicious rule, and the dreaded solitude that animates our desire for civil life. *Solitudo* names both (i) a condition of aloneness, unsupported by cooperation and (ii) a condition *deprived*, violently, of the cooperation, alliance, and kinship that ordinarily constitutes human life. If fear of solitude is a fundamental feature of human psychology, animating a universal civil appetite, as Spinoza suggests, there should be something deeply revolting about a civil order that undermines its very *raison d’être*. Indeed, even if this form of oppression is far from rare, the dissolution of solidarity, alliance, care, and mutual defense is widely grasped as evil, as anathema to ‘human’ life. A human life requires the institutional coordination of our powers to think and act (‘right’). The more we are severed from each other and opposed to the forces that govern us, the more we are mentally and

³⁰ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 30.

³¹ Tacitus, *Agricola*, 31.

³² This is a core thesis of Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

³³ Despotism technically refers to the kind of rule appropriate to a household. Although rule by the *despotes* does not have predominantly negative connotations for Plato and Aristotle, in the early modern period, despotism becomes associated with subjecting constituents to the kind of authority a *dominus*, head of household, characteristically exercised over slaves.

conatively solitary, unable to help or to be helped by those to whom we want to be united by love.

C5.P39 Although the destruction of human solidarity may seem expeditious to those in power—especially if they are new or unpopular rulers—Spinoza suggests that it is a precarious strategy.³⁴ Where common right has been eroded and especially where bonds of kinship, care, and *eros* are attacked directly, Spinoza warns that society-preserving fear can become indignation (*TP* 4/4). Political violence is a reality that is far from alien to early (or late) modern societies. But there is something distinctively brutal about tearing apart families and destroying bonds of affection, for it is in those relationships that our hopes for the future take shape. Spinoza explains that fear and hope are two sides of the same coin (*E* 3p50s). The hope for strong and secure ties is thus alloyed to the fear of solitude. We avoid solitude and desire enabling connection.

C5.P40 Nevertheless, despite our putatively natural aversion to solitude and appetite for life in common, tyranny and despotism erupt throughout human history. As Spinoza observes, ‘No state has stood so long without notable change as that of the Turks’ (*TP* 6/4). Even if we are social animals by nature, we sometimes desire and live in *solitude*. When Spinoza describes such isolation as a highly impoverished and intolerable form of life, he contributes to a counter-imagination. He urges the rulers and the ruled, despite the inconveniences of rebellious democracies, to imagine others as sources of power rather than as obstacles to it. Spinoza thus claims that, although a monarch or despot may see his subjects as hostiles to be isolated and neutralized, ‘the King’s sword, or right, is really the will of the multitude itself’ (*TP* 7/25). This imagery promotes an idea of monarchical, sovereign power as an empowering unity between the king and his subjects.³⁵ It exhorts his readers to see political strength as something that follows from empowering subjects to expand their

³⁴ Sandra Field argues that interpreters exaggerate the extent to which this strategy is self-undermining, by pointing out that Spinoza expressly acknowledges the durability of oppressive dominion in the case of the Turks. It may be incorrect to declare that such regimes will inevitably fall, but Spinoza claims that such regimes will necessarily be despised and vulnerable to insurgency (see, e.g., *TTP* 5/63). See Field, ‘Political Power and Depoliticized Acquiescence’, 4.

³⁵ Spinoza seems unable to imagine queens as effective sovereigns, or women as citizens (*TP* 6/37; 11/3–4). For my analysis of his views on women, see Hasana Sharp, ‘Eve’s Perfection: Spinoza on Sexual (In)Equality’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 50 (2012), 559–80.

virtue and thereby contribute to the strength of the polity. Yet, many rulers and civic institutions do not draw sufficiently upon their greatest resource. Lacking the wisdom and strength to embrace and incorporate the virtue of their constituents, monarchs too often impose isolation upon themselves as well their subjects.³⁶

C5.P41 Monarchies, the *Political Treatise* suggests, are typically arranged to encourage vice in rulers. Rather than fearing solitude and binding himself to his people, an absolute monarch ‘entrusted with the whole right to rule will always fear his own citizens more than his own enemies.’ The vulnerability entailed in being alone on the throne forces him ‘to plot against his subjects... especially the ones most famous for their wisdom or more powerful for their wealth’ (TP 6/6). If a monarch could be guided by his true interests rather than by his need to inoculate himself against conspiracies, nothing could be more useful to him than wise counselors and magnanimous, active citizens. A monarchy, however, is often structured so that the sovereign must fear usurpation most of all. Spinoza observes that, typically, a king is not disposed to encourage virtue even (or especially!) in his own son. ‘Kings even fear their sons more than they love them, and fear them the more, the more the sons are skilled in the arts of war and peace, and the more their virtue makes their subjects love them’ (TP 6/7). While imperialistic tyrants impose themselves on a people through eroding or destroying their subjects’ family ties, a monarch’s fear of being deposed by those closest to him poisons his own filial relations. The typical structure of monarchy gives the king so much power that he prizes secrecy and jealously guards his independence from others. But, without a complex network of advisers collaborating and reinforcing one another, removing a single individual is the most straightforward way to bring about a change in government policy. Such a ruler can hardly avoid becoming paranoid, anxious, and alienated from those closest to him. The king, then, perceives his insulation from the most capable around him as a strategic necessity. Is there a sadder fate than the conversion of wise friends into threats? And the

³⁶ Spinoza describes an effective monarch as one who ‘draws everyone to himself’ through reconciling inconsistent opinions and guiding them toward the ‘common advantage’ (TP 7/11). Compare this language of drawing others to oneself to Spinoza’s account of generosity as the power to ‘join others to oneself’, including one’s antagonists (E 4p46s).

transformation of a parent's joy in his child's accomplishment into dread at the prospect of his own annihilation?

C5.P42 Aristocracy, according to Spinoza, has a similar liability. He argues that democracy is superior to aristocracy, not because he has an *a priori* commitment to human equality, but because those in power desire insulation and thus avoid virtue. They ~~also~~, like anyone, want to see their preferences consistently realized. As a result, they do not seek the wisest and most capable counselors and successors. Instead, they empower those most susceptible to their influence. Aristocrats, accustomed to the privileges of their station, seek vehicles for their will rather than thoughtful collaborators or virtuous leaders. In the very few words he was able to dedicate to the topic prior to leaving the *Political Treatise* unfinished, Spinoza suggests that the advantage of democracy is that service in the legislature is random, based only on one's citizenship status. Spinoza prescribes something like sortition (lottery) to determine membership in democratic government. As a result, democracy avoids both the monarch's anxiety surrounding succession and the elite's hope of perpetuating their influence through manipulating those in power. If membership in the governing body is entirely random, it is not possible to ensure that excellent individuals will be in power. Yet, sortition will circumvent the perverse and predictable effort to install pliant fools.

C5.P43 Thus, Spinoza outlines some ways that humans invest themselves in isolation. In one kind of case, vicious forms of rule, especially those that arise from conquest as Tacitus describes, aim to replace existing customs, attachments, and allegiances with new ones. In order to do so, they weaken or destroy not only the practices and beliefs of a people but the relationships that animate and sustain them. To secure obedience, a conquering power often suppresses the alliances, bonds, and hopes that previously formed a people.³⁷ Spinoza refers, disdainfully, to the *solitudo* suffered by a people whose striving is only to avoid death at the hands of such despotic rule.³⁸ Even milder forms of rule, however, rely too often

³⁷ We can understand Machiavelli's *Prince*, partly, as the description of such techniques. On Spinoza and Machiavelli, see Filippo del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza* (London: Continuum, 2011).

³⁸ According to Hannah Arendt, centuries later, the result for the tyrant himself is a radical isolation and loneliness. See *On the Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 475.

on threats, ruling a people more by fear than by hope. Spinoza uses an extreme example to point out the tendency of rule through fear of violent punishment to disintegrate social life, threatening *solitudo* rather than building life in common.

C5.P44 In another kind of case, Spinoza describes monarchs and aristocrats as attracted to solitude. Because they want to protect their domain of unimpeded action, they undermine the conditions for positive influence, advice, and companionship from virtuous counselors, friends, and family. Because they pursue solitary, executive agency, they undermine the cooperative foundations of reason and virtue, upon which a durable, effective, and ‘human’ government depends. This negative representation of solitude forms the backdrop for his view of security as cooperative, as an effect of living according to ‘shared opinion’ and common mindedness. Security is not the enjoyment of solitary, unaffected activity.

C5.P45 ~~But~~ Spinoza’s erosion of the appeal of solitude also has a third dimension. We may easily appreciate how a fortress mentality or the dissolution of social ties are typical vices in the non-ideal realm of politics. Yet, Spinoza likewise calls the ethical ideal of solitude into question. To his critique of the solitary thinker, I will now turn.

C5.S3

3. Desire for Solitude

C5.P46 It is not difficult to see how being helpless, devoid of social solidarity, or being estranged from the dominant ways of thinking and acting (‘common opinion’) in ~~your~~ society is something harmful. If one is not socially supported, unable to form sufficiently strong alliances to provide for shared needs, and cannot accept the laws and norms of her society, this is a painful kind of solitude. Likewise, ‘heavy is the head that wears the crown’, due both to the immense responsibility of government and to the acute vulnerability of rulers unable to trust those nearest to them. Even when a ruler prefers solitude to depending on the virtue of others, this, too, is a painful isolation. But what about the pleasant solitude of contemplation, escape from the crowd, or withdrawal to the countryside? Is not solitude something that is often sweet, and ~~often~~ praised by philosophers, members of holy orders, and others who value meditative

tranquillity? While such solitude may be occasionally salutary and pleasant, I find that Spinoza rejects *la vita solitaria* as a model for the good life.

C5.P47 In renaissance and early modern literature, it was common to complain of the burdens of society, the unruliness of crowds, and the distractions of city life. One such classic work in Spinoza's library was Petrarch's *De vita solitaria* (ca. 1346), in which Petrarch advocates a life of withdrawal not just for the holy man but also for the philosopher. The contemplative life, according to Petrarch, requires freedom from both the exigencies of civic duty and the trivialities of sociality. In addition to leisure time for study, thinking well demands insulation from social diversions such as fashion, gossip, and idle talk. Petrarch's ode to the virtues of solitude crystallizes an exclusive ideal of *la vita contemplativa* as the good life. On a classical republican model, in contrast, one might hope to enjoy a life of the mind *and* energetically contribute to the public good.³⁹ For Petrarch, however, the philosopher ought to withdraw from political and social engagement. The contemplative life is the solitary life, best enjoyed in the tranquil countryside: 'But whether we are intent upon God, or upon ourselves and our serious studies, or seeking a mind in harmony with our own, it behooves us to withdraw as far as may be from the haunts of men and crowded cities.'⁴⁰ Here Petrarch suggests that we ought to be freed from the worldly demands of shallow urban social existence to enjoy intellectual communion with a personal God.

C5.P48 Petrarch's impassioned and sustained argument for pastoral withdrawal and contemplation articulate a common theme in classical literature. It appears in Virgil and is recounted colorfully by Madeleine de Scudéry: Free from the corruption and deception of city life, 'you shall behold no other gold, than that of the beams of the sun; no other pearls than those of the dew drops on the enamel of our meads; nor other diamonds, than

³⁹ The activist strand of classical republicanism is associated above all with Machiavelli and extends to other thinkers of the Florentine renaissance, all with roots in Aristotle and Cicero. Steinberg examines the importance of civic activism for Spinoza in *Spinoza's Political Psychology*, ch. 5.

⁴⁰ Francis Petrarch, *The Life of Solitude [The Life of Solitude]*, J. Zeitlin (trans.) (Westport, CT: Hyperion, 1978), 105.

the liquid christal of our fountains. But...how pure is that gold!’⁴¹ She promises that ‘in our solitude I can find ought wherewith to make you forget those gallant things; and wherewith make you confesse that the Country life is to be preferred before that in Cities.’⁴²

C5.P49 Although he has his own reasons to desire to be left alone,⁴³ we might speculate that Descartes participates in this rhetorical tradition of comparing and contrasting the virtues of urban versus pastoral life when he observes the following in his *Discourse on the Method*:

C5.P50 Living here, amidst this great mass of busy people who are more concerned with their own affairs than curious about those of others, I have been able to lead a life as solitary [*solitaire*] and as withdrawn as if I were in the most remote desert, while lacking none of the comforts found in the most populous cities.⁴⁴

C5.P51 Descartes thus praises solitude but disputes the notion that it requires a country life. On the contrary, he declares, solitary withdrawal is more easily enjoyed when surrounded by people. The city provides greater anonymity and more contributors to the division of labor. Because you do not have to produce or barter for your amenities directly, city life provides a better context for the solitary, undisturbed practice of science.

C5.P52 Spinoza’s rhetorical context contained a lively polemic about urban versus rural life, in which the city represents a life in pursuit of honors and riches and the country promises a life of undisturbed contemplation. Spinoza seems to participate indirectly in this genre of literature in *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. There, he rejects popular, mundane goods and understands the supreme good to consist in knowledge of God and Nature. While it is true that Spinoza believes that goods such

⁴¹ Madeleine de Scudéry, *Several Witty Discourses, Pro and Con* [*Discourses*] (London: Printed for Henry Herringman at the Anchor on the lower walk in the New Exchange, 1661), 50.

⁴² De Scudéry, *Discourses*, 54.

⁴³ As Donald Rutherford pointed out in comments on the present essay, ‘In the background to this passage is the advantage he finds in living as an exile. The Dutch, busy with their own affairs, leave him alone—in contrast to the religious and political scrutiny he would be subject to in France.’

⁴⁴ René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method* [*Discourse on the Method*], part 3 (AT vi. 31, CSM i. 126).

as esteem, wealth, and sensual pleasure ought to be subordinated to the knowledge and love of God (Nature), he does not advocate social withdrawal or pastoral existence as the means to that end.⁴⁵ Indeed, he is concerned to dispute the value of social withdrawal.

C5.P53 Nevertheless, Spinoza has been understood by some influential commentators to prescribe a kind of Epicurean withdrawal à la Petrarch.⁴⁶ His ethics have been interpreted to advocate securing a space within which the sage can be free of those social and political obstacles to intellectual perfection. For Steven B. Smith, Spinoza prescribes a solitary *vita contemplativa*: ‘The exemplary life culminates in the life of the free person engaged in the solitary and virtually continual contemplation of God and the world.’⁴⁷ Smith acknowledges the value of friendship but insists that, because very few are able to enjoy intellectual virtue, according to Spinoza, those with rare intellectual gifts must guard their independence against the degrading forces of vulgar opinion and common prejudices. Such an interpretation appears to have textual support in propositions like the following: ‘a free man who lives among the ignorant strives, as far as he can, to avoid their favors’ (*E* 4p69).⁴⁸ Yet, these isolationist accounts of Spinozist freedom go beyond the letter of the *Ethics*. They do not suggest merely that, insofar as one is free, a free person will strive not be dependent on those with passions, objectives, and values formed in ignorance. Rather, they align solitude and

⁴⁵ See Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §§1–14. Spinoza unites intellectual perfection with human community in this text when he claims that ‘it is part of my happiness to take pains that many others understand as I understand... [and] to form a society of the kind that is desirable, so that as many as possible’ may enjoy the pleasures and powers of their natures (*TIE* §14). Andrea Sangiacomo contends that the social and political dimension of Spinoza’s perfectionism only becomes a necessary feature in the *Ethics*. Without assessing his argument for periodization, I think he is right to insist that the highest good of intellectual perfection depends on certain social and political conditions, and this is most forcefully present in the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise*. See A. Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, the Passions, and the Supreme Good [Reason, the Passions, and the Supreme Good]* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴⁶ The interpretations I survey below are no longer widely discussed by scholars, but they still shape popular representations of Spinoza as a fearless iconoclast, to be admired primarily for the extent to which he transcended his social context.

⁴⁷ Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 1997), 138.

⁴⁸ Cf. Petrarch: ‘But I should hold at arm’s length from it not merely the wicked, but the idle and ignorant as well’ (*The Life of Solitude*, 165).

rationality, implying a kinship between secession from the social and intellectual perfection.

C5.P54 For Yirmiyahu Yovel, Spinoza's biography exemplifies how enjoyment of the truth incurs the cost of solitude. Spinoza was, according to Yovel, 'alone in the deepest sense of the word'.⁴⁹ It is true that Spinoza's excommunication separated him from his natal community and the threat of persecution forced him to exercise caution in his communications and writing. There is no doubt that, although Spinoza enjoyed and deeply valued friendship,⁵⁰ he was forced to fortify himself against the possibility of imprisonment or violence for his heretical views.⁵¹ Yet, for Yovel, Spinoza's solitude is not a contingent feature of living in an environment hostile to his views or his person. Rather, knowledge, by its very nature, is isolating.

C5.P55 Spinoza had to conceal his deeper thoughts from the general public—and even to some extent from his own friends and disciples. The reason was not only prudence, but a sense of the depth and intimacy of the rational truth, which can hardly be shared by the vulgar and which even devoted rationalists may lack the depth and subtlety to grasp. This made Spinoza an extremely lonely thinker.⁵²

C5.P56 Solitude, in these narratives, is not so much a lamentable condition to be overcome as it is an inevitable consequence of the life of wisdom. Intellectual truths separate the wise from the ignorant. And the more distinguished a mind is by virtue of the truth it enjoys, the more isolated the person will be from others. Solitude becomes not just a description appropriate to an individual whose thoughts are uncommon but a value, a condition of possibility for a free and good life.

C5.P57 There can be no question that a certain kind of fortification, even secession from the mainstream, is needed for heterodox thinking and

⁴⁹ Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics [Spinoza]*, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 13.

⁵⁰ 'To me, of the things outside my power, I esteem none more than being allowed the honor of entering into a pact of friendship with people who sincerely love the truth' (Ep. 19; C i. 357).

⁵¹ See Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Consider especially the terrible fate of his friend Adriaan Koerbagh, discussed by Nadler in chapter 10.

⁵² Yovel, *Spinoza*, 31.

living to flourish. Nevertheless, I can scarcely imagine a less Spinozist conviction than the one that truth is fundamentally unshareable and isolating. It is deeply at odds with the doctrines of the common notions and of virtue.⁵³ It ignores the desire for friendship that necessarily follows from our active affects, as described in the *Ethics*. We could reflect upon the myriad remarks Spinoza makes about the virtues of society and friendship, or his insistence that from reason we most desire mental community (*E* 4p18s).⁵⁴ But, more straightforwardly, Spinoza directly refutes the Petrarchian notion that solitude is more advantageous to the rational than social and political life: ‘A man who is guided by reason is more free in a state [*civitas*], where he lives according to common decision, than in solitude [*solitudo*], where he obeys only himself’ (*E* 4p73). According to Spinoza, it is not only the incontinent, ignorant, and rebellious subjects who require a state. The free person, like anyone else, lives better and more freely when joined to the coordinated mental and physical powers of others.

C5.P58 Since *civitas* in Latin can be translated as ‘city’, ‘state’, or ‘commonwealth’, we might detect an implicit engagement in the background with the polemic about whether the city, filled with ambition and corruption, undermines virtue. At the time Spinoza was writing, cities were administrative centers of political power. Nation states were not yet the dominant form of political life, so ‘city’ could just be a more historically appropriate way of referring to the commonwealth. But perhaps Spinoza also means to indicate a preference on the part of the free not only for a life under laws but also for a life in quotidian contact with human beings? Living according to ‘common decision’ certainly refers to living with the benefit of civil order, but maybe the relevant contrast to *civitas* is not lawlessness? Perhaps the greater freedom a city allows includes those forms of practical

⁵³ Sangiacomo describes the common notions as the basis for Spinoza’s ‘cooperative’ understanding of reason. See *Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*, ch. 4.

⁵⁴ The social features of ethical perfection and human freedom are often underappreciated. Although feminist (and feminism-inspired) commentators have long emphasized the social, passionate, and imaginary means of ethical and political empowerment (e.g. Genevieve Lloyd, Moira Gatens, and Mathew Kisner), there is growing appreciation of these features in the wider scholarship. For example, see the recent studies by Andrea Sangiacomo (*Reason, the Passions, and the Supreme Good*) and Andrew Youpa. The latter declares that Spinoza is ‘above all, a philosopher of friendship’, in Andrew Youpa, *The Ethics of Joy: Spinoza on the Empowered Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 161.

intelligence that regular interaction with a diverse range of people in city life involves? Could Spinoza mean that life in a city is freer than a life retired to the countryside? Perhaps he is agreeing with Descartes that life in a city supports the life of a thinker, while questioning whether it is desirable to ‘lead a life as solitary and as withdrawn as if I were in the most remote desert’?⁵⁵

C5.P59 Admittedly, my notion that Spinoza may be intervening in a debate about the virtues of rural versus urban life is (rather!) speculative. Even if Spinoza did not have anyone in particular in mind when formulating proposition 73 of part IV of the *Ethics*, he clearly rejects the ideal of a solitary life here and elsewhere. For example, he is exasperated with what he calls ‘melancholic’ exhortations to abandon human society, even though he admits human beings can be quite irksome:

C5.P60 [I]t rarely happens that men live according to the guidance of reason. Instead, their lives are so constituted that they are usually envious and burdensome to one another. They can hardly, however, live a solitary life [*vita solitaria*]; hence, that definition which makes man a social animal has been quite pleasing to most. And surely we do derive, from the society of our fellow men, many more advantages than disadvantages.

C5.P61 So let the Satirists laugh as much as they like at human affairs, let the Theologians curse them, let Melancholics praise as much as they can a life that is uncultivated and wild, let them disdain men and admire the lower animals. (*E* 4p35s)

C5.P62 Humans, Spinoza surely had many occasions to witness, can be irritating and dangerous. But he ridicules those who advocate withdrawal, dismissing their misanthropic preference for wilderness over society. It is only great ‘impatience of mind, and a false zeal for religion’ that have made many, according to Spinoza, prefer ‘to live among the lower animals rather than among men’ (*E* 4app13). He accuses such people of a childish hatred of rules, norms, and an excessive fear of reproof. In these examples,

⁵⁵ Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, part 3.

Spinoza associates the desire for escape and retreat from the burdens of social and political life with pathos and childish contempt.⁵⁶

C5.P63 Those who act from reason, in contrast, strive to ‘form associations, to bind themselves by those bonds most apt to make one people of them, and absolutely, to do those things which strengthen friendships’ (*E* 4app12). Spinoza associates freedom with the art of encouraging society and friendship, and of combining powers of mind and body with others. Retreat and self-fortification may be necessary in turbulent times, under hostile social conditions.⁵⁷ But insofar as we exercise the powers characteristic of our natures, we joyously oppose hostility and win over as many others as we can (*E* 4p46s). The free person is generous, striving to ‘aid other men and join them in friendship’ (*E* 3p59s).⁵⁸ Thus, Spinoza represents the free life as an active, engaged, and social life that brings people together as friends and citizens.

C5.P64 Associating freedom with the *civitas* rather than *solitudo*, and representing social withdrawal as pathological, Spinoza rhetorically paints an unappealing picture of solitude. His *Ethics* participates obliquely in a rhetorical tradition concerning the nature of the best life, and expressly rejects the solitary and rustic life. His suspicion of the solitary ideal as an escape from laws and rules and a flight toward community with beasts and wilderness coheres with his political philosophy. His *Political Treatise* represents solitude as a fundamental evil and advocates tying the monarch to the mast of law and arming him with the virtue of his own constituents (*TP* 7/1). Solitude represents here an evasion of rules, a resistance to thinking in common, and an inability to cooperate toward shared ends. Fear of solitude animates a desire for civil order that allows

⁵⁶ In another context, however, he suggests that the ‘childish’ impulse to contest rules is a healthy feature of democratic life (*TP* 6/4). It seems that challenging rules, for Spinoza, is a valuable way to increase our mental powers, but that fleeing social order altogether is anathema to our mental and physical flourishing.

⁵⁷ I don’t mean to suggest that Spinoza rejects episodic solitary contemplation. If we can occasionally, or even regularly, enjoy private time to contemplate, it is precisely because, as Descartes himself attests, we are socially supported. Descartes mentions how the social division of labor provides him the opportunity for solitude, which is certainly true. We also depend upon a somewhat well-ordered commonwealth. But perhaps most of all, we think well when we have enjoyed quality care, education, and intellectual companionship. This is a richly social life with opportunity for tranquil reflection rather than a paradigmatically solitary life.

⁵⁸ I replace Curley’s translation of ‘nobility’ for *generositas*, since ‘generosity’ better indicates its relationship to Descartes’s highest virtue of *générosité* from *Passions of the Soul*.

us to coordinate our powers to think and act in mutual support of living in a ‘human’ way. And yet, solitude is like the siren’s song, calling us away from the arduous and sometimes dangerous work of striving to think and act in harmony. When frustrated by the unreasonableness (and worse) of our fellows, it is not strange to desire escape and liberation from civil strife, conflict, and the uncertainties of living among those with diverse temperaments, passions, and ideals. If we enjoy a position of power, we may shun consultation and collaboration. It is slower and more difficult than acting on one’s own: ‘while the Romans deliberate Sagantum is lost.’ But Spinoza urges, nonetheless:

C5.P65 [W]hen the few decide everything, simply on the basis of their own affects, freedom and the common good are lost. For human wits are too sluggish to penetrate everything right away. But by asking advice, listening, and arguing, they’re sharpened. When people try all means, in the end, they find ways to the things they want which everyone approves and no one had ever thought of before. (TP 9/14)

C5.P66 Arguing and listening generate ideas and open paths to what we desire. These more potent ideas and better paths are foreclosed by isolation. Thus, Spinoza declares that even the free live better when they unite themselves under common decision. Attention to Spinoza’s remarks on solitude helps us to see not only that the supreme good is something that is best enjoyed in community with others, but that our vital interests can be threatened by the appeal of solitude.⁵⁹

C5.P67

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⁵⁹ I worked on this essay over several years and it certainly was not a product of solitude. I benefitted from questions and comments from so many generous interlocutors that I cannot name them all. Nevertheless, I would like to express special gratitude to my colleagues in the Research Group on Constitutional Studies at McGill, to Donald Rutherford and the anonymous referees at *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, and to Will Roberts (who endured and improved several drafts) for their perspicacious remarks and questions. I am indebted as well to the research support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.