

# Citizens and States in Spinoza's *Political Treatise*

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In his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza repeatedly compares states to human beings. In this interpretation of the comparisons, I present a progressively more restrictive account of Spinoza's views about the nature of human beings in the *Ethics* and show at each step how those views inform the account of states in the *Political Treatise*. Because, like human beings, states are individuals, they strive to persevere in existence. Because, like human beings, states are composed of parts that are individuals, states' parts also strive to persevere in being. Finally, because in states, as in human beings, a change to the power of striving of a part can be at the same time a change to the whole that differs in kind, strong states can be bad for their citizens and states that serve their citizens well may nevertheless be weak. Spinoza's principal project in the *Political Treatise* is to design states that are stable and good for their citizens. This account of the comparisons shows why that project is so difficult: one cannot design a good state simply by designing a stable state.

## 1. Introduction

In his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza repeatedly compares states to human beings. He writes, for example, that 'like each citizen or like a man in the state of nature, the greater reason for fear a state has, the less it is its own master' (TP 3.9); that 'the rules and causes of fear and respect bind the state by no reason other than that by which they bind a man in the state of nature: so that he can rule himself and not be an enemy to himself, he must take care not to kill himself' (TP 4.5); and that 'the best life is that which a man or a state leads insofar as it is most its own ruler' (TP 5.1).<sup>1</sup>

These comparisons promise needed insight into Spinoza's understanding of the nature of states in the *Political Treatise*. Spinoza's stated purpose in the work is to show how, given the way human beings actually are, states may remain stable (TP 1.6) and help people

<sup>1</sup> I use the following abbreviations for references to Spinoza 1925: *Ethics*=E followed by conventional abbreviations for the apparatus; *Political Treatise*=TP; *Theological Political Treatise*=TTP; *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*=TIE. References include Chapter or Section number and Gebhardt volume, page, and line where necessary. Translations of Spinoza's Latin are my own, frequently in consultation with Curley (Spinoza 2016).

to live cooperatively and securely (TP 1.3). The *Theological Political Treatise*, although of course a valuable source of insight into the *Political Treatise*, has a different purpose, the defence of the freedom to philosophize; moreover, the relation between its doctrines and those of Spinoza's other works is contentious.<sup>2</sup> Neither work offers a detailed account of the metaphysical status of the state. That leaves the *Ethics*, among Spinoza's mature works, as the source for understanding his views. Spinoza does rely upon the *Ethics* in the *Political Treatise*, evidence that the latter builds upon the former.<sup>3</sup> The *Ethics*, however, offers only a sketchy account of states, the bulk of which may be found in two scholia to E4p37. In contrast, Spinoza devotes four of the five parts of the *Ethics* to the human being. The comparisons in the *Political Treatise*, then, explain the state in terms of the finite thing that Spinoza describes in the greatest detail.

Here, I defend an interpretation of the comparisons. I present a progressively more restrictive account of Spinoza's views about the nature of human beings in the *Ethics* and show at each step how those views inform the account of states in the *Political Treatise*. I argue first that Spinoza characterizes the human being as an individual and a singular thing. All such things, Spinoza maintains, strive to persevere in existence. The comparisons suggest, therefore, that the state does also. Next, I describe a further property that Spinoza takes to be distinctive of human beings: we are composed of parts that are themselves individuals. Spinoza's comparisons suggest that he takes this also to be true of states. Attention to the association of individuality and striving requires that we understand this view to mean, principally, that in human beings and states alike the whole strives to persevere in its existence but each part also strives to persevere in its existence. Third, I argue that there is a property that, on the account of the *Ethics*, distinguishes human beings even from some other highly composite individuals. Changes that increase the power with which parts of the human body strive can at the same time decrease the power of the body as a whole, and changes that decrease the power of parts of the human body can at the same time increase the power of the body. Spinoza's comparisons offer a metaphysical basis, then, for

<sup>2</sup> Central issues include the relation of the God of the *Ethics* to the tenets of universal faith that Spinoza presents in TTP 14 and the theory of contract as a basis for states, which is explicit at TTP 16 but absent in the TP.

<sup>3</sup> See, notably, TP 1.5, which makes several doctrines in the *Ethics* bases for arguments to follow. Other prominent references include TP 2.1, 2.24, and 7.6.

the conclusions that strong states may be bad for their citizens and that states that serve their citizens well may nevertheless be fragile.

Scholarly attention to the comparisons has focused on the question of realism. Some critics argue that in the comparisons Spinoza takes states to be real individuals.<sup>4</sup> Others defend antirealist positions on which Spinoza's language is merely figurative.<sup>5</sup> One, Justin Steinberg, finds that the question of realism does not matter greatly.<sup>6</sup>

In the conclusion, I address the implications of this interpretation for the debate. I take Spinoza to be a realist in the disputed sense. States really are finite things, on Spinoza's account. They really strive to persevere and have parts that strive to persevere. A state's power to persevere in being really correlates only imperfectly with the power to persevere in any of its parts. These conclusions show why the debate matters. To deny the reality of states is to underestimate the challenge that Spinoza sets himself in trying to secure both the stability of states and the good of citizens.

## 2. Citizens and states as finite things

For Spinoza, to suggest that the state is like a human being is in the first instance to say that it, like a human being, is a finite thing. To be a finite thing, for Spinoza, is to strive to persevere in being. The comparisons therefore suggest that states, like human beings, strive to persevere in being.

Two technical terms in the *Ethics*, 'singular thing' and 'individual', characterize finite things in causal and structural ways respectively. Spinoza offers a definition of 'singular things' at the beginning of his account of the human mind in *Ethics* 2:

By 'singular things' I understand things that have a finite and determinate existence. If many individuals concur in such a way in one action that they are all together the cause of one effect, I consider them all to this extent a singular thing. (E2d7)

<sup>4</sup> See Meinecke (1965); Matheron (1969, pp. 37-62); Garrett (1996, n. 42); Balibar (1998); Blom (2007); and Steinberg (2019).

<sup>5</sup> See Joachim (1901, p. 130); McShea (1968, pp. 129-136); Den Uyl (1983, pp. 68-80); Rice (1990, pp. 271-286); Barbone (2002); Negri (2004, p. 45); and Campos (2010).

<sup>6</sup> See Steinberg (2013, §5).

Here, Spinoza's language is explicitly causal: insofar as individuals collectively cause some effect, they are a singular thing.

The definition of 'individual', which may be found several pages later in an interruption to the account of mind in *Ethics* 2 known as the 'physical discursus', emphasizes structure:

When some bodies, of the same or of different sizes, are so constrained by others that they press upon one another, or if they move with the same or different grades of speed so that they communicate their motions to one another by a certain fixed ratio, we will say that those bodies are united with one another and likewise that they all compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from others through this union of bodies. (Definition following E2p13 at G II/99-100)

The definition introduces two sufficient conditions on individuality: (1) if bodies press upon one another or (2) if bodies communicate their motions to one another by a certain fixed ratio, they compose one individual. This is perhaps not a hard distinction, sorting all individuals into one type or the other. Not being in motion with respect to one another and in effect locking each other into this relation by pressing against one another may be a basic way of having a certain fixed ratio. If so, everything that satisfies the first condition also satisfies the second. In any case, it is the language of the second condition—the language of ratio—that appears frequently in subsequent arguments in the *Ethics* and in Spinoza's characterizations of human beings.

Propositions and other claims concerning striving to persevere in being in *Ethics* 3 associate the causal language of E2d7 with the structural language of the definition of 'individual'. At E3p6, Spinoza claims that each thing, to the extent that it can, strives to persevere in being. The demonstration, which begins, 'For singular things are modes. . .', makes it clear that 'each thing' in the proposition refers to each singular thing. So understood the proposition offers an account of what it is that things cause insofar as they are singular things: their own perseverance. The proposition that follows suggests that any singular thing's striving to persevere is its essence (E3p7), a characterization that Spinoza takes to imply that all of the human mind's effects are to be understood in terms of this striving (E3p9). Where Spinoza offers an account of the essence of a human body in the demonstration to E2p24, however, he identifies the body's certain fixed ratio as its essence: 'The parts composing the human body pertain to the essence of the body itself only insofar as they communicate their motions to one another in a certain

fixed ratio (see the definition [following E2p13])'.<sup>7</sup> The ratio that makes a human body an individual on the account of the definition of 'individual' is therefore also the causal power by which it strives by E3p6 and in virtue of which it is to some extent a singular thing by E2d7.<sup>8</sup>

The account at E2p24 explicitly concerns human beings rather than finite things more broadly. This need not matter a great deal in the present context: the passages in the *Political Treatise* are comparisons of the state not to a finite thing generically but to a human being. There is nevertheless reason to take the argument of the last paragraph to have broad implications that ought to matter to critics who take Spinoza to deny individuality to states. Spinoza contends that much of what he shows about human beings in the *Ethics* is perfectly general (E2p13cs, E3Pref), and the propositions in question appear to depend upon no views that characterize human beings narrowly. Because the account is general, it suggests that 'singular thing' and 'individual' are materially equivalent;<sup>9</sup> that any finite cause is a finite thing; and that any finite thing strives to persevere in being. Spinoza's claim in the *Political Treatise* that 'man, like all other individuals, strives to the extent that he can to preserve his being' (TP 2.7) is evidence both that he continues there to maintain material equivalence, because he uses 'individuals' where at E3p6's demonstration he uses 'singular things', and also that he continues to take all finite causes to strive to persevere in being, because that is the doctrine of E3p6. These doctrines suggest, even setting the comparisons of the *Political Treatise* to one side, that Spinoza takes states—and many, many more things—to be individuals.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> E4p39 includes a similar passage.

<sup>8</sup> How to understand relations among these concepts, and particularly between power and essence, remains a subject of debate. Letter 64, to Tschirnhaus, E3p7, and E4p5 are central passages. Recent discussions include LeBuffe (2009); Marshall (2013, pp. 58-103); and Hübner (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Bennett (1984, pp. 138-139) and Gueroult (1974, p. 165) argue that there is a distinction between singular things and individuals. For arguments against a sharp distinction, see Curley (1988, pp. 156-157); Garrett (1994); and Melamed (2013, pp. 74-79). Because 'individual' on Spinoza's definition clearly refers only to composite things, one might begin the task of arguing against the material equivalence of the terms by noting that what Spinoza calls 'simple bodies' may, on the basis of the first sentence of E2d7, be singular things but are not composite. Another salient difference is that E2d7 explicitly invokes an incremental notion, on which causes are singular things to an extent, whereas the definition of 'individual' does not.

<sup>10</sup> Campos (2010, pp. 16-23) argues that Spinoza could take the state to be a genuine thing only at the cost of making any given 'set of parts' an individual. It is not clear that this is a cost, however. The position, universalism or unrestricted composition, continues to have prominent, sophisticated adherents (see, for example, Lewis 1986, pp. 212-213 or Sider 2001,

Because Spinoza aims at stable states in the *Political Treatise*, the relation between perseverance and duration is of particular interest here.<sup>11</sup> In the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes between eternity and duration (E1d8Exp.); rejects a straightforward association of perseverance and duration (E3p8); and identifies a greater power to persevere for minds with a more robust existence in some eternal sense (E5pp20-42). These positions show that he does not simply equate a greater power to persevere with greater duration. The clearest expression of this view is Spinoza's conviction that, however great a finite thing's power may become, there will always be more powerful forces external to it (E4pp3-5).<sup>12</sup>

Spinoza nevertheless maintains that the power a body possesses is a power to resist the destructive influence of external forces and so to preserve the fixed ratio of motion among its parts that characterizes it. This position suggests that more powerful bodies tend to endure longer than less powerful ones. Evidence that Spinoza accepts this implication may be found in both the *Ethics* and, as we have seen, the *Political Treatise* (TP 4.5), where he opposes the striving to persevere and death. At the scholium to E4p18, for example, he writes that 'reason demands that everyone...strive to preserve his own being'. Then he argues that it follows from this account of striving that those who kill themselves are weak and overcome by external causes. Similarly he maintains that if, *per impossibile*, human beings were not vulnerable to external forces, we would 'not die' (*non posset perire*) and 'always exist' (*semper existere*).<sup>13</sup>

Further evidence may be found in Spinoza's accounts of bodies' complexity, capability, and power. His accounts of complex bodies (E2pp13-14), some of which I discuss below in §3, suggest that more complex bodies persist through more changes in their parts. For

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pp. 120-139). Recent interpretations of Spinoza's accounts of finite things by Lord (2010, pp. 61-63), LeBuffe (2018, Chapter 1) and Newlands (2018, Chapter 6) do not rule out universalism; Melamed (2013, Chapter 2) explicitly attributes it to Spinoza.

<sup>11</sup> Prominent uses of 'stable' (*stabile*) include TP 1.6, 5.7, 6.8, 6.39, and 7.1. Spinoza also uses 'to last' (*permanere*) to express this aim (TP 1.6, 7.25, 8.1).

<sup>12</sup> See also E2p30, E2p45, E3p8, and the end of E4Preface.

<sup>13</sup> Spinoza's views on the relation between human perseverance and life remain a subject of critical debate. Notable contributions include Youpa (2003), Della Rocca (2010), and Nadler (2016), which distinguish between perseverance in being and duration; Garrett (1990) and LeBuffe (2017, pp. 112-119) find a close association. Central texts include E4p20s, on suicide; and recommendations of honesty (E4p72) and loyalty (TTP 20, G III/241), which at least appear to value them above life.

example, he argues that the most complex body, the whole of nature, persists through all changes (E2p13L7s). Spinoza argues in *Ethics* 4 that such complexity makes bodies more capable (E4p38). There he also argues that more capability is good (E4p39), an indication that an increase in capability is an increase in power. Spinoza's association of more capable bodies with minds that have a more robust eternal existence (5p39) suggests a similar conclusion.<sup>14</sup> Spinoza therefore associates complexity and the ability that it gives bodies to persist through change—that is, to endure—with capability and the power to persevere.

Because human beings are individuals, Spinoza's comparisons of states to human beings in the *Political Treatise* suggest, then, that states are also individuals. The state therefore strives for its own perseverance in being. Perseverance is certainly something more than duration. States that strive with more power tend to endure longer, however, and Spinoza's effort to produce stable states emphasizes this aspect of power.

Other features of the text support this interpretation. Spinoza frequently mentions the power of the state or, what he takes to extend as far as power extends, its right.<sup>15</sup> He uses both terms, for example, in his comparison of the state to a human being at TP 3.2: '[J]ust as each person [*unusquisque*] in the state of nature, so also the body and mind of the whole state [*imperii*] has as much right as it has power'.<sup>16</sup> As we have seen, anything's power just is a power to persevere, so passages like this one suggest that a state strives to persevere.

A few passages suggest this conclusion more explicitly. At TP 4.5, recall, Spinoza argues that states are bound by the laws of nature, just as individual human beings are, not to kill themselves. This suggests that states strive to persevere in being and that more powerful states tend to last longer. In the same passage, Spinoza goes on to argue that the state is bound by natural law 'to hold nothing to be good or evil unless it has judged it to be good or evil for itself', a passage that echoes his account at TP 2.18 of the way natural law binds individual

<sup>14</sup> Recent accounts of consciousness in Spinoza (Garrett 2008; Nadler 2008; LeBuffe 2010b) emphasize the relation between complexity and power.

<sup>15</sup> For the association of power and right, see E4p37s1; TTP 16, G III/189-190; and TP 2.3-2.4.

<sup>16</sup> Other relevant passages include TP 2.13-17, 3.6, and 3.11-12. See also TTP 16, G III/193-194 and, what may be its basis, TTP 3, G III/47. Garrett (2010) and Grey (forthcoming) inform my account of right. Barbone (2002, p. 106), who nevertheless differs, informs my account of TP 3.2.

human beings. Spinoza's understanding and use of value terms remains a subject of critical debate. However, he certainly associates a human being's judgment that something is good, in some way, with what increases that person's power to persevere.<sup>17</sup> A state's judgment that something is good, then, reflects its nature in a similar way.

In building toward another of the comparisons, Spinoza argues that reason prescribes self-preservation to a state just as it does to a human being and that there is a best way for a state to live just as there is a best way for a human being to live:

Because the best way of living, to preserve oneself as much as possible, is founded upon the prescription of reason, it follows therefore that the best life is that which a man or a state leads insofar as it is most its own ruler . . . I say that it is one thing to defend oneself, preserve oneself, and judge for oneself by right and that it is another thing [to do these] in the best way. (TP 5.1)<sup>18</sup>

Like human beings, states should preserve themselves, and they should do so in the best way.

Finally, Spinoza refers to the state's health and associates it closely with preservation. He argues at TP 10.1, for example, that because dictators' authority is not usually stable, 'the health and preservation of the republic' in a dictatorship will usually be uncertain.<sup>19</sup> The instability of dictatorships makes them weak. They will not necessarily fall as a consequence, just as strong individuals do not necessarily endure. Their weakness, however, does make them more vulnerable to existential threats.

In the *Political Treatise*, then, Spinoza treats states as finite things. That is, a state is a singular thing with its own effects and an individual with its own structure. Spinoza's account of the effects that any singular thing has at E3pp6-9 suggests, moreover, that the activity of a state, like that of a human being, is that which, if unimpeded,

<sup>17</sup> For Spinoza's theory of the good, see E3p9s, E3p39s, E4Pref, E4d1-d2, and E4p8. How precisely Spinoza associates perseverance and the good is a matter of on-going debate. Recent discussions include LeBuffe (2010, pp. 160-174); Della Rocca (2010), which emphasizes politics; Kisner (2011, pp. 87-111); and Youpa (2020, Chapter 3).

<sup>18</sup> Spinoza suggests here that states judge for themselves (*sese judicium ferre*), a central issue for a prominent recent discussion of the individuality of states (List and Pettit 2006). Spinoza tends to write, however, about the highest authority's judgment (TP 6.2, 7.30, 10.1). Sharp (2011) and Tucker (2019) are recent works on Spinoza's importance for political theory today.

<sup>19</sup> See also TP 1.6, 3.14, and 8.48.



preserves it. The project of the *Political Treatise*, in part, is to design stable states. These points suggest that one way to do so is to build powerful states that will tend to strive successfully.

### 3. Citizens and states as individuals composed of individuals

On a second, more restrictive understanding of what Spinoza takes a human being to be, to suggest that the state is like a human being is to suggest that the state is an individual composed of individuals. As in §1, the most important implications of this view concern striving. Any individual, for Spinoza, strives to persevere in being. To attribute this structure to the state, then, is to suggest that, while the state strives to persevere in its being, each of its citizens also strives to persevere in being. Although states and their citizens are interdependent, their striving, power, and perseverance differ.

Spinoza's foundational account of the structure of the human body, in a postulate of the physical discursus, emphasizes the point that it is composed of individuals: 'E2p13P1: The human body is composed of many individuals diverse in nature, each of which is highly composite'. Supposing a hand to be a part of the body, Spinoza's characterizations of individuals together with this postulate suggest that the hand strives to persevere in its being.<sup>20</sup> Like other composite individuals, moreover, changes to the hand can be changes in its striving, which can be more or less powerful.

Spinoza recognizes these points in the *Ethics*, where his accounts of the human affects incorporate them. Spinoza introduces the claim that the human body's power can change in a postulate at the beginning of *Ethics* 3. At Ep11, he argues that changes to the body's power are also changes to the mind's power. In the demonstration, he identifies these changes with changes in the perfection of mind and body.<sup>21</sup> Then, in a scholium, he introduces the human affects:

By 'joy' [*laetitia*], therefore, I shall understand in what follows a passion by which a mind passes to greater perfection. By 'sadness' [*tristitia*], however, a passion by which it passes to lesser perfection. From this point, I shall call the affect of joy, when it is related to

<sup>20</sup> Here I follow the example in Aristotle's *Politics* (1253a). James (2012, p. 244) notes the importance of this discussion to Spinoza. Letter 32, to Oldenburg, suggests that Spinoza would agree that hands are parts of the body.

<sup>21</sup> See also the General Definition of the Affects following E3.

mind and body at once, ‘pleasure’ [*titillatio*] or ‘cheerfulness’ [*hilaritas*]; that of sadness, however, ‘pain’ [*dolor*] or ‘melancholy’ [*melancholia*]. But, it should be noted, pleasure and pain are ascribed to a man when one part of him is affected more than the others, but cheerfulness and melancholy when all parts are equally affected. (E3p11s)

Joy has two basic forms: an increase in power to the whole of a person’s body, which is cheerfulness, and an increase in power to one part of a person’s body more than the others, which is pleasure. Similarly, sadness can relate to the whole body (melancholy) or to one part of it more than the others (pain). Pleasure and pain and their forms, on this account, are changes primarily in the power of parts of the body. Again, supposing that a hand is a part of a body, an increase in the hand’s power is pleasure (rather than cheerfulness) for the whole, and a decrease in the hand’s power is pain.

As he does at E3p11s, Spinoza tends to emphasize mind in his accounts of the affects.<sup>22</sup> There is nevertheless a strand of argument building on this proposition that indicates the importance of pleasure and pain to his psychology. At E4p60, Spinoza argues that in desires arising from these passions we have no regard for the advantage of the whole. Then, in a scholium, he writes that most human desire is like this: ‘Because, then, most joy is related to one part of the body, we therefore mostly desire to preserve ourselves with no consideration of our health as a whole’ (E4p60s).<sup>23</sup>

A strong view of biological unity might be one on which the nature of the whole saturates it, excluding any independent nature in its parts. On such a view, there is no sense in saying that something makes my hand more or less powerful unless perhaps this is a way of referring indirectly to what makes me so. Likewise, if the state were such a unity, there would be no sense in saying that something makes a citizen more or less powerful unless perhaps doing so were a way of referring to what makes the state so.<sup>24</sup> Spinoza’s account of the human body and subsequent account of the passions rule out such a view of the biological unity of the human being. My parts are individuals, so

<sup>22</sup> See the end of E3p59s or E3App.3Exp.

<sup>23</sup> The doctrine of E3p11s associates with these passages by way of Ep43 (see §3 here), Ep44, Ep44s, and E4p60.

<sup>24</sup> This worry seems to push [Barbone \(2002, p. 107; cf. Berlin 2002, p. 193\)](#) to take Spinoza to deny genuine individuality to states. [Steinberg \(2019, §2\)](#) offers an effective response.

they have their own striving and power, which can be characterized independently of my own.

Comparisons of the state to a human being in the *Political Treatise* suggest that the state is similar: it strives and has power, and each person who lives in the state also strives and has power. Spinoza's commitment to this view is evident in his accounts of right. We have seen that right is a function of power and that for a thing to have power, it must strive and be an individual. To give up one's right in belonging to a state, then, would, for Spinoza, be to give up one's own power and individuality. Spinoza, however, forcefully maintains that citizens do not give up their right in belonging to a state. A letter to Jarig Jelles, in which he distinguishes between his view and Hobbes's, is clear:

As far as politics is concerned, the difference you ask about, between Hobbes and me, is this: I always preserve natural right unimpaired, and I maintain that in each state the supreme magistrate has no more right over its subjects than it has greater power over them. (Letter 50, [Spinoza 2016](#), vol. 2, p. 406)<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, on Spinoza's view, human beings arrange their power in different ways in different states, and a group of human beings entering a state for the first time would gather the powers of each together, at least for certain purposes, in contributing to the great power of this new entity. In distinguishing himself here from Hobbes (who nevertheless conceives of natural right in a different way), Spinoza emphasizes the point, however, that the organization of individual human beings' powers in a state is not any kind of intrinsic change to the individuals' powers.<sup>26</sup>

Spinoza's accounts of individuals and states in the *Political Treatise* retain the notions of right and power that distinguish Spinoza from Hobbes in Letter 50.<sup>27</sup> Any individual's right, by nature, is a function of its power: '[E]ach natural thing has as much right by nature as it

<sup>25</sup> This is Curley's translation of Spinoza's Dutch, lightly edited.

<sup>26</sup> [Garrett \(2010, p. 205\)](#) informs my interpretation of Letter 50.

<sup>27</sup> Some closely related views do change over Spinoza's different works. An earlier explicit theory of contract (TTP, Chapter 16) is not present in the *Political Treatise*. Grey (forthcoming) points out that in an earlier account, the association of individual right and power derives from the power of the whole of nature (TTP 16, G III/189), whereas in the TP, drawing probably upon the demonstration to E3p6, Spinoza derives the association from the power of God (TP 2.3).

has power to exist and work' (TP 2.3; cf. TTP 16, G III/189). Any two individuals might have more right, just as they have more power, by cooperating in bringing about some effect (TP 2.13). Therefore, a great number of individuals cooperating in a state, which Spinoza calls 'the multitude', have a great right and a great power (TP 2.17). The multitude's power and its use by the state, however, is a function of individuals' on-going, contingent cooperation.

The point that the state is an individual composed of individuals is familiar in Hobbes, whose views Spinoza clearly considered, and in the history of philosophy generally.<sup>28</sup> However, Spinoza's comparison of the human being and the state is, in this respect, closer than the analogy in Hobbes. Spinoza's comparison emphasizes the point that the state and the human being share this particular kind of composition: from the facts that the human being is an individual composed of individuals and that the state is like the human being, we learn that the state is an individual composed of individuals.<sup>29</sup> Hobbes makes the state an artificial man, and one sense in which for Hobbes the artificial man differs from the natural is that an artificial man has, where a natural man does not, natural individuals for parts.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Citizens and states as highly complex individuals

This section offers a still more restrictive characterization of the human being: on Spinoza's account, the human being differs even from other individuals that are composed of individuals in virtue of its high degree of complexity. In the human being, but not in some less complex individuals, a change to the individuals that compose the whole can be at the same time a change to the whole that differs in kind. If my hand is a part of me, for example, an increase in the power of my hand might be at the same time a decrease in my own power.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to Aristotle, cited above, Machiavelli and Hobbes were important sources for Spinoza. Spinoza refers to Machiavelli's comparison of the state to a human being explicitly at TP 10.1. See Machiavelli (1996 III.1). Spinoza owned and clearly read carefully Hobbes's *de Cive* (1983 5.9-10). He may also have been familiar with *Leviathan* (see Malcolm 2002, p. 47). Compare TP 3.11-13 to *de Cive* 10.17 or *Leviathan* (Hobbes 2012 vol. 2, p. 196, ll. 1-9).

<sup>29</sup> Balibar (1998, pp. 64-72) emphasizes correctly that the state for Spinoza is an individual of individuals. This characteristic, however, does not distinguish states from their own citizens.

<sup>30</sup> By 'natural individual', which might have a pragmatic sense in other contexts for Hobbes, I mean one that strives to preserve itself. Hobbes reserves striving, so understood, to animals where Spinoza does not. See *de Corpore* 25.12 (Hobbes 1839-1845 1.332). James (1997, Chapter 6) offers a useful comparison of striving in Hobbes and Spinoza.

Likewise, a decrease in my hand's power may be an increase in my own. To say that the state is like a human being is, once again, to say something similar about the state. Notably (for Spinoza might conceive of the state as having parts greater or smaller than its citizens), the power of citizens and that of the state may diverge on Spinoza's account. We want our states to secure our own good, that is, to make us more powerful. Spinoza's comparisons of the state to the human being warn us that we cannot secure that end simply by making the state more powerful.

Spinoza distinguishes between particularly complex individuals, such as the human being, and others by referring to persistence conditions. Four lemmata (LL4-7) in the physical discursus describe persistence conditions for any individual. Any individual persists without any change to its form (*absque ulla formae mutatione*) through some replacements of parts (L4); some changes in which its parts become greater or lesser (*maiores minoresve*) (L5)<sup>31</sup>; some changes to the motions of its parts (L6); and some motions of the whole (L7). At the end of the lemmata, Spinoza proceeds to refer to changes that more complex individuals only might survive:

To this point, we have considered an individual that is composed only of bodies that are distinguished from one another by motion and rest, speed and slowness, that is, that are composed only of the simplest bodies. But if we now consider a different individual [*aliud*], composed of many individuals diverse in nature, we will discover that it can be affected in many other ways with its nature nevertheless preserved (E2p13L7S)

In this scholium, Spinoza introduces a new kind of individual, different from what he has discussed so far. He describes the difference first in structural terms. A complex individual is *not* composed only of the simplest bodies. Instead it is composed of 'many individuals diverse in nature', a phrase that, as we have seen, recurs in the discursus' account of the human body. Spinoza goes on to assert that such individuals can survive kinds of change beyond those described in the lemmata.

The scholium does not describe these changes. Because, however, Spinoza does introduce a paradigm of such an individual, the human body (E2p13P1), we may look to subsequent arguments in the *Ethics*

<sup>31</sup> *Majores minoresve* is difficult to translate. In letter 39, to Jelles, the only other occurrence in Spinoza's works, it means simply 'bigger or smaller' (G IV/193). Spinoza's application of L5 at E3Post.1 may suggest that the phrase there means 'more or less powerful'.

for accounts of the sorts of changes that a human being can survive but which LL 4-7 do not describe. The best candidate for the sort of change the survival of which marks the great complexity of the human body is a change to the power of its parts that is not reflected in the same change to the power of the whole. We have already seen that the human being can undergo changes in power and that some of these—pleasure and pain—are changes principally to some parts.<sup>32</sup> Later in the *Ethics*, Spinoza offers more detail, arguing that such changes need not even be the same kind of change to the whole:

E4p43: Pleasure can be excessive and bad; pain, however, can be good to the extent that pleasure, or joy, is bad.

Dem.: Pleasure is joy, which, insofar as it relates to a body, consists in this: one or some of its parts are affected more than others (see 3p11s). The power of this affect can be so great that it exceeds other actions of the body (4p6); sticks stubbornly to it; and so renders the body less able to be affected in many other ways. Therefore it can be bad. . . [A similar argument concludes that pain can be good if it counteracts a bad pleasure.]

On this view, parts of the body can gain power in such a way that the body as a whole loses power and can lose power in such a way that the body as a whole gains power. For example, an immoderate devotion to sit-ups might strengthen my abdominals in a way that harms my posture and so my overall strength. Likewise, in such a predicament, neglecting and so weakening my abdominals might improve my overall strength.<sup>33</sup>

Spinoza does not describe changes of this sort in his account of the persistence conditions for individuals generally at LL4-7, nor does he refer to the lemmata in the demonstration to E4p43. He leaves the claim that there are such changes without detailed explanation. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the scholium following Lemma 7, Spinoza maintains that there are changes that complex individuals but not other individuals can survive but that are not described in the

<sup>32</sup> As Peterman (2017, p. 116) notes, L4 and L6 suggest that the human body can also survive changes which do not change its power.

<sup>33</sup> Spinoza himself does not offer an example that names particular parts of the body. Instead he refers to different corporeal pleasures and simply asserts that each relates to one part of the body more than others (E4p44s, E4p45s). Because, as we have seen, most of our desires arise from such affects, Spinoza recommends that we please ourselves in many different ways in moderation, so that the body's 'many parts of diverse natures' flourish equally (E4p45s). In effect, he recommends a diversified exercise regimen.

lemmata. It is therefore plausible to conclude that the human being's persistence through these sorts of changes distinguishes it from many other, simpler individuals.

Highly complex individuals, then, have parts that are themselves highly composite individuals of different natures and, presumably in virtue of this complexity, survive some changes that other kinds of individuals do not. This capacity in the human body shows itself when it persists through a change to the power of some of its parts that is at the same time a change to the power of the whole that differs in kind. A specific way of understanding Spinoza's comparison of states to human beings is to take him to suggest that states are similar: what makes a citizen more powerful can weaken the state and what weakens a citizen can make the state more powerful.

One might be tempted, on the basis of the rest of the scholium to Lemma 7, to argue that the state can survive an even greater variety of changes than a human being:

But if we conceive of yet a third kind of individual composed of [individuals of the second kind], we will discover that it can be affected in many other ways without any change to its form [*absque ulla ejus formae mutatione*]. And if we go in this way to infinite, we can easily conceive the whole of nature to be one individual whose parts—that is, all bodies—vary in infinite ways without any change to the whole individual. (E2p13L7S)

On the supposition that the state is still more complex than the human being, we might conclude that in virtue of this complexity it is closer to the whole of nature than a human being. So understood, the state will have still further persistence conditions than a human being.

Spinoza's accounts of right, on which, as we have seen in §2, natural human beings who combine their rights create a more powerful thing (TP 2.13, 2.17), may support this interpretation. Given the correlation between complexity and power, the greater complexity of the combination may, at least in part, explain its greater power. Nevertheless it is difficult to support a general version of the conclusion. Although the whole of nature presumably does incorporate all of the complexity of its parts, the incrementalism of Spinoza's accounts of singular things suggests that finite things frequently do not.<sup>34</sup> A pyramid built of philosophers, for example, would not fully incorporate the

<sup>34</sup> As I read E2p13L7s, Spinoza maintains that any given individual, I<sub>2</sub>, more complex than another, I<sub>1</sub>, will be more complex in virtue of its structure, and that one way of conceiving of

complexity of its components into its structure; mannequins might serve just as well. Spinoza's scholium rules out neither an account of states on which they are more complex nor one on which they are, like the human pyramid, less complex than their human parts.<sup>35</sup> It leaves the complexity of nearly all finite things unspecified. Spinoza's comparisons of the state to the human being in the *Political Treatise* are particularly valuable, then, because they do offer a specific account of the complexity of the state: among the whole range of complex individuals introduced by the scholium following Lemma 7, the state is like a human being.<sup>36</sup>

At this finest level of detail that Spinoza's accounts of things and their parts offer, the comparisons of the *Political Treatise* suggest that in states, as in individual human beings, changes in parts may differ in kind from changes in the whole. In the best circumstances, for both the human being and the state, what serves the whole also serves its parts. To be characterized by ideas of reason, for an individual human being, is to have joy as a characteristic affect (E3p58). Joy, as we have seen, is an affect in which all of the body's parts are affected equally: the power of the parts and those of the whole correlate closely. To the extent that a state is founded on reason, the dynamic is the same: each citizen becomes more powerful in acting freely from reason, and the state as a whole is more powerful as a result of the coordination and cooperation of powerful citizens. As we have seen, several of the comparisons in the *Political Treatise* emphasize the point that individual human beings and states are alike in this respect (TP 3.7, TP 5.1). Spinoza maintains that the most powerful states, like the most powerful people, are led by reason.

Spinoza also maintains, however, that consistently acting from reason is rare for individuals and that having citizens who act wholly from reason is an unreachable ideal for societies. In the introduction to the *Political Treatise*, he criticizes philosophers for conceiving of societies ideally, in ways that are possible only in the 'poets' golden

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such an individual is to conceive of I2 as composed of I1 and similar individuals in such a way as to incorporate all of their complexity.

<sup>35</sup> Because states may integrate their citizens incompletely, some properties of citizens may not belong to the state at all. Della Rocca (2008, p. 117) makes a similar point about the human body. Letter 32 to Oldenburg, E2d7 (see §1 here), and E2p24 are central texts.

<sup>36</sup> Barbone and Rice (Spinoza 2000, pp. 26-27) argue that Spinoza cannot be a realist because he takes citizens, not external forces, to be the greatest threat to states (TP 6.6). The imperfect integration of states suggests that this is a false dichotomy. A citizen can at once be part of a state and also an external force acting on the state. The case of suicide in a natural human being is similar, as Steinberg (2013 §5) notes.



age'. Later, he characterizes this mistake as one in which we attribute too great a role to reason:

We have shown that reason can do a great deal to restrain and moderate affects but we have seen also that this path which reason shows us is arduous. People who persuade themselves, then, that a multitude... can be led to live from the prescriptions of reason alone dream of the poets' golden age. (TP 5.1; cf. E4p37s2)

Spinoza's practical approach to politics emphasizes the imperfect nature of actual citizens and actual states. It is an attempt to design states that can be better for their citizens and more stable even if the ideal state is out of reach.<sup>37</sup> The stability and strength of even imperfect states, as Spinoza presents it, is typically a great good to citizens, which they should promote and in which they should tolerate some irrationality (E4p40; TTP 16, G III/194; TP 3.6). In actual states, however, Spinoza's theory of complex individuals suggests that what promotes the stability of the state and what serves the citizen can sometimes conflict. Institutions that help citizens to become more powerful may present hazards for the state and those that weaken citizens can make the state more powerful. In attempting to secure both ends, Spinoza may have to accept some instability in order to have institutions that promote the power of citizens and some compromise of free institutions in order to promote stability.<sup>38</sup>

Here, however, a salient difference between societies and human beings arises not from Spinoza's metaphysics but from his priorities. What Spinoza values, ultimately, is the good of human beings.<sup>39</sup> In the

<sup>37</sup> Spinoza frequently refers to groups of people being led as if by one mind (TP 2.16, 2.21, 3.2, 3.5, 3.7, 4.1, 6.1, 8.6, and 8.19). The qualification 'as if' is sometimes cited as evidence for the view that states are not real things (Rice 1990, pp. 274-275; Barbone 2002 §8). This is a distraction, I think. To act as if from one mind, as TP 6.1 indicates most clearly, is to act on a common passion—such as fear or, better, hope—in a way that approaches the coordination that reason would bring. Action truly from one mind, so understood, would be action wholly from reason. In this sense, a conflicted person can, like a group, be of two minds.

<sup>38</sup> Chapters 19 and 20 of the TTP concern Spinoza's views about such institutions in a republic.

<sup>39</sup> Critics note that Spinoza's anthropocentrism in ethics is striking given his emphasis on the eternal perspective (Moore 2017, pp. 51-53) or, similarly, his commitment to treating human beings like all other natural things (LeBuffe 2010, pp. 162-166). The choice to focus on the human good certainly reflects Spinoza's over-arching project, which is to promote human welfare (E2Pref; TIE §14; TP 1.3, 5.2). It may also have a basis in the ordinary use of value terms (E3p9, E3p39s), which serves as a basis for Spinoza's formal theory of value in *Ethics* 4.

case of a human being a given affect or desire, even if it is passive, is better or worse than others to the extent that it makes the whole more or less powerful. The parts of the human being matter only to the extent that they contribute to the good of the whole. Because of Spinoza's emphasis on human good, the converse is true of human societies. Spinoza values the strength of the whole state only instrumentally to the extent that it serves those who live in it. His metaphysics of complex individuals shows that this value does not arise as a matter of course. To the extent that what makes a state powerful harms citizens, Spinoza will consider it to be bad. The basis for choosing among the different compromises that we might reach in actual states will be the good of the human beings that compose them.

In Chapter 6, Spinoza refers both to a strong state that harms its citizens and therefore is bad and also to states that serve their citizens well, and so are good, but that are also weak. Here, the contrast between the state's power and that of its citizens is stark:

No empire has stood for so long without notable change [*absque ulla notabili mutatione stetit*] as that of the Turks, and, on the other hand, none has been less enduring than popular or democratic states. Nowhere else have so many rebellions arisen. But if slavery [*servitium*], barbarity and solitude are to be called peace, nothing is more miserable for men than peace. (TP 6.4)

In its fourth century and at its greatest extent at the time of the composition of the *Political Treatise*, the Ottoman Empire was the clearest example available to Spinoza of a state that endures.<sup>40</sup> Spinoza's account of the persistence of the Ottoman Empire—*absque ulla notabili mutatione stetit*—resembles, moreover, his descriptions of the persistence of composite individuals repeated in Lemmata 4-6 as well as Lemma 7 scholium: '*absque ulla formae mutatione*'. Its duration suggests that, among actual states, it is particularly strong. What is notable about this individual, however, is that its strength is not reflected in the strength of the people who live in it. '*Servitus*' is Spinoza's preferred label for human weakness. The implication is

<sup>40</sup> Gundogdu (2017) argues that the empire lost significant territory in a series of defeats beginning in 1683. Perhaps the decline began less than a decade after Spinoza took the empire to be a paradigm of endurance.

that the Ottoman Empire is strong in spite of—even because of—the weakness of its people.<sup>41</sup>

Just as what is pleasant may weaken the body, Spinoza's account of democracies in this passage suggests, states that are good for their citizens may nevertheless be weak. Spinoza consistently maintains that democracies are the best states for peace, harmony, and meaningful freedom.<sup>42</sup> That is, they are best for those who live in them. Strong citizens, however, do not necessarily make states strong, and, where he warns readers about an instance of a strong slave state, Spinoza also warns of instances of the weakness of free states, which are susceptible to rebellion. In other passages, he argues that such states are susceptible to war (TP 7.5) and to degradation into less and less democratic forms of government (TP 8.12).

In the case of states that are strong at the expense of their citizens, the contingent value of state power is particularly clear. On Spinoza's account, security, or a confident hope of a good life, depends upon both political stability and good institutions.<sup>43</sup> More powerful states will tend to endure longer. States that are powerful, then, are good if they also serve their citizens by having good institutions. Perhaps the Dutch Republic is an example of such a state for Spinoza (TP 8.4; cf. TTP 20, G III/246). The example of the Ottoman Empire shows, however, that power in a state is not necessarily good. Spinoza makes this point in general terms at TP 5. He argues that states acquired by war, and with slaves rather than subjects, can endure by means that differ from those that sustain a free commonwealth. In such states power is instrumental not to the good but to the enduring misery of people who live in them. Spinoza does not value power in this kind of case: it contributes nothing to genuine peace or harmony (for these

<sup>41</sup> The Ottoman Empire is Spinoza's preferred example of a state that is brutal and bad for its people. See also TTP Preface (G III/7) and the account of monarchy in the TP (7.23). The choice of example may follow Machiavelli, whom Spinoza cites in his discussion of slave states in TP 5. Machiavelli (1857, Chapter 4) characterizes the same state (though more than a century earlier) in cognate terms (*turco, servi*).

<sup>42</sup> See TP 7.5, 8.12; TTP 16, G III/193-194, 20, G III/239, 245. Steinberg (2018, pp. 163-189) rightly emphasizes in Spinoza a preference not only for democracy but also for the democratisation of monarchy and aristocracy.

<sup>43</sup> A good state emphasizes security (*securitas*) for Spinoza (TTP 20, G III/240-241; TP 1.6, 5.2). Beyond physical security, this is a confident expectation of the good that develops from hope (E3def.aff. 14). This is a theme of Steinberg (2018, pp. 80-100), which draws my attention to these passages.

see TP6.4) or, therefore, security. That is why he contends that such a state is better called a wasteland than a commonwealth (TP 5.4).

## 5. Conclusion: Spinoza's realism and the importance of the debate

Justin Steinberg concludes his summary of the debate over the meaning of Spinoza's comparisons with a shrug:

[T]he collectivist can embrace the normative primacy of the individual human being. If this is allowed, the matter of whether the state is a literal or merely metaphorical individual seems to matter far less than many scholars have supposed. (Steinberg 2013, §5)

This is an appropriate response to some antirealists. Antirealists tend to think that the debate matters because they find in Spinoza a view on which, if human beings were to be parts of a genuine individual, they would lose their own interests and individuality.<sup>44</sup> As §2 shows, however, Spinoza's difficult metaphysics of individuals and their parts suggests that a real individual with a genuine interest can have parts that are also real individuals with genuine interests. Indeed, he makes the defining feature of the human body composition from other individuals. Therefore, the conclusion that individual human beings do not matter—which would indeed be at odds with Spinoza's explicit, enduring commitment to the good of all in society—does not follow from realism. As Steinberg suggests, the concern is not well-founded.

Here I have taken Spinoza to be a realist. Spinoza's permissive ontology of finite things makes states genuine finite things. His comparisons of states to human beings reaffirms that point: even critics who find a less permissive ontology in Spinoza should agree that, for Spinoza, human beings are things. The comparisons therefore reaffirm that states are things, and they also show us what kind of things states are.

This realist interpretation suggests a different account—now from the perspective of the realist—of the importance of the debate. The complex nature of states shows how they can be strong even as they fail their citizens and can be weak even as they serve their citizens. It shows how a state can become more powerful in ways that harm its

<sup>44</sup> See Barbone (2002, p. 107) and Berlin (2002, p. 193).

citizens and how a state that promotes the welfare of its citizens may nevertheless be susceptible to rebellion or deterioration. Spinoza's project in the *Political Treatise* is to design states that are good and also stable. The individuality and complex nature of states explain why that project is difficult.<sup>45</sup>

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