

## **Spinoza, Equality, and Hierarchy**

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### **Abstract:**

Spinoza has long been championed as a supporter of progressive political positions. Some recent scholars have asserted that egalitarianism, in the sense of an opposition to all forms of hierarchy, follows from his metaphysics. In this paper I argue that this egalitarianism is misattributed to Spinoza, since it relies on a notion of the essential equality of human beings that Spinoza does not espouse. I examine Spinoza's doctrines of formal and actual essences in order to demonstrate this, before turning to the implications of Spinoza's doctrine. In understanding that Spinoza takes people to be essentially unequal, we see that he promotes a hierarchy of power which gives him a stronger position from which to oppose hierarchies of wealth. I close by suggesting that the idea of proportion gives us a better basis for thinking about Spinozian egalitarianism than does the notion of essential equality.

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## Spinoza, Equality, and Hierarchy

A well established liberal tradition of reading Spinoza casts him as a forerunner of Enlightenment doctrines of equality. Jonathan Israel, in his influential and important books, argues that modern political ideas of freedom and equality are rooted in the ‘radical’ Spinozistic Enlightenment as much as they are in the ‘moderate’ Enlightenment of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. In a recent book, Israel (2010) claims that the Spinozistic radical Enlightenment is *the* democratic and egalitarian tradition of thought, whereas the moderate Enlightenment sought to maintain social, economic, and political hierarchies. Nick Nesbitt, while critical of Israel, upholds this claim, arguing that Spinoza believes in ‘the pursuit of undivided, universal equality by whatever means necessary’ (2012, 166).

Marxist readers criticize the liberal reading but offer an alternative ground for a Spinozian egalitarianism. For Negri (1991), Spinoza’s denial of metaphysical transcendence gives way to a politics based on the constitutive power of the multitude rather than sovereignty, subjection, or predetermined order. This implies an anti-hierarchism grounded in Spinoza’s metaphysical monism, from which Negri’s recent followers have drawn egalitarian conclusions. These commentators – who I will call ‘Marxian’ in distinction from the politically Marxist accounts of Althusser and Negri – find in Spinoza’s naturalistic monism a basis for opposing privilege and exclusivity. Michael Mack (2010, 2011) argues that Spinozistic thinkers are necessarily anti-hierarchical, whereas those in the Cartesian and Kantian traditions condone inequalities that lead to oppression. For him, the *Ethics* ‘delineates the blueprint for a nonhierarchical and nonexclusive understanding of human sociability’ (Mack 2011, 100). Hasana Sharp (2011) similarly argues for Spinoza’s advocacy of social and

political inclusivity, while Cesare Casarino (2011) finds in Spinoza a critique of the inequities of global capitalism.

These liberal and Marxian readings share the view that Spinoza is opposed to using status as an organizing principle to determine social or political inclusion, social or moral worthiness, or social, political, or economic deserts.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they claim, Spinoza thinks people are naturally equals, that inequality indicates a departure from our essential nature, and that reaffirming our natural equality is necessary for a flourishing society. Liberals might name this a commitment to ‘moral equality’: that is, the principle that each person has equal worth and the right to have his or her interests taken equally into consideration. The view that Spinoza fits into this Enlightenment tradition of thought is not uncommon, even among those who seek to set Spinoza apart from that tradition. Israel states that Spinoza’s ‘moral and social theory is grounded on the principle that every person’s happiness, and hence worldly interests, must be deemed equal. ... Every person’s needs and views are of equal weight’ (2010, 92).

Though Marxian readers may align moral equality with bourgeois ideology, they rely on a similar notion of essential equality identifiable in the early Marx. Marx suggests that individual and social equilibrium require human beings to have an equal stake in the production of their own material conditions of existence. This equality is part of natural human being, but is disrupted as modes of production develop and people become alienated from their nature. In recognizing that we are part of nature, and in reasserting a naturalistic way of being human, we struggle against the interests of the ruling class. Marx’s reliance on Spinoza is evident here: for Spinoza too, we must understand that we are part of nature, and work to reclaim true human nature from the inadequate ideas that have come to obscure it from us. This parallel leads

readily to the assumption that Marx's model of human nature is also grounded in Spinoza, and thus that Marx and Spinoza really share the same aim: to restore us to our true 'human nature' which overcomes stratifications of status (and its associated exclusions and oppressions) by rendering us equally able to determine our individual and communal lives. This is not far removed from the liberal concept of moral equality: Mack argues that for Spinoza, all perspectives are truly equal, and therefore any individual who asserts supremacy over others diminishes his virtue (2011, 111-12). For Sharp, Spinoza offers a 'politics of renaturalization' because his project to reclaim human nature restores to us a natural equality through which hierarchy and exclusivity will be opposed.

Spinoza, however, does not aim to reclaim human nature in order to support equality or inclusive politics. His aim is that we should all become more powerful; an aim which requires not the dissolution but the promotion of hierarchy. The notion that Spinoza is necessarily pro-egalitarian, on the grounds that the *Ethics* includes a doctrine of the essential equality of human beings, is what I will criticize here. I argue that Spinoza's *Ethics* suggests we are equal in a formal sense, but this does not entail the moral equality of the liberal position or the natural equality of the Marxian reading. Spinoza insists that human beings are fundamentally unequal: on the basis of our different powers, he believes that each of us should become as powerful as we can, with the implication that our natural differences are perpetuated. This is productive for thinking about how political equality might be grounded in a natural inequality and a hierarchy of power. I will suggest that Spinoza's metaphysics does not ground strictly egalitarian societies, but it may promote more proportionate ones.

1.

I will first explain the equality Spinoza thinks human beings do have by virtue of their essence: a merely formal equality of basic bodily and mental capacities. In order to understand this we must clarify his notion of the *formal essence* of a singular thing, and distinguish it from its *actual essence*.

For Spinoza, individuals are not independent substances but finite ‘modes’ of God, the single substance that is infinite being. Modes are defined as the ‘affections’, or changeable properties, of God which inhere in and follow necessarily from God’s essence (E ID5, IP15-16).<sup>2</sup> Finite modes are immanently caused by God, such that their being is a ‘certain and determinate way’ of expressing God’s essence (E IP18, IP25C). Since the essence of God is its power – *the power* – to exist and act (E IP34), individuals can be said to be finite modes of power, or certain and determinate ways of expressing the power to be and act. Thus each individual, ‘as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being’ (E IIP6). The next proposition states that this ‘power, or striving’ (*conatus*) is the individual’s ‘actual essence’ (*rei actualem essentiam*’; E IIP7).

The actual essence of a thing, then, is its particular power to persevere in its being, and determines what that thing *does*. Certain effects follow from a thing’s actual essence (E IIP9S), including the behaviours and actions by which it strives to persevere: desires for useful things, aversions to harmful things, and the actions by which it enhances its existence and avoids harm. A thing’s actual essence is not the sole determinant of its acts, for those are largely determined by its circumstances, imaginings, and affects. Our actual essence is one force determining us to act in a complex of determining forces, and it determines us to do things that will preserve our being within our specific circumstances (see E IV Pref.). Because a thing’s actual essence is particular to its existence, and because the circumstances of its existence

change constantly, its actual essence differs from other things' actual essences (see E IIP57). It even differs from itself from moment to moment, in that the desires and acts it determines in an individual differ as her circumstances change (see E IIP56). The individual's power to persevere in being constantly fluctuates, as her affects cause transitions to greater and lesser perfection. Our 'actual essence' or power is characterized by change, and determines what we *do* as our existential circumstances change.

Spinoza's use of the term 'essence' in *Ethics* Parts III and IV generally refers to the actual essences of existing things. However, in Parts I, II, and V Spinoza uses 'essence' in another sense. For example, he says that while men differ in their existence, 'they can agree entirely according to their essence'. Thus, while ending the existence of one man does not end the existence of another, destroying the essence of one man means 'the other's essence would also be destroyed' (E IP17S). In this case Spinoza is not referring to the actual essence of one man or the other, but to the formal essence that the two men have in common (*essentia formalis*). Spinoza explains that formal essence is 'an eternal truth': 'The truth and formal essence of things is what it is because it exists objectively in that way in God's intellect' (E IP17S). So whereas a thing's actual essence is the power pertaining to and varying with its particular existence, its formal essence is *what it is* eternally in God. Actual essence determines what an individual *does* in durational existence; formal essence determines what that individual *is* eternally.<sup>3</sup>

Formal essences explain how there can be true ideas of modes which do not actually or presently exist: 'their essences are comprehended in another [i.e. in God/substance] in such a way that they can be conceived through it' (E IP8S2, cf. E IIP8 where these essences are termed *essentiae formales*). So formal essences exist

eternally in God's intellect, regardless of whether any of the modes they determine exist durationally: actual existence does not follow from the formal essences of modes (E IP24). Similarly, formal essences are not causally responsible for *how many* actual modes they determine. The formal essence determines *what the thing is*, or 'the nature of the thing', which is expressed by its definition (E IP8S2; see Viljanen 2011, ch. 1). Spinoza explains that the 'true definition of man' captures what man is, without determining that any particular number of men exist; that number is determined by actual extrinsic forces (E IP8S2; E IP28). This suggests that all men have in common a single formal essence, nature, or definition.

Scholars stress the importance of the distinction between formal and actual essences, particularly when it comes to understanding Spinoza's claims about the essence of the human body and the mind's eternity in Part V (see Viljanen 2011; Garrett 2009; Hallett 1957). Both kinds of essence conform to Spinoza's definition: 'I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived, and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing' (E IID2). Where the formal essence of human being is given, 'the thing is necessarily posited' in that there is necessarily some human being as its object (E IID2, cf. E IA6). However, since formal essence does not necessitate actual existence, the 'human being' that is the object of the formal essence is one that exists eternally and 'virtually' in God's attributes (E IIP8). The actualization of this eternal 'human being' is the coming-to-be of the actual essences of durationally existing human beings, which occurs through a series of extrinsic finite causes. So actual essences are the actualizations, or instantiations, of a formal

essence, where the latter is necessary but not sufficient to bring about the former.

Garrett explains this concisely:

An *actual essence* is something such that, when it is given as existing, the thing itself actually exists (i.e., is posited as existing). A *formal essence*, in contrast, is something such that (i) when it is given as existing, the thing itself is *possible* (i.e., is posited as possible); and (ii) when it is given *as instantiated*, the thing itself is posited as actual. Because a singular thing actually exists if and only if its actual essence does, we may also think of the actual essence of a singular thing as the *actualization* or instantiation of its existing formal essence, rendering the thing itself actual. (Garrett 2009, 286-7)

Garrett argues that formal essences are particular to individuals, whereas I tend to agree with Hallett (1957) that they are shared by individuals of the same kind. While I do not propose to pursue this discussion further here, it is worth noting that to posit a shared human formal essence is not to adopt a universal concept of ‘man’. Universal terms are generalizations brought about by our inability to imagine all the particulars we have experienced at once (E IIP40S1), and are therefore imaginary and highly confused. The formal essence of man, by contrast, follows from the essence of God, as conceived through one or more of God’s attributes. It exists in God, and can be truly understood by the human mind.

Following this line of interpretation, let us suppose that there is a formal essence of ‘human being’ in (and following from) God’s attributes that grounds (but does not cause) multiple – perhaps infinite – instantiations of individual humans, each with its particular actual essence. With the aim of considering whether formal essence can ground moral equality, we ask: what is the content of the formal essence of

‘human being’? It is comprehended in God’s idea of ‘human being’ as it exists across the infinite attributes (see E IIP7S). Our perspective is limited to the attributes of thought and extension, so we may understand some aspects of our formal essence: those aspects of thought and extension that go into determining the nature of ‘human being’. And because God’s attributes, and our formal essence which follows from them, are eternal, it can be said that we understand (some aspects of) our formal essence when we conceive the human body ‘under a species of eternity’ (E VP22, cf. VP23, VP29S; Garrett 2009, 292-6). Understanding what human being is, in its formal essence, requires understanding the eternal properties of the human body and how they follow from the attribute of extension.

Complete understanding of how our formal essence follows from the attributes is intuition, the third kind of knowledge (E IIP40S2, cf. VP31). But we can gain adequate understanding of some of the body’s eternal properties through reasoning, the second kind of knowledge, and we can see *Ethics* Part II as an attempt to set out rationally those aspects of our common formal essence. Three aspects of this essence Spinoza takes to be axiomatic: ‘man thinks’, ‘we feel that a certain body is affected in many ways’, and ‘we neither feel nor perceive any singular things, except bodies and modes of thinking’ (E IIA2, IIA4, IIA5). What follows from this, the laws according to which we perceive and think, fill in some of the content of the formal essence of human being. To understand our essence is to understand those aspects of extension that are required to define an actual human body, and it is to understand them not from the confused perspective of a particular individual, but rationally, adequately, and truly. Indeed, since ‘it is of the nature of reason to perceive things under a certain species of eternity’, the primary object of our rational cognition is the eternal formal essence that is ‘common to all’ and does ‘not explain the essence of any singular

thing' (E IIP44C2). As it follows from the attribute of extension, the formal essence of the body must include motion and rest, expressed as the capacity to move within a certain range of velocities. The adequate ideas of the human body Spinoza provides are expressed in the six postulates following E IIL7: it is composed of many individuals of different natures; it is affected in many ways by other bodies and requires some of these bodies for its being; it is capable of affecting other bodies; and it perceives through being affected. Human bodies are *essentially* mobile, composite, affective, and perceptual. Though these properties are common to many non-human bodies too, Spinoza suggests that there is a specific way in which the *human* body is composite and affective that differs from other kinds of body – perhaps in the *extent* to which it is composite and affective, which he suggests is greater for humans (E IIP13S).

Similarly, Spinoza suggests that the human mind is distinguished from other minds in its complexity: it 'is not simple, but is composed of a great many ideas' (E IIP15), due to being the idea of the complexly composite human body. The human mind perceives its own affections and other bodies, and imagines (E IIP16-17). But this kind of activity reflects our finite durational being; it does not constitute the part of the mind that is eternal, and does not pertain to the mind's essence (see E VP23). The mind's eternal 'part' conceives the eternal properties of the body insofar as they follow from the attribute of extension, and our finite minds do this when they adequately conceive ideas that are 'common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole' (E IIP38). These 'common notions' include ideas of those aspects of extension common to all bodies, and these ideas are 'common to all men' (E IIP38C). Common notions that are exclusive to humans are the eternal ideas of our bodily capacities as outlined above. If the formal essence of the human body includes

capacities for mobility, composition, affectivity, and perception, the formal essence of the human mind includes eternal ideas of those capacities. The human mind is thus *essentially defined* by imagining (i.e. representing bodily affections and perceptions), reasoning (i.e. understanding the body's motion and composition adequately and deducing its further properties), and intuiting (i.e. deducing the formal essence of its own body from the formal essence of God's attribute of extension). The formal essence of human being therefore includes a set of basic capacities: the capacities of the body to move, be composed, affect and be affected in certain ways, and the mind's capacity to reflect and understand these capacities.

This common human formal essence does ground a kind of equality. To use Spinoza's architectural analogy, all human beings have the same blueprint and geometrical definition that is eternally true regardless of its actually existing instances (Spinoza 2002, 781-2). That is, human beings *are* determined to have the capacity for feeling and reasoning regardless of the extent to which existing human beings actually *do* affect other bodies, think rationally, and so on. Humans are equal in that all of us exist as composite bodies that move, perceive, affect and are affected, within a certain specifically human range. For Spinoza, this common capacity to *feel and perceive* is not grounds for equal consideration of interests or the equal right to seek pleasure and avoid pain: we cannot unfold any such right from the basic capacities shared by all human bodies. That's because these basic capacities constitute an eternal aspect of our formal essence, explained through the attribute of extension. First, moral equality or rights could not follow from a strictly physical blueprint or its eternal idea: if there were any moral qualities in our formal essence, they would have some physical form, explicable through motion and rest and extension; they would be eternal truths understood adequately and rationally, subject to no more doubt or dispute than the

fact that we are composite bodies. Second, our formal essence cannot cause actual existents or determine what occurs in actuality. If we have any ‘rights’ to act or be considered in certain ways, these rights must pertain to our *power* to act, which pertains to our actual essence and the conditions of our existence. Spinoza states that we have a ‘right’ to persevere in existence, to pursue what is good for us and avoid what is bad, but this right ‘is defined by [each individual’s] virtue, *or power*’ (E IVP37S1). In other words, our right is defined by our *actual essence* that determines what would be best for us to do depending on the circumstances. For Spinoza, the fact that all human beings are the same in certain physical respects is an eternal truth that contributes to the definition of what we are; from that truth we cannot deduce anything about our interests or how our interests ought to be considered by others.

Our common bodily structure does not provide a basis for the moral equality of human individuals. Nor is there any basis for this equality in our common mental capacity to have adequate ideas of the body: again, we cannot unfold moral qualities or rights from this. For Spinoza, the capacity for rational thought is the capacity adequately to capture eternal ideas of the body’s formal essence; it pertains (in some form) to all beings in nature (E IIP13S) and it does not give humans or their interests any special status. No moral quality can follow from this mere capacity that could render rationality morally significant, for once again, that moral quality would have to be the eternal idea of some physical configuration, explicable through the attribute of extension and discoverable through physical investigation. Finally, our capacity to reason is part of our formal essence, and formal essence does not cause what we actually do or achieve. Our minds are equal in that all have a basic capacity to know their object, but this formal equality does not entail actual equality in terms of what we know, what we do, or how we are treated (cf. Oksenberg Rorty 1996).

Spinoza takes human beings to be equal in a formal sense. We share formal essence, and thus we are the same in what we are determined to *be* through God's attributes. Our 'blueprint' includes certain bodily and mental capacities that are very differently realized in each existing instantiation. Human nature is characterized by this sameness, but by the nature of a formal essence it cannot include moral equality or an equal right to self-determination. Our formal essence makes us constitutively similar but not essentially equal in either the liberal or Marxian senses.

## 2.

Beyond a mere formal sameness, then, we cannot find grounds for equality in our formal essence. Next we will see that equality does not emerge from Spinoza's doctrine of actual essences either: we are *actually* unequal.

As stated earlier, 'the actual essence of each thing' is 'the striving by which [it] strives to persevere in its being' (E IIP7). From this actual essence certain things necessarily follow: things that promote the thing's preservation and lead it to avoid harm (E IIP9S). So each individual is determined to act in certain ways by its actual essence. Actual essence is the *power* to go on being what the thing formally *is*; to pursue what causes it to persist, and to resist what destroys it. Actual essences strive for the preservation of the existing instantiation of the formal essence; they do this in the midst of a complex causal world of other actual essences striving to do the same. Actual essences are characterized by difference and change because they adapt to the individual's circumstances. A thing strives differently depending on what it can do in its circumstances.

'Striving to persevere' is not just a matter of maintaining one's existence, but of increasing one's perfection: that is, strengthening one's power, or making one's

actual essence ever more ‘perfect’ (in the sense of ‘complete’) by realizing the effects that necessarily follow from it (see E IIP9S, IIP11S, IIP12, III Def. Affects). From a human being’s *conatus* certain things necessarily follow, ‘and so man is determined to do those things’ (E IIP9S) within a world of helpful and harmful causes. *Conatus* strives perfectly to unfold what follows from it, to exist by the content and power of its actual essence alone. As Viljanen puts it,

[C]onatus is not just a principle of persevering in existence but a principle of persevering in *perfect existence*, of striving to exist in an autonomous, free, virtuous, active, and self-determined state in which is instantiated not only the striver’s essence but also everything that follows from it alone. ... [Things] strive to bring about being determined by the unhindered realization of their essences. Thus, I would call *conatus* the principle of perfect essence realization. (2011, 127)

It is impossible that a finite mode could exist by the content and power of its actual essence alone. For its existence does not follow from (and is not sustained by) its essence; it follows from (and is sustained by) a complex of external causes in nature. Existence is therefore a matter of *striving* for perfect autonomy, freedom, virtue, and activity in a nature that contains helps and hindrances, without ever reaching those goals. As we understand how to negotiate those helps and hindrances better, we become more virtuous and free, and we strengthen our power, or actual essence. Spinoza explains our striving for increased perfection as striving ‘to affirm a greater force of existing than before’ (E III Gen. Def. Affects). To affirm a greater proportion of our power, and to actualize more of the effects that follow from it, is to increase our virtue (E IVP20).

Each being has its own actual essence or power that is different from all the others. Spinoza's proposition that what follows from the necessity of God's nature is 'infinitely many things in infinitely many modes' (E IP16) suggests that modes are differentiated according to the *way* they express God's power, that is, by their actual essences; Spinoza's remark that different kinds of modes differ in their power confirms this (E IIIP57S). This indicates that actual essences, bound up with external circumstances, are where individuals differ. Things are made *what* they are by the formal essence, and are undifferentiated from others of their kind at that eternal level; but they are *actual* only by virtue of the nexus of finite causes that determines them to exist and produce effects (E IP28). Because each one is differently actualized and caused, each one exists and produces effects in its own particular way. It is impossible that the causal circumstances of their existence could be removed to reveal a 'pure' actual essence that would render all individuals the same. It cannot be said, then, that human beings have *equal power* to persevere in their being and strive for its perfection. Power is not equally distributed to finite modes as a 'potential' prior to their actual existence. Rather, *the power to be* is actually expressed in the activity of an *existing* finite mode, and is always aided and constrained by the mode's circumstances. For Spinoza, there is no equal starting point for individuals in terms of their power to persevere or their potential to increase their power.

Spinoza appears to provide evidence to the contrary in the following passage:

[B]y perfection in general I shall, as I have said, understand reality, that is, the essence of each thing insofar as it exists and produces an effect, having no regard to its duration. For no singular thing can be called more perfect for having persevered in existing for a longer time. Indeed, the duration of things cannot be determined from their essence,

since the essence of things involves no certain and determinate time of existing. But any thing whatever, whether it is more perfect or less, will always be able to persevere in existing by the same force by which it begins to exist; so they are all equal in this regard. (E IV Preface)

From this one might conclude that Spinoza claims for humans an equal starting point based on ‘equality of internal power of existing’ (Hoffheimer 1985, 239). I don’t think this is right. Spinoza means that no thing can claim greater perfection and power *merely* by virtue of its ongoing existence. That’s because all things are equal in their capacity for mere ongoing existence: every finite mode *will* just go on existing in the absence of constraints, and no thing is stronger than any other in this respect (E IIP4). First, *conatus* is not simply a matter of perseverance. It is a striving to perfectly realize the thing’s actual essence through doing what follows from it, which is why Spinoza explains that perfection is ‘the essence of each thing insofar as it exists *and produces an effect*’. Second, there are *always* constraints on the existence of every finite mode (E IVA1, IVP2-4), so their ‘equality’ is only notional. In other words, all things are equal in their mere capacity to go on existing, but no thing in nature *merely* strives to go on existing or *could* just go on existing. Things are unequal in their *power* to go on existing under the constraints of existence and to do what follows from their essence, and thus they are necessarily unequal in their perfection (cf. Oksenberg Rorty 1996, 42).

The same point emerges from Spinoza’s claim that individuals have equal natural right. In his remarks about the state of nature Spinoza says that each individual has a natural right that is coextensive with its power. In the state of nature,

Everyone exists by the highest right of Nature, and consequently everyone, by the highest right of Nature, does those things which

follow from the necessity of his own nature. So everyone, by the highest right of Nature, judges what is good and what is evil, considers his own advantage according to his own temperament, avenges himself, and strives to preserve what he loves and destroy what he hates. (E IVP37S2)

Similarly, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza says that ‘each individual thing has the sovereign right to do everything that it can do, or the right of each thing extends so far as its determined power extends’ (TTP, ch. 16, 195; cf. TP, ch. 2, 683).<sup>4</sup> By ‘right’ Spinoza does not mean an entitlement to do something based on a norm which demands respect or obligations from others (see Steinberg 2010, 217; Balibar 1998, 60-1; James 2012, 240-1; Verbeek 2007). He means an individual’s power to pursue its own advantage based on its judgment of what is good for it, or, put otherwise, an individual’s ability to do what its actual essence determines it to do: to go on being what it is and to perfect its actual essence. Insofar as a person possesses this natural right in the state of nature, ‘he is not bound by any law to submit to anyone except himself’ (E IVP37S2).

If all human individuals were equal in their power, they would also be equal in their right: each one would have the *same* ability to pursue its advantage and perfect its actual essence, and given uniform circumstances (as the state of nature hypothesizes) each would achieve advantage and perfection to the same extent. But human individuals are not equal in their power or, consequently, their right. They have different abilities to judge and pursue what is good for them, and they are able to perfect their natures to different extents. Even in uniform circumstances, different degrees of power entail different levels of right and achievement. We are the same only in that each of us has *some* degree of power and each exercises its right

concomitantly with its power (see Verbeek 2007, 264). This is what Spinoza means when he says ‘we have the same right against [animals] that they have against us’ (IVP37S1). Every individual has the right to do all it *can* do, but what one can do differs from what another can do:

[W]hatever each thing does by the laws of its nature, that it does with sovereign right, since it is acting as it was determined to by nature and can not do otherwise. ... [J]ust as a wise man has a sovereign right to do all things that reason dictates, i.e., [he has] the right of living by the laws of reason, so also the ignorant or intemperate person possesses the sovereign right to [do] everything that desire suggests, i.e., he has the right of living by the laws of appetite. ... [He is] no more obliged to live by the laws of a sound mind than a cat is by the laws of a lion’s nature. (TTP, ch. 16, 196)

There is no sense in which people are actually, naturally, or essentially equals in the state of nature, except insofar as they, like all beings, are equally subjected to the power of nature as a whole. A form of egalitarianism does, however, emerge from Spinoza’s discussion of state formation. In the state of nature people have a right to do anything their *conatus* determines them to do to preserve their being and perfect their nature, and because most people are ignorant, irrational, and emotional, this is a state of conflict and violence. Like Hobbes, Spinoza believes individuals must give their natural right up to a sovereign that joins the strengths of individual powers. This is necessary to ensure security and to distribute the right to pursue natural goods in a way not determined by ‘the force and appetite of each individual but by the power and will of all of them together’ (TTP, ch. 16, 197). The move to the civil state is therefore a move to greater equality in that it redistributes natural right (cf. Balibar

1998, 60). Every person loses some of his power to defend himself in order that everyone is equally secure; every person loses some of her right to appropriate natural goods in order that they may be distributed in the way deemed best by collective rational thinking. An equal distribution of goods is not thereby guaranteed. Yet Spinoza does remark that the vastly *unequal* distribution of money, land, and status is detrimental to harmony, suggesting that a preferable distribution rests on some ratio appropriate to the circumstances (see TTP, ch. 17, 226-9; TP, ch. 7-8, 716 and 728). Furthermore, he notes that citizens of a state may be regarded as equals ‘because the power of the individual compared with the power of the entire state is of no account’ (TP, ch. 9, 742). Judges in legal disputes thus treat all persons as equals, and defend their right to exercise their power, taking no account of wealth (TTP, ch. 16, 203). In these respects at least, Spinoza opposes hierarchy. But importantly, the civil state does not treat people as legal and moral equals because they are essentially equal; it does so because flattening people’s unequal powers down to rough equivalences is the best way to promote harmony.

Equality, then, is a contrivance of the civil state: a good state makes people’s powers more equal, introduces legal equality, and implements greater material equality to harmonize citizens and facilitate justice. Yet our unequal natural right does not disappear. For Spinoza, natural right is inalienable because power, the actual essence of an individual, cannot be taken away: unlike Hobbes, he claims individuals retain their natural right even after transferring it to a sovereign power (TTP, ch. 16, 199-200, 202). In joining a civil state, the transfer of the individual’s natural right is not a ‘giving up’ but a contribution of aspects of her natural right to collective endeavour (see Negri 1991, ch. 5; Curley 1996, 330). The right of this collective endeavour is democracy:

Democracy therefore is properly defined as a united gathering of people which collectively has the sovereign right to do all that it has the power to do. ... In a democracy no one transfers their natural right to another in such a way that they are not thereafter consulted but rather to the majority of the whole society of which they are a part. In this way all remain equal as they had been previously, in the state of nature. (TTP, ch. 16, 200, 202)

As we have seen, people in the state of nature are ‘equal’ only in the sense that they ‘equally’ pursue their own advantage, based on their very unequal powers to strive for and achieve that advantage. In doing so, they are equally subject to a greater power. So Spinoza’s claim for equality here is similar to that of the *Ethics* addressed above. It expresses that all beings, humans included, are equally subject to a natural law that gives them the right to do whatever they can; they retain this right in the civil state, where they become equally subject to civil laws that manage their right (see Verbeek 2007, 261). No one is truly equal in the state of nature because each person has a different amount of power and exercises it to gain unequal advantages. This essential inequality persists in a democracy: the state can distribute goods more equally, treat people as equals, and prevent differences in power from causing conflict, but it cannot overcome these differences entirely or diminish their significance.

### 3.

One of the challenges of the civil state, for Spinoza, is how to treat people as legal and moral equals despite natural differences in power (see James 1996). How should we reconcile equality and inequality? This is one of the guiding questions of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, a fuller treatment of which – along with a thorough

study of the senses of equality in Spinoza's political texts – is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, we have seen that Spinoza's metaphysics does not yield a concept of moral equality that would ground either liberal or Marxian egalitarianism. I want to close by suggesting that the metaphysical rejection of moral equality opens a more promising route for considering political equality in Spinoza.

First, we must recognize that on the basis of his metaphysics, Spinoza is not against hierarchy. There is a spectrum of human perfection that reflects the extent to which individuals are able to affirm and understand their own power. This hierarchy, of people who are worse and better at doing what follows from their actual essence, is not a contingent aspect of our being, for no finite mode can exist or be determined according to its formal essence alone (E IP28, cf. IVP4). It is a natural effect of our being 'part of nature'. The gap between 'better' and 'worse' widens as those who are more virtuous, rational, and free (through luck, good opportunities, positive experiences, hard work, or a combination) tend to become more and more so, whereas people who are less virtuous, rational, and free (through bad luck, evil circumstances, poor opportunities, illness, laziness, or a combination) tend to become less and less so. In Part V Spinoza suggests that the extent to which our minds enjoy eternal being depends on the extent to which we have become more powerful in durational life: the hierarchy of powers appears to reach into eternity (E VP39).<sup>5</sup> Spinoza thinks it is good to be more powerful, and natural that the powerful are praised, honoured, and venerated. Indeed, increased power affirms itself. The virtuous person's self-esteem, and the inferior person's veneration for her, are not the debilitating passions of pride and envy but 'active joys' that move them to greater perfection (E IIIP52-55, IIIP58, IVP51-52). By contrast, the irrational and passionate person is to be avoided as far as possible. Spinoza's ethics depends on our *not* taking one way of life to be as good as

another, but on holding some ways better than others, and on wanting to be better than we are. We naturally and rightly desire to be more powerful thinkers and actors, to be more virtuous, more free, and more rational.

There is, then, a potential conflict between our natural desire to increase our power and the state's need to assert equality. The solution is found in communal activity: since rational people are most useful to one another, we work together to increase our collective power through the increased power of individuals (E IVP35-37). As individuals become more rational, free, and virtuous, they understand that it is best that everyone be able to thus improve themselves, and they work together to achieve the common good: that everyone should know God (E IVP36). Our common good and our capacity to work together to achieve it is based on our shared formal essence: 'it is not by accident that man's greatest good is common to all; rather, it arises from the very nature of reason, because it is deduced from the very essence of man' (E IVP36S). Our equality at the level of formal essence enables us to make the best of our actual inequality, allowing each person to be as powerful and wise as his or her nature permits. Rather than dissolving differences in status and 'respecting' the humanity of the weak, the powerful should help them to improve their status so they may become more useful contributors to this common endeavour (E IVP35C1 and C2). Insofar as the virtuous person wants the greatest good for himself, he wants it also for others (E IVP37), and his virtue entails blessedness, not wealth or social favour (E V42, IV70-3).

Increasing everyone's power requires that our status is understood to be determined by power and not by wealth. Spinoza thinks great disparities of wealth are counterproductive both to individual virtue and to the common endeavour to maximize power. Since money is a good that cannot be enjoyed by all, it generates

conflict, determines desires, and leads to affects of pride, despondency, and envy (E IIP26, IIP32S, IVP57S, IVApp. xxviii-xxix). Politically, disparities of wealth may lead to insecurity and ruin (TTP, ch. 17, 226-8; TP, ch. 7, 716). The *Political Treatise* suggests that distributing political power according to wealth, as in an aristocracy, is less stable than its democratic distribution according to natural power. Democracy enables the strongest to use their natural power to guide society, denies political power to the weakest, and offers the best opportunities for everyone to improve.<sup>6</sup> Those at the lowest ebb will be pushed upward to the full extent that their power allows, rather than pulled further down by their circumstances. The most powerful will grow ever more powerful, but not at the expense of the weaker. For ‘the greatest good’ – knowledge of God – ‘is common to all, and can be enjoyed by all equally’ (E IVP36). Through increasing our power, each of us understands God more and more, and we enjoy an aspect of our shared formal essence. Our formal equality is highlighted when we strive together as actually unequal powers who understand a common good.

Spinoza’s metaphysics suggests he is egalitarian only at the level of formal essence, and that the political utility of this formal equality can only be realized when, as unequal powers in uneven circumstances, individuals strive to improve themselves. It seems, then, that forms of equality instituted by the state should be ones that recognize natural differences in power and that encourage individuals to become ever stronger, more rational and more virtuous. Treating people as moral equals, while perhaps useful for settling legal disputes, will not achieve this, but a more proportionate distribution of finite goods will. Money, for example, should be used proportionately to the needs of a body increasing in power. ‘Whatever there is in Nature apart from men ... [we should] adapt to our use in any way whatever’ (E

IVApp. xxvi-xxix). Money, that most convertible of objects, is not to be used in any way we please, but should be used proportionately to our needs as we pursue the common good. The principle of seeking our own advantage does not demand that we preserve anything non-human in nature, but it does ‘teach us to preserve or destroy it according to its use’ – that is, according to what we need to function and increase our power (E IVApp. xxvi-xxvii). Owning money beyond our needs is disproportionate: it does not lead to greater strength but to excessive love and pride, and therefore weakness. A society that accords status to wealth is misguided about what to esteem in people. Nevertheless, those societies that do link status to wealth should do so proportionately: for an aristocracy to maintain stability, ‘a ratio should be maintained between the population and the patricians’ (TP, ch. 8, 728).

Becoming a virtuous person involves understanding the body’s needs – based on one’s actual essence – and acting to meet them proportionately. Similarly, a good society – itself a body – meets the needs of its constituent members proportionately and enables them to become more powerful in proportion to their capacity to do so. It does this, in part, by distributing material goods in order to increase opportunities to develop reasoning and virtue. But there is no promise that this will result in equal attainment of reasoning or virtue: knowledge of God ‘can be enjoyed by all equally’ (IV P36) only in the sense that each person can know God to the extent that his or her power allows. Promoting greater material equality does not eradicate our essential inequality, but it does enable our status in society to be proportionate to our power. This contributes to the aim for as many to be rational and free as they can be within a hierarchy of free reasoners.

The *Ethics*, in challenging us to reclaim human nature, requires us to understand that people are fundamentally unequal in power, virtue, reason, and

freedom. It denies that we are equals except in a formal sense; understanding ourselves to be ‘part of nature’ does not imply egalitarianism. However, the *Ethics* presents an interesting alternative to the idea that human beings are morally, essentially, or naturally equal: the idea, associated more with the Renaissance than the Enlightenment, that individuals, at the level of particular bodies and composite groups, are characterized by proportion. The idea of proportion gives us some sense of the kind of equality Spinoza thinks we should pursue. Instead of declaring moral and political equality, equal representation and respect, and the dismantling of hierarchy, Spinoza’s metaphysics suggests that we should focus on pulling unequal powers up to the highest levels so that everyone may flourish in proportion as they are able. Increasing income equality is one way of giving everyone – both rich and poor – better circumstances in which to build common human power. The political implications of this interpretation have yet to be spelled out and will undoubtedly present challenges not considered here. In the meantime, this seems to me a more philosophically promising way of thinking about equality in Spinoza than either the liberal or Marxian readings offer.

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<sup>1</sup> Many Spinoza scholars fit into neither the liberal nor Marxian categories and treat questions of liberty and rights with greater complexity than the positions sketched above; see especially James (1996, 2012), Balibar (1998), Verbeek (2007), Steinberg (2010), Prokhovnik (2009), and Smith (1994). None of these texts, however, makes egalitarianism its focus.

<sup>2</sup> E refers to *Ethics* (trans. Curley; Spinoza 1994). Parenthetical references follow Curley's system of abbreviation: part number in roman numerals, followed by proposition (P), corollary (C), scholium (S), definition (D), or axiom (A) number, or appendix (App.) section.

<sup>3</sup> There are only a few cases in which Spinoza specifies which sense of *essentia* is being used. In the majority of cases cited here, the basis for the distinction between formal and actual essence is interpretive rather than textual.

<sup>4</sup> TTP refers to Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (trans. Silverthorne and Israel; Spinoza 2007). TP refers to the *Political Treatise* (trans. Shirley; Spinoza 2002, 676-754).

<sup>5</sup> This passage suggests that our eternal formal essence is affected by our durational actual essence, which is inconsistent with several of my claims earlier in the paper. Such difficulties are typical of *Ethics* Part V where Spinoza turns to the eternity of the mind; but as this problem is marginal to this paper's theme, I will not discuss it further here.

<sup>6</sup> On these kinds of points, we should stress the strangeness of Spinoza's account of democracy, rather than its continuity with more contemporary notions.