

# Freedom of Speech and Philosophical Citizenship in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*

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In this essay, I challenge genealogies that anoint Baruch Spinoza the founder of liberal democracy and liberal individualism. Spinoza's departure from mainstream liberal individualism manifests most starkly in his argument for freedom of thought and expression – the argument invariably cited to prove Spinoza's liberal credentials. When Spinoza defends freedom of speech, in *The Theologico-Political Treatise*, he endorses a mode of democratic citizenship, and an ethos of public discourse, devoid of the heroic self-display endorsed by theorists like John Stuart Mill. According to Spinoza, philosophy and democracy are mutually reinforcing: philosophers can pursue challenging lines of inquiry in a democracy that grants freedom of speech, and the democracy that welcomes philosophy proves more resilient than a tyranny that polices opinion. Philosophy enhances democracy because philosophers comport themselves in ways that expand egalitarian community: specifically, philosophers observe anonymous protocol. According to Spinoza, democratic philosophers should aspire to the role of courteous friend – not the role of celebrity, martyr, or disciple. Spinoza's argument for anonymity remains relevant for contemporary democratic theorists: Spinoza offers a compelling alternative to dominant modes of philosophical citizenship. *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 2006; 2: 91–114

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After generations of scholarly neglect, Baruch Spinoza now occupies an august position within annals of democratic theory: Spinoza is routinely hailed as the first liberal democrat.<sup>1</sup> Several factors prompt attribution of liberalism's paternity to Spinoza. Spinoza's boosters invariably cite his

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1. See Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* trans. E.M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 16; Lewis Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1958), p. 65; Joel Schwartz, "Liberalism and the Jewish Question: A Study of Spinoza and the Young Marx," *Political Theory* 13 (Feb. 1985), pp. 58–84; Douglas J. Den Uyl and Stuart D. Warner, "Liberalism and Hobbes and Spinoza," *Studia Spinozana* 3 (1987), p. 306; Hillel G. Fradkin, "The 'Separation' of Religion and Politics: The Paradoxes of Spinoza," *Review of Politics* 4 (1988), p. 605; Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 22–26.

advocacy of freedom of speech, toleration, and secularization of politics as evidence that the *Theologico-Political Treatise* anticipates, or even inaugurates, the brand of democratic theory that would later be termed “liberal.”<sup>2</sup> The *Theologico-Political Treatise* is an argument for democracy, not an argument for liberalism – and, in some cases, Spinoza argues from markedly illiberal premises. However, Spinoza’s brief for democracy creates theoretical conditions of possibility for the signature structures and institutions of liberal democracy. Moreover, historians credit Spinoza with “discovering” the autonomous individual, of whom theorists of impeccably liberal pedigree are enamoured.<sup>3</sup> On this reading, Spinoza creates an incubator for autonomy when he devises democratic solutions to vexing theologico-political problems. Spinoza endorses a democratic polity largely because it “fosters a certain kind of human being with distinctive traits of character and mind,” such as “independence, self-mastery, and, above all, courage.”<sup>4</sup> Theorists insist that Spinoza’s courageous individual is essentially the same “kind of human being” as the individual celebrated by liberal stalwarts. An early partisan of heroic<sup>5</sup> individualism, Spinoza “helped found the proud tradition of political thought that can boast such later luminaries as Locke, Montesquieu, the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, Kant, Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill.”<sup>6</sup>

Theorists also marshal biographical evidence to cement Spinoza’s standing as a liberal democratic patriarch. Many studies of Spinoza’s political theory offer biographical anecdotes, as well as textual exegesis.<sup>7</sup>

2. For the claim that Spinoza devises liberal constitutional arrangements, see Fradkin, Hillel “Separation,” and Den Uyl and Warner, “Hobbes and Spinoza.”

3. In recent years, Spinoza has also been hailed as the founder of a non- or anti-liberal stream within modern political theory. Determined to resuscitate an exhausted radical tradition, European Marxists influenced by Louis Althusser have hailed Spinoza as a materialist ancestor, a precocious dissenter from bourgeois thought. Theorists in this tradition cite Spinoza’s concept of the multitude, and his insistence that humanity does not constitute “a dominion within a dominion,” as evidence that Spinoza is anti-humanist, a precursor to the Foucault of *The Order of Things*. (See Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics* trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), III Pref.) As Antonio Negri narrates the history of political theory, Spinoza, theorist of the multitude, faces off against Hobbes, apologist for the bourgeois individual. (Ironically, the argument that absolves Spinoza of bourgeois individualism turns him into a heroic figure, a philosophical celebrity. Their anti-humanism notwithstanding, radical Spinozists perpetuate the cult of Spinoza’s personality. See Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. xix, xxviii.) It is beyond the scope of this essay to present a detailed critique of radical strands of Spinoza interpretation. Suffice to say that, although I deny that Spinoza’s individualism is heroic, I do not deny that Spinoza is an individualist. Indeed, I hope to demonstrate that individualism takes many forms in modernity. As I read him, Spinoza offers an alternative not to individualism *tout court*, but to the assertive individualism that gains ascendancy with the consolidation of liberalism. The philosopher whose speech Spinoza would protect is an individual with unique, contrarian opinions – but unlike the assertive individual, Spinoza’s philosopher feels no need to flaunt his individuality to public acclaim.

4. Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza, Liberalism*, p. 24.

5. For the heroism of Spinoza’s ideal individual, see Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza’s Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 113.

6. Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza, Liberalism*, p. xvi.

7. See Feuer, Lewis, *Spinoza and the Rise*; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), Vol. I; Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza, Liberalism*, pp. 7–13; Smith, *Spinoza’s Book*, pp. xix–xxvi.

When theorists recount the story of Spinoza's excommunication from Amsterdam's Jewish community, they position him as an epochal individual, who "articulated and exemplified in his person what was to emerge in time as the overriding principle of modern life" (namely, the principle of a secular, political identity).<sup>8</sup> Just as Spinoza's texts anticipate liberal democratic doctrines, so does Spinoza incarnate liberal democratic subjectivity. On this reading, Spinoza was the first to resist traditional options for self-identification. Liberals deem Spinoza "a true harbinger of modernity,"<sup>9</sup> "the individual par excellence,"<sup>10</sup> "a paradigm for the new liberated individual,"<sup>11</sup> and, in somewhat less grandiose terms, "the early prototype of the European Jewish radical."<sup>12</sup>

It is no accident that liberals who claim Spinoza as a forbear indulge in hagiography. When Spinoza's biography is foregrounded, he fits more comfortably within the mainstream of liberal individualism; for the historical Spinoza resembles the bold iconoclast familiar from mainstays like *On Liberty*. Liberals never tire of reminding readers that Spinoza has historically found few compatriots, and even fewer partisans. "Seldom, if ever, was a philosopher so lonely as was Baruch Spinoza."<sup>13</sup> Of course, Spinoza's "loneliness" is a primary source of his allure for generations of critics (including contemporary liberals): "His very loneliness made him a kind of philosophical, even literary, hero to many."<sup>14</sup> The litany of Spinoza's isolation licenses Spinoza's canonization: Spinoza is a renegade whose fame derives from his infamy, but for this reason his persona exerts an inexorable and seemingly inexhaustible fascination. When liberals nominate Spinoza the first modern individual, they perpetuate a cult of Spinoza's personality.

In this essay, I argue that the cult of Spinoza's personality runs counter to the spirit of Spinoza's democratic theory. Liberals see nothing amiss with venerating Spinoza's *person* because they assimilate him to a tradition of political thought in which heroic individualism is the normative mode of philosophical citizenship. By contrast, I read Spinoza as a trenchant critic of philosophical celebrity, who exposes undemocratic propensities of the robust self-assertion dignified by liberalism's "later luminaries." While I grant that Spinoza endorses democracy as an incubator for a "certain kind of human being," I deny that the individual whom Spinoza would cultivate resembles the heroic eccentric celebrated by John Stuart Mill. (For purposes of this essay, I consider Mill the canonical exponent of liberal individualism.) Critics who deem Spinoza's texts "touchstones of the modern idea of individuality" presume that individuality is relatively uniform.<sup>15</sup> I expose

8. Yovel, Yirmiyahu, *Spinoza and Other*, p. 177.

9. Yovel, Yirmiyahu, *Spinoza and Other*, p. 177.

10. Yovel, Yirmiyahu, *Spinoza and Other*, p. 173.

11. Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza, Liberalism*, p. 201.

12. Feuer, Lewis, *Spinoza and the Rise*, p. 5.

13. Yovel, Yirmiyahu, *Spinoza and Other*, p. 172. For similar claims, see Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza's Book*, p. 183.

14. Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza, Liberalism*, p. 8; see also Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza's Book*, pp. xxv–xxvi.

15. Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza's Book*, p. xv.

fissures within modern individualism – fissures obscured by extant genealogies of liberalism – and thereby re-evaluate Spinoza's position within the liberal pantheon. In my view, Spinoza favors a mode of democratic individualism that is emphatically modern, but which eschews flamboyant self-assertion.

Further, I argue that Spinoza's departure from mainstream liberal individualism manifests most starkly in his argument for freedom of thought and expression – the argument invariably cited to prove Spinoza's liberal credentials.<sup>16</sup> When Spinoza defends freedom of speech, he endorses a mode of democratic citizenship, and an ethos of public discourse, devoid of self-display. In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza aims to secure freedom to philosophize. Philosophy thrives in democracy, Spinoza explains, because state jurisdiction does not extend to opinions; a philosopher can “think as he pleases, and say what he thinks.”<sup>17</sup> But Spinoza advances a bolder claim for the affinity between philosophy and democracy: Spinoza links a regime's viability to its tolerance for philosophy. A democracy that welcomes philosophers is stronger than a regime that polices opinion, because the philosopher comports himself<sup>18</sup> in ways that expand egalitarian community. As Spinoza defines him, the philosopher is the antithesis of Mill's picturesque iconoclast – *anonymity* is the philosopher's signature ethos. Resisting the temptations of celebrity, the philosopher extends courtesies of friendship to his fellow citizens. The philosopher who encourages peers to live under the guidance of reason strengthens democracy, for rational citizens buttress a regime's viability.

I emphasize Spinoza's predilection for anonymity not, as most critics do, to capture dynamics of censorship in the seventeenth century, but rather to limn the contours of democratic citizenship. Many have sought to explain why, with the exception of an early synopsis of Descartes' philosophy, Spinoza's texts were published anonymously or posthumously. Scholars detail social and political conditions that led Spinoza to publish anonymously, as well as the mechanics of anonymous publication in the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> Following Leo Strauss, others examine rhetorical strategies, such as equivocal and contradictory language, that Spinoza

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16. See Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza, Liberalism*, pp. 156–162; Feuer, Lewis, *Spinoza and the Rise*, pp. 108–119; Fradkin, Hillel, “Separation,” pp. 611–613; Den Uyl and Warner, “Hobbes and Spinoza,” pp. 280–286.

17. Baruch Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), Ch. 20, p. 222.

18. To remind readers that Spinoza excludes women from democratic citizenship, I refer to Spinoza's generic political subject, and his generic philosopher, using male pronouns. See Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise* trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 136–137, and Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics* IIP2S, where Spinoza complains that women are too talkative to observe the austere protocols of democratic discourse.

19. For a thorough account of the ruses devised to evade censorship and disseminate Spinoza's texts, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 275–294.

deploys to mute heterodoxy.<sup>20</sup> I grant that censorship was a palpable threat in seventeenth-century Amsterdam.<sup>21</sup> However, interpretations that reduce the “political” motives for anonymous publication to fear of persecution ignore Spinoza’s argument for anonymity as a *democratic* ethos. In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza presents a justification for anonymity that stresses its contribution to democracy – a regime devoid of censorship. Spinoza’s argument for anonymity remains relevant for contemporary democratic theorists: Spinoza offers a compelling alternative to dominant modes of philosophical citizenship.

## I. Philosophical Citizenship in John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*

To challenge genealogies that assimilate Spinoza to the mainstream of liberal individualism, I begin by sketching the modes of individuality and philosophical citizenship that John Stuart Mill endorses in *On Liberty*. *On Liberty* mounts the canonical argument for freedom of thought and expression. Fearful that government regulation will squelch public assertion of individuality – and that there will be no individuality left to assert if the insidious forces of social conformity prevail – Mill exempts self-regarding conduct from social and political control. Ideally, Mill declares, “one very simple principle” should arbitrate the competing claims of individual and society: “The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”<sup>22</sup>

Two claims ground Mill’s impassioned brief for freedom of expression: Mill hails unfettered speech as a crucible for the refinement of truth, and as a spur to individuality. According to Mill, fallible humans can approximate ever more closely to truth because they can speak to one another. In public debate, error, banality, and truth confront each other, and this contest ultimately vindicates truth and advances human progress. Mill’s paean to public debate weds an avowedly modest epistemology – emphasizing fallibility, perspectivism, and the value of partial truths – to dogmatic belief in progress. But when theorists insist that Spinoza “adumbrated an argument which was to grow to full force in Mill’s *On Liberty*,” they do

20. See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 142–201; Yovel, Yirmiyahu, *Spinoza and Other*, pp. 29–32, 128–152; Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza, Liberalism*, pp. 38–44; Efraim Shmueli, “The Geometric Method, Personal Caution, and the Idea of Tolerance” in Robert W. Shahan and J.I. Biro, eds., *Spinoza: New Perspectives* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), pp. 197–215.

21. Indeed, Spinoza postponed publication of the *Ethics* because he credited rumors that “theologians were everywhere plotting against me.” See Baruch Spinoza, *The Letters* trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), p. 321.

22. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 13–14.

not highlight a shared epistemology.<sup>23</sup> Rather, theorists highlight shared enthusiasm for individuality: Spinoza and Mill both value unfettered speech as an expression of the individual's sovereignty, and a condition of the individual's flourishing.

Although Spinoza and Mill both consider free speech a catalyst to "individuality," they offer diametrically opposed portraits of the individual whom public debate protects and produces. In Mill's formulation, individuality is a function of self-determination. Unlike the impressionable masses, the individual resists the forces of homogenization, freely choosing his own plan of life – and idiosyncratic choices advance human progress. Mill declaims that "Individuality is the same thing with development" – one can only exercise one's faculties, which exercise promotes social vitality, through cultivation of unique traits.<sup>24</sup>

When Mill celebrates individuality, he delineates a private sphere exempt from legal and social interference. Although individual liberty posts strict limits to public power, individuality is not wholly private. Mill's discussion of "character," a distinction of the highly individuated, implies that individuality is tailored to public display. Mill reserves "character" for those who own their idiosyncrasy: "A person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has character."<sup>25</sup> Although the "character" disregards public opinion in pursuit of idiosyncratic goals, he nevertheless emerges as an exemplary public figure. As the term's theatrical connotations suggest, the character "stands out prominently" against the drab landscape of a homogenized society: character is "marked," and, ideally, remarked upon.<sup>26</sup> "A noble and beautiful object of contemplation," the character compels peers' admiration.<sup>27</sup> To display individuality is to display eccentric tastes, passions, and pursuits, as well as unorthodox ideas. Consequently, individuality elicits aesthetic approbation (reverence for the individual's *person*), as well as respect for the individual's ideas.

At times, Mill writes as if individuality is inherently vivid. But Mill acknowledges that social pressures can blind spectators to the individual's luster. Consequently, Mill exhorts the individual to make a spectacle of himself – that is, to actively assert his idiosyncrasy. Political concerns motivate this license to exhibitionism. According to Mill, individuality possesses social utility, as well as aesthetic allure.

23. Feuer, Lewis, *Spinoza and the Rise*, p. 113. See also Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza, Liberalism*, pp. 2, 198, and editor Seymour Feldman's notes to Spinoza, *TTP*, pp. xli, 226. While most theorists who compare Spinoza to Mill highlight shared enthusiasm for individuality, some highlight the shared conviction that open debate is an engine of progress.

24. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 71.

25. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 67.

26. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 77.

27. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 70.

And as the works partake the character of those who do them, by the same process human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to. In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others.<sup>28</sup>

Eccentric characters enhance human fellowship (“strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race”) and spur human progress (“high thoughts and elevating feelings”). According to Mill, the individual performs these feats of social utility through the force of personal example. “The mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service,” because the glorious spectacle of character exposes the contingency of custom.<sup>29</sup> The character seizes “freedom to point out the way” to the masses mired in convention, with the goal of “opening their eyes” to the possibility, and the joy, of non-conformity.<sup>30</sup> Because the individual only advances the cause of liberty if he is conspicuous, Mill recuperates “Pagan self-assertion” from Christian calumny.<sup>31</sup>

The conviction that self-display can shatter the suffocating tyranny of custom shapes Mill’s brand of philosophical citizenship. For Mill, the ideal philosopher is so distinctive, and so distinguished, that his name reverberates through the ages. A philosopher who would incite dissent must achieve renown, for the spectacle of the philosopher’s *person* is what elicits admiration, and inspires independence. Mill elaborates his ideal of philosophical citizenship in a passage that invokes “a man named Socrates” to admonish against censorship.<sup>32</sup> “This acknowledged master of all the eminent thinkers who have since lived – whose fame, still growing after more than two thousand years, all but outweighs the whole remainder of the names which make his native city illustrious – was put to death by his countrymen, after a judicial conviction, for impiety and immorality.”<sup>33</sup> Socrates’ renown is the source of his political cachet: Socrates’ posthumous celebrity exposes the Athenians’ arrogance. For Mill, Socrates provides irrefutable evidence of censorship’s folly less because his philosophy is correct, than because his persona is compelling. This melodramatic evocation of Socrates’ plight reveals Mill’s preferred mode of philosophical citizenship: the philosopher displays his *person*, the idiosyncrasy of which is a unique achievement, to rouse peers from stultifying conformity. When Mill

28. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 70.

29. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 74.

30. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, pp. 74, 73.

31. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 69.

32. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 29.

33. Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 29.

holds the philosopher out as an exemplar, he endorses a fundamentally personal (and hierarchical) mechanism of individuation.<sup>34</sup>

## II. Spinoza: The Futility of Censorship

Given that zeal for the philosopher's freedom motivates Spinoza's defense of free speech, theorists frequently assume that Spinoza shares Mill's zeal for heroic self-assertion. To challenge this assumption, I now analyze Spinoza's preferred mode of philosophical citizenship. The *Theologico-Political Treatise* mounts a vigorous defense of philosophy. In the text's first half, Spinoza reinterprets the Bible in an attempt to vindicate philosophy's autonomy. Against traditional theologians, Spinoza insists that faith and philosophy have distinct mandates. Consequently, philosophers can investigate nature without contravening religious strictures, or eroding public piety. At the conclusion of his heterodox biblical exegesis, Spinoza claims to have demonstrated that "faith allows to every man the utmost freedom to philosophise."<sup>35</sup> Distinguishing the respective domains of faith and philosophy is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for philosophy's flourishing; the political regime must also be propitious to philosophy. Consequently, the *Theologico-Political Treatise* culminates in a brief for democracy. Spinoza hails democracy as the regime in which philosophy thrives: In democracy, "every man may think as he pleases, and say what he thinks," because state jurisdiction does not extend to opinions.<sup>36</sup> But the *Theologico-Political Treatise* contains a bolder claim for the affinity between philosophy and democracy: Spinoza links a regime's longevity to its tolerance for philosophy. Spinoza promises to demonstrate "that not only can this freedom [of thought and expression] be granted without endangering piety and peace of the commonwealth, but also the peace of the commonwealth and piety depend on this freedom."<sup>37</sup> Democracy and philosophy are mutually reinforcing: A democracy that welcomes philosophers is more resilient than a tyranny that polices opinion.

An argument from natural right grounds Spinoza's endorsement of democracy. For Spinoza, power is the only limit to natural right. In the absence of a sovereign who enforces conventional morality, the individual has the right to do anything he can do: "the right of the individual is co-extensive with its determinate power."<sup>38</sup> Because nature "forbids only those things that no one desires and no one can do," the state of nature is a state of complete license.<sup>39</sup> When all pursue (irrational) appetites simultaneously, these pursuits clash, and everyone's endeavor to persevere in his

34. When Mill holds the philosopher out as an exemplar, he licenses modes of veneration liable to devolve into slavish emulation. However, Mill does disavow hero-worship; see Mill, J.S., *On Liberty*, p. 74.

35. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 14, p. 164.

36. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 222.

37. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Pref. p. 3, Ch. 20, p. 229.

38. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 16, p. 173.

39. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 16, p. 174.



being founders. The inconveniences of the state of nature expose the utility of organized political community. Like Hobbes, Spinoza blames passion for rendering nature unlivable, and embraces political society as an escape hatch. Unlike Hobbes, Spinoza identifies natural freedom as the ideal toward which political society aspires. Consequently, while Hobbes inclines toward monarchy and grants the sovereign broad censorship powers, Spinoza endorses democracy, a regime that grants freedom of thought and expression.

Spinoza defines democracy as “a united body of men which corporately possesses sovereign right over everything in its power.”<sup>40</sup> Individuals who constitute a corporate sovereign participate equally in decisions likely to affect their endeavors to persevere in their being. Democratic citizens effectively retain the rights they surrender; Spinoza promises that democracy can be established “without any infringement of natural right.”<sup>41</sup> Although Spinoza requires dissenters to obey majority decisions, he denies that this requirement is coercive: for citizens retain the right to criticize laws that they obey. Spinoza writes,

in a democracy (which comes closest to the natural state) all the citizens undertake to act, but not to reason and judge, by decision made in common. That is to say, since all men cannot think alike, they agree that a proposal supported by a majority of votes shall have the force of a decree, meanwhile retaining the authority to repeal the same when they see a better alternative. Thus the less freedom of judgment is conceded to men, the further their distance from the natural state, and consequently the more oppressive the regime.<sup>42</sup>

Compliance with majority decisions advances the subject’s interests, even if these decisions frustrate the subject’s desires, because it is in the subject’s interest to live in a society that protects freedom of judgment.

As the passage above suggests, democracy restricts the sovereign’s jurisdiction to deeds. This restriction is democracy’s chief virtue. Analysis of natural right reveals that regulation of opinion is impossible, and therefore illegitimate. Like natural man, Spinoza’s sovereign has a right to do anything he can do. Such a generous construction of sovereign power might seem inimical to the subject’s freedom, which Spinoza is at pains to preserve. (Spinoza insists that “the purpose of the state is, in reality, freedom.”<sup>43</sup>) However, Spinoza denies that his expansive definition of sovereignty licenses tyranny, because he insists that nature posts severe limits to the sovereign’s power. “But although the right and power of government, when conceived in this way, are quite extensive, there can never be any government so mighty that those in command would have unlimited power

40. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 16, p. 177.

41. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 16, p. 177.

42. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, pp. 227–228.

43. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 223.

to do anything they wish.”<sup>44</sup> Spinoza denies that the sovereign can command subjects to love things that the laws of nature dictate they should hate, and vice versa. Put another way, Spinoza insists that the right to private judgment is non-transferable. “It is impossible for the mind to be completely under another’s control; for no one is able to transfer to another his natural right or faculty to reason freely and to form his own judgment on any matters whatsoever, nor can he be compelled to do so.”<sup>45</sup>

Because humans cannot alienate freedom of judgment, Spinoza concludes that censorship is futile. One could object that *speech* is amenable to regulation: Although the sovereign is powerless to squelch dissenting thoughts, he can presumably censor public *expressions* of dissent. At times, Spinoza concedes the force of this objection.<sup>46</sup> More frequently, he blurs the distinction between speech and thought.<sup>47</sup> The *Theologico-Political Treatise* is peppered with asides that characterize humans as naturally garrulous. Spinoza complains, “Not even men well versed in affairs can keep silent, not to say the lower classes. It is the common failing of men to confide what they think to others, even when secrecy is needed.”<sup>48</sup> These asides imply that thought demands expression in speech. If humans cannot speak or be silent at will, the sovereign is just as impotent when it comes to speech as he is when it comes to thought. Humanity’s penchant for blather renders censorship futile, and illegitimate: “In a free commonwealth every man may think as he pleases, and say what he thinks.”<sup>49</sup>

Given the irrepressibility of speech, censorship proves dangerous, as well as futile. Spinoza hails freedom of speech as a bulwark of political stability, and concludes that democracy is the strongest, as well as the most natural, regime. Democracy outlasts tyranny because democracy does not attempt the impossible (control of the subject’s mind and mouth). By contrast, the sovereign who polices doctrine squanders his power and incites resistance. But Spinoza does not merely enumerate political liabilities of censorship – he also hails philosophy as a catalyst to egalitarian community.

### III. Anonymity as a Democratic Protocol

To fathom the claim that philosophy enhances democracy, one must appreciate Spinoza’s definition of philosophy, and his conception of its public role. Thus, I now detour into the *Ethics*, the text in which Spinoza

44. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 17, p. 186.

45. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 222.

46. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 17, p. 186, Ch. 20, p. 222.

47. Spinoza never explicitly argues that the subject’s *speech* exceeds the sovereign’s power. Instead, Spinoza deduces the futility of laws regulating *speech* from an argument about the individual’s natural right to *think*. See Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 223: “If no man, then, can give up his freedom to judge and think as he pleases, and everyone is by absolute natural right the master of his own thoughts, it follows that utter failure will attend any attempt in a commonwealth to force men to speak only as prescribed by the sovereign despite their different and opposing opinions.”

48. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 223.

49. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 222.

endorses and observes protocols appropriate to democratic citizenship. The *Ethics* is a notoriously forbidding text. Much of the text's notoriety surrounds the impenetrable style in which it is written. While many seventeenth-century philosophers hold geometry in high esteem, Spinoza actually organizes the *Ethics* as a geometric proof, a linked series of definitions, axioms, propositions, corollaries, and scholia. It is a truism that Spinoza uses geometric method to communicate philosophical detachment and objectivity. According to dominant interpretations, devout rationalism leads Spinoza to erase all signs of subjectivity in the *Ethics*: Spinoza foregrounds the eternal necessity of philosophical truth by purging his text of historical contingency and personal idiosyncrasy.<sup>50</sup> This interpretation captures a central motive behind geometric method (although scholars exaggerate the degree to which the *Ethics* achieves the impersonality to which it aspires).<sup>51</sup> However, philosophical concerns do not exhaust the motives for the *Ethics*' impersonal style. Geometric method also reflects Spinoza's *political* convictions.

Spinoza's only justification for geometric method occurs in the preface to Part III of the *Ethics*, which surveys the affects, or emotions. In the preface, Spinoza anticipates readers' objections to his method. Spinoza suspects that his determination to "consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies" will scandalize readers in ways that his geometric analyses of God and mind do not.<sup>52</sup> Spinoza's dispassionate analysis of the passions inspires incredulity amongst traditional moralists, because Spinoza challenges their deepest metaphysical assumption, namely, the postulate of free will. Spinoza complains that belief in free will taints all previous ethical discourse:

*Most of those who have written about the affects, and men's way of living, seem to treat, not of natural things, which follow the common laws of Nature, but of things which are outside Nature. Indeed they seem to conceive man in Nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man disturbs, rather than follows, the order of Nature, that he has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself.*<sup>53</sup>

50. See Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1951), pp. 25, 227, 234–235; Leon Roth, *Spinoza, Descartes, and Maimonides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 43; Yovel, Yirmiyahu, *Spinoza and Other*, pp. 139, 141.

51. Following Gilles Deleuze, many have challenged the characterization of the *Ethics* a dispassionate, impersonal text. See Gilles Deleuze, "Spinoza and the Three 'Ethics'" in Warren Montag and Ted Stoltze, eds., *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 21–33. Smith agrees that the *Ethics* is an intensely personal text – it is nothing other than Spinoza's "intellectual autobiography." See Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza's Book*, p. xv. Deleuze and Smith correctly note that the *Ethics* betrays traces of its author's personality. But when they locate the *Ethics*' incendiary potential in the text's rare "autobiographical" moments, they overlook the polemical force of geometry itself. Spinoza deploys *impersonality* polemically, to expose political liabilities of philosophical celebrity.

52. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIPref.

53. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIPref.

Moralists who accord humanity a unique position in nature imagine that studying human emotion requires a correspondingly unique method of investigation. Because moralists exempt humanity from determination by nature's laws, they balk when Spinoza deploys the same method to decipher nature and human nature. While the moralists' extravagant claims for human power entail an extravagant proliferation of methods, Spinoza's argument for the unity of substance proves economical: "*So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws and rules of Nature.*"<sup>54</sup>

By Spinoza's admission, geometric method makes a philosophical argument about human participation in nature. But Spinoza also launches a polemic against vain self-aggrandizement when he fashions the *Ethics* as a geometric proof. Spinoza rejects the moralists' claim that the passions require a unique method of analysis – and he dismisses the moralists' preferred methods as ethically suspect. According to Spinoza, the literature of moral improvement reeks of the very passions (vanity, ambition) that moralists censure. Spinoza says of his predecessors,

*And they attribute the cause of human impotence and inconstancy, not to the common power of Nature, but to I know not what vice of human nature, which they therefore bewail, or laugh at, or disdain, or (as usually happens) curse. And he who knows how to censure more eloquently and cunningly (eloquentius vel argutius carpere) the weakness of the human mind is held to be godly (veluti divinus habetur).*<sup>55</sup>

Traditional moralists expose their peers to mockery, since few achieve the mastery with which humans are ostensibly endowed. Although the postulate of free will does not promote ethical conduct, it does allow moralists to write stylized ("eloquently and cunningly") discourses of castigation and invective. These exquisite tirades spotlight the moralist, who assumes godly stature.

Spinoza cites "the celebrated Descartes" (*celeberrimum Cartesium*) as an egregious example of the vanity that he avoids by writing geometrically.<sup>56</sup> Descartes is the only philosopher mentioned by name in the *Ethics*. Whenever Descartes' name appears, it is paired with a reverential epithet. In the preface to Part V, Spinoza summarizes the theory of "that most distinguished man (*clarissimi Viri*)" regarding the interaction of mind and body through the pineal gland.<sup>57</sup> Descartes is "so great a man (*tanto Viri*)" that Spinoza wonders how "a philosopher of his caliber (*vir Philosophus*)" could entertain the patently ludicrous hypothesis that the mind controls the body.<sup>58</sup> At first glance, these epithets seem like scholarly conventions,

54. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIPref.

55. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIPref. Throughout the essay, Latin references are from Benedicti de Spinoza, *Opera Quotquot Reperta Sunt* eds. J. van Vloten and J.P.N. Land (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1914).

56. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIPref.

57. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, VPref.

58. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, VPref.

perfunctory expressions of the respect due an eminent philosopher. Upon closer inspection, these banal accolades advance very pointed objections to Descartes' literary comportment. In Spinoza's lexicon, the epithet "distinguished" exposes Descartes' resemblance to the ambitious moralists whom both Descartes and Spinoza disdain.

Spinoza concedes that, unlike censorious moralists, Descartes "*sought to explain human affects through their first causes.*"<sup>59</sup> Yet Descartes shares the fundamental prejudice of traditional moralism: "*he too believed that the mind has absolute power over its own actions.*"<sup>60</sup> Consequently, Descartes' texts draw from the same literary repertoire as those of conventional moralists. Spinoza resists the lure of Cartesian rhetoric, which he dismisses as an eloquent testament to Descartes' ignorance. "When men say that this or that action of the body arises from the mind, which has dominion over the body, they do not know what they are saying, and they do nothing but confess, in fine-sounding words (*speciosis verbis*) that they are ignorant of the true cause of that action, and that they do not wonder at it."<sup>61</sup> However, most readers are dazzled by Descartes' flashy prose style ("fine-sounding words"); consequently, Descartes' unwitting confession of ignorance garners him celebrity, rather than ignominy. Spinoza concludes that Descartes conflates philosophy with self-advertisement. Although Descartes professes mastery over the affects, he only masters his audience, whose fascination cements his reputation: "*But in my opinion, he showed nothing but the cleverness of his understanding* (*sui ingenii acumen ostendit*)."<sup>62</sup>

Spinoza distinguishes his own literary ethos from that of his "distinguished" predecessors and peers. A passage from the *Theologico-Political Treatise* comparing prophetic and geometric discourse supports the contention that Spinoza writes geometrically to discourage fascination with his personality. Spinoza defines prophecy as a discourse that "transcends the bounds of natural knowledge" – by which he means not that prophecy expresses divine will, but that prophecy is irrational.<sup>63</sup> A product of the imagination, prophecy is a compendium of the prophet's personal prejudices. Thus, to decipher prophecy, exegetes elaborate the prophet's historical context and the subsequent dissemination of his or her prophecy: biblical hermeneutics retrieve the prophet's intention from the distortions of pious but unscrupulous editors. By contrast, the author's persona is irrelevant when ascertaining the truth or falsity of texts, such as Euclid's, that treat "matters open to intellectual perception, whereof we can readily form a clear conception."<sup>64</sup> Spinoza says of Euclid's work,

Nor need we enquire into the author's life, pursuits and character (*non vitam, studia, & mores auctoris scire*), the language in which he wrote, and for

59. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIPref.

60. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIPref.

61. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIP2.

62. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIPref.

63. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 1, p. 10.

64. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 7, p. 98.

whom and when, nor what happened to his book, nor its different readings, nor how it came to be accepted and by what council. And what we here say of Euclid can be said of all who have written of matters which of their very nature are capable of intellectual apprehension.<sup>65</sup>

In this passage, Spinoza invokes a rationalist definition of philosophy as an independently verifiable, ahistorical discourse – a definition that most contemporary readers would contest. I am less interested in the validity of Spinoza's definition than in how it withdraws the philosopher as an object of veneration. Spinoza insists that the authority of a geometric text is impersonal. A philosophical text should, ideally, be read as an anonymous text – not as a showcase for the insights of a compelling personality.

Readers willing to grant that geometric method counters vanity might still doubt that Spinoza's literary ethos has *political*, as well as philosophical, significance. Most Spinoza scholars conflate anonymity with retreat into the private sphere. On this reading, Spinoza's philosophers don impersonal guise when advancing heretical ideas, to shield themselves from persecution, and philosophy from the grubby herd.<sup>66</sup> Philosophy is essentially private; consequently, those who would address political issues must speak as prophets.<sup>67</sup>

This interpretation seems to find support in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, where Spinoza emphasizes the rarefied, recondite aspect of geometric method. In his expressly "political" work, Spinoza distinguishes "philosophical" texts, which address a minority, from texts (like Scripture) geared toward politically organized communities.

Now the process of deduction solely from intellectual axioms usually demands the apprehension of a long series of connected propositions, as well as the greatest caution, acuteness of intelligence, and restraint, all of which qualities are rarely to be found among men. So men prefer to be taught by experience rather than engage in the logical process of deduction from a few axioms. Hence it follows that if anyone sets out to teach some doctrine to an entire nation – not to say the whole of mankind – and wants it to be intelligible to all in every detail, he must rely entirely on an appeal to experience, and he must above all adapt his arguments and the definitions relevant to his doctrine to the understanding of the common people, who form the greatest part of mankind. He must not set before them a logical chain of reasoning nor frame the kind of definitions that are best suited to logical thinking. Otherwise he will be writing only for the learned; that is, he will be comprehensible only to a small minority.<sup>68</sup>

65. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 7, p. 98.

66. See Strauss, Leo, *Persecution*, p. 186.

67. See Strauss, Leo, *Persecution*, pp. 178, 183, 192 and Norman O. Brown, "Philosophy and Prophecy: Spinoza's Hermeneutics," *Political Theory* 14 (May 1986), pp. 196, 202.

68. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 5, p. 66.

When Spinoza contrasts discourse liable to sway “an entire nation” with discourse that addresses a learned elite, he seems to deprive philosophical texts of public impact. But geometric texts do not forfeit political significance simply because they abjure mass readership. Texts that address a minority still circulate publicly, and the circumstances of their circulation shape the tenor of political society. Indeed, Spinoza insists that all texts have political ramifications, for he assimilates literary production to natural laws of cause and effect – like all artifacts of nature, texts produce concrete effects. However, different texts produce different effects, and constitute different types of community. Thus, this passage is best read not as depriving philosophical texts of political purchase, but as contrasting two styles of philosophical citizenship (only one of which Spinoza would dignify with the honorific “philosophical”).

Their populist pretensions notwithstanding, “prophetic” styles of philosophical citizenship are inimical to democracy. Spinoza exposes undemocratic propensities of prophetic authority when he compares signed and anonymous publication, in the *Ethics*. To evaluate the intellectual’s ethical maturity, and his political aspirations, Spinoza examines the guise under which he publishes. Spinoza scorns signed publication as a symptom of overweening ambition:

Ambition (*Ambitio*) is a desire by which all the affects are encouraged and strengthened (by P27 and P31); so this affect can hardly be overcome. For as long as a man is bound by any desire, he must at the same time be bound by this one. As Cicero says, *Every man is led by love of esteem* (gloria), *and the more so, the better he is. Even philosophers who write books on how esteem* (gloria) *is to be disdained put their names to these works* (nomen suum inscribunt).<sup>69</sup>

The proliferation of signed treatises against glory demonstrates ambition’s (unfortunate) tenacity. Upon reflection, there is something curious about this passage. Spinoza cites an adage that commends ambition (“the more so, the better he is”) to condemn ambition as an obstacle to political stability. One could argue that Spinoza misreads Cicero. But one could also argue that Spinoza abstains from ambition by citing Cicero. Unlike ambitious philosophers, Spinoza censures glory under another man’s name.<sup>70</sup>

Spinoza defines ambition as “an excessive desire for esteem (*gloriae*).”<sup>71</sup> This craving manifests in comportment designed “solely to please men,” toward the end of extorting praise from flattered peers.<sup>72</sup> Although the ambitious resort to flattery, the lust for praise is fundamentally tyrannical: The ambitious solicit their peers’ endorsement of, and assent to, their

69. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIDefAII44Exp.

70. Although see Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, VP10S, where Spinoza makes a similar point in his own (impersonal) voice.

71. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIDefAII44.

72. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIP29S.

personal tables of value. "This striving to bring it about that everyone should approve his love and hate is really ambition (*Ambitio*)."<sup>73</sup> On Spinoza's diagnosis, intellectuals (like Descartes) who publish under their own names crave prophetic authority. A prophet is "one who has a revelation of God's decrees which he interprets to others who have not had this revelation, and who accept it solely in reliance on the prophet's authority and the confidence (*autoritate et fide*) he enjoys."<sup>74</sup> Unable to investigate the substance of prophecy, the believer credits the prophet's person. Similarly, the Cartesian venerates his teacher's "loves and hates," and emulates his "temperament" (*ingenio*), without examining the substance of his doctrines.<sup>75</sup> Further, just as prophets channel an otherwise inaccessible God, the eminent philosopher seduces students by flaunting qualities (eg a distinguished name) that they lack. Prophetic authority derives from, and perpetuates, inequality.

Consequently, a prophetic community is a cult of personality writ large. In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza deems prophetic rule appropriate only to "a people incapable of self-rule," like the ancient Hebrews.<sup>76</sup> In the absence of democratic equality, deference to a compelling personality founds and sustains the polity. "If sovereignty is invested in a few men or in one alone, he should be endowed with some extraordinary quality (*supra communem humanam naturam habere*), or must at least make every effort to convince the masses of this."<sup>77</sup> Spinoza ascribes the requisite charisma to Moses, who "surpassed all others in divine power which he convinced the people that he possessed."<sup>78</sup> As Spinoza narrates the exodus, Moses assumes a quasi-monarchic role at Sinai, where the Israelites, lacking political maturity and "overwhelmed with fear" at the theophany, abrogate their original, democratic contract.<sup>79</sup> Moses exploits the passions of this disorganized multitude toward the end of community, which end the multitude cannot achieve without external direction. Under Moses' tutelage, religious devotion supplants fear as the motive for obedience. Although devotion is a species of love, it still places the devotee in a subordinate position: Spinoza defines devotion as "love mingled with awe (*amore & admiratione simul*)."<sup>80</sup>

Spinoza concedes the relative success of the Hebrew commonwealth. However, it is not the democracy for which he argues in the *Treatise*. Spinoza famously blames the theocracy's fragility on its constitutional structure, tracing the state's demise to the rise of an independent clergy. But this constitutional flaw is not the only cause of Spinoza's reservations about the prophetic polity. Founded on inequality and sustained by the force of

73. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIP31S.

74. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 1, n. 2, p. 231, Ch. 1, p. 9.

75. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIP31S.

76. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 5, pp. 65, 64.

77. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 5, p. 63.

78. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 5, p. 64.

79. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 17, p. 190.

80. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 17, p. 199.



personality, prophetic communities are inherently weak. In the preface to the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza warns that the very passions (fear, devotion) that render people susceptible to prophecy can incite the prophet's downfall. Powerless against the vicissitudes of fortune, the vulgar clutch at schemes that promise immediate succor. Fear "engenders, preserves, and fosters superstition."<sup>81</sup> But superstition is inherently mutable, liable "to assume very varied and unstable forms."<sup>82</sup> Thus "men's readiness to fall victim to any kind of superstition makes it correspondingly difficult to persuade them to adhere to one and the same kind."<sup>83</sup> Frightened citizens may obey their rulers, but they are just as likely to seek salvation elsewhere, lionizing seers bent on sedition. Consequently, the community bound together by awe and veneration is highly precarious.

If prophecy constitutes hierarchical, and unstable, communities, anonymous philosophy forges egalitarian friendships that expand democracy, and buttress its stability. Paradoxically, Spinoza ascribes democratic potential to the admittedly "cumbersome (*prolixo*) geometric order" that philosophers favor.<sup>84</sup> Spinoza identifies anonymous comportment as an agent of democratization<sup>85</sup> when he extols the affect of courtesy, the rational analogue to the passion of ambition. While signed texts betray ambition unbecoming to a philosopher, anonymous texts betray courtesy, which is a form of "nobility" (*Generositate*), or "*the desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship.*"<sup>86</sup> As Spinoza defines it,

Courtesy (*Modestia*), that is, the desire to please men which is determined by reason, is related to morality (as we said in P37S1). But if it arises from an affect, it is ambition (*Ambitio*), or a desire by which men generally arouse discord and seditions, from a false appearance of morality. For one who desires to aid others by advice or by action, so that they may enjoy the highest good together, will aim chiefly at arousing their love for him, but not at leading them into admiration so that his teaching will be called after his name (*non autem eos in admirationem traducere, ut disciplina ex ipso habeat vocabulum*). Nor will he give any cause for envy. Again, in common conversations he will beware of relating men's vices, and will take care to speak only sparingly of a man's lack of power, but generously of the man's virtue, or power, and how it can be perfected, so that men, moved not by fear or aversion, but only by an affect of Joy, may strive to live as far as they can according to the rule of reason.<sup>87</sup>

81. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Pref. p. 2.

82. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Pref. p. 2.

83. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Pref. p. 2.

84. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IVP18S.

85. I take the concept of "democratization" from Etienne Balibar, who argues that Spinoza offers a "theory of democratization," rather than a "theory of democracy." See Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics* trans. Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 121, 74.

86. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IIIP39S.

87. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IVApp25.

This encomium to anonymous publication reads like an idealized description of Spinoza's practice in the *Ethics*: By writing geometrically, Spinoza abjures rhetorical pyrotechnics, eschews censorious moralism, and fosters egalitarian community. Unlike "the celebrated Descartes," the courteous give no "cause for envy" – anonymous comportment supports political stability, because it resists dynamics of social competition. But anonymous comportment also forges egalitarian friendship, for the courteous invite their peers to live in accordance with reason, "so that they may enjoy the highest good together." Although the courteous philosopher inspires love, readers do not venerate the philosopher as an eminent personality; rather, they love the philosopher's *reason*, because they appreciate the contribution it makes to their own endeavor for self-preservation. "There is no singular thing in Nature which is more useful to man than a man who lives according to the guidance of reason."<sup>88</sup>

A passage from the *Theologico-Political Treatise* helps to explain why anonymous texts enfranchise readers. Spinoza explains that listeners who credit a prophet's testimony believe in and defer to the prophet, and so cannot be called prophets themselves.

Now if those who listen to prophets were themselves to become prophets just as those who listen to philosophers become philosophers, the prophet would not be an interpreter of divine decrees; for his hearers would rely not on the testimony and authority (*testimonio, et autoritate*) of the prophet but on the divine revelation itself and on their own inward testimony, just as the prophet does.<sup>89</sup>

Because prophecy stands or falls by the listener's deference, prophecy fosters authoritarian community, whose instability derives from the very passions that inspire obedience. By contrast, philosophers who teach anonymously deny readers opportunities for veneration. Consequently, students can appropriate teachings as their own, and eventually graduate from tutelage: Those who read philosophy eventually become philosophers. The philosopher's predilection for anonymous publication reflects his egalitarian conviction that rational knowledge is common property. "*The greatest good of those who seek virtue is common to all, and can be enjoyed by all equally.*"<sup>90</sup> The philosopher reaps no "benefit" from his status as a public teacher – other than the augmentation of his power that comes from living in community with other rational men. In this sense, anonymous protocol is self-enhancing: Philosophers comport themselves publicly in ways that expand the ranks of the rational, and the self flourishes in a rational community.

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88. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IVP35C1.

89. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 1, n. 2, p. 231.

90. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IVP36.

#### IV. Political Liabilities of Censorship

If philosophy proves justified as an agent of democratization, democracy proves justified as the regime most hospitable to philosophy. In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza complains that philosophers can only observe anonymous protocol in democracy. Critics have argued that Spinoza recommends anonymity as a counter to censorship. But Spinoza insists that philosophers cannot sustain anonymity in a society that polices dissent. Spinoza enumerates obstacles to remaining anonymous under tyranny when he exposes political liabilities of censorship.

In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza says of laws which police doctrine: “Nor can they be enforced without great danger to the state.”<sup>91</sup> To substantiate this claim, Spinoza relates a brief history of censorship. Spinoza contends that sovereigns first sought jurisdiction over speech to quell internecine theological disputation, which results from vain ambition. Only when the church becomes a stepping stone to office and prestige do clerics preoccupied with “their own standing,” rather than their flocks’ salvation, orchestrate theological controversy.<sup>92</sup> In this debased climate, pastors pose as “eminent personages”:

The very temple became a theatre where, instead of church teachers, orators held forth (*ipsum Templum in Theatrum degeneravit, ubi non Ecclesiastici Doctores, sed Oratores audiebantur*), none of them actuated by desire to instruct the people, but keen to attract admiration (*in admirationem sui rapiendi*), to criticise their adversaries before the public, and to preach only such novel and striking doctrine as might gain the applause of the crowd (*vulgus maxime admiraretur*). This inevitably gave rise to great quarrels, envy and hatred, which no passage of time could assuage.<sup>93</sup>

The styles of oration most likely to fascinate were also most likely to breed “bitter hatred and faction” amongst clerics competing over a good, public approbation, which cannot be held in common.<sup>94</sup> Prosecution of heresy is the logical culmination of flamboyant theology. Jealous of public approbation, ambitious clerics mount campaigns to brand opposing doctrines heretical. Conveniently, these campaigns expand opportunities for celebrity: clerics who malign their opponents gain further license to pontificate. If ambition turns the church into a theater, Spinoza argues, a theatrical church multiplies heresies in order to gratify clerics’ insatiable vanity.

Moreover, the state becomes a theater when the sovereign attempts to subdue theological disputation. Despotism states host two distinct, but equally corrosive, types of performance. First, clerics stage increasingly gaudy pageants of self-display. When the sovereign intervenes in theological

91. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 226.

92. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Pref. p. 4.

93. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Pref. p. 4.

94. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Pref. p. 5.

debate, clerics dispute more vehemently, and more ostentatiously, in hopes of “enlisting the law and the magistrate on their side, of triumphing over their opponents amongst the universal applause of the mob (*communi vulgi applause*), and of gaining office.”<sup>95</sup> State censorship actually rewards clerics, because it multiplies opportunities to denounce opponents, and increases the stakes of these denunciations. Second, cowed subjects perform a disingenuous masquerade. In a theatrical regime, citizens become actors, disguising their true opinions to avoid persecution and/or curry favor. “Since it will certainly never come to pass that men will think only what they are bidden to think,” despots encourage hypocrisy.<sup>96</sup> In a state that outlaws dissent, “It would thus inevitably follow that in their daily lives men would be thinking one thing and saying another, with the result that good faith, of first importance in the state, would be undermined and the disgusting arts of sycophancy and treachery would be encouraged.”<sup>97</sup>

Once the state becomes a stage, its demise is imminent. Whether citizens observe or flout theatrical convention, their conduct undermines political stability. Citizens who observe theatrical convention hone arts of masquerade, with the result that “false dealing” runs rampant, to the detriment of mutual trust.<sup>98</sup> Citizens who flout theatrical convention incur persecution – and Spinoza predicts that the spectacle of persecution will topple a despotic regime. According to Spinoza, even the most oppressive ruler cannot eliminate public expressions of dissent. Spinoza wagers that, in a despotic regime, “those to whom a good upbringing, integrity and a virtuous disposition have given a more liberal outlook” will refuse to observe the duplicitous conventions of masquerade.<sup>99</sup> “It is far beyond the bounds of possibility that all men can be made to speak to order,” and men indifferent to status and reputation are least likely to comply with unjust orders.<sup>100</sup> In a regime where masquerade is ubiquitous, “honourable men” who dissent from approved opinion and “cannot disguise the fact (*simulare nesciunt*)” – that is, philosophers – are the most likely victims of persecution.<sup>101</sup>

When Spinoza laments the philosopher’s vulnerability, he reminds readers that philosophical protocol affects *display* (of reason), not concealment.<sup>102</sup> Philosophers risk persecution because they cannot abide disguise and duplicity. Philosophical anonymity is not a mask, but an expedient for friendly dissemination of ideas. These ideas, and the collegial spirit in which they are offered, threaten established modes of power. Precisely because philosophers disdain theatricality, the philosopher’s comportment angers his

95. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 227.

96. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 226.

97. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 226.

98. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 226.

99. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 226.

100. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 226.

101. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 227.

102. Smith argues that the *Ethics* constructs a model or “exemplar” of the ideal human being. See Smith, Steven B., *Spinoza’s Book*, pp. 134–137. As I understand him, Spinoza’s philosopher does exemplify traits conducive to democratic flourishing. However, to the extent that he serves as a model, he models democratic comportment in an emphatically impersonal manner.

ostentatious and disguised peers. Spinoza worries that clerics who “lust for supremacy” will exploit “laws enacted to settle religious controversies” to stir the masses against philosophers “who usually write only for scholars and appeal to reason alone.”<sup>103</sup>

Persecution subjects the philosopher to an unwelcome display: for the condemned philosopher is thrust onto center stage, where his unwittingly theatrical performance incites resistance to tyranny. Spinoza trusts the condemned philosopher to retain his equanimity, even when death is imminent. “*A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not death.*”<sup>104</sup> When the philosopher comports himself admirably on the scaffold, he exposes the tyranny of laws regulating opinion. The spectacle of the condemned philosopher disgraces the sovereign and inspires sedition, for subjects grow insubordinate when they mourn the philosopher’s death. Spinoza writes, “The only lesson to be drawn from their death is to emulate them, or at least to revere them (*ad imitandum, vel saltem ad adulandum*).”<sup>105</sup> The condemned philosopher emerges as a martyr whom subjects “revere,” and in whose name subjects revolt.

Of course, the philosopher’s ethos of anonymity is compromised if citizens revere him as a martyr. To Spinoza, nothing could be more “calamitous” than that “the scaffold, the terror of evildoers, should become a glorious stage where is presented a supreme example of virtuous endurance (*pulcherrimum fiat theatrum ad summum tolerantiae et virtutis exemplum*), to the utter disgrace of the ruling power.”<sup>106</sup> The philosopher’s condemnation is “calamitous” in part because it subjects him to the very dynamics of theatricality that he resists. Although the philosopher concedes that it is “a glorious thing to die for freedom,” he would prefer not to be made a spectacle of.<sup>107</sup> Histrionic spectators misinterpret the philosopher’s performance on the scaffold, and configure him as an eminent personality. But the philosopher prefers the glory of the courteous friend, who inspires through impersonal argument, to the glory of the martyr, who inspires through personal example.<sup>108</sup> As Spinoza explains, the philosopher “will aim chiefly at arousing their love for him, but not at leading them into admiration so that his teaching will be called after his name.” When Spinoza complains that tyranny “cannot endure men of noble character,” he implies that philosophers cannot sustain anonymity in a tyrannical regime.<sup>109</sup> Under tyranny, the philosopher who courts anonymity risks fostering a cult of personality. In democracy, by contrast, the philosopher can observe anonymous protocol without risk that he will be thrust onto center stage,

103. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, pp. 228–229.

104. Spinoza, Baruch, *Ethics*, IVP67.

105. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 227.

106. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 227.

107. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 227.

108. When Spinoza deems the saints’ martyrdom the Catholic Church’s “chief source of pride,” he implies that the martyr’s authority is antithetical to philosophical authority; see Spinoza, Baruch, *Letters*, p. 343.

109. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Ch. 20, p. 227.

and hailed as a martyr. Spinoza's ideal democracy is a vibrant, colorful society – neither faceless nor placid – precisely because it obviates the need for theatricality, and so facilitates dissemination of contrarian ideas. Philosophical anonymity is a protocol of *display*, which allows philosophers to present challenging ideas without eliciting veneration – which is an obstacle to equal participation in reasoned debate. Spinoza's democracy may lack celebrity, but it does not lack the public exchange and contestation that have come to be hallmarks of democratic society. Although the philosopher shuns the dubious rewards of celebrity, he rewards the democracy in whose midst he flourishes; for the philosopher invites his peers to join rational debates, and rational citizens are the source of democracy's stability.

The claim that Mill and Spinoza espouse similar modes of individualism proves unpersuasive, given their divergent assessments of philosophical martyrdom. For Mill, Socrates' posthumous celebrity certifies his success as a philosopher. Socrates is so highly individuated that persecution cannot dim his luster, and his glory incites spectators to similar feats of self-assertion. For Spinoza, by contrast, posthumous cults of personality dishonor the philosopher. Spinoza's philosopher does not aspire to stand out and inspire others by personal example, which aspiration betrays an undemocratic attachment to prophetic authority. Rather, Spinoza's philosopher aims to be unremarkable; for the philosopher's prominence is the prime index of the freedom that his society grants, and the rationality that his peers have achieved. When Spinoza asserts that a philosopher can only observe anonymous protocol in democracy, he critiques modes of self-assertion that would later be dignified by Mill and his liberal heirs. While Mill views celebrity as testament to the individual's triumph over authority, Spinoza counters that celebrity perpetuates prophetic authority.

## V. Conclusion

I have argued that the cult of Spinoza's personality is inconsistent with his democratic theory. When liberals hail Spinoza as the first modern individual, they endow him with prophetic authority. However, given his democratic commitments, Spinoza would presumably want to be the reader's friend, not the reader's hero. Readers sympathetic to my argument might still wonder whether Spinoza unwittingly solicits personal veneration. For Spinoza does not write his expressly political texts in geometric style. Perhaps Spinoza's decision to abandon geometry in the (anonymously published) *Theologico-Political Treatise* and the (unfinished) *Political Treatise* betrays disavowed desires for celebrity. On this reading, Spinoza's *political* rhetoric configures him as an eminent personality, and so invites hagiography.

Because I respect the aspiration to impersonality, I will not indulge in psychoanalytic speculation about Spinoza's unconscious desires. However, I concede that Spinoza occasionally dons prophetic guise in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. With Norman O. Brown, I consider the *Theologico-Political*

*Treatise* a “hybrid” work; Spinoza alternately speaks as a prophet and as a democratic philosopher.<sup>110</sup> Many passages exude disdain for readers, not all of whom are suitable candidates for democratic enfranchisement. According to Spinoza, it is folly to attempt universal enlightenment – although philosophers enhance democracy, Spinoza does not expect that all democratic citizens will become philosophers. Indeed, Spinoza instructs the masses, who “can no more be freed from their superstition than from their fears,” to ignore his work, lest they “make themselves a nuisance by misinterpreting it after their wont.”<sup>111</sup> Admittedly, the *Theologico-Political Treatise* does not perfectly incarnate the democratic ethos for which it argues.

However, the *Political Treatise* suggests that geometric method is not the only rhetorical style consonant with democracy. In the introduction to the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza defines political theory as a discipline founded upon empirical observation and historical experience. Disdaining philosophical approaches to politics as utopian, Spinoza embraces a “statesman”-like discourse far removed from the arid abstractions of geometric method.<sup>112</sup> Yet the passage that endorses pragmatic political theory echoes the justification for geometric method from the preface to Part III of the *Ethics*. Spinoza says of politics,

And in order to enquire into matters relevant to this branch of knowledge in the same unfettered spirit as is habitually shown in mathematical studies, I have taken great care not to deride, bewail, or execrate human actions, but to understand them. So I have regarded human emotions such as love, hatred, anger, envy, pride, pity, and other agitations of the mind not as vices of human nature but as properties pertaining to it in the same way as heat, cold, storm, thunder, and such pertain to the nature of the universe. These things, though troublesome, are inevitable, and have definite causes through which we try to understand their nature. And the mind derives as much enjoyment in contemplating them aright as from the knowledge of things that are pleasing to the senses.<sup>113</sup>

This methodological directive suggests that similar concerns motivate the rhetorical strategies of the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise*. Spinoza imbues the latter with a mathematical spirit – one component of which is impersonality – without recourse to geometric demonstration. There are many ways to cultivate impersonality, and discourage readers’ veneration.

This admission should relieve contemporary theorists persuaded that impersonal protocol harbors democratic potential. To revive impersonality as a contemporary ethos, theorists need not mimic Spinoza’s rhetoric or conventions of publication. Indeed, it is unclear whether publishing

110. Brown, Norman O., “Philosophy,” p. 197. However, I take issue with Brown’s claim that philosophy *must* be disguised as prophecy to enter the public sphere; Spinoza reserves a political role for “naked” philosophy.

111. Spinoza, Baruch, *TTP*, Pref. pp. 7–8.

112. Spinoza, Baruch, *TP*, p. 34.

113. Spinoza, Baruch, *TP*, p. 35.

anonymously would affect democratic enfranchisement, given cultural imperatives of celebrity. Consider the case of Michel Foucault, who famously professed to write “in order to have no face,” and made good on this profession by sitting for an interview that was published without disclosing the interviewee’s name.<sup>114</sup> Foucault never links his flirtations with anonymity to a concern for democratic politics. However, Foucault does echo Spinoza when he explains that concern for the social “mode of being of discourse” elicits reservations regarding signed publication.<sup>115</sup> Of course, Foucault could afford to experiment with anonymity because he had already achieved celebrity. Foucault complains that his celebrity prevents readers from engaging his texts; consequently, in his anonymous interview, he dons the mask “out of nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard.”<sup>116</sup> Foucault never offers a developed ethos of anonymity, but his scattered experiments suggest that theorists who would revive impersonality as a mode of philosophical citizenship need to do more than just publish anonymously. Indeed, Foucault’s flirtations with anonymity reinforce his mystique and amplify his celebrity. Like Spinoza, Foucault gets recuperated for flamboyant individualism, despite his best efforts to abstain from, or resist, the cult of philosophical personality.

Rather than insisting on the literal right to anonymity, theorists should develop more expansive notions of philosophical citizenship, and of philosophy’s place in democratic discourse. Issuing manifestoes and flaunting personal idiosyncrasy remain dominant strategies of intellectual intervention. But Spinoza admonishes against flashy displays of prophetic insight. As Etienne Balibar explains, Spinoza does not limit “political philosophy” to genres that prescribe policies and broadcast platforms, because Spinoza appreciates the political value of conduct becoming to a philosopher. “Thus, finally, we see why the set purpose of the philosopher – his ‘ethic’ – is not to prepare or announce the revolution but to take the risk of thinking in full view of his public. That is not a risk that many revolutions have been prepared to take.”<sup>117</sup> Balibar captures the political commitments that animate philosophical protocol. But I would amend (ever so slightly) Balibar’s characterization of this ethic. The democratic philosopher thinks not “in full view of his public,” but under cover. Resisting the temptation to appear in full view is one of the greatest challenges for a democratic theorist. Although some theorists have run the risk of thinking publicly, few public thinkers have been prepared to risk impersonality. Against the vogue for philosophical celebrity, Spinoza counsels democratic theorists to cultivate modes of courteous friendship consistent with, and conducive to, individual autonomy.

114. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 17. For Foucault’s anonymous interview, see “The Masked Philosopher,” in Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984* ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 323–330.

115. Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 107.

116. Foucault, Michel, *Politics*, p. 323.

117. Balibar, Etienne, *Spinoza*, p. 98.