
The Desiring Constitutions of Community: A Two-fold Reading of Spinoza's Social Philosophy in the *Ethics*

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Abstract

This paper argues that we find a double deduction of the origin of society in Spinoza's philosophy. The site of this doubleness is in E4p37, where Spinoza offers two distinct demonstrations for the same phenomenon. Paying close attention to this double articulation highlights important features of Spinozian social and political philosophy. As Étienne Balibar noted, the two demonstrations operate according to two dimensions of human existence, namely *rationality* and *affectivity*. Through rationality, human beings are necessarily in harmony; through affectivity, human beings are in an ambivalent relationship towards one another. The root of this ambivalence, Balibar argued, is the structure of imitation that rules human interactions. Accordingly, the task of politics is to avoid the inimical tendencies of the said ambivalence through artful strategies. In this paper, I aim to sharpen Balibar's reading by proposing a reading of E4p37 that focuses on a little-discussed distinction between *commonality* and *similarity*. This distinction bleeds into social life and becomes the difference between the apolitical community of friends and the political society of citizens. In other words, through a close re-reading of E4p37 that puts it in relation with Spinoza's political works, I argue that rationality cultivates harmony under the guise of friendship, while politics is an art that shapes the category of the similar, thus drawing the contour of the fellow-citizen. Hence, politics seeks to imitate friendship, and it can only do so by shaping our judgement concerning the similarity of the other.

Keywords: Politics, Community, Friendship, Agreement, Similarity, Imitation of affects, Étienne Balibar.

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Introduction: Ambivalent Otherness

Sociability is a riddle. The mystery of our social nature lies in the ambivalence of the other we encounter. Benedict de Spinoza captured this quite accurately in his social philosophy. In one passage of the *Ethics*, he writes:

What we have just shown is also confirmed by daily experience, which provides so much and such clear evidence that this saying is in almost everyone's mouth: man is a God to man. Still, it rarely happens that men live according to the guidance of reason. Instead, their lives are so constituted that they are usually envious and burdensome to one another. They can hardly, however, live a solitary life; hence, that definition which makes man a social animal has been quite pleasing to most. (E4p35s/G II 234, lines 1–9)

Human beings are both godlike and burdensome to one another. Society, Spinoza argues, does not do away with such ambivalence. Instead, it finds an articulation in the midst of it.

Accordingly, we find in the *Ethics* a dual deduction of the genesis of society. As Étienne Balibar notes in the third chapter of his *Spinoza et la politique*, the proposition E4p37 is developed according two different dimensions of human existence. Sociability, Balibar argues, is deduced as a phenomenon rooted equally in rationality and in affectivity. Balibar concludes that (a) sociability necessarily follows from all dimensions of human existence; (b) if the rational deduction shows the necessary harmony constitutive of human social nature, the affective one shows its ambivalent dimension. We are necessarily social; rationally, we harmoniously join each other; affectively, we are equally attracted and repulsed by the other. Political philosophy, accordingly, aims to cultivate the attractive pole of our relation to the other.¹

I propose here a slightly different reading of the proposition articulating this dual genesis. Less than a response to Balibar, I want to sharpen what he disclosed. In the following pages, I add some precision regarding the root of social ambivalence, and argue that the overlooked distinction between *commonality* and *similarity* is the true locus of difference between rational and affective constitutions of sociability. I will begin by delineating Balibar's reading. I will then propose my own reading of the texts, insisting on the importance of commonality and similarity. Finally, I will articulate what this distinction entails for an understanding of Spinoza's social philosophy. Ultimately, I contend that a focus on judgements of similarity can enrich our approach to Spinozian political philosophy.

1. E4p37: Between Reason and Affects

The proposition at hand, E4p37, is the political moment of the *Ethics*, since Spinoza claims to have “shown the foundations of the State” (E4p37s1/G II 236, line 25). It goes as follows: “The good

¹ Étienne Balibar, “L’Éthique: une anthropologie politique,” in *Spinoza politique: le transindividuel* (Paris: PUF, 2018).

which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this Desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater” (E4p37). In short, there is a determination of desire according to which virtuous human beings desire in common. Since this proposition articulates the foundations of the State, we can fairly propose that the foundation of political community is a commonality of desire.

What is interesting, however, is that the proposition has two demonstrations—a rare occurrence in the *Ethics*.² Recently, Balibar has proposed a close reading of the two demonstrations, and concluded that while there is one single phenomenon being articulated, it follows from two distinct processes. On the one hand, we have a *rational deduction*; on the other, an *affective, or passionate* one.³ The state, then, is a complex phenomenon that is both rational and affective. To understand what this entails is crucial for political philosophy.

Human experience, Spinoza says, is affective. We affect and are affected by the world around us.⁴ Some of those affections are called affects. They express a change.⁵ Some of the affects empower us and thus are joys; others weaken us and thus are sadnesses.⁶ The logic behind this, Spinoza argues, is that every entity strives to persevere in being: that is, it strives to affirm and maintain its existence.⁷ Whatever frustrates such a striving is experienced as an obstacle and something that can potentially destroy us: “[t]hings are of a contrary nature, i.e., cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other” (E3p5/G II 145-6). We call good that which produces joy, and bad what impedes it, that is, we evaluate according to how things help or undermine our striving.⁸ Some encounters, however, are ambivalent: the same object can sometimes be deemed good, and at other times bad.⁹ We navigate the world through the affects, on a sea that is far from being calm.¹⁰

Reason, it should be noted, is affective. Affectivity and rational life are not necessarily opposed: reason partakes in our affective turmoil. Spinoza claims that he seeks “to show what reason prescribes to us, which affects agree with the rules of human reason, and which, on the other hand, are contrary

2 The complete list of the propositions with multiple demonstrations is the following: E1p11, E4p37, E4p51, E4p59. There is another instance of the expression *aliter* in E1p6/G I 48, line 30, but it concerns the demonstration of a corollary, and so does not embrace the same structure as the other instances. It is curious to notice how most instances of multiple demonstrations occur in *De Servitute*.

3 Balibar, “L’*Éthique*,” 147–48.

4 “The individuals composing the human Body, and consequently, the human Body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways” (E2p13post3/G II 102); “The human Body can move and dispose external bodies in a great many ways” (E2p13post6/G II 103); “The idea of any mode in which the human Body is affected by external bodies must involve the nature of the human Body and tat the same time the nature of the external body” (E2p16/G II 103-4).

5 “By *affect* I understand affections of the Body by which the Body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections” (E3def3/G II 139).

6 “By *Joy*, therefore, I shall understand [...] that *passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection*. And by *Sadness*, that *passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection*” (E3p11s/G II 149, lines 1–5).

7 “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in being” (E3p6/G II 146).

8 “The knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of Joy or Sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it” (E4p8/G II 215).

9 “[O]ne and the same man can be affected differently at different times by one and the same object” (E3p51/G II 177).

10 “[I]t is clear that we are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that, like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate” (E3p59s/G II 189, line 5).

to those rules,” thus indicating the non-oppositional relation between reason and affective life (E4p18s/G II 222, lines 12–14).¹¹ Reason, however, can only partake in affective life if it is itself considered affectively. Spinoza, for instance, writes that true knowledge of good and evil does not counter other affects *insofar as it is true*.¹² If, for instance, I know that drinking a whole bottle of whisky in one night would strongly weaken me, it might not counter my desire to do it. If I want to repress my desire, I must make this knowledge affectively stronger. Reason and affects are intertwined in our actual experience. This is key for understanding Balibar’s reading. Reason and affectivity are not necessarily in conflict, and thus they can both articulate the same phenomenon while preserving its unity.¹³

Balibar notices that the rational deduction of sociability articulates a classical argument: insofar as human beings are rational, they necessarily concord with one another. In the words of Balibar: “sociability is a reciprocity of participation in the supreme good defined by reason”.¹⁴ Hence, the rational determination of human desire necessarily leads to society, since it establishes a common good that is desired in common.

Balibar, however, duly notes: “[r]eason alone cannot define human nature: on the contrary, Spinoza constantly insists on this, human nature is defined *at the same time* by reason and by ignorance, imagination and passion.”¹⁵ The affective deduction is not opposed to the first one. It articulates the same phenomenon according to another dimension of human existence: affective mechanisms.¹⁶ Balibar shows that the main mechanism at play is a mimetic tendency called by Spinoza the imitation of affects.¹⁷ Imitation entails that we desire what other people desire, but also that we desire other people to desire like us. It leads to harmony, but also implies a conflictual dimension. As experience shows, evaluative judgements vary. Hence, Balibar concludes, “this image [of the other] is profoundly ambivalent: it is both attractive and repulsive, reassuring and threatening.”¹⁸ Imitation is far from being necessarily harmonious, since it always bears the possibility of conflict.

This prompts the problem at the heart of my inquiry. Balibar argues that affective imitation is the source of ambivalence. I want to go deeper. The other that I imitate is, as Balibar writes, “constituted by a process of imaginary identification.”¹⁹ He does not, however, inquire into the logic of this specific process. My intuition is that the condition of possibility for this process lies in the

11 E4p18s.

12 “No affect can be restrained by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true, but only insofar as it is considered an affect” (E4p14/G II 219).

13 While one could object here that affectivity proper is not precise enough since it does not express the difference between actions and passions in Spinoza’s philosophy, it seems that such a distinction is not that important when it comes to analyzing political phenomena. To wit: “For my part I admit that the desires which don’t arise from reason are not so much human actions as passions. But because we’re dealing here with the universal power or Right of nature, we can recognize no difference here between the desires generated in us by reason and those generated by other causes” (TP 2.5/G III 277, lines 19–21).

14 Balibar, “L’Éthique,” 144. All translations from Balibar’s text are mine.

15 Balibar, 147.

16 Balibar, 148.

17 Cf. E3p27.

18 Balibar, “L’Éthique,” 151.

19 Balibar, 150.

judgement of similarity. This has consequences regarding how politics can foster cohesive forms of imitation.

That being said, how does this twofold reading interact with Spinoza's explicit references to politics elsewhere in his *oeuvre*? At first sight, the geometrical method of E4p37 does not provide it with a political garb.

The ambivalence of the affective demonstration resonates with what is often called Spinoza's so-called realism, based on his rejection of utopian forms of thinking.²⁰ Curiously, however, the rational demonstration clashes with such realism, and puts into question passages concerning the absence of politics in a community of purely rational beings.²¹

I propose to read E4p37 in relation to E4app12–13:

XII. It is especially useful to men to form associations, to bind themselves by those bonds most apt to make one people of them, and absolutely, to do those things which serve to strengthen friendships;

XIII. But skill [*ars*] and alertness are required for this. For men vary—there being few who live according to the rule of reason—and yet generally they are envious, and more inclined to vengeance than to Compassion. (E4app12–13/G II 269, lines 10–15)

Of interest to me is this *ars*, or *art*, necessitated by the conflictual dimension of our sociability.²² Unsurprisingly, Spinoza writes in the *Political Treatise* that political practitioners are ingenious or crafty: *callidis*.²³ Edwin Curley translates this term by “shrewdness”, which gives it an overtly pejorative connotation. I prefer to side with French translators such as Bernard Pautrat and Charles Ramond who translate the term by “habile,” which preserves an ambiguity regarding political *praxis*.²⁴ The term should be understood in all its ambiguity: politics is a craft, an art, or, as Justin Steinberg puts it, a formative process.²⁵ Spinoza sees social life as necessary, but it keeps being undermined by affective dissonances. To put it as Filippo del Lucchese does, “What Spinoza is describing [in his political thought] [...] is the realistic principle of creating powerful, effective strategies for

20 See, for instance, TP 1.1/G III 273.

21 I will further analyze the following passage in a latter section of the paper: “if human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason points them to, society would surely need no laws” (TP 5/G III 73, line 29). When referencing the *Theological-Political Treatise*, I prefer the following translation: Benedictus de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

22 Marilena Chaui offers an alternative, but nonetheless interesting account of the relation between passions and political art. See Marilena Chaui, “The Social: A Condition and a Danger to Politics,” *Journal of Spinoza Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 24, <https://doi.org/10.21827/jss.1.1.38482>.

23 In the *Political Treatise*, for instance, he calls political ‘practitioners’ “[ingenious] rather than wise [*potius callidi quam sapientes aestimantur*]” (TP 1.2/G III 273), and “very acute (whether cunning or [ingenious]) [*acutissimis, sive astutis sive callidis*]” (TP 1.3/G 274).

24 Cf. O V 91, and Baruch Spinoza, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Bernard Pautrat, trans. Bernard Pautrat et al., (Paris: Gallimard, 2022), 904.

25 Justin Steinberg, *Spinoza's Political Psychology: The Taming of Fortune and Fear*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), chap. 1. See also Alexandre Matheron's reading of *callidis* and its ambiguity in Alexandre Matheron, “Spinoza et la décomposition de la politique thomiste: machiavélisme et utopie..,” in *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l'âge classique* (Lyon: ENS éditions, 2011), 81–111.

resistance: the capacity to respond adequately to the conflict which continually troubles the existence of states.”²⁶ Politics, in this sense, is not reduceable to a striving for harmony. Politics is “strategic”, it is cultivating a “capacity to respond adequately” to the conflictual dimension of interhuman relations. In this sense, I agree with del Lucchese when he claims that “the idea of conceiving of politics as an absence of conflict would be nothing but an illusory fiction.”²⁷ While politics cannot be said to exist in spite of reason (this is the upshot of Balibar’s reading of E4p37), it cannot be said to be necessarily harmonious.

I want to inquire into the way in which the *ars* of E4app13 relates to the affective demonstration of E4p37. The strategic nature of politics, I contend, is grounded in the judgement of similarity constituting the core of the second demonstration. I want to see if it is not possible to distinguish between *community* and *political community* through my focus on the judgement of similarity and how it defines *political art*.

2. First Demonstration: The Coherence of Reason

2.1 Summary of the Rational Demonstration

The first demonstration goes as follows:

Insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason [*Homines, quatenus ex ductu rationis vivunt*], they are most useful to man (by P35C1); hence (by P19), according to the guidance of reason, we necessarily strive to bring it about that men live according to the guidance of reason. Now, the good which everyone who lives according to the dictate of reason (i.e. by P24, who seeks virtue) wants for himself is understanding (by P26). Therefore, the good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men (E4p37d1/G II 235).²⁸

I call this demonstration the *rational demonstration*, because of the phrase “insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason.” This ‘insofar as’ [*quatenus*] indicates the selection of some key features that guide the demonstrative process at play. It is akin to creating ideal conditions while doing experiments in a laboratory. With this ‘insofar as,’ Spinoza states that the first demonstration works according to the logic of rationality *per se*.

Within the two first sentences of the demonstration, Spinoza argues that a virtuous person seeks two things, namely, to understand (“Now, the good which everyone who lives according to the dictate of reason...”) and to live among other rational human beings (“hence, according to the

26 Filippo del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation* (London: Continuum, 2011), 59.

27 Del Lucchese, *Conflict*, 78.

28 I omit here the second half of the demonstration. The reason I do so is because this second half only concerns the second clause of E4p37, namely, that the collective desire is the greater the more we know God. While important, it is not central to my inquiry. By focusing solely on the first part of the proposition *and* the first part of the demonstration, we can center our attention on the social dimension of E4p37.

guidance of reason...”). We see how this creates a circular movement: insofar as we are virtuous, we desire to understand *and* to see others understand. Hence, we share a common desire, one which could be phrased as follows: rational human beings share a desire for rationality, a desire which is satisfied through a common endeavor to foster rationality. This movement is immanent: its circularity does not require anything outside the nature of rationally guided desire.²⁹ To say it somewhat naively: it is the very nature of reason to foster rationality. As I will show in the next section, both of those desiderata are rooted in the same logic, namely, the logic of seeking one’s own advantage.

2.2 Advantage and Coherence

We can arrive at a better understanding of the inner logic of the demonstration by focusing on three moments: (α) the foundation of virtue in the desire of one’s own advantage; (β) virtue as understanding; (γ) agreement as the foundation of advantage.

(α) To start, here is Spinoza’s definition of virtue: “By virtue and power, I understand the same thing, i.e. (by [E3p7]), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, *or* nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone” (E4def8/G II 209). A key aspect of Spinoza’s understanding of virtue lies in the relation virtue holds with one’s striving to persevere in being: “the foundation of virtue is [the] very striving to preserve one’s own being” (E4p18s/G II 222).³⁰ We necessarily desire what can help us in our endeavor to preserve our being. What helps us in this task is called *advantageous*, or *useful*, both being adequate translations of the Latin *utile*. Hence, if virtue is the striving to preserve one’s being, it is always the desire for one’s own advantage.

In the first demonstration of E4p37, such a desire takes a twofold orientation: it is a “[striving] to bring it about that men live according to the guidance of reason,” but also the desire for understanding as being “the good which everyone who lives according to the dictate of reason [...] wants for himself.” It is still unclear why Spinoza is warranted in making this move.

(β) The question we now face is the following: is there something that is truly and certainly advantageous to human beings? We have the first hint of an answer in E4p18s: “virtue is nothing but acting from the laws of one’s own nature, and no one strives to preserve his being (by [E3p7]) except from the laws of his own nature” (G II 222, lines 24–25). The last clause (“and no one...”) is important here: if virtue is one’s essence, that which help us to attain it depends on our essence. In other words, one’s advantage stems from one’s particular nature.

It is because of this structure of virtue that Spinoza can claim in E4p24/G II 226: “Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being (these three signify the same thing) by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one’s own advantage”. In the demonstration of the proposition, he calls to our attention the fact that “we [human beings] act only insofar as we understand” (E4p24d), and since an action is “when something in us

29 Alexandre Mbomé calls this the “déploiement d’une logique interne” that can do without any recourse to an external moral dictate. See Alexandre Mbomé, “Les fondements métaphysiques de la puissance politique de la multitude,” in *Spinoza et la politique de la multitude*, eds. Sonja Lavaert and Pierre-François Moreau, (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2021), 176.

30 See also E4p22 and its corollary.

or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone” (E3def2/G II 139), we can easily reconstruct the argument. Living rationally, that is, understanding, follows from the laws of human nature, and virtue is everything which follows from such laws, hence: “what we strive for from reason is nothing but understanding; nor does the Mind, insofar as it uses reason, judge anything else useful to itself except what leads to understanding” (E4p26/G II 227). All of this indicates that living rationally is ontologically grounded in human existence, as in, it is the fullest expression of our essence.

From there, we can say the following: living virtuously is living rationally, and what promotes such a life is called advantageous. The argument of the first demonstration of E4p37 is that this very structure is constitutive of collective desire, and thus collective life.

(γ) The final step of the argument lies in the necessarily collective dimension of virtuous desire. The argument relies on a series of propositions (E4p29–37) that develops what is sometimes called the “interhuman dimension” of our desires.³¹ The key principle at play here is the notion of *agreement in nature [convenientia]*. We call *advantageous* whatever agrees with our nature: “the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, *or* better, it is for us, and, conversely, the more a thing is useful to us, the more it agrees with our nature” (E4p31c/G II 230). Agreement articulates the ontological foundation of advantage. It explains how a desire can be shared, and thus, held in common.

The logic of agreement is articulated in detail in the propositions 29–37 of part four of the *Ethics*.³² I propose, however, to look at another passage, namely a letter dating from November 1665, sent to Spinoza’s friend, Henry Oldenburg.³³ Letter 32 answers a question from Oldenburg: “you ask me what I think about the question concerning *our knowledge of how each part of Nature agrees [conveniat] with its whole and how it coheres [cohoereat] with the others*” (Ep 32, Spinoza to Oldenburg, 20 November 1665 (G IV 169a–170a)). The problem of agreement concerns the unity of individuals not only with the world, but also with each other. It is the latter that is of importance in the present inquiry.³⁴

Spinoza answers as follows: “By the coherence of parts, then, I understand nothing but that the laws *or* the nature of the one part adapts itself to the laws *or* the nature of the other part so that they are opposed to each other as little as possible” (Ep 32, Spinoza to Oldenburg, 20 November 1665 (G IV 170a, lines 14–15)). Coherence of parts means that the natures of each part are “opposed to each other as little as possible.” Coherence means a non-oppositional position that results from the mutual adaptation of different individuals. If coherence is advantageous, it is because it avoids conflicts which could be detrimental to one entity. Coherence is a condition for one’s advantage. One’s advantage is determined according to the degree of coherence it shares with external objects.

31 Alexandre Matheron, “Les fondements d’une éthique de la similitude (Éthique IV, propositions 29 à 31 et corollaire),” in *Études sur Spinoza*, 665–680; Pierre-François Moreau, “Imitation of the Affects and Interhuman Relations,” in *Spinoza’s Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, eds. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz, and Robert Schnepf (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

32 For a detailed analysis of this demonstrative movement, see Matheron, “Fondements d’une éthique de la similitude.”

33 I am indebted here to Andrea Sangiacomo who points out this letter as an important text when it comes to unfolding the notion of agreement in Spinoza’s philosophy. See Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 118.

34 Note that in the following, I take *conveniat* and *cohoereat* to be synonymous, an intuition warranted by the letter, but also supported by Andrea Sangiacomo’s reading of the letter. See Sangiacomo, 121.

I read E4p37 as articulating the coherence of rational individuals at the level of their desires. It is this coherence, or agreement, that explains how virtuous desire, as a desire following from the laws of human nature, is ontologically collective. Rational individuals cohere with one another: they desire the same thing, in the same way, and they are thus naturally ‘adapted’ to each other’s nature. They require no adaptation to each other, because they necessarily follow the laws of human nature. They desire in common, and this is the foundation of community.

But E4p37 goes further: not only do rational individuals agree with one another because they share a common desire, but they also desire each other’s presence. The rationale behind this is expressed in the appendix to the fourth part of the *Ethics*:

It is impossible for man not to be a part of nature and not to follow the common order of nature. But if he lives among such individuals as agree with his nature, his power of acting will thereby be aided and encouraged. *On the other hand, if he is among such as do not agree at all with his nature, he will hardly be able to accommodate himself to them without greatly changing himself* (E4app7/G II 268, italics mine).

Coherence is advantageous because it removes opposition between individuals, thus helping them to persevere in being. This passage stresses how a strong enough disagreement requires an individual to “greatly change” to adapt themselves to their world. Disagreement, at the ontological level, is contrary to virtue since it undermines the foundation of virtue, viz. perseverance in being. When human beings live rationally, they follow the laws of human nature, and can be said to share a common nature. One would be at pains to find a more optimal form of coherence. Hence, desiring to bring it about that other human beings also live rationally is a desire for the strongest form of coherence. It is implied in virtuous desire, which is a desire for one’s advantage. The logic of seeking one’s own advantage implies that we desire understanding and to share such understanding.

To conclude the present subsection, I can thus summarize my reading of the first demonstration programmatically:

- (α) To be virtuous is to seek one’s own advantage, because to be virtuous is to foster our own perseverance in being;
- (β) One’s own advantage is dependent on one’s nature; in the case of human beings, this means understanding (per E4p24 and E4p26);
- (γ) Advantage is founded in agreement, whereby different individuals can be said to cohere together, that is, a state where oppositions are diminished. Agreement requires adaptation to one another, and so, if individuals follow the dictates of reason, they are naturally adapted to one another, since they all act following the laws of human nature.

Ergo, the first demonstration shows how the very structure of human virtue is immanently collective: one’s virtue is understanding, and it is fostered by the presence of other individuals sharing the same desire.

2.3 Consequences and Echoes

The first demonstration shows us how a society of virtuous persons is constituted. Community arises out of the nature of reason itself through the foundation of virtue in the desire for one’s advantage. Community, in other words, is immanent to the virtuous orientation of desire.

We can, however, raise some concerns. Is Spinoza implying that all communities are necessarily virtuous? If so, how does it work with his disavowal of utopian political philosophies (cf. TP 1.1/G III 273)?

In many passages of his political works, Spinoza insists on the fact that politics is necessary because human beings are *not* solely guided by reason. Take the following passage from the *TPP*: “[n]ow, if human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason [*vera ratio*] points them to, society would surely need no laws; men would only need to learn true moral doctrine [*vera documenta moralia*], in order to do what is truly useful [*vere utile*] of their own accord with upright and free mind. But they are not so constituted, far from it” (TPP 5/G III 73, lines 29–31). If human existence were solely rational, there would be no need for any laws. Experience, however, tells us that such a condition is not the human one.

Dimitris Vardoulakis proposes the following reading:

[i]f society included members who all calculated their utility according to the operation of reason, without being overwhelmed by emotions such as fear, then there would be no need for statutory law. The entire social function would then consist in the coordination between reason and utility, and no authority would be required to instruct humans what is the right conduct, nor written laws to institute a command and obedience model.³⁵

The prescription of *true reason* does not require an external form of authority to be followed. From the desire for one’s advantage, one is led to find a *true moral doctrine*, which is nothing but the striving to obtain that which is *truly useful*. Thus, as Vardoulakis rightly shows, *authority*, understood here as an external power that imposes some commands, is not required in a society of purely rational individuals. The problem is that, for Spinoza, a true knowledge, insofar as it is true, is not sufficient to counter affects.³⁶ Spinoza insists three times on the truthful character of a purely rational life: true reason, true moral doctrine, and true advantage, all of which are, in experience, insufficient to counter the real tendencies of our all too human condition.

This passage allows Vardoulakis to show that utility is *logically* and *ontologically* prior to authority within Spinoza’s political thought. I find his insight helpful for the present inquiry because, by showing that utility is prior to authority, it becomes possible to stress the difference between *society* and *the state* within Spinoza’s philosophy.

In E4p37s1, Spinoza establishes the difference between life under the guidance of reason and the state. After defining the features of a life under the guidance of reason, he writes: “[i]n addition to this, I have also shown what the foundations of the state [*civitatis*] are” (E4p37s1/G II 236, line 26, italics mine). I take the ‘in addition to this’ to indicate that what is said about a rational existence is distinct from the foundations of the state. Let us consider the structure of communal rational existence to understand such a distinction.

Spinoza gives three features of a rational life: i) what we desire and do following the knowledge of God (*religion*), ii) the desire to do good arising from life under the guidance of reason (*piety*), iii) the desire of one living under the guidance of reason to befriend other human beings (*being*)

35 Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Spinoza, the Epicurean* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 150.

36 Cf. E4p14.

honourable). I immediately notice that there is no mention of authority or polity: through religion and piety, a rational life teaches a true moral doctrine. The social dimension of such a life is called friendship [*amicitia*] (E4p37s1/G II 236, lines 20–25). Friends, in this sense, are human beings perfectly cohering in virtue of their desire.

We find here a foreshadowing of the passages I already cited from the appendix to *De Servitute*: E4app12/G II 269 states that “to do those things which serve to strengthen friendships” is “especially useful,” and E4app13/G II 269–270 explains that this enterprise is complicated, “[f]or men vary—there being few who live according to the rule of reason,” and so requires “skill and alertness.” There is thus a tension between what we do following reason alone and human condition in actual experience. Following reason, we pursue bonds of friendship, and we “show best how much our skill and understanding are worth by educating men so that at last they live according to the command of their own reason” (E4app9/G II 269). In other words, under the guidance of reason, we entertain friendship by seeking to share our desire for understanding—without the necessity to coerce the other.

This leads me to the following conclusion: E4p37d articulates the apolitical dimension of our social lives. In this sense, authors who insist on the fact that Spinozian politics are *not* rooted in reason are right.³⁷ They are right insofar as from the dictates of reason alone, we cannot derive a structure of authority: we can only deduce a *true moral doctrine*, which delineates what I would call an *ethics of friendship*. Nevertheless, because human beings do not solely live under the guidance of reason, reason must use a strategy, to use Laurent Bove’s expression.³⁸ This will become clearer in the next section.

I propose to call the community following from the nature of reason a *community of friendship*, one characterized by a common love for understanding. There exists a rational society which is a community of *friends*.³⁹ Such a community is *apolitical*: it expresses the optimal form collective desire can take; it is immanent to the nature of rational life. E4p37d is *the demonstration of friendship*.

37 Aurelia Armstrong, “Natural and Unnatural Communities: Spinoza Beyond Hobbes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 279–305; Laurent Bove, *La stratégie du conatus: Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1996); Eugene Garver, “Spinoza’s Democratic Imagination,” *The European Legacy* 19, no. 7 (2014): 833–853; Sophie Laveran, “Le problème de la composition politique chez Spinoza : hypothèses ontologiques et perspectives pratiques,” *Philonsorbonne*, no. 6 (2012): 41–63, <https://doi.org/10.4000/philonsorbonne.387>; Matheron, “Fondements d’une éthique de la similitude.”

38 As per the title of Bove’s book: *La stratégie du conatus*.

39 One can find a related argument in Mogens Lærke’s most recent book. In the chapter dedicated to the different forms of authority one can find in the *TPP*, Lærke shows that Spinoza sees a form of authority in friendship, even though this authority might be better defined as private rather than public. The foundation of this private authority is found in human nature, and it thus lies beyond what Vardoulakis and I consider to be authority. Lærke ultimately argues that “[f]ree philosophizing is governed by a form of authority—the authority to teach and advise—that Spinoza considers an inalienable natural right entirely beyond the grasp of civil law”. Mogens Lærke, *Spinoza and the Freedom of Philosophizing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 85.

3. Alternative Demonstration: The Image of the Other

3.1 Summary of the Argument

As Balibar claims, the second demonstration concerns affective mechanisms. Indeed, it goes as follows:

The good which man wants for himself and loves, he will love more constantly if he sees that others love it (by [E3p31]). So (by [E3p31cor]), he will strive to have the others love the same thing. And because this good is common to all (by P36), and all can enjoy it, he will therefore (by the same reason) strive that all may enjoy it. And this striving will be the greater, the more he enjoys this good (by [E3p37]), q.e.d. (E4p37alt/G II 235–236).

It articulates a form of *collective love* which is accompanied by a *collective enjoyment*. Hence, it is the affective genesis of the collective constitution of desire.

I suggest that we keep in mind the tension that appeared in the last few pages. We require politics, and so authority, because we are under the yoke of the affects. Still, Spinoza does contend that he can show how affects work with reason, and not against it.⁴⁰ The issue, as I will show, is that whereas reason necessarily leads to a community of friends, affective social life is inherently ambivalent and ambiguous. Some features of society that do not arise under the sole guidance of reason come from this ambivalence.

3.2 Imitation and the Politics of Enjoyment

The path of affectivity seems much simpler than the rational one. It is founded in the imitation of the affects. Here is Spinoza's explanation of the phenomenon: "If we imagine a thing like us [*rem nobis similem*], toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect" (E3p27/G II 160). On the surface, this proposition is as simple as it gets: when we see another thing [*rem*] we *imagine* to be similar to us, we spontaneously tend to imitate its affects because of the similarity it bears with us. I say 'spontaneously,' because the proposition mentions the fact that this *rem nobis similem* is a thing toward which we have had no affect. At this level, it seems that the affective constitution of collective desire is a spontaneous process: community arises because a dimension of our affective life is inherently mimetic, thus, inherently social. Just as rationally guided desire was necessarily social it seems that imitation makes affective life *necessarily* interpersonal.

The concept of imitation has recently been identified as playing an essential role in the formation of society. Alexandre Matheron and Justin Steinberg, for instance, place the process of imitation as the central dynamic of our social lives. Because we tend to imitate the affects of others like us, we

40 Cf. E4p18s/G II 222, lines 12–14.

interact with other beings with a desire for esteem and an aversion for shame.⁴¹ Indeed, if any of our actions cause another person to be disgusted, we will imitate such an affect and feel disgusted by our own actions, which will sadden us. We thus strive to have other people esteem us, since we will imitate such an esteem and feel happy about ourselves. As Spinoza writes: “[w]e shall strive to do also whatever we imagine men to look on with Joy, and on the other hand, we shall be averse to doing what we imagine men are averse to” (E3p29/G II 162). Imitation acts as a cohesive factor: it creates a sense of collective values that shapes interpersonal relations. We see in the alternative demonstration that we want others to love and enjoy what we love and enjoy because it bolsters our own feelings of love and joy. A community is born through the creation of collective appreciation.

Affects can be said to work in accordance with the dictates of reason when we delve into the affective structure of virtue. We saw that virtue consists in preserving our being and that anything aiding such a task is judged to be useful. From an affective standpoint, an individual will strive to imagine that which brings them joy, if the latter is understood as “a man’s passage from a lesser to a greater perfection” (E3def.aff.2/G II 191). If a virtuous individual seeks to preserve their being, then anything bringing them to a greater power will not only be advantageous (from the standpoint of reason), but will also be an object of love, where love is understood as “a Joy, accompanied by the idea of an external cause” (E3def.aff.6/G II 192–193). Affectively then, virtuous human beings will pursue through love what brings them the utmost joy.⁴² The affective dimension of one’s own advantage is one’s enjoyment.

This is where the imitation of affects plays a determinant role: imitation can shift our desire, and any other affects, from an object *per se* to a relation to the object. Instead of desiring understanding as such, the process of imitation makes it so that we desire the desire of others we consider to be like us.⁴³ Just as the coherence of desire creates an optimal environment for the individual living under the guidance of reason, imitation creates an affective cohesion in the enjoyment of the other’s joy. To put it more simply, the more I see other beings enjoying the same thing as I do, the more my own joy will be reinforced. Hence, from an affective standpoint, the virtuous person enjoys the other’s enjoyment to further their own joy. The mimetic dimension of our affective life entails that maximal joy has to be social.

I propose to call this dynamic a *politics of enjoyment*. Imitation, in its positive dimension, makes it possible to produce joyful affects which are intrinsically interpersonal.⁴⁴ The enjoyment of the object becomes secondary to the enjoyment of the communal desire for it. The genesis of society, when affectively virtuous, happens through the enjoyment of imitation—through the constitution of common joyful affects rooted in an eternally and universally enjoyable good, viz. understanding.

⁴¹ Alexandre Matheron, “L’indignation et le *conatus* de l’État spinoziste,” in *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l’âge classique*, (Lyon: ENS éditions, 2011), 219–220; Steinberg, *Spinoza’s Political Psychology*, 29.

⁴² Cf. E3p28.

⁴³ Armstrong, “Natural and Unnatural Communities,” 287.

⁴⁴ Pierre-François Moreau proposes the distinction between two kinds of passions: “One might say that human life finally organizes itself around two types of passions: those based on the connection between objects and those based on similarity, which facilitates the imitation of affects,” in Moreau, “Imitation,” 168. Another way to phrase this would be to say that for Spinoza, there are passions rooted in a direct relation with object and others that are rooted in the other. So not only do we desire certain objects, but we also desire the desire of others.

3.3 Ambiguities and Consequences

There remains, however, *le non-dit* of the second demonstration: the antagonistic dimension of imitation. Imitation can also be a source of disharmony. This appears in E4p37s1: “[h]e who strives, only because of an affect, that others should love what he loves, and live according to his temperament, acts only from impulse and is hateful” (G II 236, lines 8–10). The warning reappears, albeit in a different form, in the appendix to *De Servitute*:

[f]or men vary—there being few who live according to the rule of reason—and yet generally they are envious, and more inclined to vengeance than to Compassion. *So it requires a singular power of mind to bear with each one according to his understanding, and to restrain oneself from imitating their affects* (E4app13/G II 269, italics mine).

Not only must the virtuous person avoid living only according to impulse, but they must also “restrain themselves from imitating the affects” of impulsive individuals. Whereas the rational demonstration unambiguously leads to friendship, the affective constitution of community can easily turn into a rule of impulses, where envy and jealousy threaten to undo the community.

Because imitation can potentially break out into a regime of impulsions, the process of imitation must be guided in the direction of collective enjoyment: that is, it must strive to approach the dynamic of friendship. Hence, the requirement of creating institutions that will orient the process of imitation towards virtuous imitation: “Society has the power to prescribe a common rule of life, to make laws, and to maintain them—not by reason [...] but by threats. This Society [*Societas*] [...] is called a State [*Civitatis*], and those who are defended by its laws, Citizens [*Cives*]” (E4p37s2/G II 236, lines 10–17, italics mine). The affectively constituted society [*societas*] is a community of citizens [*cives*], who are produced through the prescription of a common rule of life. If rationally guided individuals are inherently *friends* because they necessarily follow the same prescriptions (the rational ‘religion’ of E4p37s1), the affective bond uniting individuals under a common prescription oftentimes requires (“For men vary...”) an artificial construct, namely, the creation of the citizen. The task of politics—or the art [*ars*] of politics, to use the language of E4app13—is to create common rules which foster a virtuous form of imitation. Citizens are created through coercion into a simulacrum of friendship. This is what Balibar identified as the attractive pole of the ambivalence of the image of the other.

So our problem seems to already be solved: in order to counter the ambivalence of imitation, it suffices to develop institutions that will aim to avoid the bad tendencies of affective life. Take, for instance, this passage from the *Political Treatise*:

Both in the natural state and in the civil order, man acts according to the laws of his own nature [*ex legibus sua naturae*] and looks out for his own advantage. In each situation, I say, man, is guided by hope or fear, either to do or not to do, this or that action. *The principal difference between the two conditions is that in the civil order everyone fears the same things: for everyone there is one and the same cause of security and principle of living* (TP 3.3/G III 285, lines 23–26, italics mine).

The political community differs from the natural order of things by the constitution of a common object of fear which calls for a common rule to provide security. This is *not* against the order of

nature: “Right of nature does not cease in the civil order,” simply because the rule of looking out for one’s own advantage is still maintained (TP 3.3/G III 285, line 22). Now, however, one’s advantage is construed as common by the production of a common affect. Political institutions are ultimately only makeshift for a proper rational constitution: they imitate the effects of the rational constitution of collective desire.⁴⁵

There remains, however, a crucial notion to unpack: *similarity*. Sophie Laveran has insisted on the fact that similarity is always potentially inadequate.⁴⁶ She is right insofar as similarity is the result of an imagining: I imagine the other as similar, and what can fall under this process is not determined in advance. Similarity is undetermined in the sense that we do not know what makes certain beings similar to us.⁴⁷ In E3p27, Spinoza does not mention that we necessarily imitate human beings: he uses the phrase *rem nobis similem*, implying that what we judge to be similar is first and foremost a *thing [rem]*, and not a person. The problem of similarity is crucial. If the other is potentially any thing [*res*], then the problem of similarity concerns what can be considered worthy of imitation. It concerns, in other words, the political determination of the other as a citizen.

There is a widespread assumption that *similarity* and *coherence* (agreement) are the same phenomenon.⁴⁸ For instance, Alexandre Matheron, in his essay concerning what he calls the “ethics of similitude,”⁴⁹ is solely concerned with the logic of agreement presented in *De Servitute* (viz. proposition E4p29-31). Without a proper justification, Matheron and other scholars making the same assumption leave in the dark the notion of similarity. While they grasp the ambivalence of imitation, they miss its ambiguity. It leaves in the dark an important aspect of the political shaping of imitation.

To understand how similarity differs from agreement in nature, consider the possibility of imitating animal affects. Warren Montag accurately points out that the barrier between what is similar and what is not is porous and can fluctuate.⁵⁰ Montag calls to our attention a passage in E4p68s, where Spinoza recounts the Adamic narrative of the Fall:

45 Compare my conclusion with this passage: “For the Right of a Commonwealth is determined by the power of a multitude which is led as if by one mind. But there is no way this union of minds can be conceived unless the Commonwealth aims most at what sound reason teaches to be useful to all men” (TP 3.7/G III 287).

46 Laveran, “Le problème”, 54.

47 Douglas J. Den Uyl also notices this problem: “Spinoza’s nominalism permits the possibility that the *imitation of affects* principle will not occur at times because, for some reason (e.g. race, dress, or language), the other is not perceived as similar to oneself”. Douglas J. Den Uyl, “Sociality and Social Contract: A Spinozistic Perspective,” in *Spinoza’s Philosophy of Society*, eds. Emilia Giancotti Boscherini, Alexandre Matheron, and Manfred Walther, *Studia Spinozana* 1 (Alling: Walther & Walther, 1985), 47n28.

48 There are, however, a few exceptions. See Michael Della Rocca, “Egoism and the Imitation of Affects in Spinoza,” in *Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man: Ethica Papers Presented at the Fourth Jerusalem Conference*, eds. Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal, Spinoza by 2000 (New York: Little Room Press, 2004). Similarly, Moreau puts into question our spontaneous association of ‘similarity’ with ‘human beings’ cf. Moreau, “Imitation.” None of them, however, go further than raising some doubts. The most developed account of the difference between similarity and agreement is in Laveran, “Le problème de la composition politique chez Spinoza.” According to her, *De Servitute* is an attempt to replace a logic of similarity with a logic of utility and agreement. She reads similarity as an ‘as if...’, which differs from my own reading.

49 Matheron, “Fondements d’une éthique de la similitude.”

50 Warren Montag, “Imitating the Affects of Beasts: Interest and Inhumanity in Spinoza,” *Differences* 20, no. 2–3 (2009): 69, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2009-004>.

And so we are told that God prohibited a free man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that as soon as he ate of it, he immediately feared death, rather than desiring to live; and then, that, the man having found a wife who agreed completely with his nature, he knew that there could be in nothing in nature more useful to him than she was; but that after he believed the lower animals to be like himself, he immediately began to imitate their affects (see [E3p27]) and to lose his freedom[.] (G II 261–262, lines 29–5).

Imitation is not limited to other human beings. The first man knew that his wife completely agreed with him in nature, thus being the most useful thing there could be. In other words, the first man rationally understood the advantage of forming a society with another human being. Still, he came to form the belief that beasts were similar to him, and thus imitated their affects. This imitation is the cause of Adam's loss of freedom, which he only recovers, Spinoza says, when he starts to "desire for other men the good he desires for himself", in other words, freedom is only recovered when Adam actualizes E4p37. Imitation, as undetermined, can be a cause of unity,⁵¹ or a cause of servitude.⁵²

Montag argues that this possibility of animal imitation blurs the apparent objectivity of the category of similarity. I take him to mean that when we first encounter E3p27, we tend to associate *rem nobis similem* to other human beings. This is indeed warranted by the demonstration of E3p27 which deduces imitation from the structure of the body. Because images are ideas that involve both the nature of one's body and of an external thing,⁵³ if the structure of the external body is like our own, then when we imagine an affection of this external body, we imagine a similar affection of our body. Such an argument has led a scholar like Daniela Bostrenghi to conclude that imitation has a biological foundation.⁵⁴ She posits that the social dimension of our affective life is something rooted in the very structure of our bodies: we experience, viscerally, the other as similar to us.⁵⁵ This reading does not allow us, however, to understand how the imitation of animals is possible. If the structure of the body explains imitation, then the narrative of E4p68s would be incomprehensible. Indeed, Adam's human body could not be said to resemble the body of animals, and so imitation could not ensue, even more when it is said that Adam *knew* that Eve completely agreed with his nature.

I want to propose here a different reading of the nature of similarity. The text of E3p27d says the following: "if the nature of the external body is like the nature of our body" (G II 160, line 14). The likeness of the other's body is based on the image I have of my own body. Through a judgement of similarity, I see *myself* in the *other*. The ground of similarity is the image I have of my own body. The nature of such an image is affective: through experiences of joy and sadness, I come to understand the way in which my body interacts with the world. When I put my hand above a flame, the pain of the interaction traces the image I have of myself. A human being who would put their hand in the

51 Cf. E4p37alt.

52 Cf. E4p68s.

53 Cf. E2p16.

54 Daniela Bostrenghi, "Tantum juris quantum potentiae : Puissance de la raison et puissance des affects chez Spinoza," in *Spinoza Transalpin : les interprétations actuelles en Italie*, eds. Chantal Jaquet and Pierre-François Moreau (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2014) 117–138, <http://books.openedition.org/psorbonne/263>.

55 Bostrenghi, para. 10.

fire without any pain would appear highly dissimilar: their tolerance to pain would appear to be inhuman. This leads me to suggest that similarity is not rooted in the body, but in affectivity: to see myself in the other, they have to express affects that are similar to mine.⁵⁶

Take another example, this time, drawn from the *Ethics* “For one who is moved to aid others neither by reason nor by pity is rightly called *inhuman*. For (by [E3p27]) he seems to be *unlike a man*” (E4p50s/G II 247, line 26). One reason why we are moved to pity is because when we see a being similar to us being affected with sadness, we also feel sad, and since we strive to avoid sadness, we strive to relieve them of it. We expect human beings to be moved by pity at the sight of human sadness, because imitation makes it so that we seek the joy of others to imitate such a joy. Failing to pity another human being entails failing to imitate the other; such a failure expresses a lack of similarity. Without similarity, my relation to another human being is akin to a relation to a mere object, without any interpersonal dimension. Aristotle writes in his *Politics*: “he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need for it because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.”⁵⁷ Spinoza’s theory of affective mimesis implies the same thing. The being unable to imitate is incapable of being social: it is unlike a human being. It is a being that is unable to make proper judgements of similarity.

When it comes to the structure of society, imitation is required to uphold common values. Similarity, in other words, has to be produced. A being that would transgress every single law and taboo would be seen as inhuman and deviant.⁵⁸ Through institutions, the state creates similarity amongst the citizens. If the golden rule says to love one’s neighbor as oneself, I see politics as that which determines the content of the notion of ‘neighbor’. Not everyone can count as a neighbor, and politics draws distinctions between those who are neighbors, and those who are not.⁵⁹

Politics draws the contours, or the image, of the friend. Affectively, society [*societas*] offers optimal enjoyment through common love and joy. Because similarity is ambiguous, political practitioners (as per the language of the *TP*) must be cunning and ingenious in order to orient the process of imitation: they have to artificially produce bonds of friendship. They do so by transforming society [*societas*] into a state [*civitatis*]. They must paint a figure, the figure of the friend through the determination of what falls within the category of the similar: they create the citizen [*cives*] by shaping judgements of similarity. E4p37alt insinuates that the art of politics is the art of creating the figure of the friend: it is the crafty [*callidus*] imitation of reason.

56 Such a similarity of affects seems to be at play in Bove’s interpretation of the imitation of affects. As he mentions in a footnote: “L’imagination est ainsi toujours imagination « humaine », que j’imagine la joie d’un animal ou celle d’un autre homme,” in Bove, *La stratégie du conatus*, 79n2. Bove refers to E4p68s to show how Adam was able to imitate the beasts and did so in a human way; the problem was that such an imitation was necessarily inadequate to its object, since the animal is incapable of truly human affects. Thus, Bove’s interpretations suggests that imitation can only be human—something which could work with the conclusions of E4p37alt.

57 Aristotle, *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1253a27–29.

58 Take for instance the work of someone like Georges Bataille who shows that there is a mingling of divinity and animality in the very movement of transgression, leading some individuals to be completely sovereign. Cf. Georges Bataille, *La part maudite*, Reprise 22 (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1949); Georges Bataille, *L’érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957).

59 Related to this, Laurent Bove will say that the unity of a nation, or a sense of nationalism, depends on the mimetic dimension of our affective life. See Bove, *La stratégie du conatus*, 200–201.

4. Conclusion: Friends and Citizens

The present paper stemmed from a single proposition, the one articulating the necessarily collective dimension of our desire. Ultimately, I showed that friendship and politics are both necessary because of our nature. Both express the collective constitution of our desire. They do so, however, differently. Friendship necessarily follows from a common pursuit: life under the guidance of reason, or virtue. Rationally guided desire leads to an *ethics of friendship*. Politics forms citizens: it traces the figure of the friend through the institutions of shared values that shape our conception of similarity. It does so to promote forms of imitation, because through imitation human beings are able to enter into loops of mutual enjoyment. Affectively, communities are ruled by a *politics of enjoyment*.

In a letter to Jarig Jelles, Spinoza cites Thales of Miletus: “All things, he said, are common among friends” (Ep. 44, Spinoza to Jelles, 17 February 1671, G IV 228). The community of friends is natural, it follows from their common love for understanding. Friends form a community in which they desire everything in a non-conflictual way. They adapt their own desires to each other’s. Affectively, friendship conduces to joy, to a constant reminder that we rejoice in the joy of the other.

Unfortunately, the story of imitation is not a steady river. Politics works differently: it must create institutions, norms, values, and those who transgress those norms and laws, that is, those who are not affected by those values in the common way, are considered dissimilar, deviant. This can only be done by shaping what ‘similarity’ means. The politically inclined individual is cunning, ingenious: he finds a way to foster imitations of friendship, or should we say friendly imitations. “For men vary...” We are carried over by our passions, we fluctuate to the rhythm of our affective conflicts.

Philosophy, as the desire for rationality, fosters a community of friends. Politics is not philosophy, but it could be said to imitate it through an ingenious art, thus affectively creating the citizen, by painting the category of similarity.

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