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Monism, Pluralism, and the Politics of Toleration

An Analysis of Spinoza's Rationalist Political Philosophy and its 20th Century Critics

A Dissertation Presented

by

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Today, the concepts “toleration” and “pluralism” are generally taken to be synonymous. Yet Baruch Spinoza’s rationalist political philosophy outlined a conception of positive liberty, as well as a robust doctrine of toleration, which grew out of a *monistic* metaphysics instead. Endorsing this view, this dissertation aims at demonstrating the conceptual connection between substance monism and political toleration. Apart from this historical and conceptual investigation into Early Modern political thought, this dissertation also examines the 20th century critics of monism and rationalist politics by self-avowed pluralists.

CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: SPINOZA’S Rational Doctrine of Toleration.....	10
Section One: Spinoza’s Ideal State.....	12
Democracy.....	15
Equalitarian wealth redistribution, compulsory civic education, and a popular army.....	21
The republican ideal – a strong, sovereign state.....	28
State sovereignty over religious piety.....	31
Liberal limitations upon the sovereign state.....	34
Section Two: Oikeiosis and the Metaphysical Foundations of Spinoza’s Politics.....	38
Ethical egoism.....	40
The Personal.....	50
The Political.....	89
The Ethical.....	103

CHAPTER TWO: THE NECESSITY of Spinoza’s system.....	124
Section One: From Necessary Knowledge to a Sure Metaphysics.....	125
What the <u>Treatise</u> must prove.....	128
Knowledge as prior to method.....	129
We possess some knowledge.....	130
The Nature of knowledge.....	132
Analysis of true ideas.....	134
Why does simplicity guarantee truth?.....	138
From analysis to deduction.....	140
Section Two: Spinoza’s Rationalist Method and Toleration.....	142
The Completion of Spinoza’s method: PSR, God, and universal intelligibility.....	143
Conclusion: The Relationship of reason to toleration.....	155
CHAPTER THREE: SARTRE and Social Pluralism.....	158
Section 1: Sartrean Pluralism and the Jews.....	163
The Practical impulse behind Sartrean pluralism.....	173

Section 2: The Theoretical basis for pluralism –Voluntarism and probabilism.....	176
The Cogito and human solidarity.....	179
The Free Will and the probabilistic universe are mutually legitimating.....	181
No ultimately intelligible universe, thus no universal man.....	188
Abandonment and normativity.....	192
Defining the Jew negatively.....	205
Particularism today, universalism tomorrow.....	221
Section 3: Why the Synthesis Fails; “Universal Sympathetic Understanding”	
as Incompatible with Existentialism.....	225
Practical problems with Sartre’s theory of the oppressed identity.....	226
The Instability of Sartre’s conceptual synthesis.....	229
Sartre’s final word on the Jews.....	237
CHAPTER FOUR: STRAUSS and Cultural Particularism.....	241
Section One: Authentic Identity Combatting Universal Reason.....	249
Strauss’ practical advantage over Sartre.....	251
The dialectics of authenticity.....	253

Conflict as vital tension.....	259
From Classical to modern reason & liberalism.....	271
Liberalism and modern reason’s failure to resolve all difference.....	275
Section Two: Conclusions and Tensions of the Straussian Position.....	277
The conservative conclusions of <u>Progress or Return</u> , <u>Preface</u>	278
The actual resolution of Straussian tension & the final affirmation of particularism.....	281
The clash of orthodoxies.....	286
Relativism versus Existentialism and Decisionism.....	293
The consequences for toleration theory.....	302
CHAPTER FIVE: SCHMITT and Political Decisionism.....	310
Section 1: Carl Schmitt’s Relationship to his Student, Leo Strauss.....	316
The tensions and dualisms in Strauss call for a solution.....	317
Schmitt’s decisionistic solution.....	321
Section Two: Carl Schmitt’s Concrete Politics.....	345
Anti-Liberalism.....	348
Abolition of the “hidden”.....	356

The supremacy of “the political” over pluralities.....	368
Right I win, Left you lose.....	385
Democracy as popular feeling, not quantitative measurement.....	395
The Führerprinzip and Gleichartigkeit –	
A sole sovereign before his homogenous people.....	400
Neutralization and Toleration – The Imperative for Racial Intolerance.....	409
CHAPTER SIX: Concluding Thoughts.....	429
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	458

INTRODUCTION

At any rate, it is a fact that our secular rationality, be it ever so plausible to our own reason [which itself was formed in the West], does not convince every *ratio*. As rationality, it fails in the attempt to demonstrate its evidential character, which is de facto limited to particular cultural contexts. It must acknowledge that it cannot win acceptance as rationality by the whole of mankind and that it cannot operate fully in mankind as a whole. In other words, there is no single rational or ethical or religious ‘world formula’ that could win acceptance by everyone and could then provide support for the whole. At any rate, such a formula is unattainable at present. This is why the so-called ‘world ethos’ remains an abstraction.¹

These words were penned by Pope Benedict XVI. They reflect a certain world view which is either given the positive appellation of “humility” or the darker label of “pessimism.” The object which Benedict is cautious about is reason, or put more accurately, the universal supremacy of reason. Specifically, Pope Benedict ties the non-universality of reason to its particularly Western cultural roots. He means this not as an indictment of rationality itself, but rather as a denial of reason’s autonomy, a denial of its universally “evidential character.” Pope Benedict’s own position is that modern reason grew up in Europe, and more than this, in a Christian Europe. He contends that a reason which does not respect these religious roots, and is not constantly nourished by this culture and this faith, necessarily “dries up” and decomposes into mere dogmatism.²

Yet, perhaps ironically, this same quotation could easily have been penned by any number of those on the political and ideological Left, those who claim no allegiance to the Church or any particular religion whatsoever. Indeed, the denial of universal reason, the

¹ Benedict XVI, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Crossroad Publications, 2006), 41-42.

² Benedict XVI, *Christianity and the Crisis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 42-43.

emphasis on the necessarily cultural grounding of thought, and the denial (or implausibility) of a world-ethos – these are all basic tenets of much of the Left since the latter half of the twentieth century. This is especially true within the domains of postcolonial theory and postmodern political theories of embodied identity. These claims represent not only a pessimism about universal reason, but as tied to this, a pessimism regarding the possibility of universal human emancipation. Instead what is often emphasized are the principles of authenticity, and fidelity to one’s own culture as a means to a more localized, or regionalized form of emancipation. In his seminal postcolonial work, Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon gives expression to such sentiment:

Generally speaking the bards of négritude would contrast old Europe versus young Africa, dull reason versus poetry, and stifling logic versus exuberant Nature; on the one side stood rigidity, ceremony, protocol, and skepticism, and on the other, naïveté, petulance, freedom, and, indeed, luxuriance.³

Thus, like Pope Benedict, Fanon does not take a normative stand against reason as such, nor does he ever deny the usefulness of reason as a tool. However, what Fanon, the Algerian anti-colonialist, the revolutionary Marxist, does express along with the Pope is the de facto claim that reason is tied to Western culture - that it is not universally self evident and not universally accepted. Fanon makes the further empirical claim that the denial of “universal” reason, of dry logic, has been an expression of third-world emancipation from the West.

We live in interesting times. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen what American political scientists, with regards to pivotal election years, term “realignment.”

³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1965), 151.

However, this has not been a realignment of people, or of demographic coalitions, or of interest groups; it has rather been the realignment of ideas. Since before the French Revolution, and the composition of the *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*, the idea of universal human reason was always tied to the concept of universal, human emancipation. Yet today, the forces of emancipation are reluctant to draw their inspiration from the notion of universal human rationality. As such, the projects of political emancipation have, themselves, become increasingly particularized and tied to the struggles of specific cultural, social, racial, and gender identities.

At their base, all political disagreements are really disagreements about metaphysics. Only this fact can illuminate the broad political trends and traditions which span multiple epochs and civilizations. Namely, there are substantive disagreements about the proper order for society because there are diverging views about the actual order of reality. Is it any wonder that Helvétius' opus, De l'esprit affirms the equal potential for reason amongst all individuals, and that Helvétius himself also argues for the egalitarian education of the masses? It is any wonder that Baron D'Holbach utilizes materialist principles to explain the workings of the universe in his 1770 work, Le Système de la nature and proposes a naturalized, secular, and egalitarian ethics in his 1773 work, Système social? It was the principles of monism and materialism which made these *philosophes* the inspiration for political projects of emancipation and revolution in eighteenth century France and beyond.

Yet nearly a century before the work of the French materialists, the philosopher Benedict Spinoza was developing a system of monistic philosophy which carried with it broad social and political implications. Of course Pope Benedict and Benedict Spinoza led diametrically opposed lives. While the former is a Roman Catholic, a citizen of Europe who has achieved seniority of

age and the highest office of his faith, the latter was a Jew whose family fled the Inquisition, who died relatively young and was excluded from his religious community as a heretic. More importantly, the two represent greatly divergent worldviews. Almost four centuries before Pope Benedict's publication of the above work, Benedict Spinoza offered a nearly diametrically opposed thesis – reason as autonomous, self-asserting, universal, and emancipatory.

Indeed, the metaphysical claim of the unity and intelligibility of the world was the basis for Spinoza's trans-cultural egalitarianism. Metaphysical monism was seen by Spinoza as the necessary condition for universal, social brotherhood; and in turn, universal brotherhood was understood to be the necessary condition for true human emancipation.

To man there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.⁴

(E 4 Proposition 18)

The image is a striking one – human cooperation as identified with a unity of “Minds and Bodies.” However, readers should be forewarned: The tedium of Spinoza's logical proofs is precisely that which gives his politics its profundity. The careful, and at times highly technical, demonstrations of propositions regarding the mind, the body, and nature as found within Spinoza's chief work, the Ethics, is entirely inextricable from his politics. In fact, it is only

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all references to Spinoza's Ethics and Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect will be from the edition translated and edited by Edwin Curley: Benedictus De Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. trans. and ed. E. M. Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985)

through a close examination of these that one can grasp not only the profundity of Spinoza's political insights, but moreover their rational necessity.

However the realignment of ideas has radically challenged the age-old coalition between reason, universalism, and monism on the one hand, and emancipation, liberty, and tolerance on the other. Rational necessity now carries with it the stain of colonialism, and the connotation of "empire." Even respected physicist Marcelo Gleiser, himself a proponent of no particular religion, argues in his newly published book, *A Tear at the Edge of Creation*, that the idea of unified reality, one which is wholly intelligible, is largely a holdover from mythological monotheism. Instead, we are entreated once more to be humble:

The first step in this direction is to admit that science has its limitations, as do the scientists who do it. This way, science will be humanized. We should confess to our confusion and sense of being lost as we confront a Universe that seems to grow more mysterious the more we study it; we should be humble in our claims knowing how often we must correct them. We should, of course, share the joy of discovery and the importance of doubt. Perhaps more importantly...we should explain that there are faith-based myths running deep in science's canon and that scientists, even the great ones, may confuse their expectations of reality with reality itself.⁵

Of course, one need not confront the formidable domain of theoretical physics to find critics of metaphysical monism and universal intelligibility – especially as it relates to political questions of tolerance for the minority. In this work I endeavor to analyze three such critics from the twentieth century – Jean-Paul Sartre, Leo Strauss, and Carl Schmitt.

⁵Marcelo Gleiser, *A Tear at the Edge of Creation: a Radical New Vision for Life in an Imperfect Universe* (New York, NY: Free, 2010), 19.

Each of these figures, to varying degrees, departs from Spinoza's affirmation of a wholly intelligible universe. Instead, what is emphasized is the uniqueness of a given culture. Of course, what makes a culture unique in a substantive sense is precisely the metaphysical idea that said culture is not wholly reducible to simple definition, and not wholly comprehensible from the exterior. In other words, cultures are unique because they are the willful products of the unique individuals who comprise them. Thus while Spinoza's rational political philosophy entails a broad doctrine of toleration just because all humans share in one common rational order, and through their common reason can form, as it were, "one Mind and one Body;" these three theorists find the dignity of a culture as based in the fact that it is different and not directly translatable to all others.

Moreover, what ties these twentieth century figures together is a persistent focus upon "the Jew" as the paradigmatic minority figure. It is through an analysis of the treatment of the Jew within the works of these three theorists that we can come to comprehend the range of political alternatives to Spinoza's monistic doctrine of emancipation. In this way, neither the above theorists, nor the Jews themselves are taken as unique in this work. To borrow a term from the natural sciences, the Jews, in this work, are our constant. They are that model of the minority figure upon which these three diverse men express their specific and varying theories. Yet these positions on the Jewish minority, themselves, are meant to be applicable to other groups as well. As Strauss himself puts it, the Jews are a chosen people insofar as their lesson is a "lesson for all humanity."⁶

⁶Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*" in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), 143.

Sartre, Strauss, and Schmitt are therefore our variables. Or rather, our variables are their respective theories of the minority and political inclusion. For though each of these men depart from Spinoza's rationalist metaphysics, they nonetheless differ from one another as well.⁷

Sartre carries the banner of pluralism. He affirms the uniqueness of cultures as a product of free-willing individuals. Judaism is the consequence of, not only historical processes, but also the free decision of the Jewish people themselves. Still, Sartre finds it both plausible and desirable for there to be understanding and solidarity between the Jews and other European peoples. He is therefore a pluralist inasmuch as he recognizes a plurality of cultures, (i.e., "social substances") yet, at the same time, conceives that all such substances can coexist within a given political arrangement. In many ways, when contemporary political scientists, pundits, and philosophers imagine the concept of toleration, they have in mind this sort of pluralism, or else something very close to it.

Leo Strauss represents a more thoroughgoing particularism. Since the Jews are a unique people, it may not be possible, or even desirable, for there to be a significant degree of cross-cultural understanding. Strauss, himself of the Jewish faith, affirms a sense of cultural pride and is less concerned with political integration as compared with the specter of cultural assimilation: "Why should we, who have a heroic past behind and within us, which is not second to that of any other group anywhere on earth, deny or forget that past? The past is all the more heroic, one

⁷ This treatment of historical theorists as "variables" or paradigms of a given position entails that this work will *not* attempt to give full accounts or synopses of these individual's whole lives, complete bodies of work, or even the evolution of their thought throughout their respective productive lives. Rather, what I aim to do is to distill the fundamental, consistent insights of each of these figures so as to *analyze and compare* their positions relative to one another in a conceptual, rather than primarily bibliographical manner. As such, quite a lot of time is spent examining, in great detail, only a few of the primary texts of these theorists, and proportionately less time upon the general reception of these authors within secondary literature. This treatment, of course, will not neglect the historical *contexts* or historical *impacts* of these figures.

could say, since its chief characters are not the glitter and trappings of martial glory and cultural splendor, although it does not lack even these.”⁸

Finally, Carl Schmitt writes several times in explicitly disparaging, and in fact anti-Semitic ways about the Jews. For him, the Jewish people fulfill the stereotype of eternal wanderers. They have no authentic culture as they are based in no particular soil. They are rather parasitic upon “authentic” European cultures and societies. For Schmitt, then, the Jew becomes two things: First, he is the alien other, the entirely strange being. Second, the Jew represents Spinozist Reason itself, as neither one of these has any earthly origin or specific home. Schmitt’s consistent particularism is the correlate of a consistent voluntarism. His culture is an immanent product of the will. As such, he cannot know anything to be common between himself and alien cultures, and ethical relations with alien cultures become, in a sense, inconceivable. In Schmitt, consistent particularity is bought at the expense of intelligibility.

As stated, these three men represent three forms of denying Spinozist rationalism, and also three ways of conceiving the minority. Yet, this present work will ask whether there can really be such a range of alternatives to rationalistic monism, or alternatively, if even a modest departure from this entails its polar opposite – namely a thoroughly consistent particularism and voluntarism. In other words, is there a middle ground between Spinoza’s wholly intelligible universe and Schmitt’s will-based theory of culture and state? Is pluralism a viable option, and can it ground a coherent doctrine of toleration, or does the denial of strict rationalism entail a “tear at the edge of creation” from which all other things collapse?

⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

CHAPTER ONE: SPINOZA'S Rational Doctrine of Toleration

So let the Satirists laugh as much as they like at human affairs, let the Theologians curse them, let Melancholics praise as much as they can a life that is uncultivated and wild, let them disdain men and admire the lower animals. Men still find from experience that by helping one another they can provide themselves much more easily with the things they require, and that only by joining forces can they avoid the dangers which threaten them on all sides...⁹

What is the basis for political toleration? For much of contemporary political theory, toleration amounts to a partial diminution of state authority. This is at least true for the currently hegemonic Anglophone tradition of classical liberalism. Those regimes in which there is absolute state sovereignty are said to be necessarily regimes which preclude any meaningful political toleration. Moreover, wherever wide degrees of political toleration can be found, wherever liberties and freedoms are enjoyed by a plurality of citizens, one will also find there a government with severe limitations imposed upon its power and authority. Nonetheless, Spinoza's vision for society appears to deny this hard opposition between authority and liberty. For it is the case that his political philosophy includes a robust theory of toleration as well as a robust affirmation of state power. This may initially appear to be a contradiction or at least a tension in his thought. On the contrary, Spinoza's strong theories of state and liberty are not merely compatible with one another, but moreover arise from a common metaphysics and philosophical anthropology. His political philosophy is perfectionist in nature insofar as both his robust theory of toleration as well as his strong theory of state power are instrumental for the achievement of the one goal of human flourishing. This is most clearly explicated in his political opus, the Tractatus Theologico Politicus, (hereafter abbreviated as simply the Tractatus, or TTP).

⁹ Benedictus De Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 4 Proposition 35 Scholium.

Section One: Spinoza's Ideal State

In the following sections of Chapter One, I will provide a step by step analysis of the metaphysical and philosophical-anthropological bases for this twin doctrine of state power and toleration. However, first, I merely wish to outline precisely what a government which lives up to Spinoza's ideal would look like. For Spinoza's political philosophy has always been a matter of passionate contention.¹⁰ On the one hand, Spinoza is often characterized as having been a staunch advocate of the freedom of conscience and communication, individual rights, and the originator of modern liberalism. In contrast, many others have cast Spinoza as endorsing the republican ideal –even anticipating the Jacobin tendencies of the French Revolution, and as a defender of a species of positive liberty which subordinates individual projects and religious expression to the strong, sovereign state.¹¹ Therefore, it is indispensable that, prior to any extensive conceptual analysis of Spinoza's political philosophy, we ascertain precisely what sort of state Spinoza actually advocated.

Arguably, part of the debate over Spinoza's political philosophy stems from his peculiar mode of exposition in the Tractatus itself. The whole work takes the form of an analysis of the ancient Hebrew state following the exodus from Egypt as described in Scripture. Spinoza's frequently stated reason for this mode of analysis revolves around the claim that a careful study of this ancient nation can allow the present-day reader to abstract lessons for modern statecraft.

In a certain sense, therefore, we can draw several parallels between Spinoza's Tractatus

¹⁰ See, for instance, Justin Steinberg's excellent article, 'Spinoza on Civil Liberation' in which he outlines and critiques the common liberal interpretation of Spinoza's political theory. Justin Steinberg, "Spinoza on Civil Liberation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47, no. 1 (2009): 35-39.

¹¹ See David West's recent article for an interpretation which places Spinoza's political theory and theory of toleration within the republican, and positive libertarian tradition. David West, "Spinoza on Positive Freedom." *Political Studies* 41 (1993): 284-96.

Theologico Politicus, and Plato's Republic. For each work uses the image of a well-ordered commonwealth as a model for illustrating specific, political virtues. In the case of Spinoza's Tractatus, there is an added rhetorical bonus. Namely, these gleaned lessons will necessarily be in accord with Scripture since the image of the commonwealth is in-fact drawn from Scripture itself— certainly an advantage given Spinoza's mid-seventeenth century, European audience.¹²

Occasionally in the Tractatus, some of these lessons are explicitly deduced and presented. One or another feature of the Hebrew state is said to have been indispensable, not only for its own historical survival and stability, but more so for the survival and stability of any given state – be it modern, or ancient. However, in many more instances, Spinoza's political positions are never made explicit and, instead, are presented under the pretext of biblical exegesis alone. Thus, there are several moments in the text where Spinoza will praise a given institution of the ancient Hebrew state; yet he will make no open endorsement of that institution as it would be applied to a modern state. The reasons for Spinoza's reluctance to be explicitly in favor of a given policy, while nonetheless insinuating his support furtively, are a matter of contemporary conjecture and debate. It may be the case that Spinoza was reluctant to openly advocate the adoption of some of the more radical features of the Hebrew state, fearing denouncement or even

¹² For additional biographical information on Spinoza, especially relating to how his status as an excommunicated Jew in Christian Europe affected his publishing habits, see Jonathan Israel's work 'Radical Enlightenment,' as well as his subsequent work, 'Enlightenment Contested.'

Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001)

Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006)

It should also be noted that personal cautiousness and fear of violent reprisal were not the only reasons for Spinoza's method of exposition in the *Tractatus*. Actually, this method of providing state-craft advice based upon Scriptural evidence is clever for Spinoza whose overall political project, we will see, aims at subordinating religion to the state, and guarding it against ambitious religious leaders who wish to siphon off aspects of state authority. What better way to prove such a case than by quoting Scripture itself.

violent reprisal. It is well known that many of Spinoza's closest friends, teachers, and political sympathizers met violent ends themselves.¹³

Whatever the reasons for Spinoza's extreme caution, the net result is that contemporary readers of the Tractatus do well to approach this text with an open interpretive mindset. We must assume, when context allows, that those features of the ancient Hebrew state which Spinoza lauded most energetically would be considered by him to be of benefit to the modern state as well.

Thus, an essential aspect of this first section will be to abstract a clear political program, contained in the biblical exegesis of the Tractatus, which is directly relevant to the modern nation-state. This will occasionally mean taking what is esoteric, or partially hidden, and making it explicit. Of course the danger here is one of interpretive overreach, and it is essential that we do not assume that absolutely every feature of the Hebrew state would be advocated by Spinoza to be transferred 'whole-cloth' upon the constitution of the modern state. Indeed, in the opening lines of chapter eighteen of the Tractatus, Spinoza is very clear in cautioning the reader that the Hebrew state ought not to be imitated today in its entirety. One must proceed extremely cautiously when deciding upon, specifically, what Spinoza's 'ideal state' amounts to. Nonetheless, attempting to reconstruct what such an ideal commonwealth looks like will be an absolutely essential propaedeutic for our further investigations.

¹³ Immediately of note is Franciscus van den Enden, Spinoza's teacher and a utopian-republican, hanged for his plot against Louis XIV, and the de Witt brothers, killed by a staged political mob in Amsterdam itself, not far from Spinoza's own residence. Granted, these events occurred well after the *Tractatus* itself was published. Nonetheless, the underlying social tensions and political atmosphere which led to these violent episodes were well known to Spinoza throughout his life.

For only after this is achieved will we be able to accomplish two further goals: First, we will be able to see precisely what are the metaphysical bases of Spinoza's political philosophy and, specifically, his doctrine of toleration. This will necessarily involve explicating the various arguments found in the Tractatus itself, as well as the relevant arguments in Spinoza's mature, and more strictly metaphysical works – the Ethics first among them. Second, it will be possible to distinguish Spinoza's doctrine of toleration from twentieth and twenty-first century doctrines of cultural pluralism.

The import of this endeavor is the following: It will be demonstrated that Spinoza's theory of toleration is the product of an underlying political philosophy and metaphysics which is antithetical to that metaphysical system which is the necessary basis of contemporary theories of cultural pluralism. This, in turn, will serve as a proof that the political doctrines themselves (i.e. modern toleration and cultural pluralism) are wholly incompatible with one another on a deep level. This demonstration will thus challenge the contemporary habit of synthesizing or mistaking these conflicting doctrines with one another.

Democracy

Spinoza's ideal state is undoubtedly a democracy. In the Tractatus, democracy is initially defined as "...a united gathering of people which collectively has the sovereign right to do all that it has the power to do."¹⁴ (TTP 188) Spinoza's endorsement of democracy as collective and equal control over state power is mentioned several times in the latter chapters of the Tractatus itself. Nonetheless, his definition of democracy is not comprehensively descriptive of what, in our present day, many envisage a democracy to be. For instance, Spinoza does not explicitly

¹⁴ All further quotations from the *Tractatus* will be taken from the following edition: Benedictus De Spinoza, *Theological-political Treatise*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Irvine Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007)

outline the particular form of democracy which he advocates. There is no explicit endorsement of either direct democracy or proportional representation, or alternatively, some other apparatus of democratic representation. Moreover, there is no mentioning of the benefits and drawbacks of a unicameral or bicameral legislature, and no reference to political parties or indeed antagonistic, organized political factions of any sort. In short, Spinoza's advocacy of democratic governance is as unrelenting as it is minimalist.

Put plainly, this lack of specificity does not in any way detract from Spinoza's consistent and frequent affirmation of democracy as constituting the ideal form of state. Indeed, his reasons for this affirmation appear to fall into two major categories. In the first place, Spinoza affirms the ideal of democracy for prudential reasons. Anticipating Rousseau, the claim is made that democracies are less liable to make illogical, hasty decisions which are based upon clearly faulty reasoning. The faulty reasoning and private prejudices and interests of the individual citizen are exposed as such, and are subsequently cancelled out within the context of a sufficiently large deliberative body.

Furthermore, there is less reason in a democratic state to fear absurd proceedings. For it is almost impossible that the majority of a large assembly would agree on the same irrational decision. In addition, there is its foundation and purpose which is precisely, as we have also shown, to avoid the follies of appetite and as much as possible to bring men within the limits of reason, so that they may dwell in peace and harmony.

(TTP 194)

This prudentialist line of reasoning is then carried further. Since a democracy negates the inordinate private appetites and prejudices of individual citizens (when these are in conflict with

the good of the commonwealth as a whole), the result is a government which not only acts wisely, but is also, as a result, more stable in its constitution. For instance, at several points Spinoza makes a positive comparison with the constitution of the Hebrew state (before the emergence of the monarchy) to modern democracies.

Also worthy of note is the fact that whilst the people held the sovereign power, they experienced only one civil war, and this conflict was brought to a complete end, the victors evincing so much compassion for the vanquished that they made every effort to restore them to their former dignity and power. But after the people, despite having no experience of kings, exchanged their original [republican] form of government for monarchy, there was practically no end to civil wars, and the Hebrews engaged in battles of unparalleled ferocity.

(TTP 224)

The reason for the stability of modern democratic states, as with the stability of the pre-monarchical Hebrew state, was one and the same. Namely, this democratic form of government (i.e. the complete sovereignty of the citizenry as a whole) prevented oligarchic and autocratic rulers from using the state as a mere instrument for the satisfaction of their own private interests. This resulted in the avoidance of jealousy and rebelliousness on the part of the masses that were not privy to the capricious favor of oligarchs or autocrats.

One may ask, however, if this is a correct interpretation of Spinoza's assessment of the pre-monarchical Hebrew state as being truly analogous to modern democracies. After all, Spinoza does clearly describe the Hebrew state under Moses as having an absolutist form of government, and the Hebrew state after Moses (and before the monarchy) is clearly labeled by Spinoza as a theocracy. It is this latter period that Spinoza most identified as having democratic

features.¹⁵ (TTP 211) Of course, neither of these terms strike the contemporary reader as anything remotely akin to modern democracy. Yet, Spinoza does make this favorable comparison between modern democracies and the Hebrew state, and this comparison is wonderfully revealing of Spinoza's specific meaning of the term democracy. Moreover, understanding Spinoza's affirmative comparison allows us to see quite clearly the second class of reasons for his affirmation of democracy in general – beyond his mere prudentialism.

The specific reason why Spinoza draws a close comparison between modern democracy and the Hebrew theocracy was the manner in which sovereign power was distributed. Just after the exodus from Egypt, the Hebrews had no state, and thus no sovereign. Theirs was the proverbial state of nature. Yet through their common fidelity to God, the newly liberated Jews gave their common, un-coerced consent to abide by God's law alone.

The Hebrews did not transfer their right to another person but rather all gave up their right, equally, as in a democracy, crying with one voice: 'We will do whatever God shall say' [making no mention of an intermediary]. It follows that they all remained perfectly equal as a result of this agreement. The right to consult God, receive laws, and interpret them remained equal for all, and all equally without exception retained the whole administration of the state.

(TTP 206)

¹⁵ Note that while Spinoza *explicitly* labels the state after the death of Moses as a theocracy, and during the reign of Moses an absolutism (and not a democracy), in fact it is during these periods of this regime in which all of the democratic features of the Hebrew state emerge – those features which Spinoza takes the greatest length and care to enumerate – such as equal administration of government amongst the various tribes. It should also be noted, as will be explained presently, that the "theocratic" state under (and after) Moses is not described in the *Tractatus* as a state run by religious authorities or a particular religious sect. Rather, since all originally had an equal share in interpreting God's decree, there was an equal share in governance.

The sovereignty of the Hebrew state was thus akin to a democracy precisely because of the citizens' common loyalty to God. For each Hebrew citizen surrendered his or her natural right to act as they pleased. Yet, at the same time, each citizen had an equal part in interpreting God's decree. As such, while the Hebrew state was formally considered to be a theocracy, subject to God's law, and the interpretation thereof "...the fact of the matter is that all these things were more opinion than reality. For in reality the Hebrews retained absolutely the right of government..."¹⁶ (TTP 206)

Of course, our task here is to discover why democracy, as seen in both the Hebrew state and in its modern form, constitutes an ideal form of government for Spinoza. As we have already discovered, one such reason is that a democratic form of government apportions sovereign power in such a way as to stabilize the state. Thus, democracy is advocated by Spinoza for prudential reasons. Yet, we can also see now that Spinoza's advocacy goes beyond mere prudentialism, and involves some conception of the freedom to reason itself.

For in a democratic state, where each citizen has equal say over the use of state power, each individual can act according to the light of their own reason. This is for the fact that in such a regime, no citizen is subject to the appetites and caprice of any monarch or set of oligarchs. Thus, the democratic form of state results in a situation in which the citizen is free insofar as she serves her own interests and not that of an external master.

¹⁶ Spinoza's advocacy of democracy at this point is, while clever, also more than a little ironic. For Spinoza bases his account of the democratic character of the Hebrew state off of biblical evidence— especially from the book of *Exodus*. However, his affirmation that the Hebrew state as described in *Exodus* was truly democratic presupposes Spinoza's *denial* of the anthropomorphic God of the Bible. For the Hebrews each shared equally in interpreting God's decree specifically because God was not a single, personal being who could have passed down direct, unambiguous legislation, and then enforced the legislation via the threat of specific punishment. Of course, it goes without saying that the God of *Exodus* precisely *is* that sort of individual – at least insofar as Scripture is read in a literal fashion.

...in a state and government where the safety of the whole people, not that of the ruler, is the supreme law, he who obeys the sovereign in all things should not be called a slave useless to himself but rather a subject. The freest state, therefore, is that whose laws are founded on sound reason; for there each man can be free whenever he wishes, that is, he can live under the guidance of reason with his whole mind.

(TTP 195)

This state of government is thus closest to the state of nature, and for this reason will count as an ideal for Spinoza.

We cannot doubt that this is the best way of ruling, and has the least disadvantages, since it is the one most at harmony with human nature. In a democratic state [which is the one closest to the state of nature], all men agree, as we showed above, to act – but not to judge or think – according to the common decision.

(TTP 245)

Of course, this second basis for affirming democracy as an ideal seems to bring forth more questions than clear answers. For instance, one may ask why the freedom to act in accord with reason, especially reason as it is determined by the collectivity of citizens, constitutes a meaningful sense of freedom at all. Surely the freedom to act in light of one's own interests is not necessarily the same as the freedom to act according to the interests of all citizens as a whole. Moreover, one may ask why acting in "according to the common decision" necessarily amounts to something which should positively be affirmed as an ideal by Spinoza. Nonetheless, at this juncture it is enough for us to understand that Spinoza does indeed affirm democracy as an ideal

for more than merely prudentialist reasons. In addition, we can now understand more clearly what Spinoza's ideal of democracy truly amounts to – namely, the expression of individuals' rational self-determination as equal parts of a collective whole.

Equalitarian wealth redistribution, compulsory civic education, and a popular army

Of course Spinoza's ideal state is not simply a free association of private individuals. The democracy of Spinoza's vision is not the democracy envisaged by Thomas Jefferson, namely, a collection of relatively independent, autonomous estates – the heads of which may come together in a forum to discuss public business. No, Spinoza's state is a unity of equal persons all of whom are composed into a single organic entity. The state is wholly intertwined with a societal structure which promotes fidelity to the commonwealth as a whole, over and above narrow, private interests. Moreover, Spinoza positively highlights several specific features of the Hebrew state which had the effect of buttressing the stability of such an organic unity. These amount to apparatuses or levers which the sovereign power may utilize in order to maintain the state's overall coherence and security. Perhaps the most striking of these is Spinoza's affirmation of material equality, and the radical redistribution of land by the state.

Apart from these factors, whose impact stemmed from opinion alone, there was another aspect to this state, a very solid factor unique to them which must have very much discouraged the citizens from thinking about defection or ever conceiving a desire to desert their country. This is consideration of their (material) interest which is the life and strength of all human actions.

(TTP 215)

The importance of material redistribution as a lever of the state is reconfirmed within the Ethics as well:

Men are also won over by generosity, especially those who do not have the means of acquiring the things they require to sustain life. But to bring aid to everyone in need far surpasses the powers **and advantage** of a private person. For his riches are quite unequal to the task. Moreover the capacity of one man is too limited for him to be able to unite all men to him in friendship. So the case of the poor falls upon society as a whole, **and concerns only the general advantage**.

(E 4 Appendix 17)

The Hebrew state, contends Spinoza, enforced such equalitarian property ownership through the periodic and mandatory abolition of all debt at the time of the jubilee year. This included not only the freeing of slaves every seventh year, but also the restoration of land to its former owners (should they have lost the land because of economic hardship). This meant that regardless of how much material wealth was accumulated over time, the means of producing additional wealth (in this agrarian context, the land itself) was periodically re-apportioned in an equalitarian fashion.

For nowhere else did citizens hold their possessions with a stronger right than this state's subjects. They held an equal portion of the lands and fields with the leader, and each one was the perpetual owner of his share. If anyone was compelled by poverty to sell his estate or field, he had to be restored to it again when the Jubilee came around, and there were other customs of this kind to ensure that no one could be dispossessed of his allotted property.

(TTP 216)

Although often overlooked entirely, this aspect of the Hebrew state which Spinoza highlights is surprisingly radical in nature, especially given his time. For it is not the case that Spinoza identifies merely the distribution of alms or welfare by the rich, or even the re-distribution of income as a key lever of the state. Indeed, highlighting these charitable aspects of the Hebrew state would have been rather easy given that such mechanisms of charity by the wealthy are well represented throughout Scripture.¹⁷ Nonetheless, Spinoza wholly ignores these examples of charity! Instead, he chooses to highlight that the Hebrew state re-apportioned the very means of producing wealth – i.e. the land itself. It is this enactment which Spinoza identifies as central to the Hebrew state’s stability and internal integrity. For this meant that every citizen, by virtue of their own material self interest, had a great deal of fidelity to the state as a whole – and not merely to an elite circle of wealthy benefactors and magnanimous individuals.

To be sure, Spinoza never explicitly advises that this equalitarian program be employed in the United Provinces of the Netherlands, nor in any other modern regime of his time. However, his unequivocal admiration of this policy as carried out by the Hebrew state is far from reserved, and it is not a leap to contend that Spinoza would have advocated this policy, or a modification thereof, for the Netherlands itself and other modern regimes. His ultimate failure to do so can quite plausibly be traced to his precarious position as an exiled Jew in mid-seventeenth century, Christian Europe. Thus we can safely assume that, for Spinoza, the ideal state – that is,

¹⁷ Particularly popular examples of charitable enactments found in Hebrew Scripture include those relating to King Solomon’s Temple as a locus for wealth redistribution, as well as the tradition of “gleaning” in which the corners of fields were left un-harvested so as to provide for the poor. (Leviticus 19:9)

the state which is most self-secure – is that state which apportions the means for producing wealth amongst its citizens along equalitarian lines.

Still another feature of the ideal state is a common civic education. Again, this idea is brought about through Spinoza's historical discussion of the Hebrew state. In this case, the common civic education was conducted by the priestly class at pre-ordained intervals. However, one should note that it is misleading to say that the Hebrew state's civic education was religious in nature. Rather, Spinoza wanted to stress precisely the converse of this. Namely, that the religious instruction of the Hebrew state was truly civic in nature. Indeed, for Spinoza, all religious instruction – insofar as it regulates the outer acts of citizens and their relationship to their fellow citizens – is necessarily civic in nature. The Hebrew state's common religion was, primarily, their common societal ethos, and this was above all else a stabilizing force. (TTP 221)

The ideal state must, therefore, not only subscribe to a coherent and robust civil creed, but it must, moreover civically educate its citizens regularly. This public ethos must stress, first and foremost, adherence to the good of the commonwealth above private interests, and the subsequent indoctrination must result in greater solidarity amongst the commonwealth's citizens.

Moreover, in Spinoza's ideal state, civic education will have a virtuous effect upon the civic leadership specifically. For Spinoza consistently adopts an egoistic psychology when it comes to his philosophical anthropology. While average citizens are prone to follow their narrow interests when a strong state and consistent indoctrination are absent, the same determination is made as regards civic leadership. Government officials will inevitably seek out personal pleasures and use the advantage of their office to do so.

Those who administer a state or hold power inevitably try to lend any wrong they do the appearance of right and try to persuade the people that they acted honourably; and they often succeed, since the whole interpretation of right or law is entirely in their hands.

(TTP 212)

From this it is evident that the Hebrew leaders were deprived of a great opportunity for wrongdoing in that the right to interpret laws was given wholly to the Levites [see Deuteronomy 21.5], who held no responsibility for government and had no portion [of territory] along with the others...[It also helped] that the whole people was ordered to congregate in a certain place once every seven years to learn the Laws from the priests, and, in addition, that everyone had an obligation to read and reread the book of the Law by himself continually and attentively [see Deuteronomy 31.9 and 6.7].

(TTP 212)

Governmental officials will be less able to use their station for private interest when the populace is provided with a sufficiently good civic education, (a civic education from the priestly class who, themselves, have no property or right to civic authority). For a common understanding of the laws will result in popular discontent when such abuses of office occur. In this sense, the point of priestly indoctrination is truly nothing else than civic education. It is this education which, in Spinoza's ideal state, is instrumental to curtailing the inevitable excesses which spring from our egoistic natures – and this applies to both private citizens and officers of the state alike.

Another clear distinction between Spinoza's vision of his ideal democratic state and that envisaged by Jefferson was the clear advocacy of a large, standing army. This advocacy on Spinoza's part may be surprising insofar as the liberties and freedoms associated with democracy appear to be at odds with the notion of military aggression – or the imminent threat thereof. And

yet, a standing army is considered by Spinoza to be simply another apparatus of sovereign power for maintaining a free, democratic, and thus stable state.

In explaining how this mechanism would work, Spinoza again makes reference to the Hebrew nation – and in particular, the Hebrew state as it existed after the death of Moses.

An additional means, plainly, and something invariably of the utmost importance for curbing the boundless licentiousness of princes, was that the military was formed from the whole body of the citizenry [with no exceptions between the ages of twenty and sixty], and that the leaders could not hire foreign mercenaries.

(TTP 212)

The executives who were the civil authorities in this state were absolutely precluded from hiring foreign mercenaries. Moreover, the constitution of the military was that of a universal conscript army--not a professional--volunteer defense force. This is the vital feature of the Hebrew state's military, making it a liberating force, and not a force of coercive subjugation.

This, unquestionably, was a very powerful restraint, for it is certain that princes can oppress a people simply by making use of a mercenary armed force, and they fear nothing more than the liberty of their soldier-citizens, whose courage, toil and expenditure of blood have won the state its freedom and glory.

(TTP 213)

A mercenary force, or indeed a professional force of any kind, would have served the state's captains as their absolute masters. As such, they would have been nothing more than an apparatus of the state's governors for the pursuit of their own private glory and material aggrandizement. Yet the Hebrew army was an army of the people, assembled entirely via the universal draft of the people as a whole. Every family whose head was of the age of service was a part of this national militia. Consequently, this popular army, while subordinate to the dictates of the sovereign state as a whole, could not be used as a mechanism of a governmental elite against the Hebrew populace. Quite the contrary, the Hebrew military, serving the sovereign people as a whole, was a constant and armed check against any of the excesses of the ruling state-captains.

Not only this; the Hebrew army was also likely to be prudent in matters of outward aggression. For there was no obvious benefit to the practice of excessive military adventurism. The reason for this can, likewise, be traced back to the military's specific constitution. Since the army was a universal conscript force, each soldier, officer, and commander led a parallel life as a civilian.

There is, finally, also the advantage that the leaders and body of the armed forces could not be carried away by a desire for war rather than peace. For the armed forces, as we said, consisted only of citizens, and therefore matters of war as well as of peace were handled by these same men. The man who was a soldier in the camp was a citizen in the assembly; the officer in the camp was a judge in the council of elders; and the general in the camp was a leader in the state. Hence no one could desire war for war's sake, but only for the sake of peace and the protection of freedom.

(TTP 214)

Moreover, it was not only the case that the soldiers and officers in the military were simply private citizens at home. No, in the Hebrew state as Spinoza reconstructs it, there is a robust and highly participatory democracy. Thus, the soldier, as stated above, is not simply a farmer at home – but a member of the forum, indeed, a legislator of sorts. Those citizens who constituted this popular army had positions of power and authority as non-military civilians in addition to their military posts. Hence the Hebrew army had no special desire for war and combat aside from those situations in which the peace and prosperity of the commonwealth were at stake. Of course, from all of this we may safely extrapolate that Spinoza’s ideal state would likewise maintain such a standing force – so long as its constitution mirrored that of the above mentioned Hebrew military – namely, a popular army universally conscripted from the citizenry as a whole.

The republican ideal – a strong, sovereign state

It will be evident, at this point, that Spinoza’s ideal state is first and foremost a strong and sovereign commonwealth. However, the sovereignty of state power extends beyond education, economic redistribution, and military force. The concept of the ultimate and undivided sovereignty of state power is far more basic to Spinoza’s conception of the ideal state than these particular state apparatuses.

Indeed, the advocacy of a powerful and sovereign state relates directly to Spinoza’s ever-present egoistic psychology and philosophical anthropology. It is Spinoza’s conjecture that any given individual will seek what she considers to be to her best advantage. Since this perceived advantage may not correspond with that which will be best for the commonwealth as a whole, there needs to be a powerful sovereign who can coercively preclude such actions of narrow self-

interest. How is this possible? Spinoza does not rule out the possibility of what we, today, may term “light power,” (i.e. non-coercive power). Thus, Spinoza says several times that the state may use indoctrination and education to assure that citizens understand that the interest of the commonwealth is truly their own. This indoctrination is intended to curb any purely selfish and destructive action on their part. (TTP 202)

Of course this will not always be sufficient, and so the sovereign must be able to exercise coercive force as well. Only in this way can it be guaranteed that any given (narrowly) selfish action will be considered undesirable and thus be avoided by a subject. For in Spinoza’s egoistic psychology, we can only choose that which we consider to be to our greatest advantage. Of course, if a sufficiently severe penalty is attached to a particular selfish act – murder, theft, and the like – it will be evident to minimally thoughtful people that these acts are no longer to their obvious advantage. (TTP 193) It is, therefore, more than evident that a fundamental aspect of this ideal state is a robust sovereignty which will be capable of overriding the private actions of individual citizens when these do not conform to the good of the commonwealth as a whole.

Indeed, it appears that any given nation must necessarily affirm the absolute sovereignty of the state, should this entity count as a state at all. For the sovereignty of the state consists precisely in the transfer of our natural right – that is, the right to act absolutely as we please – to an authority which is not identical to ourselves alone.¹⁸ Insofar as this is a rational choice, all who live in the state at least tacitly consent to the sovereign authority, and are thus bound to it.

¹⁸ I say that the state presupposes our transferring our natural right to ‘an authority not identical with ourselves,’ and *not* ‘to an external authority.’ For in a democratic republic, (Spinoza’s ideal) we certainly give up our natural right to act as we please to an authority of sorts. However, this is not a purely *external authority* insofar as the individual citizen shares in equal, collective control over state decision and power. It is merely the case that this power is not wholly ‘identical with ourselves’ insofar as it is a universally shared power to which everyone owes obedience.

Human society can thus be formed without any alienation of natural right, and the contract can be preserved in its entirety with complete fidelity, only if every person transfers all the power they possess to society, and society alone retains the supreme natural right over all things, i.e., supreme power, which all must obey, either of their own free will or through fear of the ultimate punishment.

(TTP 193)

Moreover, it is Spinoza's contention that this choice must be absolute in nature and wholly without reservation. Any reservation whatsoever of our natural right to act as we please would not be logically compatible with the affirmation of a sovereign state power. For it is precisely the right to determine laws and the exclusive right to employ violent coercion in the enforcement of laws which constitute the nature of the sovereign.

It follows that sovereign power is bound by no law and everyone is obliged to obey it in all things. For they must all have made this agreement, tacitly or explicitly, when they transferred their whole power of defending themselves, that is, their whole right, to the sovereign authority.

If they had wanted to keep any right for themselves, they should have made this provision at the same time as they could have safely defended it. Since they did not do so, and could not have done it without dividing and therefore destroying its authority, by that very fact they have submitted themselves to the sovereign's will.

(TTP 193)

Indeed, the notion of the sovereign is so absolutely fundamental to Spinoza's theory of state that all civil determinations are defined only with relation to the sovereign state power.

Spinoza is very clear that the concepts of civil right, wrong, justice, injustice, ally, enemy, and treason are each wholly meaningless apart from their relation to the state. For instance, civil right is defined simply as, "...the freedom of each person to conserve themselves in their own condition, which is determined by the edicts of the sovereign power and protected by its authority alone." Similarly, offence is described as, "[That which] is committed when a citizen or subject is compelled by another person to suffer a loss, contrary to the civil law or edict of the sovereign." (TTP 196)

Therefore, the absolute sovereignty of state power is a logical necessity for there to be any state at all. Moreover, we may extrapolate that any state which approximates an ideal for Spinoza will be one which consciously and explicitly upholds state power as absolutely sovereign. For only such a state that is so constituted will promote its own stability and, in turn, the happiness of its subjects. Here, Spinoza is particularly reacting against the various attempts in his own day to cut away sovereign authority from the state on the part of religious sects and authorities.¹⁹ He views this as being wholly destructive of the state itself, and thus an irrational act of selfish pride which, in turn, jeopardizes the security and welfare of the people as a whole.

State sovereignty over religious piety

The absolute sovereignty of Spinoza's ideal state relates directly to the State's supremacy over religious piety. As per usual in the Tractatus, Spinoza illustrates this point via reference to the Hebrew state. One of the most striking quotations relating to state sovereignty over religion is the following: "First, it is not contrary to God's rule to choose a supreme magistrate who will

¹⁹ In particular, Spinoza is reacting to both the devastating effects of the Thirty Years' War upon the whole of Europe, as well as the competition between the Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants in his own United Provinces. Spinoza viewed each of these conflicts as partly arising from the destructive tendency of religious leaders and sects to assume state authority. For a complete account of this, see: Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 269-270.

have the sovereign right of government.” (TTP 222) This comment is a specific reference to the absolute rule of Moses over the Hebrews. It is of the greatest import because Spinoza is here making reference to Scripture in order to argue for the absolute authority of the state over religious authority. The argument runs as follows: Scripture tells us that God ordained Moses’ rule directly. If there were ever any divine right to rule, it was clearly held by Moses, if by no one else. Yet Moses’ rule was so absolute that the priestly classes, the Levites, only had authority insofar as it was mediated through Moses himself. Thus, Scripture gives us clear evidence that God can, and indeed has, ordained a government which had the characteristic of absolute sovereign command over the state – an authority which entirely superseded any religious authority. (TTP 244) Therefore, if there are yet any lingering doubts about the ultimate and supreme sovereignty of the state, Spinoza’s description of the state’s dominion over religion will eliminate these completely.

Again, Spinoza’s motivations in advocating such absolute state sovereignty are many. To begin, there are fundamental issues of what, descriptively, constitutes a state. A state whose sovereignty is partly claimed by private religious authorities cannot be considered a state in the complete sense. Then, there are prudential reasons. Namely, any political scheme which does involve such fragmented sovereignty will be given to self-destruction. For it is precisely our collective transferring of our natural right to act as we please unto a single sovereign entity which is both the necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of a state and the departure from the state of nature. Should sovereignty be split between two entities, then these two entities will remain within a state of nature – at least relative to one another. This would mirror the way in which two or more sovereign states exist in a sort of ‘state of nature’ relative to one another. They each remain in a constant state of potential competition and aggression. Of course, such a

relationship is intrinsically unstable and a nation which is so constituted cannot stand for very long.

Finally, there is an argument which is derived from the nature of law-giving and morality. For Spinoza, no laws can possibly be derived from God's word without interpretation as to its specific meaning and application. The entity which has authority to interpret and execute the law is, by definition, the sovereign power. However, religious authorities, and those false prophets who wish to "devise a path to power for themselves" will frequently criticize the sovereign state's application of the law, its judgments of right and wrong, and so on. (TTP 228) This, Spinoza argues, is the height of irresponsibility and misanthropy. As such, "...it is the duty of the sovereign authority alone to determine what is necessary for the security of the whole people and of the state, and lay down what it deems necessary. It follows that it is also the duty of the sovereign authority alone to lay down how a person should behave with piety towards his neighbor, that is, how one is obliged to obey God." (TTP 232)

For the ability to pronounce and enforce laws through coercion is just what sovereign power amounts to. Should the state be deprived, in whole or in part, of this ability, it will actually cease to be sovereign. This, in effect, means the complete destruction of the state and every measure of security and welfare which is dependent upon it. As such, devotion to state is the highest sort of devotion; for if this is destroyed nothing good can survive. (TTP 232)

The sovereign state, for the above reasons, must have complete control over outer religious piety – namely, what is considered a right and wrong action within the commonwealth. Whatever the sovereign decrees to be pious, i.e. right action, is indeed pious, and carries the force of law which cannot be co-opted in any way by a competing religious authority.

Nonetheless, while the sovereign can determine any given action to be pious or impious, right or wrong, or alternatively, legal or illegal, it is absolutely not Spinoza's contention that there are no criteria by which the sovereign can make a better or worse determination as to what ought to constitute pious action. Indeed, Spinoza is very clear that the ideal state will determine for its citizens that pious acts are precisely those which consist in benevolent relations with one's fellow citizens. "In order to avoid these difficulties, the safest policy is to regard piety and the practice of religion as a question of works alone, that is, as simply the practice of charity and justice, and to leave everyone to his own free judgment about everything else." (TTP 226)

In fact, Spinoza does not envisage his ideal state to be a form of theocracy (in the common sense of the term). He specifically objects to the notion that the state should confuse piety with philosophy so as to attempt to conform society to one or another theological ideal. On the contrary, the thrust of Spinoza's argument is precisely that the state should uphold a doctrine of mutual charity and benevolence amongst citizens, something which is wholly intelligible by "natural reason," and which requires no additional religious dogma for support. Indeed, the point of his argument regarding state authority over religion is precisely that no private, religious authority ought to have the power to enforce its own code of morality parallel to, or in conflict with, the state's basic injunction to love thy neighbor. While Spinoza does admit that a state may be rather more specific as to its mandated form of outer piety – indeed he gives the sovereign absolute authority to decide upon what is to be considered pious – he nonetheless clearly argues that the ideal state will enforce a simple, non-dogmatic, notion of piety which consists solely of the command to perform good works and to deal justly with one's neighbors.

Liberal limitations upon the sovereign state

Thus far we have seen that Spinoza's ideal state is a strong republic. It is democratic insofar as citizens have equal control over state decisions and the exercise of state power. Nonetheless, the individual citizen is wholly subject to, and dependent upon, this communal power. The good of the commonwealth is consistently given preference over the narrow interests and private projects of individual citizens. Religious authority is likewise wholly subject to said sovereign power. Finally, this ideal state will have several key apparatuses at its disposal in order to retain its internal and external integrity. These, as we have discovered, include regular civic education, a large, standing, popular army, as well as the mandate to radically redistribute wealth and land along equalitarian lines.

It is often surprising, then, to discover that Spinoza is, as well, a staunch advocate of a whole host of personal, civil liberties – the freedom of conscience and communication first among them. For these individual liberties are often, in the popular imagination, at odds with a powerful republican state. However, at some basic level, it is Spinoza's contention that an absolutely all-powerful state is simply an impossibility. "No one will ever be able to transfer his power and [consequently] his right to another person in such a way that he ceases to be a human being; and there will never be a sovereign power that can dispose of everything just as it pleases." (TTP 201)

While a given state may, and indeed ought, to have absolute sovereignty (in that it should not share or "split" sovereignty with religious authorities), there is a logical limit to its sovereign power. Specifically, a state can have no right over the inner thoughts and reasoning of its subjects. For Spinoza, right is simply co-extensive with power. Since no external authority can have direct power over inner thoughts, it can claim no such right. Moreover, should a state

futilely attempt to claim such a right, it will inevitably fail and thus be considered tyrannical by its disaffected subjects.

How dangerous it is to refer purely philosophical questions to divine law, and to make laws about opinions which men can or do dispute. Government is bound to become extremely oppressive where [dissident] opinions which are within the domain of each individual, a right which no one can give up, are treated as a crime.

(TTP 225)

Things which cannot be prevented must necessarily be allowed, even though they are often harmful. How many evils arise from extravagance, from envy, greed, drunkenness, and so on! These are nevertheless tolerated because they cannot be prevented by authority of the law, even though they really are vices. How much more should liberty of judgment be conceded, which is without question a virtue and cannot be suppressed.

(TTP 243)

In turn, the tyrannical nature of such a state is precisely what leads to its own destabilization. For it pertains to human nature to rebel against those strictures and laws which are not only burdensome, but are moreover impossible to consistently enforce. It is for this same reason that some outer acts are also to be free from coercive state control. Specifically, Spinoza wishes to defend a certain conception of the freedom of speech.

For in reality it is far from possible to make everyone speak according to a script. On the contrary, the more one strives to deprive people of freedom of speech, the more obstinately they resist. I do not mean greedy, fawning people who have no moral character – their greatest comfort is to think about the money they have in the bank and

fill their fat stomachs – but those whom a good upbringing, moral integrity and virtue have rendered freer, (i.e., given a more liberal outlook).²⁰

(TTP 243-4)

Again, the concrete fallout from trying to enact serious enforcement of codes of communication are disastrous for the stability of the state itself.

What is more dangerous, I contend, than for people to be treated as enemies and led off to death, not for misdeeds or wrongdoing, but because they make a free use of their intelligence, and for the scaffold which should be the terror only of wrongdoers to become a magnificent stage on which to exhibit to all a supreme exemplum of constancy and virtue while casting the deepest reproach on the sovereign? Those who know themselves to be honest, do not fear death as wrongdoers fear it and plead to escape judgment. Their minds are not tormented by remorse for shameful actions. On the contrary, they consider it not a punishment but an honour to die in a good cause: they deem it glorious to die for freedom. And what an example they give! ...Surely no one could find anything else in such an exemplum than a desire to emulate or at least to extol it?

(TTP 245)

And so it seems as though the same pattern of justification arises once more. The ideal state is identical to the wise or prudent state – the state which seeks its own self-preservation. Wide toleration for thought, philosophy, and communication are thus attributes of the ideal state insofar as these will allow the state to remain in existence.

²⁰ The inserted parentheses refer to the older “Brill” translation of the *Tractatus* which, in my opinion, clarifies Spinoza’s point:
Benedikt Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus: Gebhardt Edition of 1925* (Leiden: Brill, 1991) 243-234.

The obvious question to ask is this: Is Spinoza's political philosophy wholly inconsistent with his advocacy of personal liberty? Does not such a strong and robust state as Spinoza advocates ultimately rule out any meaningful freedom of thought, communication, and action? Finally, can mere prudence on the part of the state really support a robust toleration? Surely it must be the case that a sufficiently powerful and prudent state can restrict the liberties of its citizens to a large degree without going so far as to instigate outright rebellion. In the following section, I will outline the metaphysical and philosophical-anthropological bases for Spinoza's theory of state. From this it will be evident that not only does Spinoza's political philosophy allow for a robust doctrine of toleration: it demands it.

Section Two: Oikeiosis and the Metaphysical Foundations of Spinoza's Politics

Spinoza's politics involves a classic tension between a robust and powerful state and, at the same time, a high regard for the rights, freedoms, and liberties of individual citizens.²¹ Such a tension cannot be resolved through recourse to pragmatic explanations alone.²² It should not be

²¹ Again, see TTP, 201, 225, 243.

²² It might be suggested that, given the form of Spinoza's *TTP*, that this *is* indeed a purely political and practical work – separate from any metaphysical foundations otherwise found within Spinoza's works. This notion is given particular credence by Spinoza's intended audience (not academic philosophers, nor committed naturalists, but apparently the broad representatives of Dutch society as a whole).

Nonetheless, as will be proven in the remainder of this chapter, the *TTP* does, in fact, necessarily ground itself in Spinoza's rationalist metaphysics. As Jonathan Israel notes in his introduction to the Cambridge edition of the *TTP* (viii):

"The *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670) of Spinoza is not a work of philosophy in the usual sense of the term. Rather it is a rare and interesting example of what we might call applied or 'practical' philosophy. That is, it is a work based throughout on a philosophical system which, however, mostly avoids employing philosophical arguments...**though it was also intended in part as a device for subtly defending and promoting Spinoza's own theories.**"

In other words, it is absolutely *true* that the *TTP* is not *explicitly* grounded in metaphysical monism and epistemological rationalism. *However*, it is equally evident that Spinoza underpins the explicit arguments of the *TTP* with these very commitments. Spinoza, in other words, is never a pragmatist, but he expresses his published writings in what Strauss might call "esoteric" fashion. He is a consistent rationalist, and we will show that only a monistic rationalism can make coherent all of the claims which are ultimately set out in the *TTP*. Yet the arguments themselves are expressed "exoterically" in historical and exegetical terms, rather than in deductive-philosophical ones. Thus, we can cite Jonathan Israel once more from his introduction to the *TTP*, x.:

surprising, then, that what lies behind such an apparently contradictory fusion is a rich and substantive view of humankind and the universe which is perfectionist in nature. Namely, such a politics is built upon a more basic understanding of power itself, an understanding which denies that the power of a whole is always at odds with the power of its constituent parts, but rather that these are wholly complimentary to one another.

Specifically, Spinoza's ethics can best be understood as a modification and modernization of the Stoic principle of *oikeiosis*. *Oikeiosis*, though conceived differently by the various stoics of the Greek and Roman traditions is generally understood to be a set of ethical and metaphysical concepts which seek to explain the basis for our caring about the welfare of others. This theory was the foundation for the stoics' affirmation of a species of universal cosmopolitanism, whereby each individual was considered a citizen of the world, or as brothers and sisters in a world family (*oikos*).²³ Provincial allegiances to family and tribe, though never disregarded, were fully generalized to encompass all sentient beings without prejudice. This process of generalization entails an ever increasing comprehension and then absorption of the world (and its inhabitants) into one's own sphere of interest and concern. In fragments from one of the earliest stoics, Hierocles, this "expanding circle" metaphor is set out nicely.

Each one of us is, as it were, entirely surrounded by many circles, some smaller, others larger, some enclosing and some enclosed... The first and nearest circle is the one which a person has drawn around his own mind as, so to speak, its center. This circle contains

"Although a particular system of philosophy inspired and underpins the whole of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, it does so in most of the chapters unobtrusively and frequently in a hidden fashion. While his revolutionary metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy subtly infuse every part and aspect of his argumentation, the tools which Spinoza more conspicuously brings to his task are exegetical, philological and historical."

²³ Liddell & Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, 1996 ed., s.v. *oikeosis*.

the body and anything taken for the sake of the body; it is roughly speaking the smallest circle, and almost touches the center itself. The second one after this, further removed from the center, but enclosing the first circle has parents, siblings, wife, and children assigned to it. The third one has in it uncles and aunts, grandparents, nephews, nieces and cousins...this is followed by the circle of members of the same *deme*, then the circle of members of the same tribe (*phyle*), next that of fellow citizens, and then in the same way the circle of people from neighboring towns, and the circle of fellow-countrymen. The outermost and largest circle, which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race.²⁴

Ethical egoism

Perhaps surprisingly, what is at the base of such a universalistic ethics is nothing other than the very concept of “self-love” or egoism. The first circle, after all, is that smallest one of “minimal radius” encompassing one’s own mind and body. It is the necessary existence of this first, minimal sphere of concern and love for oneself, one’s own power, which paves the way for an expansion towards universal care and compassion. For, at its base, *oikeiosis* is not a matter of caring and concern for the other. It is rather the transformation of the other into something identical and native to oneself by way of rational comprehension of this other. The making of that which is alien into something apart of one’s own *oikos* (or family) is quite literally accomplished by an increased “familiarization” with the world at large by the ethical agent. The more we expand outward, and rationally cognize increasing sections of the world, the more the world becomes part of ourselves. The self-regard and self-love of the agent, and indeed the egoistic desire for the ethical agent to increase his power, his lot, his family is the genesis and initial catalyst for the whole process of *oikeiosis*.

²⁴ Michael B. Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire: Ethics, Politics and Society*. (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007), 138.

Yet there has generally been resistance to this ethics based on self-love, and the pursuit of personal pleasure, power, and satisfaction. These objections have commonly come from three sources. First, opposition has come from religion: Within religious sources, hostility to the pleasure driven life was most often directed against the so called epicureans, not inasmuch as the term denotes a classical school of philosophy, but rather insofar as this connotes someone who disbelieves in the supernatural and follows earthly desires alone. For instance, in the Talmud, Maimonides (with whom Spinoza was familiar) claims in a *mishnah* commentary that the root of the word “apikoros” is actually the similar-sounding Hebrew word for freedom, namely הפקר.²⁵ This Hebrew root is best denoted as “free” or “unclaimed” and is often used to describe the status of unclaimed property. In the *mishnah* Maimonides intends to connect the meaning of הפקר with being “free” of the Law, or perhaps being abandoned by God.²⁶ Of course a better known example of such condemnation is found within the pages of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, specifically the sixth circle of Hell where Epicurus and his followers (along with all other heretics) spend eternity.²⁷ It should be noted that these instances of religious opposition are not aimed directly at pleasure itself, but rather at an emphasis on the natural and the bodily, and above all else, a denial of the ethereal, supernatural, and so on.

Secondly, since the eighteenth century, the concept of self-love as the foundation for ethics has been much denigrated. To those who take their cue, for instance from Kant, there appears to be something inconstant or even ignoble in the idea of basing one’s care for others, ultimately, upon even an initial love for oneself. This is especially true if concern for oneself

²⁵ It is very unlikely that Maimonides actually believed that the root of a clearly Greek word was, in fact, Hebrew. Rather, this is more plausibly an intentional use of a rhetorical device so as to illustrate a point about hedonistic minded individuals and their relationship to Jewish law.

²⁶ See the Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanh. xi. 1

²⁷ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno : a Verse Translation*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1982), 87.

includes the sensual concern for one's own body, the desire for pleasure, and the avoidance of personal, carnal pain. After all, reasons Kant: "All rules derived from feeling are contingent, and valid only for beings that have such a feeling. Feeling is a satisfaction that rests on the constitution of a sense...Feeling in man, is diversified, and that would also have to be so here. If morality rested on feeling, then many a one who is simply without tender feeling might attend to it less, and thereupon practice vice."²⁸

In other words, how could there be stable social and ethical relations between people if these are ultimately based, in the original case, upon the transitory and capricious whims of the flesh?

Finally, and more recently, a third species of criticism of an ethics based upon self-love has emerged, this time from within the psychoanalytic tradition. In this case, an ethics based upon egoism is critiqued on the psychological and empirical basis that, in fact, we cannot take for granted that all people uniformly possess feelings of self-love or even a basic concern for themselves. It is for this reason, some psychoanalysts contend, that a stable ethics cannot be based upon self-love; for such self-love is far from a universal certainty in the first place! For instance, the concept of *Thanatos* (or death drive), proposed by Wilhelm Stekel, a legatee of Freud, implies that contra *Eros* (the impetus towards life, lust, food, and propagation), there are competing, and in some cases countervailing, instincts towards self-annihilation.²⁹

Nonetheless, the idea that concern for one's own welfare and pleasure form the kernel of a fully universal ethics is precisely that which the ancient stoics affirmed in forming their central ethical concept of *oikeiosis*. Moreover, with extensive modification, it is essentially this same

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Lauchlan Heath and J. B. Schneewind (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), 29:625.

²⁹ Paul Roazen, *Freud and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 218.

strategy which Spinoza would employ in his magnum opus, the Ethics, in the seventeenth century. Finally, it is my own contention that this conception of ethics and human nature has contemporary import in the twenty-first century for explaining the basis for a humane political philosophy which includes a consistent doctrine of political toleration. Therefore pinning down the precise nature of Spinoza's ethical egoism is a vital and pressing task.

It may at first appear to be an unnecessary diversion to examine the intricacies of Spinoza's ethical egoism. This is both a psychological and metaphysical matter, and our broader examination of toleration is essentially a question which belongs instead to the realm of political science. However, it is precisely by comprehending how, like the stoics, Spinoza synthesized "love for oneself" with a universal ethics and care for others that we can grasp the very key to comprehending how his political philosophy affirms a strong doctrine of toleration alongside a rather muscular conception of the democratic, egalitarian state. In short, comprehending Spinoza's politics is impossible apart from understanding his metaphysics – especially insofar as the latter contributes to his ethical system and understanding of human nature.

As to the idea of egoism, this concept is expressed within the Ethics as the famous *conatus*. According to Spinoza, all beings possess a *conatus* or, put in other terms, a "striving" to maintain themselves in their existence. There is nothing in the world which is intrinsically self-destructive or self-negating. "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being." (E 3 Proposition 6) The reason for such a bold statement is largely logical rather than empirical. Namely, if a given thing were to be intrinsically self-negating, then surely it would never come to exist in the first place. It would, in other words, be an impossible thing, just as a square circle is an impossibility in itself. (E 1 Proposition 11) Therefore, we can say with certainty, that all things which in fact do exist are not intrinsically self-negating and,

positively speaking, possess a conatus to maintain themselves in their existence. Of course, Spinoza is not blind to the fact of ordinary destruction. He understands, indeed affirms, that both sentient beings as well as inanimate objects are often destroyed. His position regarding the universality of the conatus is merely that they do not destroy themselves.

“No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause.

...This Proposition is evident through itself. For the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, *or* it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it, q.e.d.”

(E 3 Proposition 4)

Two additional points of clarification should be made here vis-à-vis the conatus, one regarding “intentionality” and the other regarding “plausibility.” To the first, it has to be stated that Spinoza’s conception of the conatus as universal is not a kind of mystical panpsychism. Yes, all things “strive” to maintain themselves in their existence. However, again, this is an entirely logical point. Not all entities are rational or even sentient, and so there should be no inference made that Spinoza posits that all entities intentionally attempt to maintain their existence. Cakes do not anxiously try to keep on being cakes and rocks do not stress and strain to go on existing as rocks. Rather, the majority of entities in the world are passive in their striving for continued existence since they lack a mind. Their *conatus*, therefore, can much better be understood as akin to the physical notion of inertia, whereby a body remains constant unless acted upon by an outside force. To put it neatly, the conatus understood most generally,

as applicable to all entities, is nothing other than existential inertia. It is the natural tendency for things to not simply vanish, change, or decompose apart from external influence.

Put in Spinozistic terms, a given, finite thing's essence cannot involve duration (i.e. a definite time period of existence). Rather, a thing's essence is nothing else but that entity's striving to exist, as it is, for an indeterminate amount of time.

Indeed, the duration of things cannot be determined by their essence, since the essence of things involves no certain and determinate time of existing. But any thing whatever, whether it is more perfect or less, will always be able to persevere in existing by the same force by which it begins to exist; so they are all equal in this regard.

(E 4 Preface)

The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.

(E 3 Proposition 7)

As to the second point of the plausibility of the universality of the conatus, one must confront the myriad of empirical counter-examples in which both people and things do appear to actually destroy themselves. For instance, as a thought experiment, we can consider the case of an explosive device such as a bomb. Surely here we have a neat example of a single entity or object that is intrinsically self-destructive. Indeed, one may say that is the very point of a properly functioning bomb to explode. Yet the consistent Spinozist would, in fact, take such an example as a confirmation of the universality of the conatus. For instance, we can be more specific and posit that we are examining a chemical explosive of some sort. Some combination of chemicals inside a metal casing are combined, there is a violent chemical reaction, and the

device combusts, projecting metal shards of the ruptured casing all over a field. In doing so we recognize that the very thing that initially triggers the explosion is the interaction of two or more chemicals coming into contact with one another. The explosion is a result of these two or more chemicals striving vigorously to maintain their own, individual composesures, i.e. their respective molecular structures. The expansion of energy produced by this effect, considered as an entity in itself, moves from the center of this device outward, and pushes up against the inside of the metal casing. The metal casing, itself another entity, has its own *conatus* (i.e. existential inertia) and resists explosion. Yet it is ultimately overcome by the rush of chemical energy and the explosive rupture at last occurs. Indeed, far from disproving the principle of conatus, the explosion only occurs just because each individual element of the device possesses a conatus to resist change and self-destruction.

The moral of this thought experiment is two-fold. First, the appearance of self-destruction necessarily conceals, on closer inspection, two or more entities vying against one another fully in accord with the principle of *conatus*. As Spinoza states in Part Three of the Ethics:

Things are of a contrary nature, i.e., cannot be in the same subject, insofar as one can destroy the other.

...For if they could agree with one another, or be in the same subject at once, then there could be something in the same subject which could destroy it, which...is absurd.

(E 3 Proposition 5)

Second, and related to this, is the understanding that individuals may be aggregates. It is the aggregate nature of individuals, specifically, which can explain the appearance of self-destruction and self-negation. Human beings are no exception to these universal principles. Spinoza's psychology and philosophical anthropology emanate, in this respect, from his metaphysics. Human beings intrinsically desire or strive to maintain themselves in their existence.

Since reason demands nothing contrary to nature, it demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really bring man to greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can. This, indeed, is as necessarily true as that a whole is greater than its part...

(E 4 Proposition 18 Note)

Spinoza's position is thus in line with the Platonic tradition of denying *akrasia* (i.e. weakness of the will). His system precludes this idea that humans can knowingly and willfully do that which is worse and neglect that which is better. "From the guidance of reason, we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils."(4 Proposition 65)

From the laws of his own nature, everyone necessarily wants, or is repelled by, what he judges to be good or evil.

... And therefore everyone necessarily wants what he judges to be good, and conversely, is repelled by what he judges to be evil. **But this appetite is nothing but the very essence, or nature, of man.** Therefore, everyone, from the laws of his own nature, necessarily, wants or is repelled...

(E 4 Proposition 18)

Human beings, as a matter of logical necessity, are not inherently self-destructive. By way of illustration, we can see the unequivocal manner in which Spinoza explains the phenomenon of suicide as erroneous, linked not to human action itself, but rather the effect of external influences impinging upon our rational nature. Namely, it is stated in Part Four that, “...those who kill themselves are weak-minded and completely conquered by external causes contrary to their nature.” (E 4 Proposition 18 Note)

No one, therefore, unless he is defeated by causes external, and contrary to his nature, neglects so seek his own advantage, *or* to preserve his being. No one, I say, avoids food or kills himself from the necessity of his own nature. Those who do such things are compelled by external causes, which can happen in many ways. Someone may kill himself because he is compelled by another, who twists his right hand [which happened to hold a sword] and forces him to direct the sword against his heart; or because he is forced by the command of a Tyrant [as Seneca was] to open his veins, i.e., he desires to avoid a greater evil by [submitting to] a lesser; or finally because hidden external causes so dispose his imagination, and so affect his body, that it takes on another nature, contrary to the former, a nature of which there cannot be an idea in the mind. But that a man should, from the necessity of his own nature, strive not to exist, or to be changed into another form, is as impossible as that something should come from nothing. Anyone who gives this a little thought will see it.

(E 4 Proposition 20 Schol.)

All self-destructive behavior necessarily originates as external to the human being himself. One’s own reason can never guide one to suicide. This can only come from the overpowering influence of external, physical entities – either the brute forcing of one’s hand by

another or, alternatively, by an inordinate inflammation of the passions and imagination which may lead to disordered thought. In this sense, the suicidal human being is analogous to the explosive device. In each case, there is the appearance of self-destruction or self-negation. Yet what presents itself as self-destruction is, on closer inspection, an antagonism between two or more distinct entities – for instance, human reason and the external stimuli affecting the imagination.

The analysis of suicide reconfirms, by way of illustration, that self-love is a logical necessity for all sentient, rational beings. It is not that we should desire our own existence and welfare. Rather, we simply and necessarily do so.³⁰ Indeed, all ethical considerations are wholly subordinate to the actual existence of the ethical agent.³¹ “No virtue can be conceived prior to this [virtue] (viz. the striving to preserve one's self).” (E 4 Proposition 22) Put another way, the desire to persist in one's being is of ultimate intrinsic value within Spinoza's ethical system. The specific moral evaluation of a given act is thus determined in light of how conducive that act is to the further existence of the ethical agent.

³⁰ It should, additionally, be noted that the deduction of rational self-love is deduced from the logic of universal conatus, and not the other way around. Namely, perhaps unlike the stoics, Spinoza does not demand that nature conform to what is seen in the human mind. Indeed, he vigorously attacks and derides all such anthropomorphisms. Thus, it is not said that all things in nature intrinsically persist in their being because that is what rational humans do, and that what is rational is desirable, and so on. Rather, it is said that humans necessarily desire to maintain their own existence (i.e. have self-love) because they are sentient beings extant in the universe and that, as a matter of logical necessity, *all things* persist in such a manner and are never self-negating.

³¹ The implications of this ethical egoism (and the consequent priority of existence over moral evaluation) are striking. For instance, in the appendix to Part Four of the *Ethics* Spinoza states: “Our actions, that is, those desires which are defined by man's power or reason, are always good. The rest may be either good or bad.” (E 4 Appendix 3) Contra moralists in the Kantian tradition, (and in keeping with his denial of *akrasia*), Spinoza denies that any “action” (that is any purposeful deed made in accord with our human nature) can ever be bad.

No one can desire to be blessed, to act well and to live well, unless at the same time he desires to be, act, and to live, i.e., to actually exist.

(E 4 Proposition 21)

No one strives to preserve his being for the sake of anything else.

(E 4 Proposition 25)

This *a priori* necessity of egoism which is an indelible feature of human existence has implications on three levels: the personal, the political, and the ethical. Examination of each of these will be necessary for a full comprehension of Spinoza's doctrine of toleration and the state.

The Personal

On the personal level, Spinoza is simply concerned to show the path towards living a good life, the most basic and straightforward aim of all egoistically driven beings. Nonetheless, "good" for Spinoza, just as its correlate concept "evil," is merely a relative term. Nature (or God – which Spinoza famously equates), being eternal and infinite, knows nothing of good or evil since it wants, lacks, and desires nothing. Indeed, it is only a feature of our psychological need to anthropomorphize the natural world that we identify natural phenomena as either "good" or "bad." Thus humans are accustomed to:

...believe that nature [which they think does nothing except for the sake of some end] looks to them, and sets them before themselves as models. So when they see something happen in nature which does not agree with the model they have conceived of this kind of thing, they believe that Nature itself has failed or sinned, and left the thing imperfect.

(E 4 Preface)

Specifically, it is our erroneously assigning intentionality to Nature which causes such confusion. People imagine that there are proper forms which Nature ought to take, that there are better and worse ways in which the universe can modify itself. Yet this confused idea is really parasitic upon the more basic confusion surrounding the concept of “telos” or purposeful ends. Since human beings have desires and ends in mind; since our plans and projects involve certain goals which are either achieved or not achieved; we have a tendency to imagine that God or Nature, likewise, has for itself such ends in mind. Of course, the infinite character of God wholly precludes any such end-directed actions. For end-directedness implies finitude. It implies an entity which lacks something, which is not everywhere and is not everything. Put otherwise, end-directedness is wholly incompatible with the notions of infinity and eternity – notions wholly inseparable from Spinoza’s monistic conception of the universe or Nature.

...we have shown ...that Nature does nothing on account of an end. That eternal and infinite being we call God, *or* Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists. For we have shown that the necessity of nature from which he acts is the same as that from which he exists. The reason, therefore, *or* cause, why God, *or* Nature acts, and the reason why he exists, are one and the same. As he exists for the sake of no end, he also acts for the sake of no end. Rather, as he has no principle or end of existing, so he also has none of acting. What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite in so far as it is considered as a principle, *or* primary cause, of some thing.

(E 4 Preface)

God acts according to the necessity of its own eternal nature, and so God (or Nature) is free only in the sense that its infinitude entails that it is not limited or conditioned by anything else. Nature simply is everything and therefore, acts upon its own necessity alone.

Consequently, the terms “good” and “bad” can in no way pertain to Nature itself. Rather, these terms of valuation can only ever relate to the way in which rational, sentient beings think about Nature in terms of their own ends. (i.e. It is not bad “as such” that a fruit tree withers and dies. It is only bad with regard to the farmer who depends on that tree for his livelihood.) In this sense, perhaps, Spinoza may be labeled an ethical relativist.

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, *or* notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For examples, Music is good for one who is Melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad for one who is deaf.

(E 4 Preface)

The clearest and most striking expression of this relativistic tendency can be found in the note to Part Three, Proposition Nine: “From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it.” (E 3 Proposition 9 Schol.)

A thing is considered good if and only if it is desired. The statement here sounds nearly Benthamite. The subjective desire for a given thing is what determines its status as good – not the other way around. In fact this position leads Spinoza to consistently adopt a species of hedonism. “Joy is not directly evil, but good. Sadness, on the other hand, is directly evil.” (E 4 Proposition 41) “The knowledge of good and evil is nothing else but an affect of Joy (pleasure)

or Sadness (pain), in so far as we are conscious of it. (E 4 Proposition 8) For things are not good or bad in themselves but only insofar as they affect sentient, sensuous beings. Consequently, the ethical determination of something as either good or bad is wholly posterior to our reflection as to whether that thing caused us pleasure or pain.³²

Nonetheless, it is absolutely crucial to understand that, in Spinoza's system, human beings are definite entities with their own definite natures and, relative to them, "good" and "evil" come to have very specific and non-arbitrary meanings. Spinoza is therefore a relativist only in the sense that he denies the absurdity that "good" or "evil" exists independently in the universe, wholly unrelated to the subjective feelings of sentient beings. Yet Spinoza is in no way a relativist in the sense that "good" or "evil" are empty terms which can freely be applied to anything depending on the subjective whim of an individual, clan, or culture. In other words, "good" and "evil" exist only relative to sentient beings; however sentient beings do not freely choose what is good and what is evil for them, neither do they freely choose what affords them pleasure and what afflicts them with pain. Again, these are a function of the kinds of entities human beings are.

However, if this is the case, then what exactly does determine the good for human beings in Spinoza's system? In accord with the aforementioned principle of conatus, what is ultimately good is persisting in one's being, or alternatively, attaining greater power and facility to persist in one's being.

³² Throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza seems anxious to overturn prevailing religious sentiments which went against this affirmation of hedonism:

"...no deity, nor anyone else, unless he is envious, takes pleasure in my lack of power and my misfortune; nor does he ascribe to virtue our tears, sighs, fear, and other things of that kind, which are signs of a weak mind. On the contrary, the greater the Joy with which we are affected, the greater the perfection to which we pass..."

(E 4 Proposition 45 Note)

Here, pleasure is explicitly equated with "perfection."

In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before us. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, in so far as they approach more or less near to this model.

(E 4 Preface)

What is crucial to note is that it is the specific nature or essence of that entity (in this case, human beings) which determines what will be conducive to its further existence and, indeed, perfection. In Spinoza's system, continued existence always means continued existence as something. For reasons which will be fully explicated shortly, Spinoza links the human essence with "understanding" itself. Humans are first and foremost thinking, rational creatures. Thus, we are more perfect, that is, we have greater power to exist in direct proportion to how much we know and comprehend. Accordingly, since all beings (in accord with the principle of conatus) intrinsically desire increased power and existence; humans positively and necessarily desire increased understanding and knowledge. For, according to our very nature, it is this increased power of understanding which affords human beings the greatest possible happiness. In short, Spinoza's system inextricably links the concepts of "happiness," "power," "perfection," "goodness," and "knowledge." Specifically, the increased power of an individual (through the capacity to know) is what accounts for that individual's goodness or virtue, and the attainment of this virtue is what affords humans the greatest sort of happiness.

...since this striving of the Mind, by which the Mind, insofar as it reasons, strives to preserve its being, is nothing but understanding...this striving for understanding is the first and only foundation of virtue, nor do we strive to understand things for the sake of some end. On the contrary, the Mind, insofar as it reasons, cannot conceive anything to be for itself except what leads to understanding, q.e.d.

(E 4 Proposition 26)

We know nothing to be certainly good or evil, except what really leads to understanding or what can prevent us from understanding.

(E 4 Proposition 27)

At this point, no doubt, the contemporary reader may be scandalized. There seems to be before us a series of wild assumptions about humanity, essences, and rationality. Yet, how do we know that human beings are essentially rational? Indeed, one may first ask how we know that human beings have essences! Furthermore, it certainly seems to be evident from everyday empirical insight that quite a lot of very intelligent people are rather unhappy, while by contrast, there are plenty of ignorant, happy people. Knowledge and pleasure seem to be only incidentally linked at most. Additionally, common sense tells us that there is no shortage of bad yet intelligent people in the world. Indeed, one of our culture's favorite stock characters in fiction is the "evil genius" or the "mad scientist," and we are sure that, albeit in pale reflection, these personages exist in real life – whether as the biological weapons scientist, or the Wall Street manipulator. Thus empirical evidence seems to indicate that there is no analytic identity between goodness or virtue on the one hand, and knowledge on the other.

Although it may be plausible that increased understanding in some cases results in increased power, it is not clear that this is true in all cases. Geniuses can be trampled under the tracks of tanks just as easily as anyone else. Moreover, one can imagine several scenarios in

which increased power is attained wholly apart from increased understanding. Generals, dictators, and presidents may wield awesome power, may affect the lives of millions, yet there is little evidence that the greatest of these have in any sense been the most intelligent or rational. Great political power can just as readily be gained by rather obtuse individuals who happen to have the benefit of interpersonal networking skills or simply the good fortune of being “born well.”

Still, it is somehow Spinoza’s contention that power and understanding are intrinsically and necessarily connected to human virtue, goodness, and happiness.

Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, preserving our being (these three signify the same thing) by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one’s own advantage.

(E 4 Proposition 24)

Further, since virtue is nothing but acting from the laws of one’s own nature, and no one strives to preserve his being except from the laws of his own nature, it follows...that the foundation of virtue is this very striving to preserve one’s own being, and that happiness consists in man’s being able to preserve his being...

(E 4 Proposition 18 Schol.)

What’s more, Spinoza effectively establishes this vital connection through a series of deductive arguments. Perhaps surprisingly, the very first step in the argument is establishing the necessitarian nature of existence as a whole. This may seem an extremely indirect way to reach anthropological conclusions about human virtue, power and knowledge, yet it proves to be entirely indispensable within the context of Spinoza’s system.

Though Spinoza himself never employs the term “principle of sufficient reason,” the concept itself is vital to his view of Nature and, consequently, human beings as well.³³ It is basic to his system that for every entity, action, or event, there is a cause sufficient for said entity, action, or event to come about. Nothing happens randomly or for no reason. Chance and probability are human constructs and that is all. “For nothing belongs to the nature of anything except what follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause. And whatever follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause happens necessarily.” (E 4 Preface)

But what does this mean for human freedom? In fact Spinoza spends a lot of time discussing freedom within the Ethics. Half of which he spends denying that we even possess what is commonly understood as “freedom.” The other half is positively spent instructing his readers on how to attain true freedom. Of course, the conception of freedom which Spinoza does affirm is wholly shaped by his consistent fidelity to the principle of sufficient reason. This principle, and the universal determinism which is its major implication, preclude freedom in the sense of “arbitrary choice.” Within the context of a deterministic universe, choosing without being entirely guided by the intellect becomes meaningless. A “free act of the will,” that is, a choice which is unguided by reason would be nothing more than a random spasm – hardly something deserving the appellation “freedom” in the first place. Indeed, if we grant Spinoza the aforementioned determinism, then it follows that any action unguided by the intellect would have to have as its cause some other sufficient impetus, perhaps chemical reactions, or perhaps bodily reflexes to environmental stimuli. In any case, the idea that an action can be free, in the sense of being uncaused by anything is entirely precluded. In place of this confused conception of

³³ Of course, there are several *formulations* of this principle throughout his work including, but not limited to: his exposition of Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy* (Part 1 Axioms 7,8), and the conclusion of the fifteenth chapter of the *Tractatus*.

freedom, Spinoza affirms within the pages of the Ethics that we humans are free only insofar as we have the power to go on existing according to our own nature and our power to do so is not overridden by external forces. Freedom, for Spinoza, is therefore a wholly positive conception. It does not merely denote the so called “negative” freedom from external restriction. Freedom, rather, signifies the actual power to persist in our being – to purposefully act according to the dictates of our reason.

In light of this definition, we can readily see how the freedom of God and the freedom of man is both principally the same and yet distinct from one another at the same time. In both cases, freedom is understood in the “positive” sense of having the power to act according to one’s own nature. Yet just because of this conception of freedom, it is understood that the freedom of God is distinct from the freedom of humanity. God, as we have seen, is identical with Nature. God is infinite, eternal, and identical with all that is. Infinitude implies the absence of any limitation whatsoever. It is for this reason that God is rightly considered the one and only substance – God or Nature is that one necessary thing which exists and is conceived solely in and through itself. (E 1 Proposition 11) Since God’s existence is *sui generis* there is nothing outside of God’s nature. All that comes to pass is the product of God’s own nature itself, wholly unconditioned by anything external to it (of course, since nothing is external to God). God is absolutely free because God necessarily acts according to its own necessity alone.³⁴

Humanity is somewhat different. Freedom is still understood as acting according to one’s own nature. As we have explicated above, Spinoza derides any attempt to defend a doctrine of

³⁴ Note that the conception of God’s freedom is absolute and unlimited in spite of the fact that, for Spinoza, God has no faculty called a will, but only an eternal nature. This should be informative of how, in general, Spinoza regards the common conception of the will and its importance for an adequate understanding of freedom. Namely, the former conception is merely a confused idea and adds *nothing* to an adequate conception of freedom.

“freedom as arbitrary choice.” Yet the freedom of humanity is different from that of God because, unlike God, humans are finite beings. They are not *sui generis* entities, existing by virtue of their own essence alone and able to be comprehended wholly apart from the rest of Nature. Rather, they are modifications (or modes) of Nature or God. “It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.” (E 4 Proposition 4) This is not to say that humans do not have their own essence, or, what is the same, their own power of existing. If this were the case, no thing known as a human would even come to exist or be able to be comprehended. Yet, the essence or power of humanity is dependent upon the whole order of Nature itself, of which it is merely a part. What’s more, since humanity’s nature is not in itself necessary, individual humans can be destroyed, die, and pass into other forms (corpses, dust, and perhaps eventually other forms of life). Just as the power of human beings is limited, just as human existence is finite, so is human freedom limited as well. Again, this is for the simple reason that men and women are part of Nature, and not the whole of Nature itself.

Humans will always exist and act according to the immutable laws and order of Nature. This is simply the doctrine of universal determinism which springs from a basic fidelity to the principle of sufficient reason. Yet humans will only sometimes act according to the nature of humanity considered in itself. Put another way, humans will inevitably endeavor to persist in their being, to increase their power, and continue in their existence. Yet this endeavor will not always be successful. Individual humans become enfeebled, die, and as a daily matter of course, put up with severe and occasionally insurmountable limitations to their own power and freedom.

The power by which singular things (and consequently [any] man) preserve their being is the power itself of God, *or* Nature, not in so far as it is infinite, but insofar as it can be explained through the man's actual essence... {Again} if it were possible that a man could undergo no changes except those which can be understood through the man's nature alone, it would follow that he could not perish, but necessarily he would always exist. And this would have to follow from a cause whose power would be either finite or infinite, viz. either from the power of man alone, who would be able to avert from himself other changes which could arise from external causes, or from the infinite power of Nature, by which all singular things would be directed so that man could undergo no other changes except those which assist his preservation...it is {therefore} impossible that a man should undergo no other changes except those of which he himself is the adequate cause.

(E 4 Proposition 4)

What is important to note is the corollary to this proof:

Corollary.—From this it follows that man is necessarily always subject to passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires.

(E 4 Proposition 4 Corollary)

The corollary to this proof is of paramount importance. The proof itself connects the immutable, deterministic order of Nature with the finitude of man – a conceptual connection already discussed. The corollary, meanwhile, draws out the further implication that this finite and mutable nature of humanity (the fact that humans are a mere modification of Nature) entails that man will be “always subject to passions.” The obvious question to ask, as always, is “why?”

Why does the finitude of man (a byproduct of Spinoza's overall monistic and deterministic view of Nature), have anything to do with human emotions or, more specifically, human passions? Indeed, why does human passion entail a limitation on man's power? After all, at least colloquially, we consider "passion" to be a good thing, perhaps even indispensable when it comes to human greatness.

The best place to begin searching for the answer to this question is in the previous part, Part Three, in a section entitled, "The General Definition of the Affects." In this important section Spinoza seeks to explain why emotion is a passivity of the soul, or a failure of the mind to act according to its own power. "An Affect that is called a Passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the mind affirms of its body, or some part of it, a greater or lesser force of existing than before, which, when it is given, determines the Mind to think of this rather than that." (E 3 General Definition of the Affects)

The contention is that passive emotion, unlike rational thought, does not originate from the power and nature of the human being considered in itself alone. Rather, passive emotion (given by Spinoza the Latin appellation *passio* which comes from the root meaning "to submit") represents the scenario in which the human intellect is impacted and influenced from without to "think of one thing rather than another." Thus, in an analogous passage from the subsequent Part Four, we have the following statement: "The force and growth of any passion, and its perseverance in existing, are not defined by the power by which we (ourselves) strive to persevere in existing, but by the power of an external cause compared with our own." (E 4 Proposition 5)

Just how passion amounts to a passivity of the intellect, and why this is in any way connected to our possessing inadequate ideas is, therefore, the next necessary area of inquiry. The solution to this problem lies primarily with Spinoza's treatment of the mind's relation to the body. What Spinoza absolutely and repeatedly rejects is the Cartesian position that the mind is, in some sense, a separate substance as compared to the body. Under this theory, though mind and body are distinct substances, there is nonetheless a relationship between the two such that, for instance, the mind can compel the arm to move.³⁵ The problematic nature of this Cartesian explanation was obvious to Spinoza, for arms are extended things while minds are not, and so any interaction, causal or otherwise, is certainly impossible.³⁶ As he states in the beginning of Part Three, "The Body cannot determine the Mind to thinking, and the Mind cannot determine the Body to motion, to rest or to anything else (if there is anything else)." (E 3 Proposition 2) Indeed, it is basic to Spinoza's substance monism that there not be two separate substances having causal interactions. For substance, by definition, is distinguished from mere modes in that the former exists and is conceived in and through itself. It is therefore eternal and unlimited, and it is thus a definitional absurdity to posit a plurality of substances. For two unlimited substances cannot coexist as they would necessarily limit one another.

Instead, the Spinozist solution to this mind-body problem involves what has generally been described by commentators as mind-body "parallelism." Thought and extension are not two substances, but rather they are merely two attributes of the very same, singular substance. As such, mind and body do not interact. Rather, any given thing can be considered "under the

³⁵ See especially Descartes' discussion of causality in the *Third Meditation*. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, ed. John Cottingham (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996) 24-36.

³⁶ For more on Spinoza's criticism of Descartes' mind/body dualism and causal interaction (as expressed in *Passions de l'Âme*, I.50) see the preface to Part Five of the *Ethics*.

attribute” of mind, or alternatively “under the attribute” of extension. Indeed, the term “parallelism” which is conventionally used to describe this solution may be somewhat misleading as it may suggest to some readers a whole world of thought and a separate world of extension which never interact and yet are set in harmony to one another by virtue of their existing in God. This, however, is far closer to a Malebranchean conception of the universe than one every affirmed by Spinoza. Another, entirely different pitfall when trying to comprehend Spinozistic parallelism is the temptation to imagine Spinoza as advocating a sort of panpsychism. One may imagine that, since thought and extension are each eternal attributes of Substance, then any given thing can be conceived under either attribute, and therefore everything, from rocks to dirt, must have a mind and go about thinking! This is simply not the case for Spinoza’s system, at least not in any commonly understood sense.

Instead, Spinoza’s mind/body parallelism entails that every entity merely has an “idea” in the sense that its very existence implies that it is intelligible in some sense. Moreover, things are not intelligible because their materiality impacts our thoughts. For this would pose the same problem as the above Cartesian conception of mind/body interaction. Namely, how would material objects, that is, extended things impact or affect non-extended thoughts? Therefore, posits Spinoza, it is actually only ideas which affect ideas and only extended things which impact extended things. The materiality of a rock affects other material things. Yet we come to know the rock in our thoughts, ultimately, because this object possesses an “idea” of itself, i.e. because it has the property of intelligibility. But why is the order and connection the same between extended things and ideas? In other words, why does the idea of a rock accompany the materiality of that same rock? In what sense are ideas and things existing within the same order of Nature?

The answer can be found within the explanation to the famous Proposition Seven of Part Two, “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.” Specifically, in the scholium to this proposition, Spinoza explains, “...whatever can be perceived by an infinite intellect as constituting an essence of substance pertains to one substance only, and consequently that the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that.” The move here is that substance monism does not only negatively preclude the dualism of mind and body understood as two distinct substances. Moreover, substance monism positively entails that since mind and body (i.e. thought and extension) are of one substance, that is, since mind and body are simply the eternal attributes of Nature, then they must exist in and throughout every part of Nature simultaneously.

This is best understood spatially at first. Namely, material extension is certainly one attribute of Nature that we know of. We can pick out a number of extended things within our immediate vicinity. These extended things, as extended, are certainly only affected or modified by other extended things. We may desire a drink of water. Yet it is not our mentally reflecting on this desire which gains us this beverage. Rather, it is the physical interaction of our hand, fingers, and lips with the container of water which accomplishes this feat. Now particular extended things are only ever limited by other extended things, and are not possibly limited by non-extended things such as ideas. For as Spinoza points out in one of the earliest propositions in the Ethics, “If things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other.” (E 1 Proposition 3)

The import of all this is that nothing in fact can limit extended being as-such. For non-extended being has nothing in common with extended, material being and so has no power to

limit it. Alternatively, extended being cannot limit or negate itself. For this would be an absurdity, as nothing, by logical necessity, can possibly negate itself.³⁷ Therefore, while individual material things may affect or limit other individual material things (such as a knife cutting through a mass of clay), material extension as-such can never be so limited, nor limit itself as a whole. This, finally, is the key to Spinoza's distinction between mode and attribute. An attribute is an aspect of Substance which is understood entirely in itself, or put otherwise, it comprises part of the eternal essence of Substance as a whole. We need no further concepts to understand material extension. Material extension is not comprehended more easily via attempting to explain it through, for instance, the concepts of thought or idea. By contrast, individual finite things, denoted by Spinoza as "modifications of Nature," or simply "modes," are only able to be understood through something else – namely, through one or another attribute of Substance. So, to return to our last illustration, we will notice that the concepts "clay" or "knife" are necessarily understood with at least an implicit reference to the concept of the attribute of material extension. (This is more fully explained in E 1 Proposition 10). Individual material modes may be limited, divided, destroyed, or cease to exist. The knife may successfully cut through and divide the clay. The knife may, itself, be melted down into an entirely different object and cease to be a knife. Yet extension itself is not so affected. Extended space is not able to be cut in half or destroyed. Extension is not only unlimited in the extensive sense that there is no "outer edge to the universe," but it is also eternal and unlimited in the intensive sense that it cannot be internally divided or limited by itself or anything else. In addition, it also follows from the fact that the attribute of extension is understood only through itself that extension has always existed and will always continue to exist.

³⁷ See the earlier discussion on the principle of the conatus.

Likewise, we can now understand the distinction between the attribute of thought on the one hand, and individual modifications of this attribute (i.e. individual ideas) on the other. We know that thought is an eternal attribute of substance because, firstly, we experience ideas which, of course, are non-extended (and thus cannot fall under the attribute of extension), and secondly, thought as-such is conceived entirely in and through itself. Again, no reductionist explanation of thought via material entities can grant us an adequate comprehension of thought itself. Consequently, just as in the case of the attribute of material extension, thought is as well an eternal attribute of Substance, i.e. part of the eternal and infinite essence of God. The same consequences follow from this fact as discussed above. Namely, while individual modes which fall under the attribute of thought can be limited and affected, thought as such cannot be. For instance, one idea may supplant another. Some specific idea of a particular thing may pass out of existence. However, thought is a ubiquitous feature of the universe. It cannot be limited by itself or by an alien attribute, and so it is eternal both intensively and extensively and, like extension, has always and will always continue to exist as part of the eternal essence of Nature.

We can now comprehend why Spinoza asserts that, "...a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways." (E 2 Proposition 7 Schol.) For there are not several, atomistic instances of thought in the universe and, aside from these, several atomistic instances of extension. In such a case it may be plausible to suggest that any given instance of thought may not necessarily "match up" or exist as parallel to a corresponding instance of bodily extension. For instance, we may doubt whether a physical rock matches up, or is parallel to a corresponding idea of that particular rock.³⁸ However, as we have just explicated,

³⁸ Again, it has to be remembered that "idea" in this case is far closer to the Platonic sense of the word than the common understanding of the term. Idea, here, denotes the totality of intelligible features of a given thing, not necessarily the subjective thought of a thing in the mind of one or another person. Perhaps this notion is

there are not such atomistic instances of thought and extension. Rather, as attributes, thought and extension each are entirely ubiquitous and blanket the whole of eternal existence without limitation, division, or pause.

Therefore, Spinoza is fully warranted in positing that the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas. For there is no limitation of either attribute which would allow for such discrepancy.

Some of the Hebrews seem to have seen this, as if through a cloud, when they maintained that God, God's intellect, and the things understood by God are one and the same. For example, a circle existing in nature and the idea of the existing circle, which is also in God, are one and the same thing, which is explained through different attributes. Therefore, whether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, *or* one and the same connection of causes, i.e., that the same things follow one another.

(E 2 Proposition 7 Schol.)

Of course, it may nonetheless sound strange or implausible to suggest that God, which Spinoza famously equates with impersonal Nature, should have a mind or possess ideas, and indeed should always have done so. Certainly before humans or other animals came into existence, there were, as far as modern science can tell, no extant sentient beings. How, therefore, could we legitimately say that there were ideas to be found anywhere in Nature at this

facilitated, rather, by imagining the eternal mind of God. The “idea of a rock” is fully comprehended within the eternal and infinite intellect of God. It is, by contrast, not fully comprehended within the limited intellect of the human being who necessarily has limited access to the rock’s intelligible features.

time? To suggest that God or Nature always possessed ideas, independent of the existence of rational, thinking creatures, seems to contradict Spinoza's denial of God as personal.

Yet the issue here is truly not with the definition of God, but rather with a proper understanding of the term "idea." Within Spinoza's system, sentience is no prerequisite for the existence of ideas or even an intellect. For instance, God has an infinite intellect, and yet Spinoza makes no claim that God is the sort of being which, insofar as it is infinite, possesses any sentience whatsoever. Rather God possesses an infinite intellect insofar as an infinite number of intelligible things follow from God's infinite nature. Only intelligible things follow from God's nature, and as intelligible, are expressed under the attribute of thought as an idea. If, therefore, we consider an actually existing, extended thing, then we must know that this entity is intelligible since it follows from the infinite, intelligible nature of God. In other words, it comes about because of certain definite proximate causes in conjunction with certain eternal laws of motion, matter, etc. (As Henry Oldenburg correctly observes about Spinoza in a letter to him in 1676, "...God is, according to you, unable to do or produce anything, for which men cannot assign a reason, if they employ all the strength of their faculties.³⁹")

In proposition eight of Part Two of the Ethics, Spinoza provides a helpful metaphor for God's infinite intellect, and his possessing all intelligible ideas – that is, ideas of the infinitude of things which could possibly, or in-fact actually, exist:

If anyone wishes me to explain this further by an example, I will, of course, not be able to give one which adequately explains what I speak of here, since it is unique. Still I

³⁹ Benedictus De Spinoza, "Selected Letters" in *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Cosimo, 2006), Letter XXIV.

shall try as far as possible to illustrate the matter: the circle is of such a nature that the rectangles formed from the segments of all the straight lines intersecting in it are equal to one another. So in a circle there are contained infinitely many rectangles that are equal to one another. Nevertheless, none of them can be said to exist except insofar as the circle exists, nor also can the idea of any of these rectangles be said to exist except insofar as it is comprehended in the idea of the circle. Now of these infinitely many [rectangles] let two only, viz. [those formed from the segments of lines]...exist. Of course their ideas also exist now, not only insofar as they are comprehended in the idea of the circle, but also insofar as they involve the existence of those rectangles. By this they are distinguished from the other ideas of the other rectangles.

(E 2 Proposition 8 Schol.)

The circle is infinite in terms of the number of equal rectangles which can exist within it (by virtue of intersecting lines). The nature of these rectangles is wholly dependent upon the actual existence of the circle. If, as per the illustration, only several rectangles actually exist, then these will be in some sense distinguished from the non-existent ones. Yet the ideas of each rectangle (i.e. the potentially existent rectangles and the actually existent rectangles) are dependant in both cases upon the prior idea of the circle. For it is the dimension and nature of the circle which, itself, determines the subsequent nature of the potentially infinite number of rectangles which follow.

The same holds true for substance, and the things which can be produced through and within substance. Substance (or Nature), as a whole, is both intelligible and infinite. It follows, thus, that an infinite number of intelligible modifications follow (in reality or in principle) from its own essence. What's more, these entities are intelligible just because they follow (i.e. are produced) via this eternal, intelligible essence of Nature.

We may even consider a pre-historic rock which impacts Earth before any sentient life evolves there to experience it. This rock's very existence is a testament to its intelligibility. It

exists and moves through the universe as a result of a series of intelligible, proximate causes and infinite, eternal physical laws. Yet inasmuch as we are speaking about intelligibility, we are presupposing the potential for affecting ideas. Moreover, if we are speaking of the potential affecting of ideas, for instance within a thinking creature which will one day evolve to experience this rock, we are presupposing the actual existence of an idea in the thing itself. For, again, we do not form ideas of material things directly. Rather, only ideas can affect ideas. In short, the Spinozistic conception of ideas does not necessarily entail extant, sentient life. Rather, “idea” more nearly denotes the expression of a given mode under the attribute of thought such that a thinking being could, itself, potentially form an idea of it. Of course, the mind of God is a unique case since, by definition all extant things are within the infinite intellect of God. Yet, again, this jargon should not in any way suggest sentience or personality as aspects of God or Nature. We have seen, to the contrary, that Spinoza’s system explicitly denies these.

Now that we have a more adequate comprehension of the general attributes of thought and extension, we can return to our original discussion regarding the specific relationship between the human mind and the human body. For it is this relationship which finally will shed light on the nature of human emotion and why, as per Spinoza’s claim, human passions represent a diminution of our power and an undesirable limitation of our very being.

The major insight to be gleaned from the general discussion of attributes and modes is that there is a necessary parallelism between the expression of a given finite thing under the attribute of thought and under the attribute of extension. A given mode is always potentially expressed under both attributes. Spinoza now makes the further claim that the human mind and the human body are not incidentally related but rather are, themselves, two expressions of the very same mode. The human intellect is nothing other than the expression of the human being

under the attribute of thought, and inversely, the human body is nothing other than the expression of the same human being under the attribute of extension. The specific nature of this unity of mind and body is established in two steps.

First, it is demonstrated that the object of the mind, i.e. that idea which constitutes the original elements of the mind, is necessarily an idea of a finite, existing thing. This is established in 2 Proposition 11, “The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists.” The cited reasons behind this proposition are largely self-evident and are derived from the axioms of Part Two. Specifically, “Man thinks” (2 Axiom 2), Ideas in nature exist prior to our thinking about them (E 2 Axiom 3), and, “The essence of man does not involve necessary existence...” (E 2 Axiom 1). Related to this last axiom is also cited 2 Proposition 10 which merely repeats the claim that man is not, himself, a substance.

The original axioms establish that, while man does indeed think, he must possess as the object of his thought at least some idea. For thoughts are always thoughts of some prior idea. In other words, all cognition is of something. Furthermore, 2 Axiom 1 along with 2 Proposition 10 establish that this original idea which comprises the nature of the human mind cannot be of an infinite, eternal thing. As the order and connection of things is the same as that of ideas, the notion that the mind would have for its original object the idea of an infinite thing would imply that it was, itself, a substance. It would imply that it had infinite knowledge and, as such, was itself infinite. That is for the reason that only an infinite thing can possibly have infinite knowledge. Of course this is absurd as no finite thing, including man, can possibly be a substance which is, by definition, infinite.

Additionally, 2 Proposition 8 establishes that the idea which comprises the original elements of the mind cannot be of a non-existing thing.

From this it follows that so long as singular {i.e. particular} things do not exist, except in so far as they are comprehended in the God's attributes, their objective being, *or* ideas, do not exist, except in so far as God's infinite idea exists. And when singular {i.e. particular} things are said to exist, not only in so far as they are comprehended in God's attributes, but insofar also as they are said to have duration, their ideas also involve the existence through which they are said to have duration.

(E 2 Proposition 8 Corollary)

Simply put, because it was earlier established that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things, it follows that things which do not exist in terms of extension also do not exist as expressed in thought, i.e. are not in our minds. That is to say, we only have ideas of things which actually exist.⁴⁰ The conclusion as expressed in 2 Proposition 11 is, again, that the first element which constitutes the human mind is the idea of an actually existing, finite thing.

However, this proposition alone is insufficient to pin down the relationship between the mind and body. For there are a great number of finite, existing things in the world. What is required is the additional proof of 2 Proposition 13, namely, "The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else." This seminal proposition establishes specifically the unity of the human mind and human body. Furthermore, the proof establishing this proposition is primarily the self-evident statement

⁴⁰ A further defense of this controversial claim is to be found in Chapter Two.

comprising 2 Axiom 4, “We feel that a certain body is affected in many ways.” In other words, it is axiomatic that, in fact, we directly experience the modifications of our own bodies. That is to say, we directly experience our seeing, feeling, hearing things, etc, and not these modifications in others. That, after all, is what makes us “us” and others “others.” To speak precisely, inasmuch as we experience the modifications of our body with our intellect, we have an idea of our body. Of course, we do not have an idea of the extended human body itself, but rather we have an idea of the extended human body as expressed through the attribute of thought. The first element which comprises the human mind is thus the idea of the human body as it actually exists.

The human mind, insofar as it is reflective, only has ideas of the ideas of the modifications of the human body. (E 2 Proposition 13) As such, we know the external, material world only because we possess the idea of the idea of the modifications of our body. This is so as our body, itself, is affected in a number of ways by still other external bodies. (E 2 Proposition 26) To put this in less technical terms, it is Spinoza’s position that we do not directly experience external objects in Nature. We have, for instance, no direct experience of a chair. For this would, once again, pose the very same Cartesian conundrum of physical, extended entities somehow having a causal relationship with our non-extended ideas. Instead, claims Spinoza, our own body (which of course is an extended thing) is affected and modified in a number of ways with relation to the other extended things in Nature. Our skin and nerve endings are activated via our touching various objects; these same objects may likewise affect our eye’s lenses and retinas through the interplay of light waves; additionally, the minute bones and tissue in our ears are affected by the vibrations of air which is produced by various extended entities within our environment. Each of these physical modifications of the body, in turn, affects further physical modifications – namely, the firing of certain neurons in the brain. This whole chain of physical

reactions, culminating in neural-electric activity, constitutes a change in our mind as well. Note, I do not say that it causes any change in our mind. There is no causal interaction between, for instance, the vibrations of our ear drum, the subsequent neural firings, and the creation of the idea of a certain sound. Rather, the two are strictly identical! An analogous relationship might be that of a television screen picture and the various electrons which occupy that same space. It is not that the electrons cause a particular picture on television, or vice versa. Rather, the very same entity can either be explained and described in terms of electrons or in terms of the visible picture. (Of course, this is an extremely imperfect analogy as both electrons and the picture are extended things which share the same attribute.) Since the idea which constitutes the mind is nothing other than the idea of the body's modifications, the vibration of the eardrum and the firing of signals in the brain are merely the physical expressions of what can otherwise be expressed as a certain sound. It is only that the former constitutes the expression of a given mode under the attribute of extension, and the latter is expressed under the attribute of thought. In any case, what the mind experiences is only ever the body itself, or put more precisely, the idea of the modifications of the body as it interacts with the rest of extended space (E 2 Proposition 19).⁴¹

⁴¹ This helps us avoid certain absurdities that might otherwise be attributed to, and levied against Spinoza. For instance, there might be the following objection to the Spinozist claim that only ideas can affect ideas and only material things can affect other material entities: "Granted that ideas may affect our mind and cause new or modified ideas. Yet aren't there some rather clear cut instances where material things directly impact our mind or our ideas? For instance, there are cases of blunt brain trauma, a bullet through the brain, and so on. It is not the 'idea' of the bullet which alters our thoughts and causes a loss of mental capacity. In more tragic cases, it is not the 'idea' of the fatal bullet to the brain which ceases our thinking altogether. It is the physical bullet itself!"

The Spinozist response to this sort of objection is that the object of our mind is the body itself (because the order and connection of things...etc.). We only know the world through the modifications of our body and its sensory organs by the external world. The partial or complete destruction of our body and or its sensory organs will, therefore, of course alter or cease our thinking. Yet this is because the idea of the body (which is the sole object of the mind) ceases to exist, fully or partially, when all or part of the material body likewise ceases to exist. Therefore, it is *of course* the case that the physical destruction of the brain by the physical bullet will result in the

One key consequence of the mind having as its sole object the idea of the human body is that, just as the body is certainly finite, the mind is likewise finite. The human body is, of course, a finite modification of the attribute of extension. It is not the infinite attribute itself. This is an important point to mention especially as an all too common critique of Spinoza (and perhaps rationalism in general) is that he ends up denying the importance of the body, or in other words, that rationalistic theories promote a disembodied and all-too ethereal conception of the intellect. To the contrary, we see here that the mind and body are necessarily united as one, inseparable entity.⁴²

Moreover, the human body is certainly a complex thing. (E 2 Postulate 1) Therefore, the individual parts "...composing the human Body, and consequently, the human Body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways." (E 2 Postulate 3) Indeed, contra those who would charge Spinozist rationalism with disembodiment of the human being, and treating men as eternal spirits, Spinoza asserts that, "The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated." (E 2 Postulate 4) Man is inextricably a part of Nature by virtue of his own, finite being. What's more, the finite, bodily essence of man entails (as per the above discussion) the finitude of his intellect as well.

The specific effect of this finitude is key for our further understanding of human nature, the passions, human power, and happiness. Namely, the fact that man is physically finite

cessation of thought. For the destruction or absence of the physical brain (or other parts of the body) deprives the mind of its sole idea. Yet it is *not* the case that the physicality of the bullet directly limits our non-extended thoughts.

⁴² It is only Spinoza's rationalist consistency over Descartes' own position which resulted in this conclusion. For Descartes' separation of thinking and extended substance was truly an anti-rationalist element within his overall rationalist system. It allowed Descartes a sort of absolute freedom of the will as the mind did not fall within the purview of natural cause and effect. Cartesian dualism was the defect which allowed later, twentieth century theorists (notably Jean-Paul Sartre) to develop various voluntarist conceptions of the will. Spinoza's unified notion of mind and body is therefore consistent with the strictest fidelity to the principles of rationalism.

necessitates that he is limited in his powers of comprehension. For instance, in the note to 2 Proposition 40, Spinoza demonstrates the way in which the limitedness of the human body results in the creation of confused and arbitrary terms and concepts.

These terms arise from the fact that the human Body, being limited, is capable of forming distinctly only a certain number of images at the same time... If that number is exceeded, the images will begin to be confused, and if this number of images the Body is capable of forming distinctly in itself at once is greatly exceeded, they will all be completely confused with one another. Since this is so... the human Mind will be able to imagine distinctly, at the same time, as many bodies as there can be images formed at the same time in its body.

Since the mind only has as its object the idea of the body's modifications, then all ideas of entities in the external world are mediated through ideas of the modifications of the body, i.e. ideas of the body as affected by the external world. Yet the body is only so complex and sophisticated. While the human corpus is complex enough to, as per Postulate 4, always stand "in need for its preservation a number of other bodies," it is nonetheless not so sufficiently complex as to be able to form fully adequate images of all facets of every external entity in time and space with which it makes contact. For this would require a body which is, by definition, eternal and infinite. (As such, God necessarily has complete or "objective" ideas of all modes within its unlimited intellect. Humans, having limited intellects and apprehension of the ideas of external entities only via our bodily interactions necessarily have only partial or "subjective" thoughts of said external entities.) Out of necessity, therefore, human beings expediently group the sheer multitude of images into general categories or abstractions. Yet we do not do so

purposefully, as by the dictate of reason. Rather, finite human beings lump specific images together according to how the limited body happens to be affected by the external world.

The notions...Man, Horse, Dog, etc., have arisen from similar causes, viz. because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human Body that they surpass the power of imagining - not entirely, of course, but still to the point where the Mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular [men] (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body. For the body has been affected most by [what is common] since each singular has affected it [by this property]...But it should be noted that these notions are not formed by all in the same way, but vary from one to another, in accordance with what the body has more often been affected by, and what the Mind imagines or recollects more easily. For example, those who have more often regarded men's stature with wonder will understand by the word *man* an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men - e.g., that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal.⁴³

(E 2 Proposition 40 Schol.)

It is important to note that these “generalities” which we produce as a result of the breakdown of our imagination, i.e. the limitedness of our body, is not necessarily the same in all people. For, as we have said, these generalities come about when the imagination is overwhelmed, and are produced “...in accordance with what the body has more often been affected by, and what the Mind imagines or recollects more easily” Of course, how “the body has more often been affected” is in no way a necessary product of our own reason or activity, but rather is the consequence of the general order of Nature. That is to say, the manner in which our

⁴³ Parentheses and Bracketing are reproduced here as they are in the original text as translated and edited by Edwin Curley.

bodies are affected by external entities is simply due to the configuration of our given environment, and the causal interactions therein.

This, finally, brings us to the distinction Spinoza makes between adequate and inadequate ideas – a distinction important for a full comprehension of human power and passion. In fact, it is Spinoza’s position that the mind can form ideas of the body which are both inadequate (E 2 Proposition 29 Corollary) and adequate (E 2 Proposition 38 Corollary). Inadequate, confused, or what might otherwise be termed “fragmentary” ideas are those ideas of which we have only partial comprehension or non-apodictic knowledge. The source of such non-apodictic or inadequate ideas was discussed above. Namely, we have in our mind only the idea of the body, insofar as it is affected by external objects. Yet this does not afford us complete or sufficient understanding of those objects since the manner in which they affect our body is simply contingent. It may have been otherwise according to the given configuration of our immediate environment. Thus we may have some sense of a boulder in front of us. Yet our knowledge of the boulder is inadequate as it is formed on the contingent basis of the way that boulder interacts with our nerve endings, rods, and cones, and so forth on that particular day. We can never be certain since the object itself exists as prior to our bodily interaction with it. (E 2 Proposition 25) Moreover, just as the state of the environment on that particular day (i.e. the strength of the sun, cloud cover, rain, etc.) contingently reveals to us only some aspects of the boulder, we likewise are only made aware, by virtue of contingent circumstances, only some aspects of the modifications of our own body. For we only come to understand the various facets of our body when these are affected by external objects – for instance, we only begin to have an idea of our power of vision if we actually see things. (E 2 Proposition 19) Thus, to restate, inadequate or

fragmentary ideas (both of external objects and of our own body) are the product of contingent and limited interactions with the world.

However, if this is the cause of inadequate ideas, then how can the mind have for itself adequate ideas as well? As 2 Proposition 38 states, adequate ideas, insofar as they exist, are also to be found in the idea of the body. (Of course, this is a given as we have already established that all of the mind's ideas are that of the body). Yet the adequate ideas which are in the body are distinct from the inadequate ideas inasmuch as they have the quality of being universal. "Those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately." (E 2 Proposition 38)

The specific proof of this proposition moves from the concept of "universal existence" towards the concept of "universal comprehension":

...Let A be something which is common to all bodies, and which is equally in the part of each body and in the whole. I say that A can only be conceived adequately. For its idea will necessarily be adequate in God, both insofar as he has the idea of the human body, and insofar as he has ideas of its affections, which involve in part both the nature of the human Body and that of external bodies. That is, this idea will necessarily be adequate in God insofar as he constitutes the human Mind, *or* insofar as he has the ideas that are in the human mind.

(E 2 Proposition 38 Proof)

Essentially, the proof states that the mind does not naturally form incomplete or fragmented ideas. The mind, rather, forms the most complete and adequate ideas of things as possible. Yet it is precluded from doing so in cases where the number of images far outweighs

the limited nature of the body, or alternatively, (as in the previous illustration) when it tries to form an idea of an external body which, by virtue of contingent circumstances, impacts the finite human body in only a limited number of ways – thereby leaving some of its features unknown to the human mind. However, if, as per the above proof, there were a given thing which was common to all bodies, and more than just that, was common to all bodies in exactly the same way, then surely the mind could not help but form a completely adequate idea about this thing.

We see very clearly from this passage why Spinoza is the paradigmatic rationalist philosopher as opposed to being a member of the empiricist tradition. For the claim here is that things which are universal, expressed everywhere with the same efficacy, are adequately known since they necessarily exist in our mind just the same as they exist everywhere else. To give particular illustration to this otherwise opaque statement, we can give the following example: We know more surely that “every event has a cause” as compared to the statement, “this chair is magenta.” The latter statement involves the contingent interplay of the chair with the modifications of our body, along with a myriad of other affecting modifications such as the light in the room where the chair resides, the relative health of our eyes, the possibility that we are wearing tinted glasses or have been drinking heavily, and so on. The former statement, by contrast, is a logical necessity and for this reason is intrinsically to be understood via an adequate idea.⁴⁴ For it is the nature of the thing itself which determines whether it is to be understood adequately or not, as Spinoza states, “... the excellence of ideas, and the actual power of thinking

⁴⁴ Of course, empiricists such as Hume would not agree. Rather, Hume would claim that the notion of universal causality is not *a priori* and apodictic, but rather parasitic upon our inductive, empirical experiences of a number of events we narrate as having causal qualities. However, as will be fully discussed in the final section of this chapter, Spinoza takes an opposing position to this, granting causality universal and apodictic status as he identifies spatial causality with a more general *principle of sufficient reason* which is, itself, indispensable to reasoning at all.

are measured by the excellence of the object.” (E 3 Gen. Def. of Affects) ⁴⁵ Since “Every event has a cause,” is a necessarily universal statement (for if it be denied, absurdities clearly follow), it follows that its comprehension necessarily follows from our nature alone. That is to say, even if we had no specific empirical knowledge of the external world whatsoever, we could still claim apodictically that “every event has a cause” even in respect to that external world.⁴⁶ Of course, this is entirely consistent with Spinoza’s repeated position that the order and connection of ideas is the same as that of things. While this is true for all ideas in Nature, relative to the limited human intellect only some ideas count as adequate. That is, we are only warranted in claiming certainty about our given idea’s correspondence to an actual object in reality insofar as we find this idea to be intrinsically universal.

Put another way, we are only sometimes warranted in claiming identity between our subjective idea of something (i.e. our thoughts of that thing) and the objective idea of that thing (i.e. the complete idea of a thing as it exists in the mind of God). While God’s ideas are always objective, as all things follow directly from the nature of God itself, our ideas are not always objective, as only some things can be deduced from our nature alone. The nature of a boulder, for instance, is not deducible from our nature alone, and so it follows that we have only fragmented, subjective, or inadequate ideas of this thing. Yet universal concepts such as “causal determinacy,” since they are universal, follow adequately from our own nature as it does from the nature of any body or mind. Our idea of causal determinacy, therefore, cannot help but be

⁴⁵ This formulation is taken from the Elwes translation where it is more clearly expressed

⁴⁶ That this statement follows from “our nature alone” does not, obviously, mean that it does not follow from the nature of other things. Being universal, it follows from every part of Nature equally. This former statement only means, as stated in the body, that it can be deduced (if needed) via introspection alone, i.e. reflection of the mind and its object (i.e. the idea of the body) without any reference to particular entities in the exterior world being necessary whatsoever.

objective, adequate, or in other words, identical to the idea as it exists in the infinite mind of God.

The formation of these adequate ideas (whose objects are always universal) entail an activity on the part of our selves since their creation does not depend on anything external to us. Again, these ideas can be legitimately deduced from our nature alone. Of course, it is generally true that any given cause be considered an adequate cause if and only if the given effect can be deduced from that cause's nature alone. (E 3 Definition 1). As such, we can only be said to act (i.e. positively exercise our freedom) only inasmuch as the internal or external result of our action (in deed or in thought) can be deduced from our nature alone. Finally, therefore, we can apodictically say that the mind is more active insofar as it has adequate ideas (i.e. ideas deducible from its own nature), and is more passive insofar as it has inadequate ideas (i.e. fails to form true ideas deducible from its own nature). For in the latter case, the mind is consequently more liable to be affected by external modifications, i.e. the general order of nature as a whole. Thus, we can finally see why the claim was made that, "The force and growth of any passion, and its perseverance in existing, are not defined by the power by which we strive to persevere in existing, but by the power of an external cause compared with our own." (E 4 Proposition 5)

A passion occurs, by definition, when we are passive, that is, when we do not have ideas which follow from our nature alone, but rather are produced externally, and thus also are derived from the general order of Nature. As we have discussed, such ideas are inadequate insofar as their being produced by the general order of Nature affords us no certainty about them. They lack universality and cannot be deduced through our nature alone. Consequently, human passion, i.e. passivity, is the product of our having inadequate ideas. Inadequate ideas, insofar as they

result in our passivity, are thereby concomitant with a diminution of our power, and ultimately, our very happiness.

Of course, all of this may sound extremely formalistic. Yes, technically speaking, passions are defined by Spinoza as human passivity (that is, our not forming ideas which are deducible from our nature alone). However, it may be objected that this very dry definition of passion does not really cohere with the common understanding of the term – more often associated with anger, jealousy, anxiety, and so on, as opposed to simple passivity. Along these same lines, it may be objected that, while Spinoza constantly asserts that passions and the diminution of our power are always attended with human unhappiness, to the common understanding of the word, mere passivity seems unrelated to human happiness one way or the other. Indeed, colloquially speaking, it is the very definition of passivity to be emotionally inert.

Contrary to these objections, it is vital to note that Spinoza's deduction of human passion as connected with inadequate ideas and unhappiness is not merely formalistic or definitional. It rather explains the actual maladies of everyday life and their cure. Nobody denies that tragedies occur and, on a far more regular basis, ordinary obstacles and disappointments manifest themselves over the course of an average day. What's more, humans have a tendency to magnify the setbacks in life by way of our anxious, resentful, and sometimes even angry dispositions towards them. In fact, a setback is only manifest as a setback insofar as we reflectively consider that event to have brought us pain and unhappiness. In other words, our emotional response to maladies and even tragedies is what constitutes them as such. In the absence of emotion, neither good nor evil exists.

Spinoza's Ethics is, in the final analysis, the metaphysically grounded therapy for these emotionally derived maladies in life. It is a guidebook for how they can be overcome, and we can live a life which is pleasurable and truly free. Ultimately, Spinoza's "cure" for the contingencies in life, themselves, emanate from his monistic and deterministic view of the universe. That is to say, he first and foremost would have us realize that they are not contingencies in the technical sense at all. Namely, Spinoza denies that we can ever detach ourselves from the necessitarian causal flow of Nature. "So all things have been determined by the necessity of the divine nature, not only to exist, but to exist in a certain way. There is nothing contingent." (E 1 Proposition 29)

Yet, if we cannot escape the traumatic events which daily afflict us, what is the source of human freedom and happiness? Spinoza's answer is that freedom and happiness arise from the human capacity for reason. Though we cannot ever escape life's eventualities, we can at least form adequate ideas about these. Similarly, we can form adequate ideas about our emotional and behavioral responses to life's traumatic events. The obvious question may be: Why should subsuming a thing under our reason nullify its negative effects? Surely fires burn just as hot and angry mobs are no less destructive when we come to know their proximate causes! Spinoza's answer to such an objection is essentially that an adequate understanding of a trauma may not negate the event itself, but it can negate a great deal of its ill effect.

The easiest way to understand why this may be the case is a closer examination of the idea of causal determinacy (a universal and thus adequate idea). Since the universe, and all the modifications thereof, exist and act according to strict necessity as expressed through efficient causation, then comprehending the reason for a given trauma is nothing other than comprehending said trauma's specific necessity. Yet once we come to comprehend a given

thing's necessity, it no longer has as much power to inflict emotional pain, i.e. to enflame the passions.

The more this knowledge that things are necessary is concerned with singular (particular) things, which we imagine more distinctly and vividly, the greater is this power of the Mind over the affects, as experience itself also testifies. For we see that Sadness over some good which has perished is lessened as soon as the man who has lost it realizes that this good could not, in any way, have been kept. Similarly, we see that no one pities infants because of their inability to speak, to walk, or to reason, or because they live so many years, as it were, unconscious of themselves. But if most people were born grown up, and only one or two were born infants, then everyone would pity the infants, because they would regard infancy itself, not as a natural and necessary thing, but as a vice of nature, *or* a sin. We could point out many other things along this line.

(E 5 Proposition 6 Note)

It is only because of our ignorance, that is, our confused and fragmented ideas about Nature that we are prey to our passions. If we heed only our inductive, empirical insights, those which are afforded to us not as universal ideas which exist in us just as in the rest of Nature, but rather come to us according to the given configuration of our environment, then we will be likely to make several errors. Specifically, we are likely to assume that Nature is in some places excellent and in others deformed (as though Nature could have purposeful ends which are either met or not met). We are, in a related manner, likely to be ignorant of the universal causal determinacy which is a necessary feature of Nature. Yet such empirical insights are not of our own making, but rather come to us as a result of our fortune to have experienced one part of the world or another. In other words, we are entirely passive in having these fragmented ideas, and it is these fragmented ideas, these skewed and incomplete conceptions of our world, which pave

the way for our being dominated by our passions. “Man’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call bondage. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse.” (E 4 Preface)

Moreover, since these inadequate ideas are not constant and universal, but instead arise, as it were, by accident, the resulting passions are likewise liable to be inconstant. While reason, the product of adequate (i.e. universal) ideas, is not capricious, that is, does not conflict with itself, various passions are very often at odds with one another. These may, “...pull a man differently (i.e. in different directions), although they are of the same genus - such as gluttony and greed, which ... are opposites, not by nature, but accidentally.” (E 4 Definition 5) It is not difficult to find common instances of this. Those enflamed with multiple passions will often become quite agitated at the prospect of having to mediate them, at times even risking outright destruction as a result. We see, therefore, that inadequate ideas not only bind man to passions which may dominate him, but also that these passions, by their very nature, have a tendency to multiply and oppose themselves to one another, thereby multiplying their powers of enslavement.

On the other hand, should we actively produce adequate ideas, first among these a comprehension of universal causal determinacy, then we will be less likely to be emotionally disturbed or crippled by life’s maladies. The more we understand the necessitarian nature of existence, and apply this principle to specific events, the more serene we will be.

Of course, this is not to suggest that Spinoza advocated a life lived with indifference to the actual, physical events around us. Spinoza in no way promoted an outright acceptance of all

of the various pains, traumas, and hardships which are an unmistakable mark on modern society. Quite the opposite, it is by virtue of our reason, that is, our adequate conception of our own power along with an adequate conception of the order and connection of things in Nature that we can overcome many of the troubles that impact our lives. In a striking passage, Spinoza writes: “Therefore, the more we strive to live according to the guidance of reason, the more we strive to depend less on Hope, to free ourselves from Fear, and, **to conquer fortune as much as we can,** and to direct our actions by the certain counsel of reason.” (E 4 Proposition 47 Schol.)

Indeed, it is by the very force of reason that we will necessarily do whatever is in our power to improve our physical circumstances. Again, the human essence is marked by the conatus to increase our power and persist in our being. It is only that we, by the same force of reason, do not lament that which is beyond our control, that is, beyond our actual power. Moreover, the capacity to reason, to form adequate ideas about causal nature, the order and connection of things, is what allows us to determine the difference between what is within our power to affect and what is beyond it. We see, therefore, that within Spinoza’s system all paths to happiness have as their root the human understanding, and consequently, human freedom which is the same thing.

Thus far it has been explained that, in cases where we do not have the power to change our physical circumstances, the human capacity to form adequate ideas about the necessity of various events affords us a sort of peace and tranquility, what the Stoics termed *ataraxia* or *apatheia*. However, Spinoza’s philosophical therapy goes a step further. Namely, in combining a determinist conception of the universe with a monistic understanding of the universe as well, Spinoza encourages the individual to not only be at peace in the face of adversity, but more so to actively and positively affirm and love the world in the face of all of its apparent contingencies.

The link between monism and an ethical affirmation of the world is complex, but it can be distilled into the following explanation: First, we recognize that, as finite creatures, we are modifications of a singular, eternal, and infinite universe or God. The various events which take place in our life occur necessarily and so, as mentioned above, we have no rational basis for protesting them or of enflaming our passions in pining for things to have occurred differently. Yet, combining this insight with the idea that we, ourselves, are an inextricable part of the overall pattern of the universe, plus the idea that we necessarily have an innate self-love, yields the result that the fully rational and cognizant individual will be joyous, even in the face of extreme adversity. For every event in the universe, even the tragic and potentially traumatic ones, exist within a unified whole to which we, ourselves, belong. In short, the evils which befall us are just as necessary as our very own existence and we necessarily affirm our own existence. As even Nietzsche states, “Did you ever say yes to a pleasure? Oh my friends, then you also said yes to all pain. All things are linked, entwined, in love with one another.” Therefore, the case can be made that in Spinoza’s Ethics, he actually surpasses the standard, erroneous stereotype of dispassionate “stoic calm” and affirms what Epictetus himself actually proposed, namely that the truly rational individual may be “sick and yet happy, in peril and yet happy, dying and yet happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy.”⁴⁷ In short, the consistently hedonistic pattern of Spinoza’s thought is that comprehension entails affirmation.

To tie this picture together with Spinoza’s conception of freedom (which has obvious import insofar as this discussion relates to his political doctrine), we may say the following. Freedom means activity according to one’s own nature. Furthermore, it is our nature to comprehend things. As Spinoza states, the mind is nothing other than the possession of ideas.

⁴⁷ Epictetus, *Epictetus Discourses Books 1 and 2*, trans. P.E. Matheson (Mineola, NY: Dover Philosophical Classics, 2004), 106.

We are increasingly active, and therefore increasingly free, insofar as we come to understand more and more about the universe. We can therefore add the concepts of “activity” and “knowledge” to the aforementioned list of related terms, namely “freedom,” “power,” and “pleasure.” Here we see clearly the basis for comparing Spinoza’s ethical system to the stoic conception of *oikeiosis*. Namely, freedom, peace, and happiness are achieved not by escaping the world, or effacing ourselves before an otherworldly being. No, these benefits are attained through a necessary affirmation of ourselves, body and mind, and a subsequent comprehension and affirmation of the world. The more of the world we appropriate and subsume within our understanding, the more of the world will we positively affirm as inextricable from our own existence, and consequently the happier and more at peace we will be.

Finally, it is important to note that, despite this optimism regarding the emancipatory power of human reason, Spinoza recognizes the limitations to this therapy. Humans are, after all, finite beings. Our limited bodily nature entails that there are limits to our rational overcoming of adversity. As the only axiom of Part Four states, “There is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed.” (E 4 Axiom 1) All finite things, man included, will be limited and ultimately nullified by the general and eternal order of Nature. As such, “The force whereby a man perseveres in existing is limited, and is infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes.” (E 4 Proposition 3) Thus, perhaps ironically, it is the immutable order of Nature which offers us personal salvation, even a sort of transcendent beatitude, insofar as we comprehend Nature’s eternal necessity. Yet it is this same, immutable order of Nature which entails our own bodily finitude and mortality.

The Political

In the Ethics, Spinoza does not speak of the sage. His philosophical therapy is meant, in principle, for all people as all people possess an intellect. However, if there was such a person as the “Spinozist sage” he would look far more like a prince or a revolutionary than the stereotypical hermit on a mountaintop.⁴⁸ For social relations with other intellectual beings is the necessary precondition for our own salvation and enlightenment. Moreover, peaceful social relations can only ever occur within a stable, egalitarian, and secure polis. While the above section outlines, in skeleton form, the basic elements of Spinoza’s rationalist therapy for individuals, it has to be understood that the Ethics is first and foremost a social text. The good life cannot likely be attained apart from the political life.

We have seen that it is basic to Spinoza’s metaphysics that man is not a substance in and of himself. As such, he cannot possibly act and exist as his own island. What’s more, insofar as man is never an island but always joined to the mainland of existence, it is advantageous for him to associate most with other beings who share in his nature.

It is impossible for man not to be a part of nature and not to follow the general 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.

(E 4 Appendix 7)

⁴⁸ The young Marx in the sixth notebook to his dissertation says as much by contrasting the Spinozist sage to the Platonic sage as the former has a world-historical impact, while the latter is merely a “hot water bottle” for the individual intellect.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)* on the *Marxists Internet Archive*.
<http://www.marxists.org>

Moreover, man's nature is essentially that of a knower. His power is expressed and manifested through the power of the understanding. Therefore, insofar as he necessarily combines and interacts with other beings in nature, man is best served by seeking out other rational individuals – namely, other human beings.

Nothing can agree more with the nature of any thing than other individuals of the same species. And so nothing is more useful to man in preserving his being and enjoying a rational life than is a man **who is guided by reason**. Again, because, among singular things, we know nothing more excellent than a man who is guided by reason, we can show best how much our skill and understanding are worth by educating men so that they live according to the command of their own reason.

(E 4 Appendix 9)

Of course, the reason why men are best served by associating with other rational men was largely explained in the previous discussion. Namely, men who are guided by reason are not enslaved by their various passions. (E 4 Proposition 32) They are constant in their aims and dispositions, and consequently are constant in their relations to one another. (E 4 Proposition 35) For our passionate reactions are just that: reactions to environmental stimuli. They originate not in any deliberate activity on our part, but rather they spring from our contingent exposure to our immediate environment, and "...That is why there are as many species of each affect as there are species of objects by which we are affected ... [and] that is why men are affected differently by one and the same object ... and to that extent, disagree in nature." (E 4 Proposition 33)

True happiness is best served by being rational oneself, and also combining with other rational agents. Achieving rationality in oneself frees one from the enslavement of the passions

and bondage to the general order of Nature. Combining with other rational agents, since they are as well constant, further facilitates the achieving of long-term, complex goals which otherwise could not be achieved by the individual alone, whether this be the construction of sewage systems that prevent typhoid and dysentery, the production of consistent food surpluses so as to avoid seasonal famine, and so on. In short, the division of labor which is a pre-requisite for a certain level of comfort and happiness is undergirded by the common capacity to reason amongst men. Indeed, the reason within men allows for the subduing of passions, and thus the construction of civilization which is nothing other than the manifestation of reason in time and space. Reason in the individual mind, and reason expressed as the state, each in their own way, allows man to escape the general order of Nature, and instead, to live by his own terms, freedom, and power. “Though men, therefore, generally direct everything according to their own lust, nevertheless, more advantages than disadvantages follow from their forming a common society. So it is better to bear men’s wrongs calmly, and apply one’s zeal to those things that help to bring men together in harmony and friendship.” (E 4 Appendix 14)

Consistently, Spinoza reserves his most strident criticism and biting rhetoric for those “satirists and theologians” who spend their days deriding human civilization. The state of nature, for Spinoza, is not a romantic state of equality and freedom. It is rather a near-Hobbesian state of anarchy whereby the strongest at any given moment may kill or maim the weaker as he pleases. For right is nothing else than power. (TTP 240) The moment the strongest by a turn of fate loses his hegemony, he in turn is killed by some other brute. In nature, life is short, violent, and uncertain.⁴⁹ To those political satirists who lionize a fictional human past, free from

⁴⁹ Spinoza’s attitude here is a clear indication of his following in the “State of Nature” tradition of Hobbes, and specifically the latter’s assessment of pre-political life in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: with selected variants from*

contracts, civilization, and government, and decry the maladies of modernity, Spinoza has nothing but contempt. His answer to them is that the drawbacks of modernity are best served by more modernity. Sentimental reaction is illusory. Rather the state, as the expression of the whole populace, must secure the freedom and rights of its citizens by consolidating power, not giving it up. Specifically, the state must wrest power out of the hands of the sectarian churches and self-proclaimed prophets who would divide sovereign power and keep a share of authority for themselves, in effect reintroducing the anarchy and brutishness of the state of nature. These people are only an obstacle to civilization: the cooperation and coordination of all persons for rational and hedonistic ends.

And surely we do derive, from the society of our fellow men, many more advantages than disadvantages. So let the Satirists laugh as much as they like at human affairs, let the Theologians curse them, let Melancholics praise as much as they can a life that is uncultivated and wild, let them disdain men and admire the lower animals. Men still find from experience that by helping one another they can provide themselves much more easily with the things they require, and that only by joining forces can they avoid the dangers which threaten them on all sides...

(E 4 Proposition 35 Schol.)

It is the bodily nature of man, as much as his rational nature, which entails the goodness of civilization. For if man was only a rational spirit, wholly unconnected to a body, then it might possibly be conceivable that each member of humanity could manage as individuals alone.⁵⁰

the Latin edition of 1668, trans. and ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), Chapter 13, para. 9

⁵⁰ Of course, as we have seen in the previous discussion, it is in any case impossible that a finite modification expressed as an idea through the attribute of thought not also be expressed as bodily through the attribute of extension.

Yet, as evidenced in last discussion, man is necessarily bodily and, not only this, but in possession of a very complex, compound body, which is in need of and benefit from a variety of external bodies for its own survival and flourishing. (E 4 Proposition 38) Our inevitable quest for personal, sensuous happiness is not a mark of decadence or bodily corruption. It is rather coextensive with an endeavor to increase our power as expressed both bodily and mentally as well.

To use things, therefore, and take pleasure in them as far as possible – not, of course, to the point where we are disgusted with them, for there is no pleasure in that – this is the part of a wise man. It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sport, the theatre, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another. For the human Body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole Body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the Mind may also be equally capable of understanding many things.

(E 4 Proposition 45 Note Excerpt)

Of course, perfumes, music, sport, and theatre are the products of a vibrant and secure civilization. The more we peaceably combine with others in the context of a productive civilization, the more we are in possession of the means to produce beyond mere subsistence. The “luxuries” of music and theatre are actually necessities for the further flourishing of the human mind and spirit. (E 4 Proposition 39) No reactionary return to agrarian or pre-agrarian methods of subsistence can, therefore, afford humanity any greater freedom or virtue. Such a move backwards would only deprive humanity of the material basis of its mental development,

and consequently, its power to act and be free. In this regard, Spinoza is a standard bearer for cosmopolitanism, giving early modern expression to this ideal midway between the stoics and Marx. Just as with Marx, Spinoza clearly notes the failures of modernity – despotism, warfare, and exploitation. However, as with Marx, Spinoza’s solution is a progressive one, namely, the advancement of society, the increased agency of humanity as expressed collectively through the state.

Yet this dedication to the cosmopolitan ideal cuts both ways for Spinoza. Though his closest associates were radical republicans, though he favored democracy over monarchy, though he even lauded the radical wealth distribution that he saw in the ancient Hebrew state, Spinoza was always wary of what may be termed today as “revolutionary adventurism,” or the premature toppling of regimes even in the absence of likely success in replacing them with something better. Social and political stability is key for anything good to flourish. (TTP 232)

So we see that, at the level of the state, it is a matter of both self-love and prudence to aid in the peace and prosperity of the commonwealth. Reason (coterminous with both happiness and freedom) is necessary for the success of the state, but it is also a byproduct of the successful state. Out of rational self-love, and the freedom to act in accord with such self-concern, rational beings construct the state which, in turn, perpetuates and safeguards greater and greater manifestations of freedom.

Of course, just as on the personal level, Spinoza’s optimism regarding the emancipatory and rational character of the state is, in part, tempered by his sober realism. As mentioned above, human rationality (being tied to the finite body) is infinitely overcome by external forces. Thus, we are constantly led to be irrational, narrow, and violent; for we are overcome by

appetites which overwhelm our own power. While reason can instruct proper behavior, it is insufficient to combat all of the illusions brought on by appetite and the passions. Thus, the good state will necessarily be, at times, coercive.

In the second scholium to 4 Proposition 37, we see the reoccurrence of the same formula. Namely, if it were possible that all, “men lived according to the guidance of reason, everyone would possess the right of his without any injury to anyone else ...But because they are subject to the affects which far surpass man’s power, *or* virtue they are often drawn in different directions...”

In Spinoza’s theory of state, the solution to this persistent problem comes not from an alien authority, standing as it were, above society. Rather, by the same scholium, men being “... contrary to one another ...**require one another’s aid.**” Namely, it is the common understanding that finite individuals will at times become impassioned and seek their narrow advantage to the detriment of others which binds men together in a commonwealth. That is to say, men will sometimes become anti-social (steal, break contracts, perhaps even kill) for the sake of their own social advantage. It is required, therefore, that there be mutual consent to forfeit one’s right to do exactly as one pleases. Likewise, for this pledge to have any efficacy, there must also be mutual consent that society as a whole should have sole right to exercise civil penalty and ultimately violence to enforce a determined code of behavior.

In order, therefore, that men may be able to live harmoniously and be of assistance to one another, it is necessary for them to give up their natural right, and to make one another confident that they will do nothing which could harm others. How can it happen that men who are necessarily subject to affects, inconstant and changeable, should be able to make one another confident and have trust in one another, is clear...No affect can be restrained except by an affect stronger than and contrary to the affect to be

restrained, and everyone refrains from doing harm out of timidity regarding a greater harm.

(E 4 Proposition 37 Schol. 2)

We see, therefore, that civilization, and all of its benefits, are in part safeguarded by the flourishing of reason amongst the populace, but also in part safeguarded by the violent and coercive power of the state. Yet the essential point here is that the state's power is, itself, ultimately derived from the rational aims of its citizenry, and that its positive social function exists only so long as this power remains undivided.

By this law, therefore, Society can be maintained, provided it appropriates to itself the right everyone has of avenging himself, and of judging concerning good and evil. In this way Society has the power to lay prescribe a common rule of life, to make laws, and to maintain them - not by reason, which cannot restrain the affects, but by threats. This Society, maintained by laws and the power it has of preserving itself, is called a State, and those who are defended by its laws, Citizens.

(E 4 Proposition 37 Schol. 2)

It thus follows that the coercive power of the state is in no sense based upon an abstract concept of normative right or retribution. For the concepts of "justice," "injustice," "sin" and so on are extrinsic concepts and exist not in the state of nature, but rather wholly posterior to the extant state itself. (E 4 Proposition 37 Note 2) Specifically, these concepts of normative right are constructs of the state for the aim of some agreed upon good – namely, the collective security of a populace. Therefore, in Spinoza's system, the aim of justice consists in its utility. This

tendency is expressed in particularly illuminating terms within the corollary, second proof, and note to 4 Proposition 63.

In the corollary to this proposition, it is stated that, “Desire arising from reason, we directly follow the good, and indirectly flee the evil.” The proof for this statement clearly follows from our earlier discussion on reason and the emotions. Namely, insofar as we are active, and form adequate ideas, we necessarily seek our own good, that is, our own pleasure and happiness. By contrast, we are only concerned with the evils and ills which befall us insofar as we are overcome by the passions, or to speak technically, insofar as we are passively affected by the general order of Nature and the specific fortunes which happen to transpire. Therefore, while the rational man does seek the good directly, he will “only by implication shun evil.⁵¹” That is to say, his direct concern is attaining a positive good. In doing so, he may indeed avoid certain evils just as a man seeking nourishing, delicious food thereby avoids starvation. Yet the prospect of starvation is not the object of his direct concern, it does not agitate him or become a preoccupation.

Likewise, with reference to justice, the rational state will punish offenders not out of a primary concern for retribution, but rather with a primary aim of the positive welfare of society as a whole. “Similarly, a judge who condemns a guilty man to death - not from Hate or Anger, etc., but only from a Love of the general welfare - is guided only by reason.” (E 4 Proposition 63 Schol. 2) If, in the wake of a crime, society could be made whole, and all plaintiffs satisfied, while the offender is rehabilitated without additional punishment, then so the better. For, again,

⁵¹ For the purposes of clarity, this formulation is taken from the Elwes translation: Benedictus De Spinoza, *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*

the primary rational end of justice cannot be the evil of a crime itself, nor the additional evil of coercive punishment, but rather the positive welfare and flourishing of the polis.

If, in another case, violent punishment is employed against a criminal offender, then this has nothing whatsoever to do with a normative call to “give every man his due,” a right of retribution (*jus talionis*) or alternatively, as in Kant’s system, the imperative to “respect the rational decision of the offender.” For Spinoza is consistent in equating unlawful, criminal actions which harm others with irrational and thus passive behavior. In other words, no one purposefully chooses to do what he knows is evil. Evil actions are merely the result of ignorance. So if a criminal is punished, even put to death, it is not because this person “deserves” ill treatment in return for his bad deeds. It is only that capital punishment is, in this case, deemed necessary for the future security of society. This view of punishment is well illuminated in Spinoza’s letter to his friend Henry Oldenburg, February 7th, 1676: “He who goes mad from the bite of a dog is excusable, yet he is rightly suffocated. Lastly, he who cannot govern his desires, and keep them in check with the fear of the laws, though his weakness may be excusable, yet he cannot enjoy with contentment the knowledge and love of God, but necessarily perishes.⁵²”

However, just as coercion is sometimes needed for the preservation of the state, so is toleration. For there are objective limits to the power of the state. As argued within the pages of the *Tractatus*, as well as the first section of this chapter, a widely intolerant state will naturally make for itself a wide array of domestic enemies. For it pertains to human nature to exercise their power to the fullest degree possible, and laws which are essentially unenforceable (such as

⁵² Benedictus De Spinoza, "Selected Letters" in *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*, Letter XXV.

those governing private thought, belief, or communication) are likely to be ignored, and result in the citizenry holding the state in low regard. The state, which is the safeguard of reason on earth, thus jeopardizes its own existence by such intolerant laws. The prudent state therefore will tolerate the diversity found in men's thoughts, opinions, and beliefs for the good of cooperation in deed and action amongst all citizens. Toleration is for the end of rational cooperation, or in other words, for the attainment of common goals which have as their basis the common faculty of human reason and the universal feature of the hedonistic impulse.

Stepping back for a moment, one important and potentially disturbing feature of Spinoza's system is that the basis for human cooperation, indeed the basis for civilization itself, is that which all humans have in common. Human passions are identified as the enemy to societal harmony just because the passions are diverse, and thus make men inconstant in regards to one another, and even themselves. Human reason, by contrast, is held up as the key to civilization and human emancipation precisely because it is universally common to all men. (E 2 Proposition 38 Corollary) This may well be so, yet it seems to be at odds with most common notions of political toleration. Specifically, it is commonly asserted that political toleration, the hallmark of any decent political philosophy, is invariably based in a sort of regard for diversity and pluralism. While it is my own contention that Spinoza does indeed provide a consistent philosophical basis for political toleration, it is nonetheless perfectly clear that his own political doctrine is in no way an affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of pluralism or diversity. Indeed, it is not very difficult to find within the pages of the Ethics statements such as, "In this way we can easily show that the other causes of hate depend only on the fact that men disagree in nature, not in that in which they agree." (E 4 Proposition 34 Schol.) Diversity in society may prove to be a

good by virtue of its extrinsic products. Yet this is only a contingent matter and does not indicate that diversity as-such is a desired good.

This, then, is related to another potentially problematic or disturbing feature of Spinoza's politics. Namely, Spinoza's political philosophy is, as we have seen, ultimately based in his doctrine of ethical egoism and, more generally, in his concept of the conatus. In many ways it is Spinoza's perfectionist argument that personal egoistic impulses, when expressed rationally, naturally lead to agreement and harmony amongst citizens. Sheer, self-interested pragmatism bind men to one another. "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." (E 4 Appendix 12) We tolerate diversity because doing so allows for some use value to be extracted, that is, some external good to be attained for society. A diversity of cultures may provide for a wide array of interesting music, foods, theatrical performances, and so on. Yet again, it is not diversity itself, or the particularity of a culture itself which is valued. It is rather the potential products of said culture which are valued because of their hedonistic content.

Thus Spinoza may advocate a broad tolerance for the religious beliefs of a minority sect. For doing so will allow for the rational cooperation between this minority group and society at large in areas which do not involve specific religious dogmas. Yet, insofar as this tolerance is merely instrumental for the end of some further goal, it does seem to follow that toleration is not an *a priori* necessity. For instance, if this sect proved to be insignificant in size, and ultimately unimportant for the advancement of society, then their unpopular religious views may very well not be tolerated. For the value of this group's cooperation may not outweigh the negative sentiment brought about by their unpopular religious beliefs. Of course, one could make the

argument, using the text of the Tractatus, that denying toleration in any case will eventually lead to a despotic state which is inherently unstable, and therefore, even on prudential grounds, such a group should be tolerated by the prudent state. Nonetheless, one could still imagine some limited scenarios in which a particularly unpopular sect could be done away with while not leading to further despotic acts or national instability. However, the very fact of such a possibility seems to undermine the strength and seriousness of Spinoza's toleration doctrine, if we can indeed claim that he truly possesses one.

In fact, one need not make recourse to hypothetical scenarios and the imagination to find such exceptions to the link between prudence and toleration. Spinoza himself was, of course, subject to both implicit and explicit forms of censorship in the United Provinces. He was compelled by caution to publish the Ethics only posthumously, and even after his death the book was widely censored. Indeed, it was not uncommon for academics and public figures to be accused of being "Spinozists," having their own work censored, often deprived of their posts and offices, or subject to far worse penalties.⁵³ Yet it seems unclear that any of these particular acts of intolerance aimed at Spinoza and his writings actually had a direct, causal effect upon the stability of the Dutch state.

In general, at the level of the political, there is a moment of oikeiosis which springs logically from the features of oikeiosis as seen on the personal level. Namely, on the individual level, we are necessarily moved by self-love and self-concern. For this reason we endeavor to increase our power of understanding, our ability to form adequate ideas, and in doing so, free ourselves from the bondage of the passions. We empower ourselves through a process of

⁵³ Evidence of this climate is easily seen in Oldenburg's July 1675 letter to Spinoza in which he expressed concern over reaction to the publication of the *Ethics*. Benedictus De Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 401.

intellectual self-aggrandizement by way of an increasing familiarization and identification with the world through the faculty of our understanding. On the level of the political we, as rational and self-interested agents, desire the maintenance of a robust yet tolerant, democratic state. For such a state is the expression of our collective power and freedom, is most stable and, consequently, is able to provide us with long term security and amenities. In short, our self-concern mandates that we reach out and combine with others in the most efficacious way possible. Yet, our ethical identification with the other is limited, and our concern for the welfare of others is still instrumental for the welfare of ourselves. Sociality and tolerance are thus merely extrinsic goods motivated by the essentially pragmatic concerns of the individual.

The Ethical

As he dedicates so many pages to proving various propositions about the universe, the mind, the body, and the body politic, it is sometimes helpful to recall that Spinoza's magnum opus is indeed titled *Ethica*, the Ethics. Spinoza does not limit himself merely to a discussion of individual happiness, or of self-interested political association. Rather, he sees these arguments and concepts to their full and final culmination, following them, as it were, to their logical end. This end is nothing other than a universalistic conception of the ethical life. It involves a notion of man wherein, by virtue of his own freedom and rationality, directly seeks the good for both himself and others. The ethical treatment of his fellow man is not merely instrumental to his own happiness or the flourishing of society as a whole. In other words, it is not merely pragmatic or prudential. Rather ethical regard for the other is direct, immediate, and intuitive. Put otherwise, the golden rule comes naturally and without hesitation to the fully rational man.

...a man strong in character hates no one, is angry with no one, envies no one, is indignant with no one, scorns no one, and is not at all proud. For these and all things which relate to true life and Religion are easily proven...that Hate is to be conquered by returning Love, and that everyone who is led by reason desires for others also the good he wants for himself.

(E 4 Proposition 73 Note)

In many ways, Spinoza's ethical system is the subsumption of both his personal, neo-stoic therapy as well as his political philosophy. From his personal therapy is emphasized the element of rational apprehension of the world in its necessity. From his politics is emphasized the idea that this rational appropriation of the world, and the subsequent taming of the passions, allows for basic sociality between men for the sake of various desirable ends. At the level of the ethical, however, Spinoza combines these essential elements to form a further insight. Namely, the rational comprehension of the world's necessity implies the necessity of behaving ethically towards others as an end in itself, beyond any further regard for extrinsic reward, or the threat of punishment. To the question of whether rational men may, given certain circumstances, nonetheless occasionally conflict with one another, Spinoza's unequivocal reply is, "...that it is not by accident that man's greatest good is common to all; rather, it arises from the very nature of reason, because it is deduced from the very essence of man..." (4 Proposition 36 Schol.) In other words, the link between rationality and loving one's neighbor is not contingent and based upon circumstance, but is rather necessary in the fullest sense of the word.

...a man strong in character considers this most of all, that all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature, and hence, that whatever he thinks is troublesome and evil, and moreover, whatever seems immoral, dreadful, unjust, and dishonourable,

arises from the fact that he conceives the things themselves in a way that is disordered (fragmentary), mutilated, and confused...And so, as we have said, he strives, as far as he can, to act well and rejoice.

(E 4 Proposition 73 Note)

As we follow Spinoza's Ethics towards its dramatic culmination in Part Five, we find specifically that the instrumental care for others on the political level (as seen in both Part Four of the Ethics and the Tractatus) passes into an unmediated identification with others on the ethical plane. Here we see the fulfillment of Spinoza's appropriation of the stoic ideal of oikeiosis. On the personal level, the oikeiosis-based imperative to aggrandize oneself means subsuming the world under one's faculty of understanding. In other words, it means an intellectual familiarization with the world for the therapeutic end of freeing oneself from the passions, those inevitable byproducts of ignorance. On the level of the political, the self-expansion of oikeiosis comes to mean the individual's active, bodily expansion into the world by way of political associations with other discrete individuals. Finally, at the level of the ethical, we maintain our sociality and activity in the world. However, the rational insights which motivated our political associates in the first place, consistently regarded, preclude the notion that the others we encounter on the political plane are individuals absolutely distinct from ourselves. To the contrary, reason comes to show us that other rational agents are ultimately of the same body and mind as ourselves, as all individuals subsist within the body and mind of God.

Mirroring this transition from prudential, political relations to an unmediated identification with others is an additional, parallel transition. This is a transition from what Spinoza terms the second kind of knowledge (i.e. ordinary reason) to the third, and most perfect kind of knowledge (i.e. intellectual intuition). In ordinary reason we produce adequate ideas

about the form of things in the universe; yet these insights remain to some extent abstract. For instance, we may come to understand the notion of causal determinacy, but there is no direct application of this knowledge to our own, daily experiences. However, at the level of intellectual intuition, the insights of our ordinary reason are indeed directly applied to our particular experiences. We intuit eternal rational truths out of the myriad daily experiences of ourselves, our environment, and others. (E 5 Proposition 5)

The absolutely vital thing to remember in this transition from one sort of knowledge to the other is that there is no paradigm shift or destruction of ordinary reason in order to make way for intellectual intuition. (E 5 Proposition 28) There is no “either/or” structure here. Rather, intellectual intuition is the perfection of ordinary reason. (TIE 24:10-20) In a wholly parallel manner, the transition from egoist self-concern, and a politico-prudentialist linking up with others to an immediate identification and ethical concern for others is likewise not one of displacement but rather one of perfection. For the ethical identification with others, and the immediate concern for the other’s welfare is really a generalized form of egoism. It is the same process of oikeiosis, only now at its most consistent and complete.

For on this third level of knowledge we fully comprehend Nature in its eternity and in doing so we fully affirm all of existence as inextricable from our own. We directly perceive the idea of universal causal necessity as applied to our own selves, and come to see ourselves and others as part of this eternal order. In short, we comprehend the ultimate unity of ourselves with God, i.e. with the eternal order of Nature. Consistent with the basic doctrine of conatus, i.e. self-love, it certainly follows that, as per proposition eighteen, “No one can hate God.” Indeed, this third level of knowledge is that in which God loves God eternally. (E 5 Proposition 36) The ethical concern for others is therefore still a concern for oneself. It is only that the definition and

understanding of “oneself” has drastically and radically been enlarged. Indeed, it has been enlarged to the degree that it becomes equated with the divine.

The Mind’s intellectual Love of God is the very Love of God by which God loves himself, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explained by the human Mind’s essence, considered under a species of eternity; i.e., the Mind’s intellectual Love of God is part of the infinite Love by which God loves himself.

(E 5 Proposition 36)

The key to the ethical import of this proposition is to be found in its corollary. Namely, “...it follows that insofar as God loves himself, **he loves men**, and consequently that God’s love of men and the Mind’s intellectual Love of God are one and the same.” In other words, our fully adequate knowledge of God, (i.e. the eternal order of Nature), entails an identification with Nature, and thus an affirmation of Nature as a whole. This affirmation of Nature is really a self-affirmation on a grand scale. However, it cannot be equated with a love of ourselves as discrete and distinct individuals alone. Rather, it is a self affirmation insofar as we intellectually perceive ourselves as under the aspect of eternity, as are all other human beings.

In God there is necessarily a concept, *or* idea, which expresses the essence of the human Body, an idea, therefore, which is necessarily something that pertains to the essence of the human Mind... However, since what is conceived, with a certain eternal necessity, through God’s essence itself is nevertheless something, this something that pertains to the essence of the Mind will necessarily be eternal.

(E 5 Proposition 23)

Hence, our comprehension of God, that is, our intellectual love of God, does not entail God's reciprocal love towards us as an individual. For, by virtue of God's infinite nature, "He, who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return." (E 5 Proposition 19) Rather, as the note to proposition thirty six states, "...our salvation, *or* blessedness, *or* Freedom, consists, viz., in a constant and eternal Love of God, **or in God's Love for men...**" The love of God is thus nothing other than the love of the eternal order of Nature, and consequently entails an eternal love towards mankind. God is not a distinct person who can love us personally in return. Rather, in knowing God, we in a sense become God, participate intellectually in the eternal order of things, and thus affirm the existence of mankind as a whole insofar as mankind issues from this same eternal order. This, then, is the meaning of proposition thirty five, "God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love." Namely, it is through our intellect that we perceive the eternal order of things, identify with it, and thus come to love that which proceeds from it just as we necessarily love ourselves.

Of course, this third level of knowledge, denoted by Spinoza as the highest beatitude, has its own political and social implications. For instance, early in the Ethics, there is a consistent emphasis upon ethical egoism in general, and the concepts of the conatus and self-love specifically. Yet we have an apparently contrary statement in Part Four, Proposition Seventy-two.

A free man always acts honestly, not deceptively.

...So suppose someone now asks: What if a man could save himself from the present danger of death by treachery? would not the principle of preserving his own being recommend, without qualification, that he be treacherous?

The reply to this is the same. If reason should recommend that, it would recommend it to all men. And so reason would recommend, without qualification, that men make arrangements, join forces, and have common rights only by deception – i.e., that really they have no common rights. This is absurd.

(E 4 Proposition 72, Schol.)

In this extremely surprising proposition, Spinoza, the consistent egoist, the consistent hedonist, actually attacks and derides the notion that a man should lie in order to save his very life. This proposition is no less surprising for the fact that in the *Tractatus*, Spinoza explicitly affirms that no right exists apart from the threat of physical coercion, that covenants, agreements, and promises are null and void without such coercion as an ultimate guarantor, and that no man can be expected to give up all of his right or to willfully forfeit his own life. It is moreover surprising given that, in the *Ethics* itself, Spinoza clearly states that “No virtue can be prior to this [virtue] (viz., the striving to preserve oneself). (4 Proposition 22) Again, in the appendix to Part Four, Spinoza unequivocally writes:

It is permissible for us to avert, in the way that seems safest, whatever there is in nature that we judge to be evil, *or* able to prevent us from being able to exist and enjoy a rational life. On the other hand, we may take for our own use, and use in any way, whatever there is that we judge to be good, *or* useful for preserving our being and enjoying a rational life. And absolutely, it is permissible for everyone to do, by the highest right of nature, what he judges will contribute to his advantage.

(E 4 Appendix 8)

What explains this apparently bold discrepancy in his thought? What can account for Spinoza's affirming, on the one hand, man's right to do everything in his power to preserve himself, and on the other hand, denying that the rational man would even tell a lie in order to save his life? (For even if, as mentioned above, the prevalence of honesty is necessary to preserve society and the common good, this is surely of no use to the person who is dead!) The solution is to be found in Spinoza's monistic metaphysics which explains how, at this third level of knowledge, such ethical fortitude, even at the expense of one's own death, is not only consistent with an underlying egoism and hedonism, but indeed is its perfection. Spinoza's monism mandates that all individual, finite entities (i.e. the modes) are not substances unto themselves but rather, as per their name, are dependant modifications of the one, eternal and infinite Substance. So, in Part Two we find an arrangement of lemmas and axioms which state, in part:

Bodies are distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance. (E 2 Lemma 1)

As the parts of an Individual, or composite body, lie upon one another over a larger or smaller surface, so they can be forced to change their position with more or less difficulty; and consequently the more or less will be the difficulty of bringing it about that the Individual will change its shape. (E 2 Axiom 3)

If the parts composing an Individual become greater or less, but in such proportion that they all keep the same ratio of motion and rest to each other as before, then the Individual will likewise retain its nature, as before, without any change of form.

(E 2 Lemma 5)

Furthermore, the Individual so composed retains its nature, whether it, as a whole, moves or is at rest, or whether it moves in this or that direction; so long as each part retains its motion, and communicates it, as before, to the others. (E 2 Lemma 7)

The overall import of these statements is that, since modes are (by definition) not *sui generis* substances, their status as individual, finite bodies is merely provisional. An individual body can be considered as such just so long as its composite parts remain in constant motion and proportion to one another, and moreover, the whole entity does not itself become subsumed as a part within a still larger, more complex whole. In other words, no individuals are entirely discrete, but are rather aggregate and, in principle, themselves capable of becoming a constituent part of a still greater aggregate being.

This idea, essential to Spinoza's ultimate conception of rationality, ethics, and beatitude, is perhaps best explained by way of a thought experiment found within one of Spinoza's many correspondences. This experiment employs the metaphor of a blood stream within a given body. Moreover, this blood stream is, itself, composed of various parts – lymph, chyle, and so on.

Let us imagine, with your permission, a little worm, living in the blood, able to distinguish by sight the particles of blood, [namely, the] lymph, [and chyle], and to reflect on the manner in which each particle, on meeting with another particle, either is repulsed, or communicates a portion of its own motion. This little worm would live in the blood, in the same way as we live in a part of the universe, and would consider each particle of blood, not as a part, but as a whole. He would be unable to determine, how all the parts are modified by the general nature of blood, and are compelled by it to adapt themselves, so as to stand in a fixed relation to one another. For, if we imagine that there are no causes external to the blood, which could communicate fresh movements to it, nor any space beyond the blood, nor any bodies whereto the particles of blood could communicate their motion, it is certain that the blood would always remain in the same state, and its particles would undergo no modifications, save those which may be conceived as arising from the relations of motion existing between the lymph, the chyle, &c. The blood would then always have to be considered as a whole, not as a part. But, as there exist, as a matter of fact, very many causes which modify, in a given manner, the nature of the blood, and are, in turn, modified thereby, it follows

that other motions and other relations arise in the blood, springing not from the mutual relations of its parts only, but from the mutual relations between the blood as a whole and external causes. Thus the blood comes to be regarded as a part, not as a whole. So much for the whole and the part.

Thus far in the correspondence, Spinoza makes clear the provisional nature of wholes and parts. The worm, insofar as it lives within the blood stream and knows of nothing beyond it, cannot see the elements of the blood (i.e. the lymph and chyle) as anything other than wholes. These parts present themselves as discrete individuals for when one such particle meets another, it "...is repulsed, or communicates a portion of its own motion." In other words, the behavior of the particles within the blood appears to the worm to be the product of the particular shape and velocity of each particle alone. The blood stream itself is also considered by the worm to be a whole. For, again, there is no thought of anything outside of it. Of course, we know better as our horizons are infinitely wider than that of the worm. We are aware that the blood in a given body is part of a greater whole, and is animated by the various organs, especially the beating heart. In this sense, the blood is not considered a whole, but merely a part within an aggregate body. The same can be said of the lymph and chyle. Once we understand that the whole of the blood itself is moved and affected by the whole composition of the body, it clearly follows that the lymph and chyle are likewise affected. While from the worm's limited perspective these particles move, collide with one another, and refract by virtue of their own, individual natures, it is clear from the larger perspective that their actual movement in space is also determined by the general motion of the blood, again, as determined by the overall composition of the body. Spinoza then relates this thought experiment to the case of extended bodies in general:

All natural bodies can and ought to be considered in the same way as we have here considered the blood, for all bodies are surrounded by others, and are mutually determined to exist and operate in a fixed and definite proportion, while the relations between motion and rest in the sum total of them, that is, in the whole universe, remain unchanged. Hence it follows that each body, in so far as it exists as modified in a particular manner, must be considered as a part of the whole universe, as agreeing with the whole, and associated with the remaining parts. As the nature of the universe is not limited, like the nature of blood, but is absolutely infinite, its parts are by this nature of infinite power infinitely modified, and compelled to undergo infinite variations. But, in respect to substance, I conceive that each part has a close union with its whole. For, as I said in my first letter...substance being infinite in its nature, it follows, as I endeavored to show, that each part belongs to the nature of substance, and, without it, can neither be nor be conceived.

Just as the chyle and lymph appear to the worm as being discrete individuals, so too do the ordinary objects in our immediate environment (tables, chairs, other people) appear to be entirely discrete. However, in each case this is merely an empirical illusion brought on by our limited and finite perspective. A more adequate view of things ought to reveal to us the dependant nature of individual entities, first insofar as they are dependent upon the extended bodies directly around them, and second insofar as they are dependent upon the whole of substance itself. (That is to say, we may perceive how various bodies are affected by specific, proximate interactions, as well as the eternal, physical laws of extended nature as well.) The only discrepancy between the worm's situation and our own is that the worm's greatest horizon is the blood stream itself. The blood is an extended, finite body and thus while it exists as a whole in relation to its constituent particles, it is nonetheless itself a part of something larger, something entirely beyond the possible scope of the worm's imagination. Humans, being rational, are however capable of perceiving extended bodies as not only parts of a larger extended body, but also as a part of substance. Substance, unlike all finite extended bodies, is

necessarily and always considered as a whole and never a part. It is by virtue of reason, a faculty ostensibly not shared by the worm, that we can have comprehensive and apodictic knowledge of a part's relation to its corresponding whole. For we come to know substance, that ultimate whole in which all things subsist, not through our imagination or empirical investigation, but through reason itself.

The key, however, is that we do not only perceive that some external, extended body is a part of substance. We moreover understand that our own body and mind are a part of Nature as well.

You see, therefore, how and why I think that the human body is a part of nature. As regards the human mind, I believe that it is also a part of nature; for I maintain that there exists in nature an infinite power of thinking, which, in so far as it is infinite, contains subjectively the whole of nature, and its thoughts proceed in the same manner as nature – that is, in the sphere of ideas. Further, I take the human mind to be identical with this said power, not in so far as it is infinite, and perceives the whole of nature, but in so far as it is finite, and perceives only the human body; in this manner, I maintain that the human mind is a part of the infinite understanding.⁵⁴

It is plain enough to see how the human body is a part of nature. As an extended thing it is dependent upon all of the other extended bodies with which it comes into proximate contact. (E 2 Postulates 3, 4) The body is not a permanent individual; it was not created *ex nihilo* and will not pass out of existence. It is a part of the infinite attribute of extension, and thus can merely change form. As Spinoza writes in another letter to Oldenburg, “...bear in mind, that men are not created but born, and that their bodies already exist before birth, though under different

⁵⁴ Benedictus De Spinoza, "Selected Letters" in *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*, Letter XV.

forms.⁵⁵ More interesting in the above excerpt is Spinoza's treatment of the mind. It is explicitly stated that the mind is, itself, not a distinct whole but rather a finite part of the infinite mind of God. (Again, as per the letter, the infinite mind of God is nothing other than the comprehensive idea of things as they actually exist in nature.) The human mind is a finite part of God's infinite intellect insofar as it has some limited knowledge of nature, namely of its own body. The human mind passes away, therefore, when the body passes away.

Thus humans are, of course, limited and finite modes in every respect. Yet, humans are unique in that we are the only modes (that we know of) that are rationally self-aware of our own metaphysical status as so limited. We can comprehend that we exist as a part of an infinite substance and, moreover, have the capability to comprehend the eternal order and nature of this substance. As stated earlier, all of our ideas are of the mind's sole object, namely our body. Still, we can derive adequate ideas from our idea of the body insofar as these ideas bear the mark of universality. Again, as explicated earlier, we can for instance derive the notion of "universal causality" by reflecting upon the nature of our (or any) given body. This adequate idea is necessarily objective and comprehensively known, even within our finite intellect. Our mind, therefore, has the capability of knowing to some extent the actual mind of God, that is, of knowing the eternal order of things. Therefore, perhaps ironically, it is our rational comprehension of our own finitude, our being inextricably a part of the general order of nature, which allows us to transcend this very finitude. As Spinoza states, "our Mind, in so far as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking, and this again by another, and so on, to infinity; so that together, they all constitute God's eternal and infinite intellect." (E 5 Proposition 40 Schol.) Moreover, "The more we

⁵⁵ Benedictus De Spinoza, "Selected Letters" in *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*, Letter IV.

understand singular (i.e. particular) things, the more we understand God.” (E 5 Proposition 24)

In essence, the more ideas of things in the world which we comprehend adequately, i.e. apply universal ideas to, the more our mind approximates the eternal and infinite mind of God. And insofar as the object of our mind is adequately understood, i.e. is a universal idea, then our mind itself is in some sense eternal. “Insofar as the Mind knows itself and the Body under a species of eternity, it necessarily has knowledge of God, and knows that it is in God, and is conceived through God.” (E 5 Proposition 30)

We humans, being modifications of a singular substance, are thus only “individuals” in a provisional, temporary, and limited sense. The more we understand about the world, the more active we are in affirming its parts, the more we will actually identify with greater and greater parts of the universe, and ultimately, not only its discrete parts, but also its eternal laws which cause these parts to be what they are. For human activity and freedom is nothing other than the willing of a certain motion. Yet, as per our earlier discussion, we cannot rightly say that we are active in freely willing something unless that thing, thought, or event can be adequately deduced from our own nature. (E 3 Definition 1) Moreover, we necessarily do will all those things which we adequately understand as following from our own nature. Thus, insofar as we adequately comprehend more and more of the world, (i.e. comprehend the eternal laws in conjunction with the proximate causes of things), the more the eternal order and nature of the world becomes our own.

In other words, when we come to know the eternal order of things, we necessarily will the *processus*, the results, of that eternal order. (For the intellect and the will are entirely indistinct from one another). God is the formal cause, the eternal author of all things, and

consequently, as our intellect – through the understanding – approximates the mind of God, so do we also become the formal cause and author of all things.

The mind conceives nothing under a species of eternity except insofar as it conceives its Body's essence under a species of eternity i.e., except insofar as it is eternal. So insofar as it is eternal, it has knowledge of God, knowledge which is necessarily adequate. And therefore, the Mind, insofar as it is eternal, is capable of knowing all those things which can follow from this given knowledge of God, i.e., of knowing things by the third kind of knowledge; **therefore, the Mind, in so far as it is eternal, is the adequate, or formal, cause of (such) knowledge. Q.E.D.**

(E 5 Proposition 31)

Our original dictum was that “comprehension entails affirmation.” This, as discussed earlier, is the basis for rational therapy. Comprehension of the world and its necessity, combined with the additional realization that we, ourselves, are part of this overall pattern entails an affirmation of the world as a whole, and is a cure for the passions of envy, jealousy, regret, and hatred. Yet a more comprehensive statement would be, “comprehension entails affirmation and identification.” For the full, rational comprehension of the necessity of things is entirely inextricable from our intuiting the manner in which the whole causal flow of the universe constitutes a sort of eternal individual of which we are merely a part. We are as a particle in the blood. However, this analogy is not quite sufficient. For intellectual intuition does not merely afford us apprehension of the finite place of things within an interconnected universe. It moreover illuminates the eternal nature of things. Thus, our comprehension of our place within the universe affords us the realization of our eternal identification with the whole of the universe.

For our minds, insofar as they fully grasp eternal, universal truths are themselves eternal and infinite.

... we feel and know by experience that we are eternal. For the mind feels those things that it conceives in understanding no less than those it has in the memory. For the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things, are the demonstrations themselves. Therefore, though we do not recollect that we existed before the body, we nevertheless feel that our mind, insofar as it involves the essence of the body under a species of eternity, is eternal, and that this existence it has cannot be defined by time, *or* explained through duration.

(E 5 Proposition 23 Note)

The process of *oikeiosis* thus involves a quantitative self-expansion followed by a qualitative change. Spurred on by our native reason we begin to apprehend the order and connection of things, i.e. the proximate causes and their various effects on various modes. We colonize and subsume greater and greater portions of the world, make the world familiar to ourselves, and in a sense, identify with increasing spheres of existence. Yet at some point our comprehension of the eternal order, and our subsequent application of this knowledge to actual things, becomes sufficient such that we directly intuit the rational order as an unbroken whole. In other words, we begin to have a rational intuition of the mind of God itself. At such a point, it is not accurate to speak of our quantitative expansion into the world, or our quantitative subsumption of increasing spheres of nature within our finite, expanding intellect. It is more correct to say that, at this stage, the mind has grasped eternal truths to such an extent that it is itself participating in the eternal, and directly and intuitively comprehending itself as such. In

this sense, we are no longer finite beings, but rather beings wholly cognizant and thus identical to the eternal and indivisible order of things.⁵⁶

...substance is not manifold, but single...Wherefore it is mere foolishness, or even insanity, to say that extended substance is made up of parts or bodies really distinct from one another. It is as though one should attempt by the aggregation and addition of many circles to make up a square, or a triangle, or something of totally different essence.⁵⁷

It is seen that in Spinoza's Ethics, we transcend the exclusive concern for our own being only because we are part of another being, greater than ourselves. (As stated, through reason we first understand ourselves as part of a greater, aggregate being – such as our family, clan, or state – but this gives way, in the fully rational individual, to the comprehension of our identification with a being – namely substance – which is not aggregate, but rather a unitary whole.) But this

⁵⁶ It should be mentioned that this does *not* at all imply an eternity of *duration* for the human mind and body. Rather this eternal participation in God's infinity may very well be momentary. *See, for instance, Spinoza on "duration" in his letter to Lewis Meyer, April 20th, 1663 – "From this difference arises the distinction between eternity and duration. Duration is only applicable to the existence of modes; eternity is applicable to the existence of substance, that is the infinite faculty of existence or being."* Benedictus De Spinoza, "Selected Letters" in *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*, Letter XXIX.

Also, the scholium to 5 Proposition 34: "If we attend to the common opinion of men, we shall see that they are indeed conscious of the eternity of their mind, but that they confuse it with duration, and attribute it to the imagination, or memory, which they {erroneously} believe to remain after death."

Also see the first part of scholium to 5 Proposition 23: "There is, as we have said, this idea, which expresses the essence of the body under a species of eternity, a certain mode of thinking, which belongs to the essence of the Mind, and which is necessarily eternal. And though it is impossible that we should recollect that we existed before the Body – since there cannot be any traces of this in the body, and eternity can neither be defined by time nor have any relation to time..."

⁵⁷ Benedictus De Spinoza, "Selected Letters" in *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*, Letter XXIX.

is not to say that we disregard our own, individual welfare. We merely transcend the narrow exclusivity of our own, personal welfare. Thus martyrdom for the good of the community or the state is not, strictly speaking, self-sacrifice. Refusing to lie, cheat, or break the public trust, even when faced with death, is not self-sacrifice. To the contrary, these acts are distinguished from suicide (which Spinoza unambiguously repudiates) just because such martyrdom is, at its base, a rational and egoistic act of self-preservation.⁵⁸ Again, it is only that the term “self” is generalized beyond the individual and its finite intellect and body. We come to directly and intuitively identify ourselves not merely with our own body, but with the body politic as a whole, and beyond. This, finally, is the ethical consummation of Spinoza’s modernized conception of *oikeiosis*.

For at this third stage of intellectual intuition, we approach the, “...greatest virtue of the Mind, i.e., the Mind’s power, *or* nature, *or* its greatest striving.” (E 5 Proposition 25)

Importantly, at this final stage of rational comprehension, knowledge (while still tied to human happiness) is not merely considered as instrumental. Rather, intellectual intuition becomes a

⁵⁸ An interesting consequence of this is that, the truly dangerous individual (with regard to the unjust state) is not the mad man, but rather the fully rational human being. Indeed, only the rational human being can qualify as a revolutionary (in the positive sense of the term), for only this person does not fear coercive measures or violent repression, but acts instead according to the dictates of his reason alone – conceiving of himself not as a discrete individual, but rather as part of humanity as a whole. Of course, said individual will only oppose the state for the (likely attainable) end of reforming or reconstituting it, and not simply for the end of simple destruction. Thus, he may be the enemy of a particular regime, but never of civilization or the state as-such. (4 Proposition 36 Corollary) The fully rational human being will be, according to context, either an irrepressible enemy of a certain establishment, or alternatively, the model citizen – wholly honorable and lawful apart from the threat of civil coercion or penalty.

This insight is reconfirmed in a passage (relating to unjust laws) from the Tractatus:
“There are many men who are so constituted that there is nothing they would more reluctantly put up with than the opinions they believe to be true should be outlawed and that they themselves should be deemed criminals for believing what moves them to piety towards God and men. They therefore proceed to reject the laws and act against the magistrate. They regard it as very honourable and not at all shameful to behave in a seditious manner, on this account, or indeed attempt any kind of misdeed. It is a fact that human nature is like this, and therefore it follows that laws to curb freedom of opinion do not affect scoundrels but rather impinge on free-minded persons. They are not made to restrain the ill-intentioned so much as persecute well-meaning men, and cannot be enforced without incurring great danger to the state.” (TTP 244)

desired end in itself. “The more the Mind is more capable of understanding things by the third kind of knowledge, the more it desires to understand them by this kind of knowledge.” (E 5 Proposition 26) In our earlier discussion on Spinoza’s personal therapy, it was explained that increased understanding affords man respite from his passions, and thus a sort of happiness. However, at this third stage of knowledge, the virtue or power of human comprehension is itself the most desired end which affords us happiness. Indeed, the capacity to be social, form human relations, and even control our passions and appetites are merely a symptom of this central good of reason itself. “Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; nor do we enjoy it because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to restrain them.” (E 5 Proposition 42)

The greatest virtue of the mind is to know God *or* to understand things by the third kind of knowledge. Indeed, this virtue is the greater, the more the Mind knows things by this kind of knowledge. So he who knows things by this kind of knowledge passes to the greatest human perfection, and consequently, is affected with the greatest Joy, accompanied by the idea of himself and his virtue

(E 5 Proposition 27)

The ethical import of this fact is far reaching in terms of Spinoza’s political doctrine, and specifically, his concept of political toleration. For, it should not be thought that the culmination of Spinoza’s ethics at the level of intellectual intuition always mandates the sort of martyrdom as described above. Ethical uprightness may, just as well, entail the ordinary care, compassion, and preservation of others. Here we see why Spinoza can be seen to uphold a truly robust doctrine of political toleration. For just as we, ourselves, intrinsically desire the freedom to think,

philosophize, communicate, meditate, and so on; we necessarily desire the same freedoms for others. The instrumental use-value or prudence of such toleration by the state is merely a beneficial symptom of an intrinsically necessary ethical imperative. Even if a certain small sect proved ultimately unimportant for the overall flourishing of a nation, even if their private beliefs were to prove odious to the general populace, it would nonetheless be unethical by Spinoza's standards to expel, coerce, or harm this group in any way, even if no ill effect would fall upon the state as a result of such coercive action. For we, ourselves, desire the freedom to form private beliefs and thoughts. Indeed, this ability to think freely is precisely that which is necessary for the eventual attainment of intellectual intuition – that ultimate good in itself. What's more, it is this same reason which tells us that there is no substantial distinction between ourselves and these very people.

It is clear now in what sense Spinoza's conception of toleration is based upon what is common amongst all individuals, as opposed to what is different. Spinoza is not a cultural chauvinist or particularist. In no way is his affirmation of what is common in man based upon one or another cultural trait, aesthetic sensibility, or even a biological form of speciesism (i.e. a crass humanism). Indeed, Spinoza criticizes the tendency in humans to desire that all others conform to their respective tastes, proclivities, and prejudices. As he notes in 5 Proposition 4, "...we have shown that human nature is so constituted that each of us wants the others to live according to his temperament. And indeed, in a man who is not led by reason this appetite is the passion called Ambition, which does not differ much from pride." Yet in the same proposition, Spinoza explains under what conditions this human desire for commonality is not an absurd passion, but rather a virtue. Namely, "...in a man **who lives by the dictate of reason** it is the action, *or* virtue, called Morality." In other words, insofar as we desire all others to be like

ourselves in terms of accidental traits such as taste, culture, religion, physical disposition, and so on, we are, ourselves, bound by mere ignorance and narrow-mindedness. However, as rational beings we rightly recognize the rationality in others and desire its increase – especially insofar as it leads to the highest good of the intellectual intuition of God.

This love towards God cannot be tainted by an affect of Envy or Jealousy: instead, the more men we imagine to be joined to God by the same bond of Love, the more it is encouraged.

...This Love toward God is the highest good which we can want from the dictate of reason, and is common to all men; we desire that all should enjoy it. And so it cannot be stained by an affect of Envy, nor by an affect of Jealousy. On the contrary, the more men we imagine to enjoy it, the more it must be encouraged, q.e.d.

(E 5 Proposition 20)

In summation, it is reason which originally undergirds the formation of the state in the first place. The state depends upon reason to exist, and in turn, fosters its further flourishing on earth. The ultimate end of the state is nothing other than the safeguarding of reason. Thus, an intolerant state is a formal contradiction existing in time and space. Intolerance is not only imprudent, turning lawful citizens into dissidents, undermining the stability of the polis, but it also negates the state's very reason for being.

CHAPTER TWO: THE NECESSITY of Spinoza's system

...it is evident that to understand the essence of Peter, it is not necessary to understand an idea of Peter, much less an idea of an idea of Peter. This is the same as if I said that, in order for me to know, it is not necessary to know that I know, much less necessary to know that I know that I know...Indeed, in these ideas the opposite is the case. For to know that I know, I must first know.⁵⁹

Section One: From Necessary Knowledge to a Sure Metaphysics

It was demonstrated in the previous chapter that Spinoza's republican political ideal, and specifically his stance on toleration, arises from an affirmation of a certain egoistic ethics, in important ways utilizing the stoic conception of *oikeiosis*. In turn, it was made evident that this ethics, itself, rests upon the dual premises of a monistic metaphysics and a strict causal determinism (the correlate of which is a robust anti-voluntarism).⁶⁰ Yet might it be the case that monism and anti-voluntarism are, themselves, merely arbitrary presuppositions? Why exactly must we affirm Spinoza's metaphysical starting point in the first place? This charge was prominently expressed by Leo Strauss in his Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion. Here, Strauss does not question the various proofs of Spinoza's Ethics. Indeed, he affirms that, should the reader assent to Spinoza's range of definitions and axioms, then the rest of the Ethics, its moral prescriptions, indeed its whole set of social and political conclusions follow with absolute validity. Rather, what Strauss takes issue with is the presupposition of Spinozistic naturalism to begin with. Specifically, the supposition that the universe is wholly intelligible, that every entity in nature has a definite cause or reason for its existence, that it is impossible for a super-natural will to exist free of the necessities of nature itself, able to abrogate natural law – these are all

⁵⁹ Benedictus De Spinoza, "*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*." in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Princeton, (34:30)

⁶⁰ Voluntarism is, here, understood as the conception of the will existing and acting independent of the intellect. It amounts to the notion of negative freedom, or "freedom of the will" which Spinoza often criticizes as a confused idea.

simply posited by Spinoza. They amount to Spinoza's underlying, (yet undefended) rationalist method. What's more, these presuppositions, Strauss asserts, while absolutely necessary to establish all of the further conclusions which Spinoza sets out in his metaphysical, moral and political philosophies, nonetheless amount to a mere prejudice in favor of reason and against religious orthodoxy or anything supra-rational whatsoever. Hence, Strauss questions the success of Spinoza's metaphysical and political arguments as a whole. For these arguments implicitly rely upon a rationalism which, in itself, is not a necessary starting point and whose validity is never formally defended – but merely assumed. In short, reason claims for itself the status of universality without warrant.

The Ethics starts from explicit premises by the granting of which one has already implicitly granted the absurdity of orthodoxy... at first glance these premises seem to be arbitrary and hence to beg the whole question... Spinoza's Ethics attempts to be the (definitive philosophical) system, but it does not succeed; the clear and distinct account of everything which it presents remains fundamentally hypothetical. As a consequence, its cognitive status is not different from that of the orthodox account.⁶¹

Strauss' critique here is a perennial one, and thus worthy of refutation. For the whole, careful demonstration of how Spinoza's doctrine of political toleration emanates from his metaphysical monism, indeed the deduction of monism itself, amounts to little more than an interesting word game should the fundamental presuppositions behind Spinoza's method be counted as merely hypothetical, merely a free choice on his part. Indeed, it is just this very question of the necessity of Spinoza's rationalist method which will be the linchpin in terms of

⁶¹ Leo Strauss, *Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 70.

accepting or rejecting his overall political theory and doctrine of toleration as, themselves, necessary and valid. It ought not to be surprising, then, that the major critics of Spinoza's system and politics in the twentieth century have focused their objections upon Spinoza's method specifically. For it is only by attacking the basic presuppositions of rationalism (grounded, as Strauss points out above, in the notion of "clear and distinct" ideas) that one can defeat the principles of republicanism, redistribution, sovereignty, and toleration which deductively (if very indirectly) follow.

That there is but one substance, that all finite things including ourselves are modifications of this substance, that all modes are determined by their proximate causes in a deterministic manner – these fundamental aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics must be shown to be the sufficient product of his rationalist method. But more than this; in order to avoid Strauss' charge of the whole system being merely hypothetical, it must be shown that the method is itself necessary – that truths about the world can be secured by the formation of clear and distinct ideas. The very method of Spinozistic rationalism must be shown to be self-asserting in a non-question begging fashion.

Fortunately, Spinoza provides such a demonstration – not primarily in the Ethics, but rather in his Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect in which Spinoza tackles the question of method directly. It is the contention of this dissertation that Spinoza not only outlines his method in the Treatise, but also this method's self-grounding necessity. It is true that the Treatise itself is an early, unfinished work. Additionally, unlike the Ethics, the Treatise is not organized in an absolutely linear, geometrical manner. There are no neatly arranged sets of axioms and definitions from which an orderly procession of propositions and inferences emerge. Nonetheless, it is possible to reconstruct the central arguments in the Treatise in a way which is

not only exegetically faithful, but also philosophically convincing, as well as consonant with the rest of Spinoza's work – especially the Ethics and the TTP.⁶²

This reconstruction, which will occupy the majority of this section, will demonstrate that Spinoza's rationalist method is not only necessary in itself, but moreover sufficient for establishing Spinoza's metaphysical, and in turn, political positions. As such, a proper understanding of the argument found within the Treatise will allow us to see the necessity of Spinoza's political theory and, specifically, his doctrine of political toleration.

What the Treatise must prove

If nothing else, the Treatise must prove the necessity of both substance monism and anti-voluntarism – the very bases of Spinoza's metaphysical, ethical, and political philosophy. Moreover, the Treatise must establish a method for inquiry itself, or in other words, it must establish the correct procedure for discovering any given truth claim – including, but not limited to, the truths of metaphysical monism and anti-voluntarism. Before this, however, the Treatise must first establish a conception of knowledge which is non-question begging. Only if this fundamental task is successful, can the first two tasks possibly be achieved. For an unimpeachable theory of knowledge is a prerequisite for determining the correct method for attaining knowledge. Finally, determining the correct method for apprehending truth is

⁶² Of course, a truly traditional interpreter of Spinoza's work might take the position that the grounding for his rationalist method is fully contained within the geometrical proofs of the *Ethics* itself. Indeed, this must necessarily be the case if the *Ethics* is to be considered at all successful in its stated aim of proving various truths by proceeding only from clear and distinct ideas. I agree with this traditional account. Nonetheless, even if the *Ethics* is entirely self-sufficient, I believe it is nonetheless helpful to the average reader, including myself, to work through the arguments in the *Treatise on the Emendations*, for these *directly*, and in plain language take on the problem of "method" specifically. Again, it is my contention that reviewing these arguments is licit insofar as they are consonant with the rest of Spinoza's mature works. I would argue, in fact, that they amount to a glimpse "behind the scenes" of *Ethics*, Part One – and make the various propositions and proofs more readily intelligible.

obviously a prerequisite for establishing specific truths – notably, the truths of substance monism and anti-voluntarism.

Knowledge as prior to method

Now that we understand what the Treatise is to prove should it be considered successful, we can begin in the most logical place – namely, the Treatise's conception of knowledge. Indeed, Spinoza explicitly denies that we should first search for a method for attaining knowledge of true ideas before understanding what a true idea is. This, he asserts, would lead to an infinite regress – a search for method to guarantee knowledge would itself require a secondary method to guarantee the first, and then a tertiary method to establish the second, and so on. (TIE 36:15-20) The analogy Spinoza uses at this juncture is revealing.

Matters here stand as they do with corporeal tools, where someone might argue in the same way. For to forge iron a hammer is needed; and to have a hammer, it must be made; for this another hammer and other tools are needed; and to have these tools too, other tools will be needed, and so on to infinity; in this way someone might try, in vain, to prove that men have no power of forging iron. But just as men, in the beginning, were able to make the easiest things with the tools they were born with (however laboriously and imperfectly), and once these had been made...[they] reached the point where they accomplished so many and so difficult things with little labor, in the same way the intellect, by its inborn power, makes intellectual tools for itself, by which it acquires other powers for other intellectual works, and from these works still other tools, or the power of searching further, and so proceeds by stages, until it reaches the pinnacle of wisdom.

(TIE 31)

Method is not, and cannot be separate from knowledge. Method can never stand above or prior to knowledge. If one were to posit this, then one automatically commits oneself to the

sort of infinite regress described above. For we would never be able to discover the true method for discovering truth, since we would need some method first for identifying which method is to be considered true. It is exhausting as it is futile. Spinoza contends that such a process (which ultimately leads to a species of skepticism) is therefore misguided and unnecessary. All that is truly required is to acknowledge that we must have some knowledge, (just as we have some ability to work iron) and it is from this knowledge, however humble, that we can develop our method for increasing our apprehension of true ideas. Knowledge must be primary. Yet this seems to bring about a new set of questions, namely: How do we know that we possess some knowledge? What is knowledge? Finally, how do we separate knowledge of true ideas from the mere illusion of knowledge?

We possess some knowledge

The fact that we possess some knowledge is the one fundamental assumption Spinoza makes in the Treatise. Contrary to the claims of his detractors, Leo Strauss first among them, Spinoza does not begin with a laundry list of unaccounted for metaphysical presuppositions from which he deduces the rest of his system. Yet, he does assume this one fact that we do possess some knowledge, and from this fact the rest of his method is produced. It is extremely important to note, however, the nature of this initial assumption. At first, Spinoza does not assume any particular item of knowledge – about nature, substance, the nature of our mind, our own existence, or anything else for that matter. No specific knowledge is assumed. Only the bare fact that some knowledge exists is supposed. Secondly, at least at this initial juncture, Spinoza makes no claim whatsoever regarding our ability to know what, in our minds, counts as knowledge of true ideas and what, on the other hand, merely presents itself as knowledge. Thus, Spinoza's singular assumption is extremely parsimonious. It is not, as Strauss contends, that we

have knowledge of God, or that the universe as a whole is intelligible, or that all things have a definite cause – at least not yet. It is not even that we can identify what little knowledge we have as separate from the multitude of false ideas which we may also possess. All that is claimed thus far is that we must certainly possess some knowledge.

Once we understand the precise nature of this assumption, it is certainly right to ask whether or not this assumption is warranted. Does it depend upon further, unexamined propositions? Can it stand on its own as inherently necessary? Spinoza's answer in the Treatise seems to be that the mere fact of our having some knowledge is necessarily self-evident and requires no additional proof. In other words, those that claim the opposite of this proposition commit themselves to an absurd self-contradiction.

But perhaps, afterwards, some Skeptic would still doubt both the first truth itself and everything we shall deduce according to the standard of the first truth. If so, then either he will speak contrary to his own consciousness, or we shall confess that there are men whose minds are also completely blinded, either from birth, or from prejudices, i.e., because of some external chance. For they are not even aware of themselves. If they affirm or doubt something, they do not know that they affirm or doubt. They say they know nothing, and that that they do not even know that they know nothing. And even this they do not say absolutely. For they are afraid to confess that they exist, so long as they know nothing. In the end, they must be speechless, lest by chance they assume something that might smell of truth.

Finally, there is no speaking of the sciences with them...For if someone proves something to them, they do not know whether the argument is a proof or not. If they deny, grant, or oppose, they do not know that they deny, grant, or oppose. So they must be regarded as automata, completely lacking a mind.

(TIE 47:8-25)

Spinoza's sarcasm here appears warranted once we understand the absolutely parsimonious assumptions which he takes his opponents to be denying. For if Spinoza merely wishes to assert that we possess some knowledge, then the denial of this claim automatically undercuts itself for rather obvious reasons. Namely, how can one deny that we possess some knowledge without, in so doing, commit to making a truth claim?

The Nature of knowledge

It is not sufficient to merely claim that we possess some knowledge. It is necessary to be clear about what knowledge is. In the Treatise, Spinoza can be found to have defined knowledge in three parts. Knowledge means the apprehension of the essence of a given thing. Secondly, the objective essence (or idea) of a thing, in turn, is a thing unto itself. Finally, the true idea of a thing is also that which corresponds to its object. It is necessary to unpack these concepts in order to see their connections to one another, as well as the further implications which Spinoza draws from them:

1) To possess knowledge means for the mind to possess a thing's objective essence, or in other words, to apprehend the true definition or idea of a given thing. (Treatise 35:1-3) This statement is analytic. Knowledge implies the apprehension of the idea of some given entity – extant or otherwise. As demonstrated above, one cannot oppose the assertion that we possess some knowledge without lapsing into absurdity. Yet knowledge just is the possession of true ideas either of existent or non-existent things. (So, for instance, we may have knowledge of an actual, extant dog or we may have knowledge of a perfect equilateral triangle which can never exist in material form). The upshot, though, is that since we must have some knowledge, we must therefore possess an understanding of at least one thing's true essence. Moreover, it should

be understood that knowing a thing's true definition does not merely denote knowledge of one or another feature of a thing; it is rather to know its reason for existing in the manner that it does.

(TIE 72:12-29) So, to illustrate, knowing the proper definition of a dog cannot merely amount to the proposition that dogs have fleas or that they bark. Rather, a true definition of a dog (whatever that may be) should tell us how dogs come to exist as they do, i.e. what makes a dog a dog – and nothing else.

2) The idea of a thing has a reality of its own. It can be understood as a thing distinct from its object, or in other words, its *ideatum*. Simply put, the idea or definition of a given thing is not the thing itself. The definition of a circle is not itself round, and the idea of weight is not itself heavy. (TIE 33) Again, this is uncontroversial. Ideas have a reality of their own apart from their objects.

3) Although the essences (ideas) of things are distinct from their respective *ideata*, true ideas correspond to their *ideata*. This, again, sounds to be more controversial than it actually is. The claim here is not that all of the impressions and notions in our head correspond to extant things in nature in a one-to-one pattern of correspondence. Spinoza is not a naive realist in this sense. All this proposition affirms is that any objective essence of a thing corresponds to its ideatum. For instance, the objective essence of a triangle (or in other words, the true definition of a triangle) denotes a two dimensional object composed of three non-parallel line segments connected at their end points. The ideatum of this idea, i.e. the triangle itself, will itself have these properties as just described. Indeed, it is only this agreement or correspondence which makes a definition of a thing its definition. Or, to use Spinoza's preferred terminology, it is only this sort of correspondence which makes the objective essence of a thing its objective essence, (i.e. its *idea*). Again, this is a fairly non-controversial, and I would venture to say, analytic

claim. Simply put, ideas are true ideas just in case they correspond to their *ideata*. An idea is counted as false just in case it does not correspond to its ideatum. (TIE 35)

In summation, knowledge means the apprehension of a given thing's essence (i.e. its true idea or definition). Moreover, a true idea, (i.e. objective essence, or definition) is such just in case it corresponds to its given object. Finally, objective essences, definitions, or ideas are not themselves their ideata or objects – rather they have their own reality as ideas. It is upon this tripartite conception of knowledge, combined with the earlier assertion that we, in fact, possess some knowledge, that Spinoza demonstrates the remainder of his rationalist method.

Analysis of true ideas

All that has been established thus far is that individuals have some knowledge. Moreover, since knowledge means the apprehension of true ideas which correspond to their ideata, then we can make the further conclusion that individuals have knowledge of at least one actual essence in reality. In short, the fact that we possess within our mind some knowledge or objective essence, combined with the fact that objective essences correspond to their ideata in reality, means that we possess some knowledge about at least one thing in reality. Put otherwise, at least one thing in reality is a known thing.

The new problem becomes, therefore, not one of global skepticism, but rather the separation of actual knowledge from those ideas which merely masquerade as knowledge. In other words, what is now needed is a method for the sorting out ideas that actually correspond to their objects from ideas which we mistakenly believe correspond to their object, but in reality do not.

Spinoza achieves this method for identification via a negative argument regarding false and fictitious ideas. A false or fictitious idea is one which does not correspond to any actual essence in reality. Spinoza then asks under what specific conditions the human intellect could arrive at such a non-corresponding idea. His answer is that all ideas which are false, which do not correspond to any essence in reality, must come about through the mistaken perception of complex ideas. Thus, a simple idea cannot, in itself, be anything other than true as all false ideas must be complex.

Before continuing, it is important to pin down two terms which Spinoza often makes use of in close proximity to one another – “fictional” and “false.” For Spinoza, a fictional idea is simply an idea whose object is feigned to exist. In other words, we pretend, while knowing that we are merely pretending or positing, that a given thing exists. For instance, we can imagine a unicorn without actually believing in unicorns. By contrast, a false idea is one in which there is actual confusion involved. We apply a real, mental assent to a given idea that does not correspond to any essence in reality.

...every perception is either of a thing considered as existing, or of an essence alone, and since fictions occur more frequently concerning things considered as existing, I shall speak first of them – i.e., where existence alone is feigned, and the thing which is feigned in such an act is understood, *or* assumed to be understood.

(TIE 5:23-27)

...between fictitious and false ideas there is no other difference except that the latter suppose assent; i.e. (as we have already noted), while the presentations appear to him [who has the false idea], there appear no causes from which he can infer [as he who is

feigning can] that they do not arise from things outside him. And this is hardly anything but dreaming with eyes open, *or* while we are awake.⁶³

(TIE 66:24-29)

Of course, the truly pernicious class of ideas is false ideas. It is the ever-present specter of false ideas, i.e. ideas in which we are truly mistaken about the nature of things, which leads to skepticism. Yet, it is Spinoza's argument in the Treatise that false ideas are really similar to rather harmless fictitious ideas in one important respect. Namely, both fictitious and false ideas are made possible by the mind's confused and hurried apprehension of a complex notion.

And since a fictitious idea cannot be clear and distinct, but only confused, and since all confusion results from the fact that the mind knows only in part a thing that is a whole, or composed of many things, and does not distinguish the known from the unknown, [and, besides, attends at once., without making any distinction, to the many things that are contained in each thing], from this it follows, first, that if an idea is of something most simple, it can only be clear and distinct. For that thing will have to become known, not in part, but either as a whole or not at all.

Secondly, it follows that if, in thought, we divide a thing that is composed of many things into all its most simple parts, and attend to each of these separately, all confusion will disappear.

Thirdly, it follows that a fiction cannot be simple, but that it is made from the composition of many confused ideas, which are different things and actions existing in nature; or rather, from attending at once, without assent, to such different ideas.

(TIE 63:15-29)

⁶³ Parentheses and Bracketing are reproduced here as they are in the original text as translated and edited by Edwin Curley.

The creation of un-true ideas (whether false or fictitious) comes about when the mind, being finite, promiscuously, “attends at once, without making any distinction, to the many things that are contained in each thing” with no regard or distinction between what is actually known and what is not. The mind can only accomplish such a feat, of course, when it attempts to apprehend complex ideas and concepts. For absolutely simple ideas cannot be understood “promiscuously” and in a hurried or confused manner just because they are absolutely simple. They lack multiple parts which can potentially misguide the intellect. Consequently, while not all complex ideas are false or fictitious, certainly all false or fictitious ideas are complex.

Therefore, the method for avoiding false ideas must be analysis – namely, the breaking down of indistinct, confused, and complex ideas into their simplest constituent parts. For once this process of analysis is achieved, then only simple, and therefore necessarily true ideas can remain. And since they are simple, these ideas will necessarily correspond to a given ideatum or object in reality. In other words, they must be true ideas, definitions, or put otherwise, the true essence of a given thing in reality.

Therefore, Spinoza’s way around skepticism is rather similar to the contemporary approach of Donald Davidson.⁶⁴ Spinoza believes he can achieve correspondence knowledge through an evaluation of an idea’s coherence. In other words, since ideas have reality in themselves, and true ideas correspond to their ideata, and since all simple ideas must be true (i.e. correspondent), then all one needs to do is identify simple ideas, and this will guarantee that they are true ideas – i.e. correspond to their object in reality. Additionally, this method avoids Descartes assertion that one requires a benevolent God or some other divine guarantor to

⁶⁴ Floris Van Der Berg, *Davidson and Spinoza: Mind, Matter, and Morality* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 44-61.

underwrite the veracity of our clear and distinct ideas. Likewise, we need not fear an evil demon who implants in us false knowledge. (TIE 79:13) For a clear and distinct idea is necessarily a true idea which corresponds to its object in reality, and so simple ideas (which are always clear and distinct) may serve as absolutely secure foundations of knowledge.

Why does simplicity guarantee truth?

Yet one may ask just why the simplicity of an idea guarantees its truth? It may well be the case that complex ideas are apt to confuse the intellect since the intellect can be overwhelmed, so to speak, by the multifarious nature of such concepts. Still, if truth for Spinoza means correspondence to a thing in reality, whatever reason do we have for assuming that all simple ideas correspond to real objects in this manner?

The answer relates back to the very definition of knowledge. An idea is true just in case it corresponds to its ideatum. Yet a false idea which is simple would have no possible object in reality whatsoever. Any given idea's object is either capable of being understood in isolation, i.e. in and through itself, or understanding a given idea's object is dependent upon the comprehension of some other idea of which the first is dependent. However the object of a completely simple, false idea could neither be understood through itself, nor through some other idea. (i.e. It cannot be understood through itself because it is false, and it cannot be understood through some other idea because it is simple.)

Of course it is easy to think of how complex, false ideas can come about. The mind is finite and can be overwhelmed by many true ideas which, through the mind's promiscuity, it "misassembles" so to speak. The mind takes many true ideas, ideas which correspond to some object in reality, and mis-combines them. That is how fictions most often come about. What is a

unicorn but the mind feigning that a horse can grow a horn. And of course both the relatively simple idea of a horse and a horn are true ideas, namely, ideas which correspond to some object in reality. The fiction comes about through a mis-assembling of ideas. (Note the similarity to the argument in Plato's Theatetus). A false idea, one where we mentally assent to a fiction, and so are actually deluded, thus will come about for the very same reasons. Multiple simple ideas are falsely combined, because of the relative feebleness of the mind, to form an ill-assembled and confused, complex idea.

Yet it is hard, (actually impossible), to conceive of a false or fictitious idea which is wholly simple. And this is very much the point. Namely, it is impossible to conceive of a simple yet false idea. For, as we have said, such an idea would necessarily correspond to no thing in reality. It could neither be conceived in itself, nor through some other assemblage of ideas. A simple, clear and distinct false idea cannot even be thought. Therefore all false ideas must be complex, and all simple ideas (i.e. non-complex ideas) must be true (i.e. not false). The intellect simply cannot have the capacity for constructing false ideas which are at the same time simple. For these ideas are, strictly, unintelligible – they defy the nature of knowledge itself.

In one particularly dramatic passage of the Treatise, Spinoza proceeds to analyze what such a scenario would amount to – namely, a situation in which the soul could produce and assent to simple ideas which are, nonetheless, not true. His answer is that this would require a soul with a god-like free will:

Evidently, they say that the soul can sense and perceive in many ways, not itself, nor the things that exist, but only things that are neither in itself nor anywhere; that is, the soul can, by its own force alone, create sensations or ideas, which are not of things; so they

consider it, to some extent, as like God.⁶⁵ Next, they say that we, or our soul, have such a freedom that it compels us, or itself, indeed its own freedom. For after it has feigned something, and offered its assent to it, it cannot think or feign it in any other way, and is also compelled by that fiction so that even other things are thought in such a way as not to conflict with the first fiction, just as here too because of their own fiction, they are forced to admit the absurdities which I review here, and which we shall not bother to refute with any demonstrations.

(TIE 60:13-23)

Such a soul would have the power not only to conjure ideas from nowhere and for no reason, but also to reign in its own absolute freedom so as to make all of its false ideas cohere with one another. (It is important to note, however, that for Spinoza's illustration to not beg the question, then the absurdity of such a soul must count as merely an illustration. That is, the absurdity of such a soul is implied by the impossibility of simple yet false ideas – and not the inverse, namely, that simple yet false ideas are impossible because such a free soul is absurd.)

In short, an absolutely free intellect, one which proceeds without sufficient reason and can create ideas *ex nihilo*, without sufficient reason or cause, cannot exist for the simple fact that (as per the singular assumption of Spinoza) we possess some knowledge. Since we possess some knowledge, and knowledge means the possession of true ideas which correspond to their ideata, then false yet simple ideas are actually impossible. And, finally, since false yet simple ideas are actually impossible, then the soul cannot have the freedom to create them.

From analysis to deduction

⁶⁵ Here the Elwes translation is superior to the above cited Curley translation in conveying the intended meaning. For Spinoza cannot mean that such a voluntaristic will is, in any way, "like God" who, as per the *Ethics*, is repeatedly said to be "free" only inasmuch as he acts according to his own *necessity*. Rather, these people who affirm voluntarism imagine, as Elwes translates, their soul to be "as a sort of god" – namely, as resembling the qualities of some confused and fragmented conception of a given deity – certainly *not* Spinoza's God as seen in the *Ethics*. The above capitalization somewhat obscures this distinction.

It is important to note, however, that this is only half of Spinoza's method. The search for simple (and thus true) ideas is really only the prerequisite for philosophical inquiry. For once this is achieved, namely, once we are in certain possession of one or more true idea, then it becomes possible to draw conclusions from said ideas. In other words, deduction becomes a possibility. We can move beyond mere analysis and positively construct a whole complex of knowledge on a solid foundation of simple, true ideas. Thus, the whole of Spinoza's method consists in the breaking down (via analysis) our indistinct, cloudy, and complex ideas into certain, simple, and thus true ideas. Then, we can deduce from these certainly true ideas a whole host of further assertions with equal certainty. In short, Spinoza's method involves a disintegration followed by a reconstitution of ideas already present to the mind.

How is deduction to proceed? Again, we refer to Spinoza's caution against seeking a whole method prior to reflecting on the knowledge we have. The method of deduction from true ideas comes about from reflecting on the content of these very ideas – and not before this!

From this it may be inferred that Method is nothing but a reflexive knowledge, or an idea of an idea; and because there is no idea of an idea, unless there is first an idea, there will be no Method unless there is first an idea. So that Method will be good which shows how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of the given true idea.

(TIE 38:1-4)

Once a given true idea is established, it will be possible to examine its essence, i.e. the content of its definition. From this content, it will be seen what can be concluded, i.e. what this definition (along with the definitions of all other simple ideas) implies.

Section Two: Spinoza's Rationalist Method and Toleration

We already have a sense that the principle of sufficient reason (hereafter referred to as simply the PSR) is somehow at work within Spinoza's system. Indeed, in the preceding sections it was shown to be indispensable for the deduction of propositions about human nature, ethics, and the state. But where does it come in exactly when it comes to Spinoza's underlying method? Is it merely a presupposition, something taken for granted, or as patently obvious, by Spinoza? This is the position taken by Don Garrett in his insightful 1979 article on Spinoza's ontological argument from *The Philosophical Review*.⁶⁶ Here, Garrett argues that the third axiom of Part One of the *Ethics*, namely: "From a given definite cause an effect necessarily follows; and, on the other hand, if no definite cause be granted, it is impossible that an effect can follow," should be read liberally as Spinoza's fully fledged principle of sufficient reason. Specifically, Garrett takes the axiom to mean that all things, essences, and events in nature, in fact, have a sufficient cause for their existence and that if no definite cause be granted, it is impossible that any effect in nature can follow.⁶⁷ In other words, Garrett's expansive reading of Axiom III takes Spinoza to be making a universal, metaphysical claim about all of extant (and in fact possible) nature. In short, everything which exists, or fails to exist, has in nature a sufficient cause for its existence or non-existence.

To be perfectly clear, I do not disagree with Garrett that Spinoza ultimately affirms such a claim. Indeed, this claim of the universality of the PSR is indispensable to the rest of Spinoza's philosophy. I also may not disagree that Spinoza, even at this early point in the *Ethics*, means to make such a robust metaphysical assertion – though I believe there is some evidence to the

⁶⁶Don Garrett, "Spinoza's 'Ontological' Argument," *The Philosophical Review* 88 no. 2 (1979): 198-223.

⁶⁷Ibid., 202.

contrary. (For instance, Axiom III comes well before 1 Proposition 11 in which the actual existence of one infinite substance, i.e. God or Nature, is proved. It is unclear how Spinoza is supposed to convincingly assert a universal character of Nature – namely sufficient reason, causality, universal determinism – before establishing the actual existence of universal Nature itself, i.e. monism.) Rather, what I am more interested in doing here is to interpret (or reconstruct) Spinoza’s argument so as to be 1) generally consonant with his original intent, and 2) sufficiently convincing – even in the face of contemporary criticism.

The Completion of Spinoza’s method: PSR, God, and universal intelligibility

It is for this reason that I interpret Axiom III more narrowly. Namely, I take Spinoza to be making not a universal, metaphysical claim, but rather something closer to an epistemological claim. (Or, at least, this is what Spinoza ought to be doing.) Such a claim should be understood as, “Whatsoever we know (i.e. whatsoever is intelligible) as an effect is necessarily the product of a definite cause.”

My motivation for making this claim about Axiom III is twofold – first, it avoids some of the more common critiques of Spinoza’s method, and second, it is fully consonant with much of what Spinoza claims about knowledge within the Treatise, his primary work on method. To the first point, it should be recalled that the major criticism of Spinoza’s metaphysical “discoveries” is that they are not discoveries at all, but rather are simply stipulated by definition, imposed upon nature by fiat, as it were. Counting Axiom III as a (comparatively humble) epistemological principle does much to silence this sort of objection. Moreover, as we shall see, it does so without sacrificing any of the further deductions Spinoza eventually wishes to make – regarding universal causal determinism, monism, and so on.

For claiming that all events we know of are the product of definite causes is simply entailed by the above definition of knowledge as taken from the Treatise. Namely, to know the essence or definition of something is to know, not its accidental properties, but rather the reason it exists as it does. Alternatively, it is stated just as well in Axiom IV of Part One, “The knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of a cause.” Since knowledge of something is always knowledge of its essence (and not its accidental properties), then it follows that all knowledge we have of a given thing involves the sufficient cause or reason for that thing’s existence. This is best explained in an oft-cited excerpt from the Treatise:

If a circle, for example, is defined as a figure in which the lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal, no one fails to see that such a definition does not at all explain the essence {i.e. definition} of the circle, but only a property of it...If the thing is created, the definition, as we have said, will have to include the proximate cause. E.g., according to this law, a circle would have to be defined as follows: it is the figure that is described by any line of which one end is fixed and the other is moveable. This definition clearly includes the proximate cause.

(TIE 95:33 - 96:16)

So, insofar as we know what a circle is, insofar as circles are intelligible to us, then we likewise comprehend how a circle is created – how it comes to exist as it does. Again, there need not yet be any universal, metaphysical claims made. For instance, universal causal determinism has not, at this point, been posited. It is merely asserted that, because of the nature of knowledge itself, that is, because of the very concept of intelligibility, anything we know must involve the knowledge of a thing’s given cause – either itself or something else.⁶⁸ This is good

⁶⁸ Note that the “cause,” in this sense, is understood as the eternal and not particular cause – see TIE 100.

inasmuch as it escapes the standard, oft repeated critique of Spinoza's system – i.e. that it simply stipulates things into existence. Contrary to this objection, all that we have thus far is a transcendental assertion about the necessary nature of our knowledge – i.e. that which is intelligible to us.

Of course, the limitation of all this is that it leaves the door wide open for sophisticated anti-rationalists to claim, as Strauss and others indeed do, that while we certainly have some knowledge, and that this knowledge is understood causally and in accord with notions of sufficient reason; all of this says nothing about the universe as a whole. Strauss would contend that there is still plenty of room for an entire universe which lies infinitely beyond our rational comprehension, and thus, there is potentially an entire expanse of creation which does not, itself, obey any of our preconceived rational rules – even those as basic as physical cause and effect. In other words, the principle of sufficient reason is perhaps useful for us, for our limited human knowledge, yet it has no right to lay claim to the whole of existence. Thus, while we have said something about what we humans find intelligible, we have said nothing about the intelligibility of the universe at large.

This is why, in my estimation, a second step is needed. We once again look back to the very nature of knowledge and see, as well, that it is necessary that we do actually possess some knowledge, i.e. some true idea. Additionally, we recall that, as per above, if we possess any knowledge at all, it must at the very least include a perfectly simple idea. For, with regard to the previous discussion, it is only perfectly simple ideas which we certainly know to be true. Moreover, unless we know an idea to be true, then we certainly cannot claim to actually know it. This may sound opaque, and so an illustration may be in order. Recall that Spinoza denies that it

is necessary to first “know that we know something” in order to claim knowledge. Rather, the inverse is true:

...it is evident that to understand the essence of Peter, it is not necessary to understand an idea of Peter, much less an idea of an idea of Peter. This is the same as if I said that, in order for me to know, it is not necessary to know that I know, much less necessary to know that I know that I know...Indeed, in these ideas the opposite is the case. For to know that I know, I must first know.

(TIE 34:30-6)

So, if I do possess some knowledge (as was argued above) it follows that I actually, already know what knowledge I have. It simply makes no sense for me to go about claiming knowledge and, subsequently, claim that I do not know what, specifically, I know. Put otherwise, to claim that I have some knowledge is to also claim (at least implicitly) what I have knowledge of. (Though, again, this may merely be implicit and come about only through prolonged introspection). Put in yet another way: To posit that I have some knowledge, yet no idea what that knowledge is, is simply absurd. (This idea is reconfirmed within 2 Proposition 43 of the Ethics: “He who has a true idea at the same time knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing.”)

Now, if I do indeed know a given thing, then I consequently know what I know. Yet, as established above, the only way I can know something with certainty is if the idea of that thing is either 1) perfectly simple or 2) adequately deduced from other, perfectly simple ideas. Clearly, then, since we must know something, we must actually know a perfectly simple thing – if nothing else.

Additionally, as also derived from our basic understanding of knowledge itself, knowledge of a perfectly simple thing entails that this idea is entirely comprehended in and through itself. Further, if an idea of a thing is comprehended entirely in and through itself, then the actual object of this idea must exist independent of anything else. (For, as earlier established, knowledge of a thing is to know the cause or reason for its existing as it does.) In other words, this object must exist in and through itself – i.e. be its own sufficient cause for existing. What is important to note here is the conceptual connection between the notions of “simplicity” and “self-causation.” Since knowledge is nothing other than knowing the sufficient cause of something, then the only absolutely simple ideas we can have (i.e. ideas which are *sui generis*) are ideas of objects which are themselves likewise simple, and thus self-caused (i.e. *sui generis*).

The ultimate conclusion of all of this is that we necessarily possess the true idea of a thing which is self-caused. However, this is simply the idea of substance itself. (E 1 Definition 3) We are thus sure that a thing actually exists that is self-caused, for we must have some simple idea, and simple ideas cannot fail to be true.

It is only at this point that Spinoza’s metaphysical propositions can be asserted in a non question-begging manner. For the actual existence of a self-caused substance (as per the various proofs in Ethics I) entails a substance which is infinite, unitary, expresses an infinite number of attributes, and thus is not coexistent with any other such substances. Rather, all finite things which exist, exist as mere modifications of this one, necessarily extant substance.

Here, in the process of ideas and concepts, is where Spinoza can rightly assert the principle of sufficient reason as a universally applicable law, both in terms of thought and

physical causation.⁶⁹ For once it is established that a universal and infinite substance exists, and we, as finite beings, subsist within it; it follows that intelligible nature knows no bounds. In other words, we have apodictic certainty that there is nothing outside of Nature, and, insofar as Nature is an intelligible thing (indeed, the most intelligible thing since entirely simple), then nothing can exist which is outside the scope of intelligibility.

Ontological or Cosmological?

Does this reconstruction of Spinoza's argument qualify as a properly "ontological" argument? In other words, is the above a strictly *a priori* argument? Perhaps and perhaps not: If one takes an ontological argument to be one which establishes the existence of God solely by analyzing a stipulated definition of God, then what I have just set out may not qualify. For intrinsic to the above argument is an analysis of knowledge or intelligibility itself, and not merely the bare definition of "God as a necessarily existing thing" alone. Of course, the perennial weakness of such ontological arguments, as Kant points out, is that existence is not a predicate of ideas, and so simply stipulating that "x is a thing which necessarily exists" is not (on its own) sufficient to claim that "x in-fact exists." Rather, the veracity of the first statement (by way of showing its simplicity) has to be affirmed through an analysis of the nature of knowledge itself.

Yet, the above argument is not exactly a cosmological (i.e. *a posteriori*) argument either. For it does not rest upon the premise of the actual existence of one or another experienced thing.

⁶⁹ Indeed, one should note that even though Ethics 1 Axiom 3 *appears* to offer a full fledged principle of sufficient reason (a principle, according to Garrett with universal existential import), it is not until 1 Proposition 29 that the non-contingent (i.e. deterministic) nature of the universe is actually affirmed. What's more (giving, I think, further credence to my reconstruction above), the way in which determinism (*in Nature*) is established in 1 Proposition 29's demonstration is via an appeal to the fact that all finite things (i.e. the modes) exist within God, and thus within God's intelligible nature.

Note that, for instance, it does not rely upon the premise that “we have knowledge of a particular finite mode,” or “we experience motion in the world.” Rather, the existence of God is produced immediately as a result of the idea of knowledge itself – not mediately by way of the known existence of a particular knowing being, or of a particular existing thing. In fact, far from proceeding from the idea of a finite thing to the conclusion of God’s existence; the above proof asserts the knowledge of God’s actual existence as necessarily primary in our thoughts, and it is from this primary truth that all other truths are subsequently deduced.

So the only existential premise involves the existence of knowledge. It is only that the nature of knowledge itself yields the result that whatever extant knowledge we may have must include the idea of a simple (and therefore self-caused) entity. In this way, the above argument is not precisely *a posteriori* inasmuch as it does not proceed from the existence of a particular thing, yet it escapes the pitfall of most ontological arguments inasmuch as it does not proceed from a stipulated definition alone. Again, it is the very concept of knowledge (of intelligibility) which entails the existence of a self-caused thing, and in turn, it is the established existence of a self-caused thing which entails universal intelligibility.

Nonetheless, within proposition eleven of Part One, Spinoza does offer what he explicitly identifies as an *a posteriori* argument to bolster the (comparatively) *a priori* arguments which precede it. Moreover, within his personal letters, Spinoza puts forth an even more overtly cosmological argument for God’s existence. Indeed, Spinoza does not so much craft the argument himself. He rather examines and critiques Scholastic interpretations of Peripatetic (i.e. Aristotelian) arguments for the existence of God.

But I should like it first to be observed here, that the later Peripatetics have, I think, misunderstood the proof given by the ancients who sought to demonstrate the existence of God. This, as I find it in a certain Jew named Rabbi Ghasdai, runs as follows: - 'If there be an infinite series of causes, all things which are, are caused. But nothing which is caused can exist necessarily in virtue of its own nature. Therefore there is nothing in nature, to whose essence existence necessarily belongs. But this is absurd. Therefore, the premise is absurd also.' Hence, the force of the argument lies not in the impossibility of an actual infinite or an infinite series of causes; but only in the absurdity of the assumption that things, which do not necessarily exist by nature, are not conditioned for existence by a thing, which does by its own nature necessarily exist.⁷⁰

Note that Spinoza here critiques the Thomistic interpretation of Aristotle's argument. Namely the positive existence of a prime mover (or God) does not rest upon the absurdity of an infinite number of causes and effects (i.e. an actual infinity). Spinoza is clear that he affirms actual infinities. (Indeed, Aristotle himself seems to have affirmed the notion of an eternal world in his "argument from motion" as seen in his *Physics*.⁷¹) As such, no theistic personality is required to spark creation at the "beginning of time." Rather, asserts Spinoza, what the existence of finite causes and effects entails is the necessity of an "un moved mover" in the sense of an ever-present being which causes and conditions all things to exist, as they do, at all times. In other words, the perception of contingent causes and effects suggests (as per E 1 Proposition 18) a God which is the "indwelling and not transient cause of all things."⁷² The whole infinite chain of causes and effects must, itself, be conditioned to exist as it does by some necessary being – though this being need not be remote.

If this understanding of the cosmological argument yet remains cloudy, there is a far simpler reading of it from the Early Modern period. Namely, this same concept is presented in

⁷⁰ Benedictus De Spinoza, "Selected Letters" in *Improvement of the Understanding, Ethics and Correspondence*, Letter XXIX.

⁷¹ See, Aristotle, *Physics*, ed. David Bostock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), Book VIII.

⁷² For the sake of clarity I again make use of the Elwes translation of the given proposition.

Part IX of David Hume's Dialogue's Concerning Natural Religion. The argument is mouthed by Demea, a buffoon of a character which the empiricist Hume creates and casts as the stereotypical rationalist or "dogmatist," comically going about insisting upon the necessity of God. In this part, Demea presents a cosmological (*a posteriori*) argument in favor of God's existence which mirrors with near precision that argument Spinoza makes within his above-excerpted letter to Lewis Meyer⁷³:

The argument, replied *Demea*, which I would insist on, is the common one. Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for any thing to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence... **In the infinite chain or succession of causes and effects, each single effect is determined to exist by the power and efficacy of that cause which immediately preceded; but the whole eternal chain or succession, taken together, is not determined or caused by any thing; and yet it is evident that it requires a cause or reason**, as much as any particular object which begins to exist in time... We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily-existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself, and who cannot be supposed not to exist, without an express contradiction. There is, consequently, such a Being, that is, there is a Deity.⁷⁴

Again, the basic line of reasoning is that, given knowledge of any series of causes and effects, there must be some reason, some underlying basis for this series' existence. One finite thing may have been affected by another, and so on and so forth to infinity. Yet any given finite thing cannot be explained wholly through its being proximately affected by another. So of

⁷³ In point of fact, Hume's character of Demea is based upon Samuel Clark, and his cosmological argument as expressed in his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705). While he was familiar with Spinoza and somewhat shared in his rationalism, Clark often took to opposing Spinoza's views on religion in his work, *Truth and Certainly of the Christian Revelation*.

⁷⁴ David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2007), 63-64.

course we can imagine that all finite things are affected to exist by other finite beings (as their proximate cause). Children are born from parents, statues are carved by sculptors from blocks of stone, and so forth. Indeed, Spinoza affirms all of this. (E 2 Proposition 7) That is, Spinoza wholly affirms actual infinities and an actually infinite chain of proximate causes and effects. Yet, proximate causes do not “create” their effects. Children are not “created” by their parents, and likewise, statues are not “created” by their respective blocks of stone *in fieri*. Rather, children are born and statues are carved. That is, children come about because of the modification of extended matter. They grow and gestate within their mother, absorb nutrients, assimilate them, and so on. Statues, likewise, are in some sense created by artists. However, a clearer conception of statue-making reveals the modification of extended matter. Nothing is created so much as it is modified. “Cause and effect” does not involve *creatio ex nihilo*, but rather the transformation of matter (i.e. extension). In each case, there is necessarily in the mind an underlying existence (i.e. an unbroken blanket of reality, understood as extension and idea) which allows blocks of stone, parents, children, and statues to exist at all. Even an infinite chain of causes and effects does not eliminate the conceptual necessity of and underlying, eternal Nature which conditions all things to exist as they do.

An interesting illustration of this conception of “indwelling” rather than “transient” creation is provided by George Hayward Joyce (SJ) in his Principles of Natural Theology: “...not only does a candle produce light in a room in the first instance, but its continued presence is necessary if the illumination is to continue. If it is removed, the light ceases.⁷⁵” This goes to the difference between causation *in esse* and causation *in fieri* – and thus the difference between the original Peripatetic argument for God’s necessary existence (which Spinoza affirms), and the

⁷⁵ George Hayward Joyce, *Principles of Natural Theology* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1924), 59.

medieval interpretations of this argument by the theistic Scholastics (which Spinoza identifies as erroneous)⁷⁶. Namely, the perception of finite objects within the illuminated room point to the persisting existence of the illumination itself. It does not, by contrast, suggest that the room must have at one time been illuminated. The same principle holds for Spinoza's *in esse* versions of the cosmological argument. Namely, as stated above, the perception of finite things in the universe entails the persisting existence of an underlying reality which conditions those things, and indeed makes them at all intelligible.

In the Treatise, Spinoza has his own apt candle analogy:

It remains for us to consider hypotheses made in problems, which sometimes involve impossibilities. (2) For instance, when we say ... that this burning candle ...burns in some imaginary space, or where there are no physical objects. (3) Such assumptions are freely made, though the last is clearly seen to be impossible... In {this} case I have merely to abstract my thoughts from the objects surrounding the candle, for the mind to devote itself to the contemplation of the candle singly looked at in itself only; I can then draw the conclusion that the candle contains in itself no causes for its own destruction, so that if there were no physical objects the candle, and even the flame, would remain unchangeable, and so on.

(TIE 57)

The above illustration amounts to yet another cosmological argument argued, this time around, as a *reductio as absurdum*. We may have a given perception of a lit candle. Yet it is impossible to consider the candle and flame as abstracted wholly from any other material

⁷⁶ Of course George Joyce, himself, being a member of the Society of Jesus, likely intends his above cited metaphor as a defense of *both* creation *in esse* and creation *in fieri* as is the orthodox belief within the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, the book from which this text is excerpted is *explicitly* meant as a philosophical defense of theism. Nonetheless, a good metaphor is one which can be redeployed for means other than those originally intended.

objects. If we do so, we thereby posit the lit candle to have the properties of God, or substance – namely, self-causation, infinitude and indestructibility. However, this is, as Spinoza puts it, “impossible.” Once again, the conclusion remains the same: The perception of any given, finite thing implies the actual existence of necessary being. As such, in the explicitly *a posteriori* portion of 1 Proposition 11, Spinoza states:

To be able not to exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power (as is known through itself). So, if what now necessarily exists are only finite beings, then finite beings are more powerful than an absolutely infinite Being. But this, as is known through itself, is absurd. So, either nothing exists, or an absolutely infinite Being also exists. But we exist, either in ourselves, or in something else, which necessarily exists. Therefore an absolutely infinite Being – i.e., God - necessarily exists, q.e.d.

(E 1 Proposition 11)

Again, the *a posteriori* argument concludes that knowledge of any finite thing implies the existence of a necessary, infinite being inasmuch as finite things cannot be conceived abstracted from the rest of reality, and moreover, an infinite series of finite things does not solve this problem. For an infinite series of finite things, just as a single finite thing, implies the existence of an underlying reality which conditions all things to exist as they do. In both the *a posteriori* arguments, as well as my reconstructed *a priori* argument, we notice that knowledge (either of a particular thing, or simply knowledge considered in itself) implies the actual existence of infinite nature, or substance. Moreover, we have seen that it is this existence of substance which, in turn, guarantees a universe without gaps, pauses, or edges. In other words, basic intelligibility entails the existence of infinite Nature, and infinite Nature implies the universality of intelligibility.

Conclusion: The Relationship of reason to toleration

The intelligibility of the whole universe was seen in the previous section to be self-asserting in a non question-begging manner. The only premise necessary to secure it is the existence and nature of knowledge itself. What this reveals is that knowledge itself, *reason itself*, is not merely formal and receptive. Rather, it is full of content. It carries metaphysical, social, political, and ethical implications.

Of particular consequence for us is that toleration is built upon this foundation of an intelligible universe (i.e. a monistic universe subject to the principle of sufficient reason). Recall that the impetus for self-emancipation from the passions, the combination with others into the state, and the ethical identification with the other all rest upon this same foundation. Namely, this is the foundation of a common universe, a common rational order, and the common feature amongst all human beings of a rational comprehension of this order.

Indeed, the more basic conception of egoism itself and the conception of positive liberty which emerges from it are, as well, tied to this irrefutable notion of a universally intelligible Nature, subject to the principle of sufficient reason. For it is precisely because all effects are the result of a specific cause that human freedom and volition cannot be understood as apart from the intellect, i.e. it cannot be understood in a voluntaristic manner. There are no uncaused decisions. There are only those decisions which follow from our nature (i.e. our intellect) and those which do not follow from our nature (i.e. are produced externally by the general order of things). Freedom, then, is understood as the actual power to act according to our nature precisely because of this overall context of an intelligible universe.

Toleration, while socially vital, is conceptually-speaking merely the symptom or effect of this more basic conception of positive liberty. For the desire to live free, to express oneself according to the dictates of reason, mandates the creation of stable states, and stability is only undermined by wide political intolerance. More than this, on the normative level, we tolerate others because we see in them the same rational nature as we see in ourselves. Indeed, the monism of this intelligible universe mandates that we see no substantial difference between ourselves and others – for it is basic to such an intelligible universe that we are not substances ourselves, but rather modifications of one substance, universal to all. We therefore directly desire the welfare of others just as we necessarily desire our own welfare.

Of course, the striking thing about this conception of toleration is that it is based in what is common and universal, as opposed to what is distinct and diverse amongst peoples. We will see in the following chapters that this “social monism” has fallen largely out of favor, and that contemporary proponents of toleration have increasingly sought to ground their respective theories upon, not what is common amongst human beings, but rather an innate respect for differences in identity.

Social monism is replaced with a social pluralism. However, it is the contention of this work that all social and political doctrines are really metaphysical in nature. One cannot consistently affirm a social pluralism, a real plurality of identities, without its correlate – namely, metaphysical pluralism. In other words, one cannot consistently assert the reality and import of societal differences without also assigning to these some sort of substantial, metaphysical reality.

Yet if monism is what undergirds positive liberty and a consistent doctrine of toleration, and if monism is itself the inherent product of basic reason, then it follows that the denial of

monism is not only destructive of the abovementioned political ideals, but it is also destructive of reason itself. In short, while pluralism may often be conflated with toleration, they are in fact intrinsically incompatible. The grafting of one concept onto the other is an inherently unstable synthesis which cannot persist for long.

CHAPTER THREE: SARTRE and Social Pluralism

“Jewish authenticity consists in choosing oneself as Jew – that is, in realizing one’s Jewish condition. The authentic Jew abandons the myth of the universal man; he knows himself and wills himself into history as a historic and damned creature; he ceases to run away from himself and to be ashamed of his own kind. He understands that society is bad; for the naive monism of the inauthentic Jew he substitutes a social pluralism.”⁷⁷

Jean-Paul Sartre is renowned as a novelist, a playwright, and a political activist just as often as he is recognized as a philosopher of existentialism. Of course, Sartre’s multifarious pursuits and abilities were not entirely disjoined from one another, but rather his literary creations helped to communicate his existentialist ideal, not only to the French intelligentsia, but to students, workers, politicians, and revolutionaries as well. In many ways, Sartre was the conscience of postwar France. The Nazi occupation of Paris and much of the North, along with the formation of the collaborationist Vichy government in the Southern “*zone libre*” combined to produce a deep crisis in the nation’s imagination. France, the paradigm of republicanism and civilization in Europe ceased to be. In its place remained a half-conquered, half fascist terrain seemingly alien to those founding ideals of French republicanism – *fraternité, égalité, et liberté*. Instead, the unoccupied zone under the authority of Marshal Pétain founded the *État Français*, a government more than willing to enact and execute the racial policies of the German Third Reich.

Worldwide, the conception of perpetual peace inherent in the ideals of Wilsonian liberalism and formalized within the charter of the League of Nations proved to be chimerical. Indeed, the Marxist and communist analyses of history seemed to be no less refuted by the

⁷⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 136.

events of World War II and its immediate aftermath. Human brutality stood as an unmistakable denial of the rationalism that Western liberalism claimed as essential to humanity, and the rational character that Marxism claimed for the processes of history. What reason could be found in the atomic bomb or the Nazi death camps? What historical *telos* could justify such unimaginable carnage and human suffering? Perhaps more pressing for Sartre, was to answer the question, “What sort of society could be rebuilt which will take responsibility for its own actions and promote solidarity with those considered alien to itself?”

In fact, Sartre was not politically active in the nineteen thirties; however his experiences during the war and especially the German occupation changed this. Initially drafted into the French army as a meteorologist, Sartre was soon captured by German forces and made a prisoner of war in nineteen forty. Ultimately, he spent nine months in Stalag 12 D, in Trèves. Shortly after, in nineteen forty one, he was released from prison, given civilian status, and allowed to take a teaching position in collaborationist Vichy France, a position recently vacated by a Jewish instructor as a result of Vichy’s anti-Semitic laws. That year, along with other writers and theorists including Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre founded *Socialisme et Liberté*, a left-libertarian socialist organization aimed at resistance to the Nazi occupation. Largely ineffective, the group dissolved and Sartre turned to writing as opposed to active political organization – setting up the editorial board for *Les Temps modernes* in 1944. Nonetheless, Sartre’s interests never would stray far from the central political concerns of his day. In 1948, he becomes involved in the founding of the leftist *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire* (RDR). Furthermore, for the remainder of his life, Sartre would retain a very lively, if turbulent relationship with the French Communist Party (PCF) whom he always courted, never joined, and often critiqued from his own existentialist perspective. It was in this

early period of Sartre's political life, immediately after World War II, in which Sartre penned *Réflexions sur la question juive*, whose English title would be Anti-Semite and Jew (1944). This was his clearest and most thorough exposition on the ethics of responsibility, the minority figure, and the nature of minority-identitarian struggle.⁷⁸

This early political project, pursued in the immediate aftermath of World War II, can best be described as an effort of radical reformation. The old political edifices, as well as their intellectual foundations, had failed humanity in a spectacularly brutal fashion. These had to be torn down and a new basis for social and political organization erected. Any society built upon the blind universalism of Wilsonian democracy or the hard determinism of Marxist materialism would not give proper weight to the individual responsibilities of free, ethical agents. Not only this; such outmoded theories did not recognize the real and important differences which grouped individuals into cultural, ethnic, gender, and religious factions – some of which have historically been oppressed in a chronic manner. Sartre thus represents a moment in political discourse on the political minority. He represents (for the purposes of this dissertation) the initial departure from Spinozistic rationalism, determinism, monism, and universalism which have traditionally served as the theoretical underpinnings for republican thought in Europe since the Early Modern period.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, Sartre is a partisan of the left. His goal is human liberation and freedom

⁷⁸Christina Howells, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Sartre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), x, xi.

⁷⁹Of course, in contemporary political scholarship such a statement may appear at first as highly contestable or at least counter-intuitive. Very often the notions of determinism, monism, and universalism are today understood as the despotic threats to individual liberty which an unchecked reason inevitably throws up. It is the thesis of this present work that such an assessment of reason's relation to human liberation is gravely mistaken – and this thesis is argued for on a conceptual plane. Nonetheless, it is more than worth pointing out at this juncture that even historically it has generally been understood (contra the prevailing opinions today) that rationalist notions such as deterministic monism are actually the *very notions* which undergird a revolutionary support for republicanism as against traditional royalism and hereditary absolutism. For example, in his latest work of intellectual history, Jonathan Israel recounts how the revolutionary French materialists of the 18th Century expounded their political ideas in a manner wholly based upon the rationalist metaphysics of Baruch Spinoza. In particular, Israel cites Helvetius' argument from a naturalistic, psychological egoism to his conclusion of the best form of state, namely,

– the end of racial bigotry and capitalist exploitation. Like Spinoza and the republican tradition which was his progeny, Sartre affirms universal human equality and solidarity and the positive creation of an egalitarian society. Yet, Sartre is skeptical that a liberated society can ever come about without a sincere focus upon the concrete struggles of particular cultural groups and the free individuals who compose them. Consequently, he harshly critiques those fellow democrats and socialists who base their politics upon a universal conception of mankind inhabiting a universally intelligible universe.

As such, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the specific nature of Jean-Paul Sartre's departure from the type of rationalist conception of political toleration as we find in Spinoza. This is not meant to be a mere exercise in exegetical comparison between two unique figures. Rather, the import of examining the differences between Spinoza's conception of toleration and Sartre's own conception is that these specific divergences are illustrative of a more general division in modern and contemporary political thought. Namely, while Spinoza's theory of political toleration is entirely dependent upon a rationalist metaphysics, and is thus universalist in nature, Sartre's own theory is dependent upon a partial rejection of rationalism and universalism – instead emphasizing the significance of particular cultural and ethnic identities, as well as the radically free will of human beings. Consequently, Sartre's own position is also illustrative of a rejection, at least in part, of any eternal and universal conception of human nature.

republican. He further cites Voltaire (who took up a more moderate position in contrast to the "radical enlightenment" stances of the materialists) as he connects Spinoza's monistic materialism to his political philosophy. Finally, the even more conservative critic of the radical enlightenment, Delisle de Sales, saw clearly the ideological kinship of Spinoza with those more radical republican philosophe's as "Fréret and La Mettrie." See: Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 672-675.

Instead, what Sartre emphasizes are the liberatory movements of particular cultural identities. Nonetheless, he denies that these identities are wholly distinct and untranslatable with regard to one another. Indeed, in defending his position on solidarity with French Jewry specifically, and the humanistic nature of his existentialism in general, Sartre affirms the goal of reconciliation and unity amongst and between identity groups. Sartre, though departing from a robust, metaphysical universalism still retains the universalist ethics and rhetoric of left-wing political discourse. Identitarian struggles are important, yet particular cultural identities are not wholly alien to one another, and reconciliation and solidarity is both possible and desirable. Sartre thus represents the moment of cultural pluralism, that initial and most moderate departure from rationalist monism. For Sartre's existentialism demands an emphasis upon the concrete and particular; yet the multiplicity of particular identities can and should be conceived in relation to one another. Particularity is mitigated by the prospect of universal solidarity, and Sartrean pluralism is intended to be that balanced position between these two elements. The question becomes, can such a pluralism provide an equal or better foundation for a doctrine of political toleration as compared to metaphysical monism?

Section 1: Sartrean Pluralism and the Jews

In Anti-Semite and Jew Sartre outlines his theory on minority cultural identity and societal discrimination. This is accomplished through an analysis, specifically, of the state of French Jewry and the parallel phenomenon of French anti-Semitism in the post-war period. Moreover, Sartre provides a normative evaluation of this scenario, including very specific suggestions as to the possibility of Jewish emancipation from anti-Semitic discrimination. By way of conclusion, Sartre asserts that the nature of anti-Semitic prejudice against French Jews requires the Jew, and those sympathetic to him, to proudly affirm Jewish cultural identity. Only

this unabashed acceptance of concrete Jewish identity can overcome the virulent anti-Semitism endemic to postwar French society, and thus allow for a new, egalitarian society to come about.

Sartre begins Anti-Semite and Jew with a phenomenological description of the anti-Semite himself. The anti-Semite is an impassioned being as anti-Semitism itself is a sort of passion. The distaste for Jews is neither based upon objective, empirical evidence nor cogent argumentation.

Indeed, it (anti-Semitism) is something quite other than an idea. It is first of all a passion. No doubt it can be set forth in the form of a theoretical proposition. The 'moderate' anti-Semite is a courteous man who will tell you quietly: 'Personally, I do not detest the Jews. I simply find it preferable, for various reasons, that they should play a lesser part in the activity of the nation.' But a moment later, if you have gained his confidence, he will add with more abandon: 'You see, there must be *something* about the Jews; they upset me physically.'⁸⁰

Sartre asserts that the anti-Semite actively and freely chooses this passion of hatred because of how he, himself, is constituted. The anti-Semite is a man or woman who flees from themselves. They are often mediocre in terms of their abilities and social station (Sartre notes that most modern anti-Semites are of the landless, petit-bourgeois classes and of the lower middle class in general), and thus their hatred for Jews is a way of disappearing into an undifferentiated mass.⁸¹ For it requires no special talent, and no special station in society to hate the Jews. Rather, this is open to essentially all citizens.

⁸⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 10.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

The anti-Semite has no illusions about what he is. He considers himself an average man, modestly average, basically mediocre. There is no example of an anti-Semite's claiming individual superiority over the Jews. But you must not think that he is ashamed of his mediocrity; he takes pleasure in it; I will even assert that he has chosen it. This man fears every kind of solitariness, that of the genius as much as that of the murderer; he is the man of the crowd. However small his stature, he takes every precaution to make it smaller, lest he stand out from the herd and find himself face to face with himself. He has made himself an anti-Semite because that is something one cannot be alone.⁸²

However, the choice of anti-Semitism does not merely allow the anti-Semite to disappear before himself and his peers, and thus conceal his mediocrity. Rather, anti-Semitism is the positive affirmation of mediocrity. The Jew may have special talents, wealth, and professional acumen. Yet each of these are merely a testament to the Jew's strangeness and peculiarity – a testament as to why she does not belong. Indeed, the Jew in the eyes of the anti-Semite is a peculiar creature, unlike any other French citizen, entirely alone in their uniqueness. Hence, what may be a virtue for any other citizen – success in business for instance – is a vice in the Jew. The Jew who is successful in business is conniving. The Jew who provides for his wife and children is a hoarder. The Jew who has a high regard for family and friends is said to be clannish.

The Jew, he says, is completely bad, completely a Jew. His virtues, if he has any, turn to vices by reason of the fact that they are his; work coming from his hands necessarily bears his stigma. If he builds a bridge, that bridge, being Jewish, is bad from the first to the last span. The same action carried out by a Jew and by a Christian does not have the

⁸² Ibid., 20.

same meaning in the two cases, for the Jew contaminates all that he touches with an I-know-not-what execrable quality.⁸³

This description of the anti-Semite gives rise to an essential epistemological insight on Sartre's part. This is his famous distinction between analytic and synthetic worldviews. The anti-Semite is a quintessentially synthetic thinker. He perceives the world according to organic wholes. The Jews are a synthetic unity; the French gentiles are another synthetic unity. There need not be anything in common between them, neither universal categories nor univocal laws of nature which affect them both in the same manner. What's more, synthetic unities by definition are more than their constitutive parts. Indeed, the synthetic whole transforms and determines the character of its constitutive parts. Thus, we can see why the Jew who is skilled at business can be held in contempt by the anti-Semite, while this very same quality can be praised by him should it be found in a fellow gentile. For the synthetic thinker, individuals are not merely complexes of personality traits and abilities. They are coherent wholes.

If we attempt to formulate in abstract terms the principle to which the anti-Semite appeals, it would come to this: A whole is more and other than the sum of its parts; a whole determines the meaning and underlying character of the parts that make it up. There is not *one* virtue of courage which enters indifferently into a Jewish character or a Christian character in the way that oxygen indifferently combines with nitrogen and argon to form air and with hydrogen to form water. Each person is an indivisible totality that has its own courage, its own generosity, its own way of thinking, laughing, drinking, and eating.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 34.

Talent in a Jew, therefore, need not be the same as talent in a Christian. Rather, it is the overall character of the Jew which determines the nature of her specific characteristics. Since the Jew is a synthetic whole in the eyes of the anti-Semite, it is useless to try and compare him to the gentile at all. Rather, Sartre comments, the Jew is taken to be like phlogiston – an ephemeral element that is not so much defined as it is perceived.⁸⁵ For the anti-Semite, the Jew need not have any particular qualities which make him a Jew. Some Jews may be tall, others short, some wealthy, and still others entirely impoverished. What makes them all Jews is the bare fact of their Jewishness. For the synthetic oriented anti-Semite, this is all a matter of intuition. The anti-Semite claims to be able to sense a Jew in his presence, to be able to smell them out!

In opposition to this synthetic, non-rational mode of cognition, is what Sartre identifies as analytic thought. The analytic thinker is the product of the French Revolution with its enlightenment-era faith in human reason. She sees only individuals and interchangeable parts. Any given whole, any given unity is simply the intelligible composition of its various components. This analytic spirit reveals a mechanistic conception of the world. It is intrinsically contra the synthetic intuitionism of the anti-Semite. For the analytic, Jews are merely individuals who happen to find themselves within a religious community. It could have been otherwise. The Jew may just as easily have been a Christian or an atheist. What's more, and again contra the synthetic anti-Semite, every feature of a Jew's personality is entirely similar to those features as expressed in other non-Jewish individuals. Pride or greed, pity or intelligence is essentially the same in all subjects, everywhere.

While Sartre clearly affirms that the analytic mode of thinking is intrinsically contra the synthetic thought of the anti-Semite, he denies that it is sufficient to defeat the anti-Semite.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 37.

Sartre identifies the democrat, that champion of universal rights, of parliamentarianism, of free civil discourse and expression, as the paradigmatic analytic thinker. The democrat cannot be an anti-Semite since he does not see the synthetic unities within society. In other words, the democrat is a universalist thinker and never a particularist. He does not see the Jews as Jews, and so he cannot hate a Jew for being Jewish. At most the democrat may, on occasion, hate an individual who happens to be a member of the Jewish community. Positively, the democrat takes it as his mission to defend the liberties and welfare of all individuals without reference to their religious, ethnic, or other affiliations.

Thus, according to Sartre, while the democrat certainly does not hate the Jews, neither can he ably defend them. The analytic democrat acts and speaks only in the official realm of the public sphere. He speaks in terms of citizens and universal rights. By contrast, the anti-Semite lives and operates in the unofficial spheres of private society. He spreads hate and discrimination amongst his peers, by the way he conducts his business, socializes with friends, and so on. The anti-Semite will, at times, even publically denounce the Jews – accusing them of treason against France, of being Communists, of orchestrating world wars, of avoiding service in these wars, of monopolizing international finance, and of many other things. Yet the democrat, disgusted by these slanders as he may be, can do little more than begrudgingly defend the anti-Semite's right to free expression. For this freedom of opinion is integral to democracy itself. He may go a bit further and actively try to argue with the anti-Semite. The democrat may provide reasons as to why the anti-Semite's specific accusations against the Jews are baseless or incoherent. The number of enlisted Jewish soldiers during World War I was in fact fully proportional to their overall population. It makes little sense for Jews to be both Bolsheviks and the force behind international capital. Of course this is all useless. The anti-Semite does not

traffic in reasons, at least not seriously or for very long. No matter what the democrat may say, even if he convinces the anti-Semite of one point or another, nothing ultimately changes. For the anti-Semite does not really hate the Jews for any identifiable reason. He hates them for the wholly synthetic and particularist intuition that they are Jews. The anti-Semite primarily hates the whole of Jewishness, the whole of this comprehensive identity, and not any specific feature of the Jews which could, in principle, be found in another subject.

Moreover, asserts Sartre, the democrat may be worse than simply a feeble defender of the Jews. For, as an analytic thinker, the democrat only wants to defend Jewish persons because they are persons and not because they are Jewish. As such, the democrat wishes for the immediate assimilation of the Jews into French society. Indeed, he supports the universal enfranchisement of all minority cultural groups into full citizenship – including the Jew. Yet the democrat demands that these groups are first and foremost loyal citizens. He does not regard so-called “hyphenated identities” as meaningful. The term French-Jew makes little sense to him. A citizen is a right bearing individual, and that is all. She deserves rights because she is human, and like all humans, desires liberty and welfare. To grant Jews civic rights as Jews is a denial of the democrat’s overall political project, and runs counter to his analytic and universalist mode of thought. Thus, says Sartre, the democrat can be nearly as dangerous as the anti-Semite. While the latter may wish to physically exterminate all of the Jews, the former wishes to save them as people, but nevertheless destroy them as Jews.

Yet, Sartre points out, a significant sector of the Jews themselves have adopted this analytic mode of thinking. Sartre, while seeing the folly in such a choice, nonetheless is sympathetic to this phenomenon. While the anti-Semites over the centuries have attacked the Jews for synthetic, intuitionist, and mystical reasons, it is understandable why many Jews turn to a species

of extreme rationalism. If the world is intelligible, if personality traits and characteristics are the same in all subjects, if for this reason, all human subjects are deserving of equal respect under the law, then perhaps it is possible to counter the mystical intuitionism of the anti-Semite. Of course, this remedy of rationalism and analytic thought comes at a price. To fully accept analytic thought is to deny one's own facticity, or in other words, one's own identity as part of a synthetic whole. The Jew who wishes to escape from the grasp of the anti-Semite through analytic rationalism, in the process, gives up a full commitment to his own Jewishness. In this case, the anti-Semite has still won the day.

The Jew who takes such a path, Sartre labels as inauthentic. She denies her own existence as part of a real, synthetic unity. In doing so, the Jew becomes unable to truly defend herself against the anti-Semite. Indeed, this mirrors the universalist democrat's own inability to defend the Jews. Sartre affirms that the only way to effectively combat the anti-Semite is to positively affirm one's Jewish identity as, in itself, meaningful and unique. In this way, Sartre actually affirms synthetic cognition himself – though he claims that it is not of the same kind as that adopted by the anti-Semite. Sartre accuses the synthetic thought of the anti-Semite of being irrationalist. He indicts the anti-Semite for simply affirming intuitionist assumptions about Jewish identity without reference to any evidence, empirical or otherwise. For the anti-Semite, the Jew is merely a particular entity unto itself. It is unique and terrible, indefinable yet appalling. The Jew is likened to that personification of incomprehensible evil – Satan himself.⁸⁶

Sartre, like the anti-Semite will affirm that the Jew is something special and unique, that Jewishness cannot be fully comprehended via universal categories which can equally apply to all groups. The French Jews, for Sartre, are indeed a synthetic unity. Individual French Jews

⁸⁶ Ibid., 39.

participate in this unity and gain some of their identity, what Sartre terms their “facticity,” by virtue of their membership. Yet unlike the anti-Semite, Sartre denies that this synthetic unity of the Jews can be conceived in isolation from the rest of humanity— definable only with regard to itself. Rather, he affirms that the nature of Jewishness is the product of political and social situations. Thus, Sartre wishes to carve out a place for his own thought which is distinct from both that of the analytic democrat and the synthetic minded anti-Semite. Distinct from the democrat, Sartre denies that Jewishness is simply the product of the aggregate of individual Jews, or in other words, that Jews are simply the same as all other peoples. Yet, distinct from the anti-Semite, Sartre denies the thoroughly particularist approach of conceiving the Jews as wholly unique and solely definable “from the inside” so to speak. The Jew is not wholly alien and elemental.

Instead, for Sartre, the Jew is the synthetic product of the society she finds herself in. Her place as social pariah is a symptom of the still un-egalitarian and exploitative nature of society. Indeed, Sartre asserts that it is the wealthy who, though not anti-Semitic themselves in large numbers, nonetheless benefit the most from the presence of anti-Semitism. For anti-Semitism is a non-dangerous release valve for revolutionary restlessness. By this he means that anti-Semitism, and the horrors which it produces, are not dangerous for the capitalist classes and the capitalist orientation of society. As long as the middle classes can be whipped up into agitation against the Jews, there is little danger for any serious examination of labor exploitation, economic disparity, and the like. In short, the Jews are a useful distraction for the benefit of the capitalist classes. Meanwhile, it is just this fact that capitalist society lacks equality and is full of exploitation that mandates a place for the Jews. They are needed as a necessary scapegoat. That is their situation, and it is productive of their synthetic identity. Indeed, the historical situation of

the Jews as makers of alcohol and money lenders is an illustration of this situational identity as well. Those very professions which often degrade the image of the Jew in the mind of Europeans was indeed created by a certain European and Christian society which prohibited the gentile from pursuing said professions, yet at the same time demanded the services associated with these lines of work. We see, then, that Jewish identity is both unique and the product of historical, social, and economic contexts. Whether the host culture requires the production of alcohol, the lending of money and credit, or simply requires a scapegoat to stave off revolutionary tensions; the Jew has traditionally been summoned, willfully or otherwise, to fill each of these roles. This, in turn, has over time shaped Jewish culture into the unique and often exploited identity Sartre saw before him in postwar France.

Sartre identifies what he sees as the one, promising way out of this hostage-like situation. The Jews must authentically accept their identity as Jews. Only this authentic self-acceptance can ever remedy the present situation in which the Jew is caught – namely between anti-Semites who wish to exterminate her, and democrats who wish to destroy her identity as a Jew. Constantly, Sartre makes a parallel between the Jew and the worker. The worker, like the Jew, is a part of a synthetic unity. The proletariat are not merely an aggregate of individuals who just happen to be workers. Yet, neither are they a wholly unique, inscrutable group which cannot be defined or comprehended externally. Rather, the worker, indeed the proletariat as a whole, gains its synthetic identity by virtue of its present-day situation relative to the rest of society. Namely, the workers are those individuals who are in the situation of being exploited by capital for their productive labor. How can the worker remedy this situation? Can he do so by denying that he is a worker? Can he simply take the cue of the analytic, rationalist democrat and affirm his own individuality? Sartre denies this as a possibility. No, the only way for the worker to improve his

lot is to faithfully and authentically affirm his synthetic and situational identity as worker. Only in this way can revolution be pursued, and a more egalitarian world be born. The Jew, according to Sartre, is in an entirely analogous position. She can never defeat the anti-Semite by following the democrat and denying her own substantial, synthetic identity. In fact, this would amount to a partial victory for the anti-Semite. Rather, Sartre asserts, the Jew must authentically self-identify as a Jew, and demand rights and civil recognition as a Jew. Only in this way can a future, non-prejudicial society be erected. Any rationalist-inspired assimilation into the present-day society would be futile. For the France of which Sartre wrote was saturated with not only economic exploitation and inequality, but also racism, prejudice and xenophobia. What could assimilation into such a society (for either the Jew or the worker) amount to other than surrender?

The Practical impulse behind Sartrean pluralism

We see very clearly, from Sartre's advice to the Jew and the worker, that he is a pluralist. Sartre denies, on the one hand, that the Jews are just like every other member of humanity, that all individuals are part of an altogether intelligible, monistic whole. On the other hand, Sartre's synthetic conception of identity is not the same as the thoroughly particularist conception of the anti-Semite who conceives of Jewish identity as wholly unique, inscrutable, and alien to all other identities. Rather, Sartre's pluralism constitutes a sort of middle path between a robust monism and a strict particularism. It allows him to conceive of the Jew, the worker, and indeed a multitude of other cultural identities, as both unique in their particularity and relatable to one another by way of social contexts and situations. What this pluralism amounts to, however, requires a fuller explanation of both the practical nature of his politics, and also how this political attitude of pluralism is undergirded by a theoretical pluralism which runs through not only Sartre's stance on the minority figure, but indeed all of his early philosophical thought.

The political, practical imperative of thinking in terms of synthetic wholes seems to hang on the insight that revolutions cannot be made by individuals alone. Again, Sartre's analogy between the Jew and the worker is material here. It is simply inconceivable that individuals who just "happen to be" workers can sufficiently change their collective lot for the better. Workers are exploited for structural reasons, and not because of the individual malevolence of specific capitalists against specific laborers. Likewise, the identity of a worker as worker is very much the product of this structural situation. Therefore to overcome exploitation means to change the structural situation of global capitalism. Revolution is needed and not individual heroics. Indeed, the most counterproductive thing of all would be for individual workers to attempt to change their lot by denying their status as worker and simply start pursuing their own path to material security. The adoption of a false bourgeois consciousness, buying into pipe dreams of upward mobility for all, indeed, the denial of the very fact of competing class interest and class antagonism; these all preclude the betterment of the worker's lot. It is a form of self-denial, or to use Sartrean terminology, the denial of one's own facticity as a member of a situationally defined group. This denial has real and pernicious consequences.

Analogously, for the Jew, to deny her membership within the Jewish community, to deny her identity as being part of a situationally oppressed group, means to preclude any improvement in this situation. Should an individual Jew pretend, as the analytic democrat would desire, that she is simply one of many French citizens, this will only be counterproductive. For even a completely secular Jew cannot assimilate into a thoroughly anti-Semitic society. Anti-Semitism is not a hatred of Jewish customs or religion or mysticism. It is a hatred of "Jewishness" – that indefinable quality of all Jews, given at birth, and irrevocable for all eternity. A simple change in lifestyle, the adoption of gentile mannerisms, dress, dialect, or even religion cannot alleviate

one's indefinable and indelible "Jewishness" in the eyes of an anti-Semitic society. Indeed, Sartre suggests, such opportunism only plays into existing stereotypes of the Jew as cunning, deceptive, disloyal, and self-interested.

Like the worker, therefore, the Jew must learn to think of herself as a part of a synthetic unity. Only in this way can French society be changed from being so thoroughly saturated with anti-Semitic sentiment. French society must learn to accept Jews as Jews. To simply assimilate is to give the signal that Jewish identity is somehow undesirable. Only the resurgence of a proud, self-affirming French-Jewry can change this attitude and be productive for a truly egalitarian French society as a whole.

Thus, on the practical level we can see precisely why Sartre is a pluralist. He denies the intransigent particularism of the anti-Semite. Sartre denies that the Jews are definable only from within themselves, wholly inscrutable from without. The Jews, like the proletariat, gain their synthetic identities by virtue of intelligible and empirically apprehensible structures in society. Indeed, he affirms that French society can one day be reformed so as to be accommodating to French Jews. Sartre asserts that the multiplicity of distinct ethnic and cultural factions within French society can, one day, harmoniously coexist and that individuals of whatever background or identity can one day be fully accepted into said society. Yet, unlike the analytic democrat and inauthentic rationalist Jew, Sartre denies that the French society of his day is ready to accept all individuals with open arms. Society is rife with xenophobia and racism, and specifically anti-Semitism. This anti-Semitism cannot be overcome by arguing for the goodness of individual Jews, or by downplaying Jewish identity, but rather by standing up for Jews as a synthetic whole. In other words, French society discriminates against Jews as a particular cultural identity, and so it is precisely this identity which must proudly be affirmed. If this is accomplished, then perhaps

one day individuals from any background or identity can be freely accepted as themselves. Yet, Sartre constantly cautions, that day is not today! We cannot be free individuals today, while our synthetic identities are still under attack. Contradictions exist in society in its present form and it will do no good ignoring these contradictions which, after all, give rise to the very identities which society discriminates against and exploits- notably, the Jew and the worker.

What must be done is to positively affirm our solidarity with these identities, with the Jew and worker, so as to reform the broad structures of society, or in other words, to nullify the contradictions in society which throw up these exploited identities in the first place. Only after this is accomplished can the worker become, simply, an individual and the Jew become simply an individual. Today, they are not afforded such a luxury. Sartre is thus a pluralist, in one sense, for very practical reasons. Society must be reformed along structural lines. The contradictory structures within society produces identities of discrimination and exploitation, and thus to reform society, we must affirm said identities and have solidarity with them. We must quit speaking of universal human nature – for this is utopian in light of our present day situation. We must rather be practical and regard as important the real synthetic identities (Jews, workers, Africans, and so on) which exist today.

Section 2: The Theoretical basis for pluralism –Voluntarism and probabilism

It would be a mistake, however, to simply assume that Sartre's pluralism is a matter of pure pragmatics. Sartre does not merely oppose the analytic democrat and rationalist Jew because they are counter-productive. He opposes them because they are metaphysically mistaken. To understand why, it is useful to reference Sartre's famous speech Existentialism is a Humanism (published in the very same year as Anti-Semite and Jew) in which he outlines some

of the key metaphysical foundations of his social and political position in this early period of his political life.

First and foremost, it is paramount to note that Sartre begins his philosophy with Descartes. Specifically, Sartre takes as the launch-point of his own theory of knowledge the Cartesian *cogito*, or at least his interpretation thereof. We may have radical doubt about all propositions about nature, yet we know at least that we, ourselves, exist. Indeed, Sartre reads the Cartesian *cogito* as specifically affirming that, above all else, we are free willing subjects. All knowledge apart from this self-reflective subjectivity is merely probable. In beginning his philosophy with a radically free will, Sartre steps outside the tradition of Enlightenment rationalism and its affirmation of a will wholly guided by the intellect. Instead, he identifies himself with a tradition of philosophers stretching at least as far back as William of Ockham, through the proto-existentialists Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, and including those twentieth century theorists, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Gabriel Marcel. The common heritage of these otherwise extremely diverse figures is an affirmation of the free will as against the intelligibility of the objective world at large. Of course, in William of Ockham, the impetus behind such a metaphysical nominalism is explicitly a strategy for saving the notion of God's omnipotence, one key aspect of His superlative greatness. God's absolute freedom mandates, for Ockham, a nominalist conception of the world. A universe of "real universals," that is to say, a world of definite and eternal natures, could not be compatible with divine freedom, and it is on this very point that Ockham sought to reform Scholastic epistemology. Though not all members of this philosophical lineage have been theists (Sartre was, famously, a self-avowed atheist), each necessarily affirms an essentially supernatural notion of the free will. The will is thought to be absolutely free of natural, deterministic necessity. The will is entirely beyond causal nature and

only limited, if at all, by itself or other free wills. Whether expressed as explicitly divine or simply human, this robust voluntarism is always affirmed at the expense of a mind-independent, intelligible universe.⁸⁷

More specifically pertinent to our current investigation, is the fact that Sartre's affirmation of voluntarism mandates a denial of a universal human essence. If the willing subject is actually free in such an absolute sense, then no objective nature can restrict it. The human being is not a thing in itself, and cannot be defined in its totality. It is even less plausible that human beings are merely the modifications of one world-Substance which is, as a whole, fully intelligible. Rather, the free subject constitutes its own identity.

All subjects are thrown into a world of determinate circumstances. Yet it is the collectivity of free individual wills which, themselves, give meaning and value to this world. Indeed, if by "world" one means not bare reality, but the experienced realm of human interactions, objects of value, places of work, and personal identities, then it is the human subject which actively and freely produces these with every passing decision. We constitute our world, and thus we constitute our selves. Our identity is not derived from a pre-existent Nature or any

⁸⁷ This nominalization of the world and world processes in light of the voluntaristic will can even be seen in later works including Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York: Verso, 2009), 18.

Specifically of note in this work is Sartre's influential *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In the section *The Dogmatic Dialectic and the Critical Dialectic*, for instance, Sartre critiques the notion of dialectics as found in orthodox Marxian theory. "Dogmatic dialectics" as he calls it involves the notion that there is a single, super-human historical process that determines the way individuals live their lives. In contrast to this, Sartre reaffirms the freedom inherent in individual life-projects, and thus that the dialectical processes of histories are rather the *result* and not the *cause* of free, human choice. Ultimately, Sartre will explicitly use the term *nominalist* to describe his desired conception of dialectics.

"It [dialectical process] is first and foremost a *resultant*; it is not the dialectic which forces historical men to live their history in terrible contradictions; it is men, as they are, dominated by scarcity and necessity, and confronting one another in circumstances which History or economics can inventory, but which only dialectical reason can explain... The dialectic, if it exists, can only be the totalization of concrete totalizations effected by a multiplicity of totalizing individualities. I shall refer to this as **dialectical nominalism**."

universal human essence. Rather, there are a multiplicity of identities each produced by the free interactions of a plurality of subjects. Of course, the wills of others do set certain, temporary parameters or limits upon our own freedom in a given situation. In other words, one is identified by their situation in the world, relative to the conscious intentions of other subjects. Yet one is not wholly defined by said situation. For each and every person is a free will and it is just this freedom which also allows for the transcendence of any given situation, or in Sartre's terminology, any given facticity. The fundamental dynamic, therefore, in Sartre's metaphysics lays between this facticity, the world of facts which results from the sedimentation of all past, willful decisions of oneself and others, and the cogito itself – namely, that individual subjectivity which is free and thus always strives to transcend all sedimented facticity heretofore.⁸⁸

The Cogito and human solidarity

It is the case that a very large portion of Existentialism is a Humanism is a defense of Sartre's subjectivism – a result of his beginning with the Cartesian cogito. He realizes that the common critique against this theoretical move is that such a position seems to preclude any notion of universal human nature, and in turn, any affirmation of human solidarity. For how can there be solidarity amongst all human beings if there is no eternal essence which encompasses

⁸⁸ In some sense, Sartre's conception of transcendence is deeply related to Kierkegaard's notion of anxiety: "Anxiety is not a category of necessity, but it is not a category of freedom either: it is entangled freedom, where freedom is not free in itself but entangled - and entangled not by necessity, but by itself." Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 49.

Overcoming one's facticity, analogous to the phenomenon of anxiety to which Kierkegaard alludes, is not an overcoming of the necessitarian laws of nature. Indeed, this conception of law-like nature is altogether precluded by the existentialist conception of freedom. Rather, it is the freedom to overcome what freedom has previously produced. This, at last, is the consistent basis for both Sartre's underlying metaphysics as well as his political prescriptions – namely, an affirmation of the free will at the expense of a necessitarian or wholly intelligible nature.

them all, nothing permanent and lasting to unite them? Indeed, how can there be the possibility of even rather humble, one-to-one ethical human relations? A reliance upon the cogito as a starting point seems to place the rest of the universe, including our fellow human beings, beyond an epistemological gulf. In short, Sartre's metaphysics appears to be at odds with his radical political stance. It is precisely this charge which Sartre attempted to refute.

One group after another censures us for overlooking humanity's solidarity, and for considering man as an isolated being. This, contends the Communists, is primarily because we base our doctrine on pure subjectivity – that is, on the Cartesian *I think* - on the very moment in which man fully comprehends his isolation, rendering us incapable of reestablishing solidarity with those who exist outside of the self, and who are inaccessible to us through the *cogito*.⁸⁹

Yet, far from moderating this subjectivist position, Sartre robustly defends it. What's more, he correctly admits that such an emphasis upon the freedom of the will renders the rest of our knowledge of the world purely probabilistic.

As our point of departure there can be no other truth than this: I think therefore I am. This is the absolute truth of consciousness confronting itself. Any theory that considers man outside of this moment of self-awareness is, at the outset, a theory that suppresses the truth, for outside of this Cartesian cogito, all objects are merely probable, and a doctrine of probabilities not rooted in any truth crumbles into nothing.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (Yale University, 2007), 18.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

We have in this short quotation a prime example of Sartre's departure from the rational monism of Spinozistic metaphysics: Sartre posits that the only absolute truth which is certain is the bare fact of our own consciousness, and by this he specifically means the free action of the will. The universe outside the subject is, again, merely probabilistic. By contrast, we have seen that Spinoza begins his investigation with Substance itself along with its correlate, the principle of sufficient reason. All subjective thought, for Spinoza, is seen to necessarily imply a monistic universe which exists in a rationally deterministic manner. Indeed, for Spinoza, the very first knowledge we can have is of Substance itself. Moreover, Substance is logically and metaphysically prior to any particular subjectivity. Therefore, this knowledge of Substance, if not in terms of chronology then in terms of logical progression, is prior to even adequate knowledge of our own consciousnesses – our own subjective selves. Since we are a modification of Substance, we have to understand this Substance, and have metaphysical knowledge of the whole, before we can begin to truly know ourselves. Psychology is derivative of metaphysical knowledge. For Sartre, on the other hand, we can have no direct access to a mind-independent world. All that we can posit about the world is derivative of a certain kind of philosophical psychology, a consideration of our own individual consciousnesses. Therefore, for Sartre, we necessarily begin and end our investigation with the human subject of which the world is a sort of epiphenomenon. How this metaphysics can support a radical politics of solidarity as well as an affirmation of cultural identity will be examined in the following sections. First, however, it is necessary to further explicate the nature of the Sartrean universe.

The Free Will and the probabilistic universe are mutually legitimating

What is important to understand at this juncture is that Spinoza and Sartre do not merely differ as to their order of philosophical investigation. More fundamentally, the two philosophical

positions offer opposing metaphysical conceptions of the world. As alluded to earlier, it is a necessary consequence of affirming a voluntaristic will that one negates the concept of a wholly intelligible universe. It is vital not to understate either the consistency or the metaphysical import of the Sartrean affirmation of voluntarism. Indeed, it is just this conception of the will which Sartre identifies as that which distinguishes his existentialist philosophy from his rationalist, philosophical predecessors.

Whatever doctrine we may be considering, say Descartes' or Leibniz's, we always agree that the will more or less follows understanding, or at the very least accompanies it, so that when God creates he knows exactly what he is creating. Thus the concept of man, in the mind of God, is comparable to the concept of the paper knife in the mind of the manufacturer...⁹¹

Unlike Descartes or Leibniz, Sartre denies that the will is dependent upon the understanding. In fact, there is no definite form of the understanding intrinsic to human nature at all. The human will, according to Sartre, is free because humans are not created things and, consequently, possess no set nature prior to the exercise of their will. In his famous "paper knife example," Sartre explains that we may consider an object to have a particular, proper function just in case it was purposefully designed with a function in mind. A paper knife's proper function is to cut paper just because the human creator of said object willed it to be so, and designed it with this very purpose ahead of time. Yet, as an atheist, Sartre denies that humans are created with a pre-determined purpose. Unlike the paper knife, humans arrive in the world before having any particular function. This is what is meant by human "existence preceding its

⁹¹Ibid., 21.

essence.” Through each passing decision we constitute our own identity and life project, and thus our own purpose. There is no function implicit in our existence, and there is no blueprint for humanity which exists prior to the actual existence of individual humans with their own, freely chosen life projects. As a consequence of this, Sartrean existentialism affirms a voluntarism which has traditionally been threatening to those who have defended the universality of certain moral prescriptions and prohibitions. “For when all is said and done, could it be that what frightens them about the doctrine (of existentialism) that I shall try to present to you here is that it offers man the possibility of individual choice.⁹²”

Putting morality aside for a moment, what is of interest here are the vast metaphysical repercussions resulting from such an affirmation of voluntarism. Namely, behind this entire discourse is a presumption that meaning and identity are only conferred by one or another will. Since we are not designed by God, and God’s free will, then we must be defined by our own free will. Referring to his own form of atheistic existentialism, Sartre reports: “It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence – a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man, or, as Heidegger put it, the human reality.⁹³”

The implication is that there is no definition, identity, or meaning inherent in existence itself. If a mind-independent reality exists, then it is a wholly noumenal reality, lacking meaning or intelligibility. Some being, whether God or man, must exist first and then proceed to willfully impart normative and descriptive form - both to itself as well as to all of existence. Again, the paper knife has no purpose apart from the one assigned to it by a willful subject. There are no

⁹² Ibid., 18-19.

⁹³ Ibid., 22.

natures and no distinct identities, meanings, or purposes intrinsic to the universe. Since Sartre denies the existence of God, we the human subject must be that entity which exists first, and then freely imparts normative and descriptive meaning.

For in any attempt at conceptualizing a metaphysics, a crucial choice must be made between three possible options: Firstly, one may submit that the universe lacks any form; that there is only flux and or void. Of course, if this first option is affirmed, then there is the problem of explaining the phenomenal fact of our perceiving actual objects, or of our forming coherent thoughts and judgments, and so on. In point of fact, discrete forms and ideas do seem to present themselves in every passing moment. Barring this first, radical option, two others remain which seek to account for the experienced fact of there being definition and form in the universe. Either form, meaning, and identity are to be considered a feature of the world itself or, alternatively, these are actively put into the world. Ironically perhaps, the atheist existentialist has much in common with a certain sort of theist. Each pursue the latter option and deny that the world is entirely formed, eternal, and full of its own normative meaning. Each assume that meaning, form, and identity have to be put into the world, either by God or by man, or some willful subject. Again, we see Kierkegaard giving voice to this very sentiment.

One sticks one's finger in the ground in order to judge where one is: I stick my finger in existence — it feels like nothing. Where am I? What is this 'the world?' What does this word mean? Who has duped me into the whole thing, and now leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I come into the world; why was I not asked, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations, but thrust into the ranks, as if I had been forced by a *Seelenverkopper* [a kidnapper, a dealer in souls]?⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M.G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60.

On the other hand the Spinozist position, or in other words, the rationalist and monistic position, sees both form and meaning as intrinsic to the world itself. Moreover, we as human subjects are native to this fully formed world – not thrown into it, nor lured into the world, not constituting it from the outside, but rather an intrinsic part or modification of the world. Substance (i.e. Nature) is eternal, and self-caused, requiring no external impetus and indeed precluding anything external at all. Normativity, if there be such a thing, is therefore an indigenous feature of this eternal world. It is, most often, conceived in hedonistic terms. The good, what is desirable, is so because it is actually desired by naturally occurring, finite creatures. It is desired either because of the very basic constitution of the body with its nerve endings and array of senses, or alternatively, a thing is desirable on an intellectual level. In this case, what is desirable is the expansion of the power of the *conatus*, and the ever greater intellectual apprehension of reality which grants intellectual beings another sort of pleasure. In either case, what is good is a feature of the world, and arises from the nature of its modifications. The good is the product of the intellectual and bodily constitutions of the world's finite creatures – not something freely added to it by a denatured will. The multitude of identities is, as well, a feature of the world – modifications of the one, infinite Substance. Again, there is no need for a willing subject to constitute identity out of a fragmented, nominalist universe. For the rationalist, such a universe is an absurd fiction. Nature is full of content, full of identity, both descriptive and normative in kind.

Thus, we see very clearly that Sartre's assertion of voluntarism is entirely inseparable from his anti-monism. It is just because we begin with a free will that no objective natures can

exist. Probabilism is the consequence of voluntarism. The inverse is also true. Since Sartre denies any essences apart from those created by an act of the will, then we humans are, as well, lacking any particular essence. Lacking a definite nature, we are free to choose as we like. It becomes clear that voluntarism and a denial of essences or natures reinforce one another. A radically free will precludes any objective nature which would, by definition, limit said will. Inversely, the fact that we have no eternal nature, i.e. no essence, means that the present and future constitution of humanity is dependent upon a series of radically free choices.

However, voluntarism does not only go hand-in-hand with the absence of a human essence. Voluntarism also has a biconditional relationship with a world which lacks essences. Indeed, for Sartre, the radically free will is just that necessary thing which can hold the universe together. A universe lacking pre-existent essences, only populated by particulars, ultimately disintegrates into nothing. It disintegrates into nothing, that is, if it were not for a free subject to consciously and willfully put it back together again and again, with every passing, free decision. Recall, that the cogito in Sartre's own terms, is the one "absolute truth." Apart from the cogito, "all objects are merely probable, and a doctrine of probabilities not rooted in any truth crumbles into nothing."

The concept of the cogito, therefore, mandates a universe which makes the cogito necessary in the first place! The logical progression of Sartre's thought seems to turn back onto itself in a circular manner. First, it is supposed that we must start with the self-reflective, free will - the *cogito*, as it is the one solid truth of existence. Second, since we have affirmed as necessary a totally free will, everything outside said will becomes merely probabilistic – indeed, indefinite and not fully formed. For, again, definite objective natures cannot exist alongside a radically free will, as they would naturally limit said will. Third, finally, the cogito is shown to

have been necessary in the first place just because of the existence of this probabilistic, unformed, and nature-less world, lest it crumble into nothingness. In other words, the only reason we can have experiences of definite entities in the world is because of our active and willing formation of those entities through our conscious subjectivity. The free cogito mandates a world without essences. Its very existence as free requires, conceptually, a universe without definite, eternal, and objective natures or identities. However, the inverse is also true. A universe lacking definite, eternal, and objective natures requires one or more voluntaristic subjects to willfully give it definite form.

Indeed, the entire picture is the very opposite of Spinoza's metaphysics which is based wholly upon the eternal existence of Substance which is infinite and thus full of descriptive and normative content. Barring such a fully formed and content-laden universe, the existentialist just as the theist must employ an external will to freely confer form and meaning. Of course, the catch is that the conferral of form and meaning must be something which the will accomplishes on its own, entirely free from the intellect or understanding. The intellect can only guide the will according to truths already apprehensible in the world. The task of the will, according to the existentialist, is to positively produce these truths *ex nihilo* as it were. Yet this implies that the production of one truth or another is done freely and without prior reason. Thus, to stray from this monistic affirmation of a fully formed Nature, as Sartre necessarily does, means to posit a will that Spinoza identified as being so free as to be absurd.

Evidently, they say that the soul can sense and perceive in many ways, not itself, nor the things that exist, but only things that are neither in itself nor anywhere; that is, the soul can, by its own force alone, create sensations or ideas, which are not of things; so they consider it, to some extent, as like God. Next, they say that we, or our soul, have such a

freedom that it compels us, or itself, indeed its own freedom. For after it has feigned something, and offered its assent to it, it cannot think or feign it in any other way, and is also compelled by that fiction so that even other things are thought in such a way as not to conflict with the first fiction, just as here too because of their own fiction, they are forced to admit the absurdities which I review here, and which we shall not bother to refute with any demonstrations.

(TIE 60:13-23)

Nonetheless, it is precisely these twin conceptions of the free will and the indefinite universe to which Sartre must adhere. For these form the necessary bases for the existentialist denial of the “universal man” and Sartre’s emphasis upon the particular identities of diverse cultural groups. In other words, Sartre’s emphasis upon the unique, synthetic identity of the particular cultural group does not come about in a conceptual vacuum. Rather, this affirmation seems to be implied by a very specific, metaphysical foundation as described above. Sartre’s metaphysical particularism, entirely intertwined with his robust voluntarism, is the necessary basis for his affirmation of unique and particular cultural identities. Without such a metaphysical particularism “in the background,” so to speak, it would make little sense to talk of cultural identities in such a substantive manner. In the absence of metaphysical particularism as a foundation, cultural particularism loses all serious meaning. Barring such a nominalism, distinct cultural identities would become little more than modifications of a universal human nature. This, however, is precisely that inauthentic conception of humanity which Sartre takes pains to dismantle.

No ultimately intelligible universe, thus no universal man

What is the particular cultural identity for Sartre? From where does it come? The freedom to pursue one’s own particular project, independent of a static human nature, indeed the

absence of forms, meanings, or identity outside the human cogito – this is the essential ingredient which informs Sartre’s position on cultural identity. Cultural identity is something freely formed. It is neither produced nor restricted by a universal human nature. The analytic democrat is not only impractical, he is wrong about the identity of the Jew. Contra the claims of the universalist democrat, the Jew is not just the same as all other human beings. Jewish identity is formed through concrete acts of the will – both the will of the Jew herself, and those who surround her in society. Jewish identity is the product of very specific historical circumstances and a very specific array of willful, historically situated actors. It is thus synthetic and unique – neither a mere modification of a singular, timeless human nature, nor wholly analyzable with reference to the aggregate of individuals who merely “happen” to be Jews. Jewish identity, like the particular identities of other cultural groups, is a special, collective project.

Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism.⁹⁵

Sartre, an atheist existentialist, denies God’s existence, and thus denies that God created mankind. Humans are not, therefore, designed ahead of time, with a preordained purpose. Humans are neither provided with such a purpose by a personal, paternal deity, nor imbued with a “built-in” purpose by an impersonal, naturalistic God a la Spinoza’s Substance. We choose our own purpose, our own life project. Since man is his own project, since he is only what he

⁹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 22.

conceives himself to be; there cannot be a permanent, universal human nature. Rather, just as there are a multiplicity of freely conceived projects, there are a multiplicity of human natures, or more properly, human identities. Human particularity, the multiplicity of synthetic human identities, is a symptom of Sartrean voluntarism. Therefore, to assert that the Jews are really just human beings like any other is to do violence to Jewish subjectivity and freedom. It is, moreover, to ignore the will of those historical actors who have collectively created this Jewish identity.

For us, man is defined first of all as a being ‘in a situation.’ That means that he forms a synthetic whole with his situation – biological, economic, political, cultural, etc. He cannot be distinguished from his situation, for it forms him and decides his possibilities; but, inversely, it is he who gives it meaning by making his choices within it and by it. To be in a situation, as we see it, is to choose oneself in a situation, and men differ from one another in their situations and also in the choices they themselves make of themselves.⁹⁶

The upshot is that Sartre’s voluntarism and particularism are the theoretical bases for his affirmation of particular cultural identities. Put negatively, the Sartrean denial of a universal human essence is dependent upon this voluntarism and metaphysical particularism. If the world were wholly intelligible, then the modifications of the world could be understood in light of the whole. Humans could be seen as a mere modification of nature, and particular cultures could be seen as mere modifications of a single humanity. In this case, individual cultures would be fully and immediately translatable to one another. Indeed, there would be no real, synthetic, or in other words, substantial, differences between them. In order for particular cultures to have real

⁹⁶ Ibid., 60.

import, they must not be such a modification of an intelligible whole. Particular cultures are substantial and unique only because they are the products of free will and not the understanding. Anything apprehended by the understanding can ultimately be translated and identified with any other thing apprehended by the understanding. It is impossible, conceptually, for the intellect to conceive of two entirely dissimilar and incomparable entities. The very fact of their both being conceived attests to this fact. Therefore, for a culture to be truly unique, it must come about through a free act of the will, beyond what the intellect can perceive in the world. Finally, it is understood through our previous demonstration that such a free will can only exist in a purely nominalist universe. As such, the nominalist universe is the necessary condition for cultural particularism.

Sartre's synthetic conception of the Jews is an interesting one. He wants to distance himself from the also synthetic anti-Semite who conceives of the Jew in wholly irrational terms. Like a good particularist, the anti-Semite does not so much understand the Jews (this is impossible as he shares nothing in common with them), but rather perceives the Jews in their terrible, unique particularity. Sartre wishes to avoid such mysticism while, himself, retaining a synthetic (and thus particularist) notion of Jewish cultural identity. Jewish identity is historically situated, and formed by perfectly intelligible social and economic forces. Yet, these forces are ultimately traced back to distinct acts of the will. Jewish identity was formed by the experiences of being social pariahs, distributors of alcohol, and lenders of money. Yet these social functions can be traced back to the individual wills which historically made up an anti-Semitic European society. Thus Jewish identity cannot be conceived apart from the free and willful acts which created said identity – willful acts of the Jews themselves, as well as of their anti-Semitic neighbors. For Sartre, Jewish identity is rightly considered as unique and important because it is

the creation of particular, free wills. The Jews are not merely a permutation of a universal human essence, let alone a universal world-Substance. Jewish cultural identity is unique because it is a willed creation amidst a nominalist universe.

Abandonment and normativity

Of course, Sartre not only wanted to define the Jews, he also wanted to give them political advice. Since the Jews are a unique cultural group, Sartre does not advocate assimilation. It is the analytic democrat who advocates for Jewish assimilation, and consistently so, as it is he who believes all humans to be essentially alike. His universalism requires a nonchalant attitude towards the various ways in which humanity divides itself – in terms of Jews and Gentiles, workers and capitalists, Caucasians and Africans, and so on. For him, these are all incidental divisions. The analytic and rationalist democrat is philosophically precluded from understanding the import or indeed the substantial reality of particular cultural identities. For only an emphasis upon the free will, and the correlate nominalization of the universe can allow for such a standpoint.

The normative consequences are striking. The rationalist democrat, posits Sartre, traditionally avoids speaking in terms of Jewish solidarity, workers' rights, or African struggle. He can only speak of human rights and human welfare. Sartre on the other hand possesses the philosophical tools to take particular cultural identities very seriously. As such, his normative advice follows suit and he can actively advocate for solidarity with the Jews as Jews, and petition for specifically Jewish rights. Indeed, given Sartre's voluntarism, the overriding ethical imperative becomes a sincere affirmation of one's own cultural particularity.

If it is agreed that man may be defined as a being having freedom within the limits of a situation, then it is easy to see that the exercise of this freedom may be considered as authentic or inauthentic according to the choices made in the situation. Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror or hate.⁹⁷

We live authentically just in case we acknowledge our particularity alongside our freedom. Inauthenticity amounts to denying either our particularity or our freedom. However, it should not be considered that these are opposing elements which are to be balanced. Actually, particularity and freedom are two sides of the very same coin. We can transcend our historical situation because we are free. Yet, our historical situation only exists by virtue of the sum total of bygone free choices. Sartre wishes for us to respect both the free choices that made us who we are, as well as the innate freedom that allows us to be more than just this. Therefore, to act morally means to act with a sincere cognizance of our freedom as particular, historically situated beings. However, it is just this freedom to constantly give new meaning to our identity, to reinvent ourselves, which allows us to remain in our particularity. The unique and distinct nature of cultural identities is an effect of these identities coming about by virtue of free choice.

Beyond this respect for our innate freedom, that is, beyond living authentically, Sartre denies that there are ready made answers as to what constitutes ethical behavior. Indeed, it is just by virtue of our existing freely which precludes the notion that there are any moral prescriptions or prohibitions intrinsic to our human nature, or indeed, intrinsic to the nature of the world at large. In the face of his Catholic critics who wished to affirm a natural theological

⁹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 90.

explanation of human happiness and normativity, Sartre stressed instead the concept of abandonment. Since God is either absent from the universe, or at the very least a mystery to us, we are abandoned in this world – left to determine our own fate, our own identity, and moreover, our own concept of the good.

It is worth taking some time to more fully interrogate this central concept of abandonment as it appears to be that vital nexus between Sartre's metaphysics and his ethical, social, and political stances. More than this, Sartre's adoption of the concept of abandonment reveals his philosophical kinship with that other atheistic existentialist – Martin Heidegger. Exegetically, this is important. For Sartre's reliance upon Heidegger's own philosophy illuminates Sartre's theoretical connection with both Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt – the other two figures investigated in this work. It is understandable that one may balk at my drawing a close relationship between these three figures. After all, Sartre was a proud leftist, an advocate for revolution and a sometimes-ally of the French Communist Party. Leo Strauss, by contrast, was a strident anti-Communist, and a consistent particularist who was fully skeptical of progressively transforming society into a harmonious whole. Carl Schmitt, of course, was a jurist for the Third Reich and one may rightly suppose that his political allegiances were far apart from Sartre's own – himself, a member of the French Resistance. Nonetheless, the very thesis of this work is that despite the obviously disparate political projects of these three theorists, what they have in common is an allegiance to central tenets of existentialist philosophy, or what may otherwise be expressed as the denial of Enlightenment era rationalism, of monism, determinism, and natural law theory as typified in Spinoza's own political philosophy. Exegetically and historically it is therefore important to note the common connection these three figures have with Martin Heidegger who, in large part, formulated and made coherent this anti-rationalist position

known as existentialism. The concept of abandonment, specifically, is a central Heideggerian theory explicitly affirmed by Sartre, and also fully evident within the political philosophies of Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt. For this singular concept ably communicates the essential thesis of political existentialism and anti-rationalism. Namely, the political decision is an absolutely free decision. Put otherwise, a decision counts as being political just in case it is performed freely. “And when we speak of ‘abandonment’ – one of Heidegger’s favorite expressions – we merely mean to say that God does not exist, and that we must bear the full consequences of that assertion.⁹⁸”

What are the political consequences of God’s abandonment, or God’s nonexistence? It is simply that there is no set good intrinsic to reality. The good is what we, as free agents, freely will it to be with every passing choice we make. As mentioned, it is our innate, radical freedom which precludes a knowable, human essence, and therefore a knowable and permanent human good pertaining to such an essence. For Sartre, the absence of an intelligible God from the universe is devastating for any objective code of ethics. Indeed, he decries any attempt to retain such a conception of morality in light of the rejection of a theistic and knowable God.

“Around 1880, when some French professors attempted to formulate a secular morality, they expressed it more or less in these words: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, so we will do without it. However, if we are to have a morality, a civil society, and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain values be taken seriously; they must have an *a priori* existence ascribed to them...***We therefore will need to do a little more thinking on this subject in order to show that such values exist all the same, and that they are inscribed in an intelligible heaven,*** even though God does not exist.⁹⁹”

⁹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 27.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

Secularization of biblical morality isn't tenable since, as Nietzsche famously put it, biblical morality requires a biblical God. However, Sartre's point here is not primarily theological, but rather metaphysical. Since God does not exist, since we were not created with a plan already in the divine mind, humans are those entities whose existence precedes their essence. Humans are free to define themselves in a voluntaristic manner. Yet, if this is the case, humans are not only free to define what they are descriptively, they are also free to decide what they ought to pursue in a normative sense. Of course, this freedom to decide negates any possibility that the answers to these vital human questions already exist in an intelligible cosmos, and are attainable *a priori*. "Existentialists, on the other hand, find it extremely disturbing that God no longer exists, for along with his disappearance goes the possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven."

Sartre, in quoting Dostoyevsky, affirms that, "If God does not exist, everything is permissible."¹⁰⁰ It is God's absence from the world, and therefore our position of absolute freedom which is both inspiring and truly terrifying for the Sartrean existentialist. For the absence of God means the absence of set answers to life's difficult ethical problems. We are not constrained to act one way or another. We are, instead, left to choose our path in life entirely without prior reasoning or excuse. "In other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom... Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse."¹⁰¹

Indeed, it is only in choosing freely, and in recognizing one's own radical freedom that we can positively evaluate human conduct.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

For example, when a military leader takes it upon himself to launch an attack and sends a number of men to their deaths, he chooses to do so, and, ultimately, makes that choice alone...All leaders have experienced that anguish, but it does not prevent them from acting. To the contrary, it is the very condition of their action, for they first contemplate several options, and, in choosing one of them, **realize that its only value lies in the fact that it was chosen.**¹⁰²

We see the very same pattern of moral evaluation in the famous example Sartre provides with regard to a student who sought his advice on whether to travel to England and join the resistance during World War II, or to stay with his ailing mother. Sartre's advice: "You are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do; there are no signs in this world."¹⁰³ There is no general rule for deciding. All decisions are too particular, too exceptional. This ethical outlook verges on a robust decisionism. Importantly, it belies a certain metaphysical commitment importantly different from those affirmed by Spinozistic rationalism. Namely, ethical decisions are so particular, defying the application of general rules, that one must decide for literally no reason. Indeed, if there were objective reasons for our chosen decision, Sartre may affirm, it is not really a decision at all but merely an intellectual exercise, or a searching for pre-existent signs. Ultimately, ethical choice is likened to artistic creation:

Rather, let us say that moral choice is like constructing a work of art... (But it is not an aesthetic morality)... Having said that, has anyone ever blamed an artist for not

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 33.

following rules of painting established *a priori*? Has anyone ever told an artist what sort of picture he should paint? It is obvious that there is no pre-defined picture to be made, and that the artist commits himself in painting his own picture, and that the picture that ought to be painted is precisely the one that he will have painted. As we all know, there are no aesthetic values *a priori*, but there are values that will subsequently be reflected in the coherence of the painting, in the relationship between the will to create and the finished work. No one can say what tomorrow's painting will look like; we cannot judge a painting until it is finished. What does that have to do with morality? We are in the same creative situation. We never speak of the gratuitousness of a work of art. When we discuss one of Picasso's paintings, we never say that it is gratuitous; we know well that his composition became what it is while he was painting it, and that the body of his work is part and parcel of his life.

The same applies to the moral plane. What art and morality have in common is creation and invention. We cannot decide *a priori* what ought to be done.¹⁰⁴

We see again the reaffirmation of the absolute freedom of moral choice. Indeed, moral choices can only be evaluated with reference to their being made with a sincere and honest sense of freedom by particular, historically situated agents. A choice is only considered immoral if it is carried out amidst a denial of this very freedom. Yet this may rightly lead one to question if existentialist morality is truly suitable for a social humanity. For if all actions are truly free, if no moral objectivity exists, then how can there be a consistent solidarity with the other? If every act is judged upon whether the agent has the proper respect for his freedom and his own cultural particularity, can Sartre truly speak of human solidarity?

Existentialist voluntarism as compatible with political solidarity?

The key to understanding Sartre's argument that existentialist voluntarism can support a humanist ethics of solidarity is Sartre's universalistic understanding of the free, moral choice. Not only do we freely choose for ourselves, we also choose for all people, everywhere, and at all

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

times. “When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men.¹⁰⁵”

The reasoning behind such a claim seems to hinge upon the precise nature of Sartrean facticity. Recall that one’s identity, one’s given facticity, is the product of sedimented acts of the will. Every choice we make contributes to the facticity of our situation. Every choice shapes what it means to be of a given culture, and more broadly, what it means to be in the human condition. This, then, is the source of ethical responsibility. Every free act determines not only our own lives, and not only the nature of our own cultural group, but also what it means to be a human being as well. Humanity, much like the multiplicity of particular cultural groups, is therefore a dynamic and changing invention, freely produced by the multiplicity of free willing beings.

Sartre wishes to claim that, far from making ethical choice trivial, and solidarity with other persons merely optional, his conception of ethics imparts a properly severe weight to moral decision making and categorically affirms that we are bound to one another and all mankind. It is just the fact that moral choice is so absolutely free that gives moral decision making its terrible and serious nature. As mentioned, we are wholly without reason, but also without excuse for our actions. More than this, our actions set a model for all of mankind. Whenever we make a given decision, we contribute to this world of facticity to which all other humans are subject. We are left to choose for each and every human being, from every geographic locale and era, and yet we are wholly deprived of any guide for our actions. Neither Nature nor God can provide any assurance that we choose correctly. This is what is meant by existential anguish. “Existentialists like to say that man is in anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits himself, and who

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility.¹⁰⁶”

We begin to see Sartre’s near Kantian moral orientation. The moral worth of actions is unhinged from hedonistic ends. The material aims of a given action do not sanction said action. For we are perfectly free to choose from any number of goods, and any number of material aims. Instead, normative evaluation of actions is entirely formal and will-based in the Kantian sense. A good action is one chosen in light of an honest and sincere understanding of one’s own radical freedom along with the recognition that what one freely chooses has import for shaping the human condition as a whole.

Of course the reason why we are in a position of choosing for all humanity is precisely that all humanity does indeed choose freely. In other words, we choose for all humanity because all humans are free willing beings. It is the universality of this free will which binds humanity together. In Sartre’s words, “we always choose the good.”¹⁰⁷ It is vital to note that Sartre does not mean that we deterministically follow the intellect in choosing the best objective option. Far from it; the intent behind this statement is that in choosing we freely designate our choice as good. Yet since we are free human beings making this choice, we make a statement about what a free humanity values as good.

Now the fact that all human beings are essentially free subjects means that with every passing decision, we implicitly affirm not only our own free power to choose, but also this same faculty of will in humanity in general. We are thus precluded, if we are to be consistent, from

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

setting ourselves apart from the rest of humanity, and of acting in a way that we would not sanction for other human beings. Sartre points out, for instance, the specifically problematic nature of lying. “Someone who lies to himself and excuses himself by saying ‘Everyone does not act that way’ is struggling with a bad conscience, for the act of lying implies attributing a universal value to lies.¹⁰⁸” The Kantian impetus behind this statement is clear. We cannot rightly consider ourselves as unique. Since not only we, but all humanity possesses a free will, then we cannot will for ourselves that which we would deny for others.

Thus, Sartre’s voluntarism is made social since the *cogito* itself is universal to all mankind. So, to begin, Sartre’s existentialist ethics seems to allow for virtually any sort of action. There are no *a priori* ethical imperatives, no pre-existent signs or normative ends inherent in an intelligible universe. Even if there were such pre-existent moral laws, particular situations are too unique for them to be applied without interpretation, artistry, invention, or in a word, human freedom. Yet not all actions are truly permitted by this existentialist ethics. First, some actions reveal the subject to be living and acting in an “inauthentic” fashion. Namely, acting in such a way which denies either our factual identity, or on the other hand, our essential freedom, undermines who we are as free and transcending beings. Second, some actions imply a contradiction and reveal the subject as acting in “bad faith.” For instance, as Sartre points out, an individual who is lying or cheating may defend her actions by claiming that not all individuals partake in such bad acts. This excuse is made in bad faith because we do, with every passing act, choose what it is to be a human being. To avoid this responsibility by denying the universal import of one’s actions is a form of self-delusion. Thirdly, it seems that actions which are directly motivated by intentions to exploit or curb the freedom of others would be impermissible

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 25.

from Sartre's existentialist perspective. Every time we act, asserts Sartre, we affirm the formal element of acting or willing as-such. In other words, every particular instance of willing implies a universal affirmation of willing in general. How then can we will the slavery or objectification of others while not at the same time lapsing into contradiction? We cannot consistently and freely will the negation of the free will in any subject.

We will freedom for freedom's sake through our individual circumstances. And in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on our own. Of course, freedom as the definition of man does not depend on others, but as soon as there is commitment, I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time I will my own. I cannot set my own freedom as a goal without also setting the freedom of others as a goal.¹⁰⁹

The universal and social nature of existentialist ethics is therefore intimately tied to their being based upon the ubiquitous nature of the free will. As long as we recognize another human as a free being, we are duty bound to respect this freedom. This much is universal. The particular actions we take while attempting to respect this innate freedom may, as Sartre points out, take a multiplicity of forms. Historical contexts and cultural backgrounds undoubtedly will shape our specific life choices. What is important, what is constant, however, is the intent behind whatever ethical actions we pursue. Namely, we must always act in such a way that we will the freedom of ourselves and others.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

The moral dilemma has not changed from the days of the American Civil War, when many were forced to choose between taking sides for or against slavery, to our own time, when one is faced with the choice between the Popular Republican Movement (a Christian democratic party founded in 1944) and the Communists.

Nevertheless we can pass judgment, for as I said, we choose in the presence of others, and we choose ourselves in the presence of others. First, we may judge [and this may be a logical rather than a value judgment] that certain choices are based on error and others on truth. We may also judge a man when we assert that he is acting in bad faith. If we define man's situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith.¹¹⁰

There is, however, a major difficulty with this approach to making existentialist ethics social in nature. Namely, if ethical choice is indeed free from all universal criteria, then does it really *matter* that we choose for all humanity? The Sartrean strategy seems to be that since we choose for all humanity, there is a certain moral weight given to our actions, and thus the apparently free existentialist ethics is actually thoroughly social in nature. Yet, we seem to only be precluded from choosing to negate the freedom of others because of a formal contradiction. If there is no reason or excuse for choosing from any of our remaining options, (i.e. those which do not lead to a formal contradiction), then why is the choice for one of these remaining options over another not merely trivial? Why is it, according to Sartre, made in anguish? This is the perennial problem of empty formalism. More importantly, if we do choose for everyone, and this is a meaningful choice, then it seems that we must have some apprehension of other people, and what is good for them. We may rightly will the freedom of the Jew, the Arab, the worker, or the African. However, unless we know something about these individuals, our willing their freedom is nothing but a hollow wish. Barring substantial knowledge of the other, the criterion-

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

less ethical choice is really a trivial one, and we may easily escape the weight of Sartrean “anguish,” and indeed, any idea that existentialism is actually social or humanistic.

It is this objection which is vital for comprehending Sartre’s position on solidarity with the minority figure and its inherent difficulties. For Sartre’s political philosophy depends upon a universal understanding of the other while at the same time affirming cultural and ethnic particularity as founded upon a strong, existentialist voluntarism. How such solidarity can be conceived between radically free and unique agents will be the topic of interrogation for the remainder of this chapter. In any case, this Sartrean project marks what Georg Lukács termed “a fusion of ‘left’ ethics and ‘right’ epistemology.”¹¹¹ In a later work, Sartre recaptures the essence of this early project: “We learned to turn pluralism (that concept of the Right) against the optimistic, monistic idealism of our professors – in the name of a Leftist thought which was still ignorant of itself. Enthusiastically we adopted all those doctrines which divided men into watertight groups.”¹¹²

Again, the recurring problem with this fusion is that a strictly consistent voluntarism not only negates universal identity, but universal normativity (and thus solidarity) as well. For simply claiming that our actions have universal import means little if we cannot have knowledge of other men, and it is voluntarism itself which precludes such knowledge. The Sartrean defense of existentialism’s humanistic credentials seems to be based upon the idea that we can have solidarity with the other as a fellow, free being – even in the absence of any further knowledge or understanding of these free beings. Yet, is this minimal commonality enough to get us to the point of solidarity?

¹¹¹Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 22.

¹¹²Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 19.

I submit that solidarity requires a deeper comprehension of the identity of the other. (Indeed, this is entailed by the conceptual arguments of Chapters Two and Three.) Of course, this comprehension of identity is just what is precluded by Sartre's robust voluntarism. For if identity is the product not of universal human nature, nor any part of intelligible nature whatsoever, but rather is the product of free will, then it seems that a person of one cultural identity could not begin to comprehend, let alone feel solidarity with, a person of a different cultural identity. Consistent voluntarism implies an equally consistent particularism – not only of the universe, but also when it comes to cultural identity as well. In short, the voluntarism which allows Sartre to emphasize the real and substantial uniqueness of particular cultures immediately throws up a barrier for solidarity between these entirely unique cultures.

Defining the Jew negatively

One strategy for dealing with this apparent tension between cultural particularism and universal solidarity is seen throughout Anti-Semite and Jew itself. In this text which emphasizes both cultural authenticity and revolutionary politics, Sartre endeavors to define the Jews in a negative fashion. That is to say, Sartre's definition of the Jew is almost purely relational, and we will see that it is this "negative" or relational definition of the Jew which is necessary for Sartre to walk this tightrope between affirmation of particular cultural identity and, at the same time, universal human solidarity. Indeed, Sartre's strategy in Anti-Semite and Jew can rightly be seen as a modification (if not an altogether break) with the strategy pursued in Existentialism is a Humanism. In the latter text, culture is consistently conceived as the product of one's own process of invention and reinvention. The individual is thrown into a given cultural identity, the product of social context and situation, and yet Sartre emphasizes that this individual is fully free to impart her own meaning into this identity. Again, cultures are said to be substantially unique

just for the reason that they are given form and meaning by the individual, free wills who comprise them. Solidarity between cultures is meant to occur because of Kantian imperatives which relate to respect for the will itself. Of course, as mentioned, the difficulty with this strategy is its formalism. If all cultural identities are given meaning “from within,” i.e. by the individual will, then how can members of one culture really come to know another, let alone develop bonds of political solidarity with the other, or moreover begin to develop a trans-cultural conception of the good? A Kantian respect for the will itself seems inadequate to reestablish bonds of understanding between such voluntaristic and self-defined cultural identities.

In Anti-Semite and Jew, a different tactic employed. In this work, cultural identity (specifically the identity of the Jew) is now said to be produced largely “from without” by a given host society. This allows Sartre the conceptual tools to advocate for not only political solidarity with the Jew, but also the creation of a unified, egalitarian society into which the Jew can fully participate. In short, since Jewish cultural identity is the product of society at large, and the role of the Jewish will for imparting meaning to itself is essentially ignored, Sartre has an easier job in advocating for cross-cultural solidarity. For Jewish identity, since not primarily the product of Jewish will, now becomes readily intelligible to the rest of society. That is for the reason that it is the rest of society, itself, which produces the Jew.

In fact, for Sartre, there is not a Jewish culture or religion to speak of, nor is there an identifiable Jewish race. The Jews, for Sartre, are a mosaic, possessing no essential and unifying qualities. More radical than this, the Jews do not even share amongst them a family resemblance of innate, positive characteristics. Rather, any familial similarity the Jewish races of the world share is derived from their common situation of being a persecuted, nationless people. It is true that within Sartre’s theory individual Jews are absolutely free to choose their path in life – to

freely choose a life of authenticity as a Jew, or an inauthentic life denying their facticity. Yet what does Jewish facticity amount to? Ultimately, the definition of this facticity of Jewishness, for Sartre, is purely negative. Jewish facticity, in the end, is not the product of intrinsic qualities, but of external situation alone.

Of course, the purely relational identity Sartre which imparts upon the Jews is in many ways a reaction against both the anti-Semite and the democrat. He wishes to avoid claiming that the Jews are essentially the same as all other human beings. If the Jews are entirely the same as all other citizens of the world, then there is no use in supporting Jewish culture, and advocating for Jewish rights specifically. The democrat's line must be affirmed, and there ought simply to be a defense of human rights. However, in Sartre's estimation, this denial of Jewish particularity is a gift to the anti-Semite. For such a denial merely papers over the actual, subjugated situation of extant Jews. It allows for all of the vicious activities of the anti-Semite in the private and unofficial spheres of society to go unchallenged. In short, analytic universalism allows, *de facto*, for the persistence of racist oppression.

Yet, if Sartre takes the opposite path and claims a substantial Jewish identity, wholly unique from all other peoples, then the anti-Semite has won on this count as well. For if the Jews are truly so alien and dissimilar, if their identity can in principle never be assimilated into French society, then the anti-Semite's intuitionist hysteria seems warranted. It proves the anti-Semite's case that the Jews are not only a race, but an unassimilable, eternally foreign race.

That Jewish community which is based neither on nation, land, religion – at least not in contemporary France – nor material interest, but only on an identity of situation, might indeed be a true *spiritual* bond of affection, of culture, and of mutual aid. But the Jew's

enemies will immediately say that this bond is ethnic, and he himself, at a loss how to designate it, will perhaps use the word *race*. Then at one stroke he has justified the anti-Semite: 'You see very well that there is a Jewish *race*; they recognize it themselves, and besides they crowd together everywhere.' And, in fact, if the Jews want to draw a legitimate pride from this community, they must indeed end up by exalting racial qualities, since they cannot take pride in any collective work that is specifically Jewish, or in a civilization properly Jewish, or in a common mysticism.¹¹³

Thus, for Sartre's political prescriptions to make any sense the Jew must be both distinct from and similar to other men; he must both affirm his own culture even though this culture contains no specific qualities on its own. The Jew must desire solidarity with his own people today while at the same time hoping for unity with all mankind in the future. There has got to be some distinct Jewish identity. Otherwise, the democrat is right to ignore Jewish particularity as a political concern. Yet, Jewish identity must, in principle, at some future date, be assimilable to French society and indeed humanity as a whole. Otherwise, there is little point in political solidarity with the Jew. If the Jew is destined for all time to be an alien or a stranger, never understood or comprehended by all other peoples, then there is nothing to be gained by solidarity with him.

For Sartre, it is the descriptive possibility and normative desirability of the Jews' eventual assimilation which warrants political solidarity with the Jew. Moreover, this possibility of assimilation requires the Jew to be defined negatively. Thus, Sartre contends, the Jew exists; we must have solidarity with him. Yet the Jew's existence is situational, extrinsically defined, and therefore temporary. Only if Jewish identity is purely relational can there be assimilation of the Jews one day. In short, the negative definition of Jewish existence is a political necessity for Sartre. It is the only way he can carve out a position between the extreme particularist anti-

¹¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 85.

Semite who denies that the Jews will ever have a place in society and the universalist democrat who pretends that the Jews are already able to be assimilated, being entirely indistinct from all other citizens in every essential respect. “We must now ask ourselves the question: does the Jew exist? And if he exists, what is he? Is he first a Jew or first a man? Is the solution of the problem to be found in the extermination of all the Israelites or in their total assimilation? Or is it possible to find some other way of stating the problem and of resolving it?¹¹⁴”

The anti-Semites wish to exterminate the Jews for being irreconcilably different. The democrats wish to save individual Jewish people while destroying them as Jews by ignoring their unique situation in French society. Sartre’s political solution is to defend Jews as Jews today so that they may peacefully and voluntarily assimilate tomorrow. Whatever the merits of this position may be, it is certainly the case that Sartre requires the Jews to have some identity which distinguishes them from all other human beings, but for this identity to be, in principle, dissolvable. Who, then, is the Jew for Sartre? “I agree therefore with the democrat that the Jew is a man like other men, but this tells us nothing in particular – except that he is free, that he is at the same time in bondage, that he is born, enjoys life, suffers, and dies, that he loves and hates, just as do all men.¹¹⁵”

The Jew is like all other men. He is both free and bound to his facticity. Yet what makes the Jew a Jew is precisely this facticity. Thus, it is Jewish facticity which requires investigation. Sartre must investigate the actual, concrete situation of the Jew. In the opening lines of this investigation we get first hint of the direction in which Sartre is heading. “I give warning that I shall limit my description to the Jews in France, for it is the problem of the French Jews that is

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

our problem.¹¹⁶ Sartre wishes to investigate only the French Jew. From the beginning Sartre denies a common identity amongst all Jews. He denies Jewishness as-such. Indeed, affirming Jewishness as-such, or an eternal Jewish nature would be doubly problematic for Sartre. First, it would mean accepting the intuitionist form of synthetic thought practiced by the anti-Semite. Sartre repeatedly charges that the anti-Semite acts irrationally in positing an eternal, Jewish nature. Second, affirming an eternal nature would be at odds with Sartre's overall existentialist program. Human nature cannot exist, and specific human natures cannot exist insofar as man is free, a being for-itself. Thus, the Jews (or any population for that matter) do not have eternal natures, but rather identities which are themselves produced freely via willful acts.

The Jew is in the situation of being a Jew. His status is not primarily the product of his own willful self-conception, but more so it is produced by the willful identification of the anti-Semite. The anti-Semite wills to be an anti-Semite, and thus to constitute the Jew by virtue of his own gaze. Yet, not all anti-Semitic cultures are the same. Since not all anti-Semitic cultures are the same, not all Jewish situations around the world are the same. Of course, it is just the situation which produces Jewish identity. Thus, as there are many anti-Semitic situations, there are as many Jewish identities. In affirming that he will focus solely upon French Jewry, Sartre already denies an identity of Jews apart from the identity of their host cultures. He denies a single, coherent Jewish culture.

As if sensitive to the politically controversial nature of such a move, Sartre is quick to point out that he does not, in fact, deny the existence of a Jewish race:

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

I shall not deny that there is a Jewish race. But we must understand each other at once. If by 'race' is understood that indefinable complex into which are tossed pell-mell both somatic characteristics and intellectual and moral traits, I believe in it no more than I do ouija boards. What, for lack of a better term, I shall call ethnic characteristics, are certain inherited physical conformations that one encounters more frequently among Jews than among non-Jews. Here it is still advisable to be prudent: perhaps we had better say Jewish *races*. We know that not all Semites are Jews, which complicates the problem. We also know that certain blond Jews of Russia are still further removed from the woolly-headed Jews of Algeria than from the 'Aryans' of East Prussia. As a matter of fact, each country has its Jews and our picture of an Israelite hardly corresponds at all to our neighbor's picture.¹¹⁷

However, it is vital to note that even as Sartre strains to show that he does not deny the existence of a Jewish race, he reverses himself almost immediately. What is the Jewish race, he asks? Is it the product of inherited, somatic characteristics? Surely there are some instances of somatic characteristics being inherited by Jews at a higher rate than amongst other peoples. Yet, Sartre continues, there are of course blond Jews, and Jews with thick, black hair, and Russian Jews look totally dissimilar from North African Jews. And indeed, not even all Semites are, themselves, Jews. The paragraph which starts out with Sartre disavowing his denial of a Jewish race ends with just such a denial! There is no one Jewish race, there is not even a somatic resemblance amongst Jews of all countries. There are, at most, Jewish *races*. Of course, to assert that there are a multiplicity of Jewish races which are culturally, ethnically, ritually, economically, and even spiritually dissimilar to one another is very much the same thing as denying a Jewish race to begin with. Fortunately, the remainder of Sartre's attempt to define Jewish facticity is far more straightforward and less ambiguous. Indeed, the rest of his investigation rigorously peels away, layer by layer, any possible, positive Jewish identity common to all Jewish peoples. Jewish identity, Sartre will argue, is exclusively situational.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

Failing to determine the Jew by his race, shall we define him by his religion or by the existence of a strictly Israelite national community? Here the question becomes complicated. Certainly at a remote time in the past there was a religious and national community that was called Israel. But the history of that community is one of dissolution over a period of twenty-five centuries. First it lost its sovereignty; there was the Babylonian captivity, then the Persian domination, finally the Roman conquest.¹¹⁸

Sartre outlines the utter destruction of a common, Jewish identity. He recalls that a Jewish nation did at one time exist. Moreover, this nation had for itself a common religion. It is important to note here that Sartre is making reference to the temple in Jerusalem, specifically, along with the hierarchy of priests, and the communal acts of worship and sacrifice. In this way, Sartre pays lip service to a Jewish identity which, at some point in time, may have existed in a positive form. However, this should not be seen as an instance of moderation on Sartre's part. For Sartre sets up this historical narrative only to topple it. Indeed, the Jews no longer have a common temple. It lies in ruins today. The Jews no longer adhere to a system of priestly hierarchy; they no longer engage in communal sacrifice in a single location. After the Babylonian captivity and finally the Roman conquest, the Jews no longer have any political, civic, or communal sovereignty whatsoever.

Nonetheless, in the wake of the disintegration of the Jews as a political and social unit, Jewish spiritual bonds of faith arose.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

The religious bond was strengthened between the Jews of the dispersion and those who remained on their own soil; it took on the sense and value of a national bond. But this 'transfer,' it is to be suspected, indicated a spiritualization of collective ties, and spiritualization, after all, means enfeeblement... In contrast to the 'strong form' that Christianity was from the first, the Hebraic religion appeared immediately as a weak form, on the road to disintegration. It managed to maintain itself only by a complicated policy of concessions and obstinacy. It resisted the persecutions and the dispersion of the Jews in the medieval world; it much less effectively resisted the progress of enlightenment and the critical spirit. The Jews who surround us today have only a ceremonial and polite contact with their religion.¹¹⁹

What Sartre outlines here is the next phase in the demolition of a coherent and positive Jewish identity. With the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem, the Roman conquest of Israel and the ultimate diaspora of the Jews, the only bond which remained amongst all of Israel was a purely spiritual bond of faith. The Jewish religion was originally sacrificial in nature. Expulsion from Israel made this impossible. Thus, what remained to unite the Jews was a spiritual affirmation of a common faith. Yet even these purely spiritual, religious ties amongst Jews proved unsustainable. Sartre contends that, next to the "strong form" of Christian spirituality, Jewish spiritual bonds began to dissolve. The Jews, for the most part, are no longer religious. The last, positively identifiable feature of the Jewish community has all but disintegrated.

Indeed, Sartre goes so far as to say that not only do the Jews not share a common political form, or a common language, or faith, but that, in fact, the Jews do not even share a collective historical memory of whatever positive unity they once held. "If it is true, as Hegel says, that a community is historical to the degree that it remembers its history, then the Jewish community is

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

the least historical of all, for it keeps a memory of nothing but a long martyrdom, that is, of a long passivity.¹²⁰,

Sartre's investigation, therefore, asks just what, if anything, makes the Jew a Jew.

Lacking all identifiable features, what can the Jews say that they have in common?

What is it then that serves to keep a semblance of unity in the Jewish community? To reply to this question, we must come back to the idea of situation. It is neither their past, their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name of Jew, it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews.¹²¹

At once Sartre's position on Jewish identity becomes crystal clear. Jewish identity is situational, but more than this, it is purely situational. Indeed, nearly one fourth of Anti-Semite and Jew consists of a litany of reasons why there is no longer a common Jewish identity. Somatic characteristics cannot produce a single Jewish identity since many Jewish populations appear drastically dissimilar to one another in a physiological sense. All national and civic bonds were destroyed by conquest and expulsion from the land of Israel. Even spiritual bonds of faith cannot unite the Jews into a coherent identity. For these have quickly dissolved in the face of Christian spirituality. At last, as if to put the final nail in the coffin of a positive Jewish identity, Sartre states that the Jews do not even have a memory of a common, positive identity. They do not even remember a common history beyond a monotonous procession of suffering and subjugation. Indeed all that constitutes the Jewish situation today is this negative relationship

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 66-67.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 67.

with their diverse and multifarious oppressors. Thus, any cohesiveness amongst the Jews is, like their identity in the first place, produced by external relations with non-Jews who are hostile to them. “That is what establishes among all Jews a solidarity which is not one of action or interest, but of situation. What unites them, even more than the sufferings of two thousand years, is the present hostility of Christians.¹²²”

Sartre’s findings is that what makes the Jew a Jew is his common situation. It is the mere fact that he is identified by others as a Jew which makes him a Jew. “The Jew is whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start.¹²³” “Thus the Jew is in the situation of a Jew because he lives in the midst of a society that takes him for a Jew.¹²⁴” Moreover, this negative identity, formed entirely by the will of those hostile to the Jewish people, is precisely what allows for solidarity amongst Jews. Sartre is very clear on this point. No cultural achievement, no language, or common faith unites the Jews. What gives rise to Jewish solidarity is specifically their situation of being singled out within a multiplicity of communities around the world. Thus, Sartre can conclude that, “In effect, the Jew is to another Jew the only man with whom he can say ‘we.’¹²⁵”

Indeed, it is not only that others make one a Jew by identifying him as such. Sartre’s point is that, more often than not, it is the anti-Semite specifically which takes the role of this identifying “other.” The anti-Semite himself constitutes the Jew, brings about Jewish identity through his hatred and self-loathing.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 100.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

The anti-Semites are right in saying that the Jew eats, drinks, reads, sleeps, and dies like a Jew. What else could he do? They have subtly poisoned his food, his sleep, and even his death. How else could it be for him, subjected every moment to this poisoning? As soon as he steps outside, as soon as he encounters others, in the street or in public places, as soon as he feels upon him the look of those whom a Jewish newspaper calls “Them” – a look that is a mixture of fear, disdain, reproach, and brotherly love – he must decide: does he or does he not consent to be the person whose role they make him play? And if he consents, to what extent? If he refuses, will he refuse all kinship with other Israelites, or only an ethnic relationship?¹²⁶

So what is the Jew to do? He may have no reason to affirm his Jewishness. He may deny the Jewish religion, find Jewish rituals alien to him, and find Jewish music foreign to his ear. Yet he is singled out as a Jew and, more likely than not, hated for it. He can retreat into an inauthentic rationalism, deny that he is anything more or less than another man. In this case, Sartre contends, the anti-Semite has won. If, however, he affirms his Jewishness the question indeed becomes – “to what extent?” To affirm his Jewishness as an eternal, immutable identity would be to naively stumble into the anti-Semite’s picture of him – as clannish, intractable, and inscrutable. In any case, it would mean another sort of inauthenticity – this time from the denial of freedom and a flight into facticity. He would become like a rock, a thing defined by an eternal essence, or in other words, a thing in-itself. Yet, this man has a third choice – authenticity. He can affirm his present situation of being a Jew. He can affirm this facticity without it becoming his totality. Indeed, he can affirm his Jewishness while not denying his common humanity.

Jewish identity, for this man, becomes a political move. Again, Sartre claims that for most Jews, there is nothing intrinsically positive about Jewish civilization which they can collectively affirm. Instead, affirming one’s Jewish identity is the only effective way for

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

combating the anti-Semite. It is not an end in itself. Again, there is nothing intrinsic to Judaism itself that this man finds desirable. He merely finds himself singled out as a Jew, disadvantaged for being a Jew. His end is simple - human liberation. The unflinching affirmation of his Jewishness, his situation of being a Jew, is a means to this goal of liberation from the anti-Semite and the inegalitarian society which produces anti-Semitism.

The Jew and the worker

This last section began with the claim that defining the Jew negatively is a political necessity for Sartre. This is for the reason that this early Sartre is ultimately a universalist in his ethical outlook. His political and ethical aim is the dissolution of contradictions within society. By this I mean those contradictions which, for instance, produce exploitation of labor by capital and bigotry against Jews by a culture of anti-Semitism. Sartre advocates a transformation of society as a whole. Indeed, his regard for the Jew or the worker as particular identities is merely instrumental. There is no intrinsically desirable Jewishness or “worker-ness” that serves as Sartre’s ethical end. No, Sartre’s ethical end is human liberation. It is merely the affirmation of synthetic identities which is a necessary prerequisite for such universal, human liberation. Indeed, since these identities are, themselves, the products of the contradictions within society, then in a truly liberated society these particular identities will, themselves, dissolve and disappear. To accurately understand this political stance, it is necessary to take very seriously the perennial analogy Sartre draws between the Jew and the worker.

Let us compare for a moment the revolutionary idea of the class struggle with the Manichaeism of the anti-Semite. In the eyes of the Marxist, the class struggle is in no sense a struggle between Good and Evil; it is a conflict of interests between human

groups. The reason why the revolutionary adopts the point of view of the proletariat is, first of all, because it is *his* own class, then because it is oppressed, because it is by far the most numerous and consequently involves the fate of mankind in its own destiny, finally because the results of its victory will necessarily involve the abolition of the class structure.¹²⁷

Sartre draws a distinction between the ethics of the Manichean anti-Semite and the Marxist. For the anti-Semite, the Jews and Gentiles constitute distinct, mutually exclusive identities. These are synthetic identities in that they are coherent wholes which cannot be simply analyzed by an investigation of their parts. For the anti-Semite, Gentiles are not merely an aggregate of individuals with characteristics potentially found in non-Gentiles. Rather, being a Gentile determines the sort of individual one is, and similarly, being a Jew determines one's individual nature and personality traits. The Marxist, on the other hand, denies the perpetual opposition of eternally constituted identities. As Sartre states, the Marxist does not look at class struggle as a contest between "Good and Evil," that is, between two mutually exclusive positions, eternally irreconcilable to one another. Rather, the Marxist sees class struggle as merely a human contest based in plainly human interests. The proletariat works for revolution not because the capitalist is a demon, or some inscrutable and evil enemy. The proletariat works for revolution because of a situation of oppression. It is entirely non-personal. In fact, in a following passage Sartre explains that, should the capitalists of the world decide to acquiesce to proletarian demands, then the worker ought to welcome this with open arms. It is the situation of capitalist exploitation that the proletariat oppose, and not persons who have the identity of being a capitalist.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

However, it is specifically the last line of this quotation which is of paramount importance. The revolutionary adopts the proletarian cause because, "...the results of its victory will necessarily involve the abolition of the class structure." This is yet another piece of evidence that Sartre's political outlook is thoroughly universalist in nature. Far from the particular identity of the worker being of intrinsic worth or importance; the affirmation of proletarian identity is merely a means to an end of universal human liberation, and the reordering of society as a whole. What's more, this reordering of society, should the proletarian revolutionary be successful, positively abolishes proletarian identity! The worker self-identifies as worker to create a future in which there are no workers. For the identity of a worker in this capitalist era is an identity constituted by a situation of exploitation. One is a worker just in case one's productive labor is exploited by capital. In a classless society, there will certainly be labor and there will certainly be production. Yet there will not be workers because there will no longer be capitalists and a situation of exploitation of one class by another.

What, then, is the purpose of worker authenticity, or in other words, the self-affirmation of oneself as a worker? "When the Communists set down as part of their program 'the radicalization of the masses,' when Marx explains that the proletarian class *ought to be* conscious of itself, what does that mean if not that the worker, too, is not at first authentic?"¹²⁸

For Sartre, worker authenticity is a necessary means to revolution. Should the worker give in to the analytic rhetoric of the democrat and believe that he is just like all other citizens, that society is simply composed of an aggregate of individuals, then revolution will never be pursued. Thus, for Sartre, authenticity and an affirmation of one's own identity is vitally important. Yet, as we have seen above, it is certainly not important for its own sake. The

¹²⁸ Ibid., 90-91.

authentic self-identification by workers as workers is a means to the end of human liberation, the abolition of a classed society, and thus the abolition of the identity of the worker itself.

The key, here, is to realize that what Sartre claims about the workers' situation is entirely analogous to his diagnosis of the situation of the Jew:

And the Jew does not escape this rule: authenticity for him is to live to the full his condition as Jew; inauthenticity is to deny it or to attempt to escape from it. Inauthenticity is no doubt more tempting for him than for other men, because the situation which he has to lay claim to and to live in is quite simply that of a martyr. What the least favored of men ordinarily discover in their situation is a bond of concrete solidarity with other men. The economic condition of the salaried man living in the perspective of revolution, or in the condition of the member of a persecuted church, involves in itself a profound unity of material and spiritual interests. **But we have shown that the Jews have neither community of interests nor community of beliefs. They do not have the same fatherland; they have no history. The sole tie that binds them is the hostility and disdain of the societies which surround them.** Thus the authentic Jew is the one who asserts his claim in the face of the disdain shown toward him.¹²⁹

Authenticity serves the same purpose in the Jew as in the worker. Both the Jew and the worker find themselves in situations of exploitation amidst a society steeped in contradiction. The point of Jewish solidarity and self-identification as Jew is precisely to combat this situation of exploitation. Yet, just as the successful worker-revolutionary eventually negates her own identity by combating this situation of exploitation, so does the Jew negate her Jewish identity in conquering anti-Semitism.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 91.

Indeed, the situation is if anything more stark in the case of the Jew as compared to that of the worker. Perhaps amongst workers there is a common bond of trade skills, and certainly there is the common bond of material interests. Yet as Sartre once again repeats, "...the Jews have neither community of interests nor community of beliefs." It is solely their situation of exploitation by the anti-Semite which constitutes their identity. Thus, surely, the overcoming of anti-Semitism negates Jewish identity, though, Sartre may contend, in a positive and constructive manner. It is the universal reconciliation of identities which is the ultimate, desired product of Sartrean authenticity. Just as the authentic worker makes revolution to bring about a classless society – free from the contradictions of worker and capital; so too does the authentic Jew endeavor to bring about an egalitarian society free from the anti-Semite and his scapegoat, the "Jew."

Particularism today, universalism tomorrow

Realizing the analogy between Jew and worker, it becomes evident what constitutes the fundamental, conceptual fissure which runs through Sartre's theory of the minority identity. Specifically, Sartre appears to advocate for a sincere affirmation of one's identity in the present for the hope of an assimilation of said identity in the future.

However, it should not be thought that Jewish uneasiness is metaphysical. It would be an error to identify it with the anxiety that moves us to a consideration of the condition of man. I should say rather that metaphysical uneasiness is a condition that the Jew – no more than the worker – cannot allow himself today. One must be sure of one's rights and firmly rooted in the world, one must be free of the fears that each day assail oppressed minorities or classes, before one dare raise questions about the place of man in the world and his ultimate destiny. In a word, metaphysics is the special privilege of

the Aryan governing classes. Let no one see in this an attempt to discredit metaphysics; when men are liberated, it will become again an essential concern of mankind.¹³⁰

Why is metaphysics precluded from the Jew and the worker? Why are they not permitted to conceive of man universally? The answer is that man is not yet universal. The Jew and the worker are still primarily concerned with the social, that is, the ordinary concerns of safety, security, and welfare in a society still rife with the contradictions of capitalist exploitation and cultural prejudice. Thus, the ruling-class Aryan is free to pursue metaphysics; for the Aryan is not the victim of these societal contradictions and fractures. The worker and the Jew haven't this luxury – at least not yet. Sartre is unambiguous here. He is not at all against metaphysical speculation, that is, of pondering man's place in the cosmos. One day the ability to conceive of "man as-such" will be open to all. However, in the present, the exploited classes have more pressing business.

The disquietude of the Jew is not metaphysical; it is social. The ordinary object of his concern is not yet the place of man in the universe, but his place in society. He cannot perceive the loneliness of each man in the midst of a silent universe, because he has not yet emerged from society into the world. It is among men that he feels himself lonely; the racial problem limits his horizon. Nor is his uneasiness of the kind that seeks perpetuation; he takes no pleasure in it – he seeks reassurance.¹³¹

Ultimately, we see Sartre's theory of the minority cultural identity cut in two. It is not impossible to pursue metaphysical knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the "place of man in the

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

universe.” It is not impossible to conceive of mankind as a whole. Far from it, this ability to think universally is an ultimate goal for Sartre. It is simply the case that for the Jew, just as for the worker, it is not yet time to think in metaphysical terms. Their concern is still social as they have not yet emerged from their precarious situation of societal exploitation. The worker and the Jew have to affirm their particularity today so as to be able to think universally tomorrow.

And, in fact, Sartre repeats twice that the situation of the Jew is not metaphysical. This does not only mean, as we have outlined above, that the Jew cannot yet concern himself with metaphysical speculation. Much more importantly, it also means that the situation of the Jew, itself, is not a metaphysical situation. Just as with the worker, Sartre denies that Jewishness is an eternally unique, metaphysically constituted identity. This is precisely how Sartre, though claiming to affirm synthetic thought, disassociates himself from the robustly synthetic thought processes of the anti-Semite. It is the anti-Semite who claims that the Jew partakes in an eternal, metaphysically substantial Jewish essence, or in other words, Jewish identity. Sartre has to deny that this is the case. He must affirm that the Jews, though occupying a distinct place in society, are nonetheless not so substantially different from all mankind. Thus, for Sartre, Jewish identity is produced by a situation. Ordinary social pressures form the Jewish identity in its entirety. Sartre objects to the anti-Semite in specifically this sense – that the Jew is not metaphysically distinct, but rather metaphysically similar to the rest of humanity. Jewish identity is purely situational, and it is for just this reason that the Jew can emerge from his situation, and join the rest of humanity. As Sartre himself puts it, the Jew “...has not yet emerged from society into the world.” Of course, the key word here is “yet.” Since Jewish identity is not a metaphysical one, but one produced purely by social situation, there may well be a time when Jewish identity is transcended altogether.

By comparing the Jew to the worker Sartre makes a statement both against the democrat and against the anti-Semite. Most obviously, Sartre compares the worker to the Jew in order to show how denying one's synthetic identity simply prolongs the societal exploitation which gave rise to these identities in the first place. The worker who pretends that he is not a worker, not a member of the proletariat who are exploited for their productive labor, but rather just another person no different from the capitalist, will never make revolution. The democrat thus does the worker no favors by defending his universal rights as citizen; for the worker must demand workers' rights if he is to truly remedy his situation. Similarly, the Jew can only combat an anti-Semitic society, Sartre claims, by proudly self-identifying as a Jew and demanding rights as a Jew.

More interesting, however, is the manner in which Sartre opposes the anti-Semite through this very same Jew/worker analogy. For the anti-Semite will claim, as mentioned above, that the Jews are metaphysically and substantially other than the French gentile. Yet by comparing the Jew to the worker, Sartre opposes this anti-Semitic stance. The Jews, like the workers, are thrown into their synthetic identity because of their situation in society. Nonetheless, the worker will not always be a worker; she will not always be an individual exploited for her productive labor. Specifically, it is by the self-aware and authentic identification of her situation as worker that she is liberated from this identity once and for all. Of course, she cannot merely liberate herself individually. Rather, she transcends her exploited situation by transforming the inegalitarian, contradiction-laden society which produced this worker-identity in the first place. Similarly, the Jewish person can and should transcend Jewish identity. For Jewish identity is not metaphysical, but purely situational. What's more, it is the product of a situation of exploitation specifically. Like the worker, the Jew cannot transcend her identity on an individual basis.

Instead, authentic self-identification as a Jew, that is to say, as a proud member of the Jewish community, is the only way to transform an inegalitarian, anti-Semitic society which gave rise to this identity in the first place. Thus, the worker's goal is clear, namely, to create a classless society free from exploitation, and thus free from both the situationally constituted identities of worker and capitalist. If the analogy holds, the Jew's goal is to create an egalitarian society, free from anti-Semites, and its necessary situational correlate, Jewish identity itself. After all, Jewish identity, much like the identity of the worker, is nothing but the synthetic product of a social situation of exploitation. In each case, authentic affirmation of identity is simply the necessary means of transcending, and indeed abolishing that very identity.

Section 3: Why the Synthesis Fails; “Universal Sympathetic Understanding” as Incompatible with Existentialism

Defining the Jew negatively is necessary for synthesizing Sartre's particularism with his universalist and revolutionary ethics. Unless Jewish identity is wholly reconcilable with the rest of humanity, the leftist imperatives of egalitarianism and internationalism remain out of reach. However, it is just this necessary move of defining the Jew in wholly negative and relational terms that amounts to a fatal inconsistency in Sartre's own metaphysics. On the one hand, the negative identity of the Jew, the fact that Jewish identity is produced by external hostilities, means that Jewish identity is not wholly particular, unique, and inscrutable. Jewish identity, since it is entirely the product of an external society, can be re-assimilated into this society one day.

Of course, the price for this commensurability of Jewish identity is very high for Sartre and his underlying existentialist commitments. Namely, Jewish identity becomes something

entirely instrumental and temporary, and thus rather shallow – lacking all substance. We may recall that in Existentialism is a Humanism it is emphasized that each subject freely gives meaning to her own identity. It is only because cultural identity is a free invention of the subject herself that it can count as something truly unique and substantial. Again, the existence and import of cultural particularity is based entirely upon the notion that cultural identity is a free project, and thus not merely a modification of an overall human essence. Sartre contradicts this necessary basis for cultural particularity in Anti-Semite and Jew. Here, Jewish identity has no intrinsic meaning, and is certainly not given any meaning from the collectivity of Jews themselves. Instead, Jewishness is evacuated of content and only serves as an empty designator for a disjointed people lacking any common heritage. The Jew does not freely form this facticity “from the inside,” through an act of the will. Jewish facticity is rather thrust upon individual Jews by an anti-Semitic society. All individual Jews can do is “authentically” accept this external designation in the hopes of one day escaping it.

Practical problems with Sartre’s theory of the oppressed identity

It is unclear how or why Jewish individuals are supposed to sincerely affirm their synthetic identities as Jews only for the end of creating an egalitarian society into which the Jews can fully assimilate. It is certainly not the case that Sartre could consistently believe that Judaism will survive the death of anti-Semitism. Constantly Sartre repeats in ever more bold and inventive ways that Jewish identity is nothing but the product of exploitation. Indeed, even Jewish memory is nothing but a memory of an undifferentiated series of various exploitations. The Jews have no common material interests, no common mysticism, or really any positive, unifying features. All the Jews have, all that constitutes them as a people, in fact, is that the Jew is the only person to whom another Jew can say “we.”

Clearly, if Sartre is in any way consistent, then he must admit that the Jew cannot survive the end of anti-Semitism as a Jew, at least, not for very long. Why, then, should Jews today self-identify as Jews? Sartre's answer seems to be that the anti-Semite will identify them as Jews either way. The Jewish person will always be identified as such from the outside. Moreover, she will always be disadvantaged because of this external identification. Denying one's Jewishness will not solve this problem. If anything, it plays to an anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as deceitful or cunning. Therefore, one authentically self-identifies as a Jew specifically, and only, to combat anti-Semitism and its negative effects. Perhaps if individuals proudly identify as Jews, and demand rights as Jews, this can effect a transformation in society at large. Perhaps society can be made more egalitarian, and the lot of Jewish individuals can be improved. Again, the Jew/worker analogy is instrumental in this Sartrean argument.

Is this practical argument plausible? It seems as though the only point of Jewish authenticity is the construction of an egalitarian society, free from contradiction and exploitation. Yet, it is unclear as to why this cannot be accomplished via a robustly universalist program from the start. If Jewish self-identification is ultimately aimed at universal human rights and liberation, if Jewish rights are ultimately pursued for the eventual goal of Jewish assimilation into a free society of equals, and additionally, if more than a few individuals understand that this is the case, then it seems rather insincere and absurd to advocate for specifically Jewish rights in the first place. What the so-called authentic Jews are really after is, in the end, human rights and human liberation. Why not simply say so in the first place?

The Sartrean reply, by way of the worker/Jew analogy may be that human rights are only possible after particular, subjugated groups within society have been liberated from their situations of exploitation. Indeed, the response may be that speaking only universally of human

rights *de facto* ignores the very specific suffering of Jews, and thus is itself an obstacle to the realization of universal human rights. In a parallel manner, speaking only of universal human rights such as free speech, the freedom to assemble, and so on, ignores the particular situation of exploitation of the worker. The worker will only gain his freedom through advocating for worker's rights specifically.

Yet, in reality, there seems to be a fundamental disanalogy between Jew and worker. The worker is advocating for his rights not as a worker, but as a human being. The fight for safe working conditions, higher wages, and indeed control over the means of production, is not the product of a peculiar worker-identity. Indeed, these demands are the product of universal human desires for safety, security, and freedom. The worker demands control over production not because he identifies culturally as a worker, but because he wishes to eat, and clothe his children, and control his daily life, as do all humans. Indeed, it is in demanding these workers' rights that he organizes with other laborers against the interests and defenders of capital. He rightly affirms a specific class consciousness. Yet, as Sartre correctly points out, it is not a consciousness of one eternally constituted identity against another. Rather, it is simply the consciousness of ordinary human interests.¹³²

Is the Jew really in the same position as the worker? What does the demand for Jewish rights actually amount to? If Jewish rights are the demand for the freedom to worship, to assemble in community centers and synagogues, to not be slandered in print media, and the like, then these are simply not "Jewish demands" in any specific sense. Indeed, these are the very same universal rights Sartre ridicules the democrat for focusing upon. Yet, what else could the Jew demand? If Sartre is correct, if Jewish identity is nothing but a situation of exploitation, and

¹³²Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 42.

lacks any positive spiritual, material, or ritualistic quality, then what would constitute specifically Jewish rights? Sartre is perfectly silent on this point.

It is not clear, in the end, that proletarian demands for worker's rights are really anything other than demands for universal human welfare and freedom. It is only the case that Marxists understand that human welfare and freedom are dependent upon the reorganization of society along classless lines, and that this means the self-activity of the working class – i.e. the great majority of humanity. For the working class is the necessary catalyst or agent which can affect such a transformation. Moreover, it is the case that the demand for Jewish rights are ultimately nothing different from the demands of proletarian revolutionaries, and thus are equally universal to all humanity. After all, Sartre himself admits that anti-Semitism is primarily fueled by class antagonism.¹³³ Specifically, anti-Semitism is primarily a tool of the owning classes for dividing the masses along racial lines, so as to deflect attention from the objective, material antagonisms within society. Thus, if anti-Semitism is largely an epiphenomenon of capitalist exploitation, would not a genuinely socialist revolution combat anti-Semitism sufficiently? What is the need for the supposedly authentic self-identification of Jews as Jews? Indeed, can such a self-identification even be authentic or sincere if there is no positive quality inherent to Judaism itself? Instead, it seems by Sartre's own premises that if Jews truly wish to combat anti-Semitism, they should become socialists and align themselves with proletarian causes. Once again, the aims of the proletariat are universal, and yet the attainment of these aims – namely of an egalitarian society – would seem to have the effect of destroying the root causes of anti-Semitism as well.

The Instability of Sartre's conceptual synthesis

¹³³ Ibid., 149.

In fact, if Sartre actually meant for his advocacy of particular, cultural struggle to be taken as only a practical consideration, there would be very little to critique. After all, it may very well be the case that the struggle for universal socialism is best fought within very specific cultural and religious sites of resistance. Even universal ideals have to be translated into national languages, and the fight for universal human rights must be taken up in specific lands by specific, historically situated peoples. However, all of this amounts to merely a procedural question. Yet, to take Sartre's pluralist position seriously means to comprehend how his emphasis upon particular cultural identity is not only pragmatic and procedural in nature.

To the contrary, it is Sartre's voluntaristic reading of the Cartesian *cogito* which precludes any speak of a human nature, but instead only the human condition – and indeed, more specific human conditions and situations. It is for this metaphysical reason that, unlike Spinoza and contra the universalistic democrat, Sartre wishes to take up the cause of particular exploited identities within society. For not only practical, but also theoretical grounds Sartre pins the hope of human liberation upon the authentic consciousnesses of particular, subjugated groups, and for this same reason he attacks the universalist democrat who does not take these particular struggles as being important. His is an identitarian politics, a pluralism which affirms the rights of specific ethnicities, cultures, and religious groups before any universal conception of human rights. Moreover, his identity politics is wholly inseparable from a voluntaristic conception of the will.

Sartre makes use of this existentialist voluntarism in order to purge the world of natures – including the human nature. It is this metaphysical move which is absolutely necessary for emphasizing the real import and uniqueness of particular cultural identities. Yet, these elements of voluntarism and nominalism enter Sartre's metaphysics as out of Pandora's Box. Once

unleashed, these notions not only provide the space for Sartre's desired cultural particularism and the emphasis for particular cultural projects. Moreover, they imply a universe so particularistic, so nominalist in nature, that the very idea of mutual understanding and solidarity between cultures is threatened as well.

In order to put things back together, that is, in order to safeguard solidarity from the voluntarism and nominalism which are essential to his own philosophy, Sartre employs an ingenious neo-Kantian strategy. We have seen that the essential nature of this strategy is that the free will, while banishing all universal natures from the world, is itself a sort of universal characteristic of all human beings. Thus, asserts Sartre, it is upon this common and universal free will that universal human solidarity can be affirmed.

Consequently, every project, however individual, has a universal value. Every project – even one belonging to a Chinese, and Indian, or an African – can be understood by a European. To say it can be understood means that the European of 1945, though his situation is different, must deal with his own limitations in the same way, and so can reinvent within himself the project undertaken by the Chinese, Indian, or black African. There is universality in every project, inasmuch as any man is capable of understanding any human project. This should not be taken to mean that a certain project defines man forever, but that it can be reinvented again and again. Given sufficient information, one can always find a way to understand an idiot, a child, a person from a so-called primitive culture, or a foreigner.¹³⁴

All human projects, (and thus all human identities which are, after all, human projects for Sartre), are unique in terms of their historical context. They are unique given the absolutely diverse manner in which they were conceived. Yet, it is the common fact that all human projects

¹³⁴Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 42-43.

are conceived freely that makes them universally similar. Moreover, it is this similarity of universal freedom and reinvention which allows an individual to comprehend the identity of, in Sartre's words, "an idiot, a child, a person from a so-called primitive culture, or a foreigner." In the end, it is freedom itself which constitutes the fundamental human situation of solidarity.

However, the Kantian strategy ultimately fails. For the obvious question arises: Can we actually understand the freedom of the other? That is to say, if Sartre is right in denying the intelligible universe apart from individual, concrete wills, then is it actually possible to even comprehend the existence these other, concrete wills? For the rationalist monist, we understand the other because, like the other, we are both a part of the same, intelligible whole. Barring this intelligible whole, how is it that we can begin to understand, or even posit the existence of other radically free beings? The Sartrean answer seems to be that we understand other radically free beings because we, ourselves, possess such a radically free will. Yet, this is peculiar. For it seems that it is the nature of such a will to defy such universality. In other words, how do we know that our own free will is anything like the free will of another? How do we know, therefore, what respecting another's freedom actually amounts to?

Kantian formalism, a respect for other beings just because they are free is entirely insufficient a ground for robust political solidarity. This is especially true since the Sartrean conception of freedom is not a positive one, like the Spinozist *conatus*. Freedom, for Sartre, is not the will to understand an objective and shared Nature, to increase the powers of intellectual apprehension, and so on. It is something, by definition, unhinged from the intellect, a common, objective Universe, and thus unhinged from the determining principle of sufficient reason. Yet how can such an entity (or non-entity?) be understood at all? Even more so, how can it be understood by a member of a radically different culture, faith, or era?

How do we know how to respect the freedom of the Jews, for instance? After all, if Sartre is at all concerned with emphasizing solidarity with specific, unique cultures, and not simply universal man, then one culture's free conception of its identity and its good may very well be radically different than another's. But if this is the case, then we are precluded from knowing specifically how to have solidarity with the other. At most we can know that the other is free, and thus, according to Sartre, worthy of respect as being free. Still, just because of this freedom, just because of this existentialist self-definition, any specific, non-formal understanding of the other becomes entirely problematic.

That is precisely why, in Anti-Semite and Jew, Sartre denies that the Jews define themselves freely. What first appears to be an emphasis upon the substantial and metaphysical differences of cultural identities is downgraded in Anti-Semite and Jew to a series of merely social differences. Identity is produced by the intelligible contours of society. In other words, Jewish cultural identity is produced externally and not by the wholly free action of the Jewish will.

This nearly unnoticeable shift from a consistent, metaphysical particularism to a merely social explanation of cultural particularity carries huge import. Specifically, it is observed that Sartre, far from advocating that the Jews give meaning to their own unique existence, and take on their cultural identity as part of a free and inventive life-project, merely exhorts the Jews to positively accept "as is" their identity as Jews. Yet, what does this amount to? Ultimately, Jewish facticity is empty in-itself. It only takes shape with reference to external hostility. However, by Sartre's own voluntarist premises, free willing individuals who are, themselves, Jews ought to be able to determine their own collective identity in a more positive manner. They

ought, moreover, to be able to choose what meaning they give to their identity independently of the will of the anti-Semite.

Of course, Sartre cannot allow for such a consistently existentialist and voluntarist conception of minority identity. To be more precise, his universalist and socialist politics cannot allow for such a consistently voluntarist conception of this identity. If it were to be the case that Jews, themselves, freely choose what it is to be a Jew, then there is no guarantee that there will one day be an egalitarian society free from contradictions. For, perhaps, the Jewish self-concept is one of perpetual suspicion of the gentile. Perhaps the Jewish self-concept involves a messianism in which all peoples eventually come to accept Mosaic Law. Perhaps, rather, it involves a society in which women are limited to the domestic sphere of the traditional Jewish household. Yet any of these possibilities would, simply put, destroy Sartre's political aims of one, socialist, egalitarian society brought about by particular, identitarian struggles. Necessarily then, the Jews must have no internally conceived identity. Their identity must be purely relational, negative, or in other words, situational. Only this is sufficient guarantee that advocating for Jewish rights ends up with the affirmation of an egalitarian society. That is because, in Sartre's Anti-Semite and Jew, there is really nothing which is particularly Jewish aside from the bare fact of being exploited by a prejudiced and inegalitarian society. Of course, Sartre cannot safely have it any other way. He is not truly a particularist in the fullest sense of the term. His identitarian politics is really a thinly veiled universalist project. The idea that Jewish particularity is evacuated and defined strictly from the outside is the absolutely necessary assurance for Sartre that his identity politics will end with an egalitarian, socialist society.

The peculiar, negative identity of the Jew in Sartre's work is thus a symptom of this tension – namely, Sartre's attempt to combat the democrat's universalism through a sort of

existentialist voluntarism, while at the same time advocating a socialist and frankly universalist end for society. However, the larger conceptual problem is that Sartre, not himself a Jew, wishes to determine what Jewish identity amounts to in the first place. This ability to comprehend and define the other is itself at odds with Sartre's metaphysical voluntarism. A truly free will must determine itself. If the Jews are truly free agents, then Sartre, no less than the anti-Semites he critiques, can possibly define them - that is, to determine their situation. All definition ought to come from within a given identity. Along these same lines, any normative criterion for action must come from within a given identity.

In this regard, Sartre is far more consistent an existentialist when he wrote the preface to Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth (1963). In evaluating this famed work on combating Western colonialism, Sartre lauds Fanon (a native of Martinique, and later advocate for Algerian independence) for addressing the colonized person directly. Sartre realizes, moreover, that as a European this book is not written for him. He has no place in the dialogue. Speaking to his European readership, Sartre writes, "...Fanon has nothing in for you at all; his work – red hot for some – in what concerns you is as cold as ice; he speaks of you often, never to you." "For the fathers, we alone were the speakers; the sons no longer even consider us as valid intermediaries: we are the objects of their speeches... In short, the Third World finds itself and speaks to itself through his (Fanon's) voice."¹³⁵

Yet, in Anti-Semite and Jew, Sartre does proclaim what path the Jew should pursue, and what constitutes a truly authentic manner of Jewish existence. There is no sense that the Jew must speak to herself through her own voice. Yet, by his own premises, Sartre cannot possibly assert what is good for the Jew if he is not, himself, a Jew. To assert this as a possibility is to

¹³⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 10.

deny the freedom of Jews which Sartre proclaims to affirm. If Sartre were a consistent voluntarist, then he would affirm that the Jews themselves must decide what is good for them. In the end, it is not for a French gentile to say whether the Jew should pursue their Jewishness in a manner which ends in an egalitarian society, a self-imposed ghettoization, or even domination of French society. Indeed, it is questionable as to who Sartre thinks he is when speaking of what is good for the Jews. Is he speaking as a French gentile? If this be the case, then he is merely voicing the particular will of French gentiles towards the Jews. It is no more or less valid than the will of the most rabid anti-Semite vis à vis the Jews. Perhaps, on the other hand, Sartre is speaking from a privileged position – beyond gentile and Jewish particularity. This, of course, would be a flagrant denial of Sartre’s underlying voluntarism and, indeed, his existentialism.

Sartre does not realize, or does not wish to realize, that consistent voluntarism implies its necessary correlate, namely, consistent metaphysical particularism. One cannot affirm that all wills will freely while, at the same time, affirming anything universal. For universal natures, indeed, natures of any sort, cannot survive an absolutely free will. Inversely, an absolutely free will cannot survive the existence of natures. The very existence of objective nature implies a limitation of said will, and thus the two cannot exist in the same universe. Therefore, the “nature” of Jews cannot be something intelligible to third party spectators, Sartre included. If anything like a Jewish nature can exist, it must be the product of spontaneous, present day affirmations of Jews themselves – entirely dependent upon their will at any given moment. What’s more, to assert that this or any other identity can be reconciled or assimilated with other identities in some future society becomes meaningless and unintelligible. What can the reconciliation of identities possibly mean when each identity is understood from within, freely given form and meaning from within? Indeed, what can be said of the goodness of the

reconciliation of identities, or the creation of a society without oppression and contradiction? To affirm the goodness of such reconciliation or indeed to conceive of its mere possibility implies something which Sartre denies. It would imply, at least in principle, a universal cognition of the whole, and indeed that the whole is universally cognizable and intelligible. Yet this comes very close to the sort of monism Sartre repeatedly derides, and with good reason, as such a universe would categorically preclude the very Cartesian cogito which Sartre claims as the starting point of his own philosophy.

Sartre's pluralist position is appealing because it is subtle. It is a delicate synthesis of a universalist ethics with a particularist metaphysics, of the rational with the voluntarist. Such a peculiar solution brings about certain odd and interesting phenomena. In Anti-Semite and Jew, this phenomenon is a conception of Jewish identity which is purely situational, and purely negative. The Jews are a distinct, particular entity within society, yet they are perfectly assimilable to a future society, as they supposedly should be. Cultural difference is real and important, yet it is claimed to be not metaphysical, but merely social. This subtle cocktail is unstable as it is intoxicating. It could possibly be filtered and clarified into the intelligible, rationalist position of Spinoza. This, of course, would mean re-emphasizing the purely social nature of cultural divisions, entirely negating their metaphysical weight, and thus jettisoning the voluntarism and nominalism integral to Sartre's underlying philosophy. Otherwise, this cocktail can be left alone to let its voluntarist and irrationalist elements corrode the whole solution into a caustic decisionism and consistent particularism. In this case, Sartre's Left politics is threatened. For not only solidarity, but also comprehension of the other becomes once again problematic. Either way, the pluralist solution cannot stand as it is.

Sartre's final word on the Jews

Ultimately, a consistent Sartre who wishes to retain the bulk of his philosophy would have to conceive of Jewish identity as not merely social, but actually metaphysical as well. Of course, this would make far more substantial and unique the concept of Jewish identity. Though, as stated, it would at the same time threaten Sartre's revolutionary political project of a unified, egalitarian society, and his certainty that assimilation into such a future society is good for the Jews. For this sort of revolutionary solidarity certainly implies knowledge of the other. However, to have knowledge of a distinct, metaphysical identity means to really be of that identity oneself. It is possible that, late in life, Sartre came to this realization. I will end this chapter with an excerpt from an interview with an elderly Sartre, aged seventy five and within weeks of his own death.

The interviewer is Benny Lévy, Sartre's final personal secretary and cofounder of the newspaper *Libération*. It is important to note that Benny Lévy's relationship with Sartre is a complicated one and is not without controversy. Lévy himself was a high profile figure in May 1968 France at which point he proclaimed strongly revolutionary, and specifically Maoist ideals. After being exposed to the work of philosopher and Talmudic scholar Emmanuel Levinas, Lévy, whose nom de guerre was Pierre Victor, underwent a radical turn towards traditional Judaism and conservatism. Thus his relationship with the elderly Sartre, especially at a time when Sartre himself proclaimed serious revisions of some of his long-held ideas, was a point of distress and concern for Sartre's other associates – not least of which being his longtime partner Simone de Beauvoir.

Nonetheless, the following excerpt from this interview is revealing - if not necessarily of Sartre's own, unguided position vis. Jewish particularity, then perhaps more importantly of the

potential of Sartre's underlying existentialism to consistently produce such a metaphysically robust and particularist account when taken to its logical end.

Benny Lévy: I was seventeen years old when I read Anti-Semite and Jew, and it served admirably to justify my desire to fight anti-Semitism. But at the same time, you assured me that if that war was won, I would discover what I dreamed of discovering – that I am a man, not a Jew. The book also covertly justified a kind of self-denial. Mind you, I didn't think that at the time.

Sartre: It's possible. You felt that, and I think others may have felt it too. It was because the reality of the Jew is lacking in the book. Admittedly, this reality is essentially metaphysical, as is the Christian's, and at the time it occupied very little place in my philosophy. There was a consciousness of self that I stripped of all individual characteristics that might have come from within and that I then made it rediscover from the outside. Once the Jew was deprived of metaphysical and subjective characteristics, he could not exist as such in my philosophy. Today I see men differently. I've taken pains to look for what the inner reality of the Jew could be. But there you are: to be able to understand the Jew from within – that I really cannot do. I would have to be one.¹³⁶

At last we see Sartre, in retrospect, acknowledging his own negative definition of the Jew. The Jew, in Sartre's early work, is "stripped of all individual characteristics." More interestingly, though, is the following realization which comes in two parts: First, if Jewish identity is recognized as being more substantial than in his early project, that is, if the Jew is conceived as being more than merely the product of social divisions, but instead the consistent product of the inner Jewish will, then Jewish identity becomes something fully *metaphysical*.

¹³⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Lévy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, trans. Adrian Van Den Hoven (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 101-102.

Secondly, if Jewish identity becomes something positively metaphysical, something produced by the will from within, then it can likewise only be understood from within. Thus, to understand the Jew, you “have to be one.” Yet, even at this late stage, as evidenced in the remainder of this interview, Sartre still believed that there could and should be solidarity with the other, including the Jew. However he is lead to admit that our knowledge of the other is limited at best, and consequently so is our knowledge of the good of the other. Therefore, at this late period in his life, and to the chagrin of many of his longtime associates, Sartre moderates his political position. No longer does solidarity with the Jew necessarily mean the joint pursuit of proletarian revolution. Instead, Sartre’s politics becomes far more conservative. We are to approach the other on their own terms, fully humbled, and fully acknowledging the mystery before us.

CHAPTER FOUR: STRAUSS and Cultural Particularism

“Hence my perceptivity is necessarily limited by my commitment. Universal sympathetic understanding is impossible. To speak crudely, one cannot have the cake and eat it; one cannot enjoy both the advantages of universal understanding and those of existentialism.¹³⁷”

“Universal sympathetic understanding” - For Leo Strauss, these three words sum up the failed project of left-wing existentialism. Strauss himself understood the underlying principles of existentialism to imply a species of political conservatism based upon the defense of one’s own culture. The free commitment of the will which is a central demand of existentialism, in fact, limits universal perceptivity and understanding. As such, the free affirmation of one’s own

¹³⁷ Leo Strauss, “*Social Science and Humanism*” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 11.

NB: Throughout this work I will regularly use the term “existentialist” to describe not only the position of Jean-Paul Sartre, but also the positions of Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt as well. This is, perhaps, not in keeping with standard practice in some quarters of academia (for various reasons and motivations – both exegetical and political).

However, the justification for my use of this term for all three figures, (including Strauss and Schmitt) is a straightforward and *conceptual* one. Namely, all three figures have in common a rejection of metaphysical monism and rationalism. Not only this, each of these figures affirms the “free existential choice” of the subject in one form or another. What’s more, for all three theorists, this “free existential choice” or the free, voluntaristic will, is constitutive (in whole or in part) of both the *identity* of that subject, and also the *normative* commitments of that subject. These conceptual considerations show the “family resemblance” of all three existentialist thinkers beyond more superficial dissimilarities – political and philosophical.

It should also be well noted that both Strauss and Schmitt do, very frequently, refer to their own positions as existentialist – even as they critique and distance themselves from what they view as the less consistent existentialism of French theorists such as Sartre. This is well represented in the above quotation from Strauss’ “*Social Science and Humanism*,” as well as Carl Schmitt’s frequent description of his central “concept of the political” as explicitly “existential.” See for instance Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 33, 49, 88.

In addition, if we do look in the popular literature, it is more than common for both the detractors and defenders of Carl Schmitt to note Schmitt’s underlying existentialism.

See for instance Herbert Marcuse’s famous appellation of Carl Schmitt as a “Political Existentialist” and the generally existentialist form of his right-wing politics in – Herbert Marcuse, “Struggle Against Liberalism in Totalitarianism” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), 21. Also see Tracy Strong’s description of Schmitt’s “existential Hobbesianism” in the foreword to *The Concept of the Political*, xvii.

culture, the criterion-less decision to embrace one's facticity, may very well constitute a barrier to the comprehension, and indeed, the possibility of political solidarity with other distinct cultures. Rather than attempt to overcome, minimize, or ignore this logical consequence of existentialist voluntarism, Strauss boldly highlights this inevitable conflict in the majority of his political and social texts. Unlike his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, also deeply marked by the ruthlessness and barbarity of World War II and the Holocaust, Strauss makes no Kantian attempt to "universalize" his concept of the free will and thereby save a universalist ethics. Put another way, no convenient synthesis between "left ethics" and "right epistemology" is ventured. Strauss' consistency precludes such a philosophical move and so instead of a liberal pluralism, Strauss comes to represent the moment of cultural particularism. He makes no apologies for his cultural commitments, nor does he pretend that these particular commitments allow for a universal affirmation of the overall project of mankind. Civilizations do clash, and there is no trans-cultural guarantor that promises *a priori* that they can be reconciled.

Unwavering in the face of the voluntaristic will and its implications, Leo Strauss is consistently unashamed to offer a robust defense of his own culture and society. Strauss understood that a consistent existentialism, or put more specifically, a consistent voluntarism could never be compatible with an entirely sympathetic understanding of the other. For given such a voluntarism, cultural commitment is understood to come freely, from within, and is therefore not necessarily intelligible from the outside. It is not by way of a universal human essence that we can comprehend a given cultural identity, and similarly, it is not through a universal ethical criterion by which we affirm said identity. Thus, the only person who can speak on behalf of Western culture is a Westerner, and the only person who can speak on behalf of Jewish identity and Jewish normativity is, in fact, a Jew. In many ways, therefore, although Leo

Strauss never formally published a critique of Sartre's theory of the oppressed minority, his own position on this subject, and on Jewish identity specifically, is furnishes the necessary answer to the conceptual tensions and contradictions found within Sartre's early work. Leo Strauss was a far more consistent existentialist who affirmed, without caveat, the freedom of the will, the absence of universal natures, and consequently the substantial particularity and unintelligibility of "the other." His was a particularism without mitigation and without apology. As such, Strauss necessarily spoke of Jewish identity only because he himself was a Jew. He only defended Western civilization and the Western intellectual canon as he, himself, was a Westerner. Moreover, he denied the necessity of any sympathetic understanding with those who did not share in his own identity.

However, we may rightly ask, "Who was Leo Strauss?" What did Strauss' own culture amount to? In fact the answers to these biographical questions may contain a clue as to the precise nature of Leo Strauss' conception of cultural identity and what he saw as the limits of liberal pluralism. To begin, it is essential to note the circumstances of Strauss' childhood and upbringing. Leo Strauss was born on September twentieth, 1899 to an orthodox Jewish family in Kirchhain, Hesse, Germany. Far from wholeheartedly embracing modernity, the Strauss family belonged to a tradition of Eastern European Jewry which was, in its world outlook, rather dissimilar from even those other observant Jewish communities which at that time inhabited the great German metropolises of Berlin and Frankfurt. Among his family there was an especially keen sense of solidarity with those Eastern Jewish refugees who fled to Germany in 1905 as a result of the brutal pogroms in czarist Russia. This pattern of witnessing the oppression of his own people, followed by an expression of deep solidarity and devotion would repeat itself throughout the entirety of Leo Strauss' life.

By the time he was seventeen, Strauss saw no great improvement in the situation of European Jewry. As such, he became an ardent Zionist. Importantly, Strauss became a follower of Vladimir Jabotinsky, a strident anti-socialist and militant in the cause of what he termed “Revisionist Zionism.” Historically, Revisionist Zionism opposed and distinguished itself from what Jabotinsky called “Practical Zionism” – which focused primarily on Jewish immigration to Palestine even in the absence of a recognized state charter, and “Political Zionism” – which emphasized the need for international recognition of the Israeli state by the world’s superpowers. These he deemed insufficiently militant, but more than this, these streams of modern and often socialistic Zionism did not sufficiently emphasize the romantic and cultural aspects of Jewish nationhood. In the established state of Israel, Revisionist Zionism took form in the deeply conservative Herut party of Menachem Begin, and eventually, in 1977, became a primary ideological current within the contemporary Likud Party. Jabotinsky represented in nascent form the most militant and right-wing sector of the Zionist movement (indeed, he broke from the mainstream Zionist Organization as early as 1923). While the overwhelming majority of Zionists identified with the interests of the liberal middle class as well as labor, and for a long time focused a portion of their attention on bettering the Jewish situation within Europe itself; Jabotinsky was a single-minded advocate of creating a Jewish majority in Palestine (on both banks of the Jordan River), and by the 1930’s, was attempting to position himself within the British armed forces in order to accomplish that very end. In doing so, he sought to glorify that which he most admired about the British Empire’s own history.

England is no longer inspired by her old lust for building and leading. And what we ask of the English is, indeed, this lust and resolution, the capacity for more courageous,

more creative action ... England is becoming continental! Not long ago the prestige of the English ruler of the “colored” colonies stood very high. Hindus, Arabs, Malays were conscious of his superiority and obeyed, not unprotestingly, yet completely. The whole scheme of training of the future rulers was built on the principle “carry yourself so that the inferior will feel your unobtainable superiority in every motion”. But a decline of imperialist instinct is felt in Englishmen ... This lessening of the taste for imperialist scope is revealed in various ways – in the indifference with which the emancipation of Egypt was received, in the lack of concern at the prospect of the loss of India and Ireland. This does not mean that all is lost. In five or ten years all this may change. England may still reeducate her proconsuls. The imperial appetite may flame up anew, because this is a very powerful and gifted people.¹³⁸

The relationship between Britain’s imperial role and the independence of Israel as a specifically Jewish state was highlighted in the early Revisionist program to which Strauss was affiliated. In his work, The Iron Wall,¹³⁹ American Trotskyist writer Lenni Brenner ably connects Jabotinsky’s glorification of British imperialism with the aims of Revisionist Zionism in the nineteen thirties. In an article entitled *State Zionism* in the October 1934 edition of the Hadassah Newsletter, Jabotinsky wrote: “But a Palestine predominantly Jewish, surrounded on all sides by Arab countries, will in the interests of its own preservation always tend to lean upon some powerful Empire, non-Arab and non-Mahommedan. This is an almost providential basis for a permanent alliance between England and a Jewish (but only a Jewish) Palestine.¹⁴⁰”

The essential idea is that a Jewish Palestine will be culturally and politically reliant upon Britain given that it would be geographically situated amongst Arab nations with which it could not hope to reconcile. Zionism and British imperialism, sharing some common cultural identity, are natural allies. Of course, one can hardly assign specific political and social beliefs to the

¹³⁸ Lenni Brenner, *The Iron Wall: Zionist Revisionism from Jabotinsky to Shamir* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1984), 77-78.

¹³⁹ It should be noted that this highly critical work of Brenner is distinct from Jabotinsky’s own text, *The Iron Wall – We and the Arabs* (1923) after which the former work was named.

¹⁴⁰ Lenni Brenner, *The Iron Wall*, 78.

seventeen year old Strauss by referencing the writings of Jabotinsky in the nineteen thirties (approximately fifteen years after Strauss' "conversion" to Zionism). Nonetheless, the fact that Strauss settled upon Jabotinsky as the model for Zionist organization and cultural self-expression, the fact that Strauss' favored Zionism was the breakaway faction of Revisionist Zionism is entirely significant. The highly romantic notions of cultural greatness and superiority, of the inevitable conflict between societies, the glorification of empire and military force, and most especially the opposition to socialism and communism – each of these elements were present in the earliest of Jabotinsky's writings, and can likewise be seen to manifest themselves within Strauss' own, mature worldview. More specifically, the idea that the West and Israel, though distinct from one another, represent forms of civilization opposed to a culturally distinct, Eastern enemy is likewise an intellectual heirloom which can justifiably be traced back to Jabotinsky himself.

Certainly, while Leo Strauss would remain an ardent Zionist and anti-communist for the rest of his life, his academic interests were far greater in scope. From 1918, Strauss would embark on a career of academic study which would ultimately span eight years and six universities, finally resulting in the completion of his doctoral dissertation at Hamburg. The course of his study reveals the extent to which the young Strauss was surrounded by those critical of the Enlightenment project and spirit. His intellectual companions were predominantly existentialists, and throughout the remainder of his professional academic career, Strauss would further develop his own thought alongside the heirs to the philosophical legacy of Martin Heidegger. Indeed Thomas Pangle (a student of Strauss' own protégé, Allen Bloom) noted in his introduction to The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism, that "Martin Heidegger's most

gifted students, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Löwith, each engaged Strauss in wide-ranging debates on the meaning and implications of the philosophy of history.¹⁴¹”

However, Strauss’ attachment to this philosophical lineage was fully evident even during his time as a student. Namely, it was at Hamburg that Strauss wrote his dissertation on F.H. Jacobi under his mentor Ernst Cassirer. Jacobi, himself, was an ardent critic of the Enlightenment and is most widely known for his endorsement of the concept of *Glaube* – translated alternatively as belief, faith and revelation. During these years of study, the young Strauss made two important contacts in addition. The first of these was Franz Rosenzweig, a Jewish theologian and existentialist who, in his own dissertation Hegel and the State, opposed what he contended to be the abstract, rationalist idealism of the Hegelian concept of humanity. Rosenzweig invited Strauss to teach at the Free House of Jewish Learning in Frankfurt between 1923 and 1925. He later came to know Julius Guttmann, a rabbi and theologian, via his piece on “Cohen’s Analysis of Spinoza’s Bible Science” in *Der Jude* (1924), published by Martin Buber. Guttmann, apart from introducing Strauss to a critical reading of Spinoza would later aid Strauss in his exiting from Germany.

It is therefore evident that Strauss’ university studies, and indeed, the entirety of his youth was deeply influenced by two major currents – each sympathetic to the other. First was the young Strauss’ Jewish experience - the traditionalism of his familial upbringing, the emphasis upon faith and ritual, his work within the splinter Revisionist Zionist movement, and the witnessing of the rapidly deteriorating condition of European Jewry from the 1905 pogroms in Eastern Europe to the steadily increasing anti-Semitism in 1920’s Germany. Second was the intellectual current of philosophical existentialism, represented within the work of those

¹⁴¹ Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ix.

surrounding him at university – Rosenzweig, Buber, and indeed, the future Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt first among them. The emphasis upon the free, non-rational commitment to an identity and a heritage found in existentialist thought would prove to be a natural ally to the cultural conservatism and Jewish nationalism instilled in Strauss at the time of his youth.

Section One: Authenticity Identity Combatting Universal Reason

Finally, in 1930 Strauss wrote Spinoza's Critique of Religion (dedicated to the memory of the then deceased Rosenzweig). This first big project represented the byproduct of these dual currents in Strauss' life. It was an attempt to defend the proper role of religion as against the assault of modern, Enlightenment rationalism. The work would be better titled "A Critique of Spinoza's Critique of Religion," were the words not so cumbersome, for it is primarily a text concerned with dismantling what Strauss saw as the modern presuppositions and prejudices behind Spinoza's philosophical objection to revelation and religious authority. It was with the postmodern tools of existentialism that Strauss sought to dismantle the mechanics of Enlightenment rationalism. Only the renewed emphasis upon the will, the contingent, and the particular could combat a modern reason that Strauss saw as intrinsically antagonistic to biblical tradition, and in fact, the very stability of Western society.

However, Strauss' tenure in Germany would not last. The same historical currents which shaped the young Strauss' consciousness and ideology, and ultimately fueled his critique of Spinoza and modern rationalism, would themselves mandate that he spend his maturity abroad – first in Western Europe, and then in the United States. Strauss left Germany in 1932 very shortly before Hitler's rise to power, the latest of a series of advances on the part of a romantic, revolutionary-conservatism in German politics. Strauss' emigration was primarily enabled by

his winning a Rockefeller Grant with recommendations from his academic mentors Ernst Cassirer and Julius Guttman, and, perhaps most ironically, Carl Schmitt – who, the very next year, would formally join the Nazi Party (NSDAP) and, following an appointment to the position of Prussian State Counselor by Hermann Göring, rose to the presidency of the *Vereinigung nationalsozialistischer Juristen*, the Union of National Socialist Jurists. Sadly, except for his wife, son, and daughter, Leo Strauss' entire family was killed in or while escaping Nazi Germany.

Strauss' dedication to Israel and his Jewish heritage would remain for his entire life. Of course, Strauss is best known for his tenure at the University of Chicago (1949-1968). However, he was sponsored by Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber in 1949 for a full time position at Hebrew University of Jerusalem which he ultimately declined, though he did teach there for one year on a temporary basis. In addition, in 1966 Strauss was awarded an honorary doctorate by Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the major seminary for Reform Judaism in America. Leo Strauss died on October 18, 1973. He was buried on the grounds of the Kneseth Israel synagogue in Annapolis, Maryland. At his ceremony, Psalm 114 (Strauss' favorite) was read. "1 When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue, 2 Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion."¹⁴²

Perhaps these opening lines offer a final glimpse into Leo Strauss' lifetime commitment, not only to Judaism as a religion, and as a system of beliefs, but more so to the Jewish people and Jewish nationhood itself. To be sure, the Psalm highlights the providential nature of God's delivery of Israel from Egypt. Yet interestingly, the precise order of these verses suggest that it is Israel's exodus from Egypt, Israel's cultural and national independence from dominion by a

¹⁴² Psalm 114 (New International Version)

foreign tongued people which allows for this special relationship with God to ever come about. God has this celebrated dominion over Israel only when Egypt does not.

Strauss' practical advantage over Sartre

When one examines the work of Leo Strauss, the most evident distinction between his own position on the minority and that of his contemporary Sartre, is the manner in which cultural identity is determined. We have seen in Chapter Three that Sartre consistently defined the Jew in purely relative terms. In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Jewish identity was said to be the byproduct of historical situation, and specifically, the situation of existing within a hostile, Christian Europe. Nothing united the Jews apart from a series of negative encounters with their host communities, and so Jewish identity is conceived as a mosaic, lacking internal definition and unity. By contrast, Strauss will assert the irreducibility of Jewish culture and the Jewish heritage. The Jew is what she is by virtue of her inner greatness, and certainly not because of an external relationship with some mass of bigots. Speaking of the specter of modern Jewish assimilation, Strauss wrote: “Why should we, who have a heroic past behind and within us, which is not second to that of any other group anywhere on earth, deny or forget that past? The past is all the more heroic, one could say, since its chief characters are not the glitter and trappings of martial glory and cultural splendor, although it does not lack even these.”¹⁴³

We see that for Strauss, Jewish identity is not dependent upon societal context to constitute itself. There are identifiable, praiseworthy features of Jewish civilization which make the Jews, as a people, great. More than this, the criterion by which one judges greatness is intrinsic to the cultural community itself. Thus, the Jews are not only intrinsically great for

¹⁴³ Leo Strauss, *Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 92.

identifiable, definite reasons. Moreover, the Jews, by virtue of their biblical worldview have affirmed a particularly Jewish criterion and measure for greatness. We see, then, that the differences between Sartre and Strauss are clear. While both affirm an authentic fidelity to one's particular heritage, and explicitly do so with reference to European and American Jewry, they nonetheless differ greatly when it comes to how the meaning of the cultural identity is constituted. Sartre finds identity to be produced externally through a negative relationship with the other, while Strauss finds a positive identity, as well as the criterion by which that identity is normatively affirmed, to be wholly internal to Jewish culture itself.

While the remainder of this chapter will focus upon the underlying, theoretical reasons behind this important difference; it is vital to note here the practical and political advantages of Strauss's position over that of Sartre. Namely, Sartre's left politics demanded of him that he evacuate the identity of the Jew so as to ensure the reconcilability of Jewish cultural identity with the rest of humanity. Yet in doing so, he left little reason for the individual Jew, herself, to proudly affirm her own identity. By contrast, Strauss is wholly unconcerned with reconciling Jewish identity with the multifarious cultural identities of the gentile. Thus, he freely affirms that Jewish culture is full of positive features which warrant and justify a sort of national pride. In emphasizing the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jewish identity Strauss precludes for himself the pluralistic, egalitarian and liberal politics of Jean-Paul Sartre. Of course, this is of no concern to him. Rather, what Strauss does have the ability to do is consistently argue for the authentic self-affirmation of one's Jewish cultural identity. Jewish culture has an inner greatness, an ineffable spirit, and a list of particularly Jewish accomplishments for which one can feel legitimate national pride. Unhampered by any countervailing political agenda, Strauss can

advocate for cultural authenticity in a far more straightforward and convincing manner than Sartre ever could.

The dialectics of authenticity

It is the contention of this work that Strauss' practical and rhetorical advantages over Sartre are actually symptomatic of a deeper metaphysical difference. Namely, Sartre's liberal pluralism, his fusion between the authentic affirmation of cultural particularity with a universalist conception of ethical normativity proves to be an unstable synthesis. This pluralism, in other words, is implicitly dependent upon two incompatible metaphysical presuppositions. Cultural authenticity, the very idea that cultural identities are unique and should be affirmed in their uniqueness, implies a universe populated by particulars and lacking universal natures. It implies a concept of the will which produces identities freely, thereby ensuring their unique status. Sartre's universalistic ethics, on the other hand, his egalitarianism, and his conception of the translatability and commensurability of cultures, implies a monistic metaphysics (though Sartre strains to deny this fact). These features of Sartre's left politics imply a universe which is wholly intelligible, or at the very least, contains within itself a universal and intelligible essence of humanity which guarantees that individual cultures are not irreconcilably unique, but rather substantially the same, and thus able to form bonds of understanding and political solidarity with one another.

Strauss' practical advantages over Sartre are merely an indication of his greater metaphysical consistency. This work will contend that Strauss' metaphysics involves no unstable synthesis as found in Sartre's early writings. Leo Strauss invariably affirms the particularity of the given culture in light of an invariably voluntaristic conception of the will, and

a thoroughly anti-monistic conception of the universe. No mitigation is involved, and no incompatible metaphysics are brought in to moderate the social implications of such a universe. The irreducible particularity of a given culture and the irreconcilability between cultures is left as is. The dialectical movement between Sartre's moment of pluralism to the moment of Strauss' particularism is thus practical on one level, but deeply metaphysical on the other.

At this juncture, however, it is important to define the nature of this dialectical movement. It must first be pointed out that the transition from Sartre to Strauss is neither biographical nor is it chronological. Each of these figures were contemporaries of one another, witnesses to the same global conflict and European genocide. And yet neither did Strauss explicitly respond to Sartre within his own work, nor did Sartre attempt to respond to Strauss in such a manner. Instead, the link between the philosophies of these two men is a conceptual one. Both Sartre and Strauss occupy a single continuum of thought. Each deny several of the metaphysical and epistemological positions common to the modern, rationalist viewpoint. Put another way, both Sartre and Strauss are post-Enlightenment thinkers insofar as they share an explicit rejection of modern Spinozistic rationalist conceptions of determinism, monism, and the full intelligibility of nature. Yet, despite their similarities, Sartre and Strauss merely share a single continuum of post-Enlightenment thought, and not the very same position on said continuum.

Rather, it will be shown that the Sartrean position on toleration outlined in Chapter Three contains within itself several contradictions which the more consistent Straussian position resolves. Moreover, it will be argued that the contradictions found within the Sartrean position arise from a partial retention of rationalist premises which are fundamentally incompatible with the rest of Sartre's otherwise post-Enlightenment, and existentialist thought. The manner in

which Strauss avoids these contradictions, therefore, is simply through his greater self-consistency. To return to the continuum image, we may imagine a line inscribed upon a graph. This line is at a diagonal indicating a direct relationship between the 'x' and 'y' axes. The horizontal, or 'x' axis is the measure of the degree of post-enlightenment thought. Namely, to what degree are the robust, rationalist positions of Spinoza denied. The vertical, or 'y' axis measures internal consistency. We will notice that the greater the degree of post-Enlightenment thought, the greater the measure of internal consistency.¹⁴⁴ Put another way, the only manner of remaining self-consistent while staying on this post-Enlightenment continuum is to adopt ever more purely post-Enlightenment and anti-rationalist positions. This is the nature of the conceptual relationship between Sartre and Strauss. While each are, in many respects, post-Enlightenment philosophers who reject some of the essential affirmations of modern rationalism, Strauss is more persistent in this rejection and thus far more self-consistent in his own thought than is Sartre. In this way, and only in this way, can we see a logical transition from the Sartrean position to the Straussian position on the minority figure. It is a movement born of the contradictions internal to Sartre's own thought.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Of course, it should immediately be noted that this "continuum" image is not meant to be evidence for the veracity of my position. It is, rather, a mere illustration of what I intend to prove through exegetical and conceptual analyses in both this chapter and chapters to come.

¹⁴⁵ It should, as well, be noted that the manner of my investigation treats the philosophers in question not as wholly unique and original figures to be understood entirely in their own light. Rather, a productive analysis necessarily treats these philosophers as representatives or manifestations of a given philosophical position – a position which exists prior to themselves. In other words, the variety of possible metaphysical and epistemological standpoints necessarily *precedes* the creative act of writing these positions on paper, within a given philosophical text. Otherwise, we could not even begin to have any stable, schematic understanding of one philosopher in relation to another.

It may be objected that my treatment of philosophers as mere representatives of an already extant philosophical position does violence to the creative process no doubt at work in these great figures, or alternatively, that this method simply reveals a prejudice on my part for reason of the early Modern sort. I can only respond that treating the product of these philosophers as explications of an eternal philosophical position, (rather than the creation of something purely fanciful or private) is not an act of violence, but is rather indicative of the utmost admiration and respect on my part. Moreover, I would contend, and intend to prove over the course of this

Why then, given this essential difference between Sartre and Strauss' conception of the minority cultural identity, does the former position logically and practically give way the latter position? In other words, why does Sartre's theory of liberal toleration for the minority culture inexorably lead to the deeply conservative cultural particularism as exemplified by Leo Strauss?

One reason is that Strauss recognizes the essential tension between external definition of oneself and existentialist thought. Namely, the constitution of identity in such a relative fashion actually contradicts Sartre's original existentialist impulse. For it is essential to existentialist thought that one forms one's own identity by virtue of a free, un-coerced choice. Identity, to be authentic, cannot be imposed by either the necessities of nature or the coercive necessities imposed by other human beings. This would negate the primordial, existential freedom which is most characteristic and distinguishing of Sartre's thought. To suggest that the Jew is dependent upon the anti-Semite for her identity is a flagrant negation of the Jew's ability to freely affirm and constitute her own identity, which Sartre apparently affirms as necessary for the Jew's own authenticity. This is a serious contradiction. On the one hand, Sartre makes the Jew's self affirmation of her Jewishness a precondition of her living a truly authentic life. Yet, on the other hand, Sartre conceives of Jewish identity in a negative fashion, as being dependent upon the character of the French Anti-Semite entirely. Thus, there can be no free, authentic affirmation of such an identity (despite Sartre's apparent claim to the contrary). For this identity is, itself, inauthentic just because it is not free as per its own definition. Jewish identity is the product of forces, notably violent and coercive forces, wholly external to itself.

present work, that "reason" itself can never be a mere prejudice; and that to assert such a claim, far from being innocent or even-handed, is the product of a robust yet flawed metaphysic.

Moreover, there is no sense in which Sartre makes the identity of the Anti-Semite dependent upon that of the Jew. There is a strange asymmetry here. For some reason, it is only the Jew whose identity is controlled by the apparently autonomous self identity of the French chauvinist. In any case, the primary contradiction in Sartre's conception of minority identity lies in the fact that this identity is, itself, not self-constituting and thus inauthentic by his own standards. And yet, the only way for members of a cultural community to live authentic lives is to affirm this very inauthentic identity. Strauss' own position is free of this contradiction as he avoids, from the very beginning, any extrinsic defining of the cultural community, nor even any external or universalistic criterion by which said cultural community can be normatively evaluated.

A second reason for the logical progression from Sartre's position to Strauss' own position relates to the telos of the authentic affirmation of one's cultural identity. For Sartre, the end of Jewish self-identification is actually Jewish assimilation. Only, this will be assimilation into a purely egalitarian, free society of the future, and not the in-egalitarian society of exploitation seen today. Indeed, Sartre argues in Anti-Semite and Jew that the authentic self-identification of the oppressed Jew as Jew is what allows for the creation of this future, egalitarian society. Essentially, no such society can come into existence while minority identities are still denied or repressed. Most importantly, though, it is the negative definition of the Jew, and not simply her self-affirmation, that allows for Sartre's egalitarian future to ever come about. For it is not enough that the Jew self-identify, but it must be that this identity itself is conceived relatively and negatively in relation to other cultural identities. Only if this is the case can there ever be a future, egalitarian translation, synthesis, and thus negation of all separate identities into one, harmonious polis. Indeed, this future negation of cultural differences is

simply indispensable for Sartre's utopian vision. Of course, this future negation of cultural differences is itself dependent upon an understanding of particular identities as constituted negatively and relatively.

For Strauss, there can never be a society free of contradictions, and so the Sartrean goal is necessarily illusory. This is wholly consistent with Strauss' purely immanent constitution of cultural identity and his overall particularist metaphysical stance. Since the Jew, and the criterion by which the Jew is normatively evaluated, is wholly internal and imminent to the Jewish, biblical worldview itself; there can never be a reconciliation between Jewish culture and those cultures external to it. For the Jewish identity is not relative, and thus translatable, to the identity of the bigot, nor for that matter, is it fully translatable to the identity of the pagan, or Greek philosopher. Jewish identity will thus persist so long as the Jews persist. The necessary and sufficient condition for the assimilation of Jewish identity will be the destruction of the Jews themselves. Again, whether we affirm Strauss' position or deny it, it is clear that he is, in any case, far more self-consistent than Sartre. Specifically, Strauss does not contradict himself when he affirms Jewish identity along immanent, existentialist lines. Jewish identity is defined in light of its own particularity, and Strauss is consistent when he therefore denies any translation or synthesis of this particular identity with opposing identities. Sartre, by contrast, contradicts himself and is inconsistent insofar as he too conceives of the authentic affirmation of one's own identity along existentialist lines, and yet lapses into universalistic visions of a future in which these identities will be sublimated into a harmonious whole, lacking the contradictions and divisions of present-day society.

Thus, the impetus for affirming Strauss' thoroughly particularist position of cultural-pride is found within the contradictions intrinsic to the Sartrean position itself—contradictions both

logical and practical in nature. It is necessary, at this point, to examine the manner in which the specifically logical tensions in the Sartrean position are resolved in Strauss' own theory.

Conflict as vital tension

Above all else, Strauss highlights in his social and political texts both the inevitability and desirability of conflict. On the other hand, pluralism, if we wish to use this term to describe the Sartrean position, can be understood as a hybrid theory. It involves a respect for one's own particular identity plus an empathetic, universal understanding of the many disparate identities within a given society. Pluralism, therefore, is primarily a statement that cultural conflict is both resolvable and that the resolution of conflict is beneficial. However, this reveals that Sartrean pluralism involves not one, but rather two synthetic resolutions. First is the aforementioned notion that there can be a resolution of the various particular cultural identities through universal empathy. Yet the very possibility of such trans-cultural understanding implies a "second-order" resolution on the part of Jean-Paul Sartre himself. Namely, it is the resolution, this time in Sartre's philosophical system, of universalist thought and metaphysics with particularist thought and metaphysics. Sartre's pluralism is itself a hybrid theory and thus presupposes a fundamental compatibility of rational, universalist ethics with a non-rational, will-based affirmation of cultural identity.

It is precisely on this point that we can see the differences between Strauss' position and Sartre's theory in high relief. For Strauss no harmonization between a sincere regard for one's particular identity and sincere hope for a universally egalitarian future can ever take place. Moreover, he denies that the sort of "second-order" synthesis intrinsic to Sartre's pluralism is actually a harmony at all. Instead, any connection of universal reason and universal criteria on

the one hand, with tradition, orthodoxy, and immanent cultural criteria on the other will always be a relationship of subjugation and authority. This is Strauss' famous opposition between Spinoza and orthodoxy, philosophy and the Bible, reason and the will, or in other words, the opposition between Athens and Jerusalem.

Indeed, it is this irresolvable tension and the preclusion of harmonious resolution between the biblical and philosophical worldviews which Strauss identifies as the vital tension which has always animated Western civilization.¹⁴⁶ Western society needs both the non-rational will as well as the intellect. But more imperative than this; Western society thrives on the everlasting and irresolvable combat between the two! Sartre's pluralism seeks to destroy this vital tension through a sort of convenient synthesis. The modern rationalists, who are Strauss' main targets, similarly pursue a project of eliminating or resolving this tension through a superficial ignorance of the distinctness of these competing worldviews. In either case, Strauss contends that this endeavor is not only doomed to fail, but is moreover necessarily destructive of the vitalizing force behind Western civilization.

However, before we can investigate what Strauss sees as the failures of modern rationalism and liberalism, it is first necessary to examine precisely what the opposing entities are that Strauss contends constitute this aforementioned vital tension. This opposition between revelation and reason is most manifest in Strauss' 1952 work, Progress or Return, which was originally composed as an address to the University of Chicago Hillel association. In this work, Strauss outlines the key features of both the biblical worldview and the philosophical worldview, and then proceeds to demonstrate that the essential features of each of these worldviews make

¹⁴⁶ Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?" in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Green (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 116-117.

them wholly incompatible with one another. It is for this reason specifically that the modern project of harmonizing is repudiated.

This radical disagreement today (between philosophy and faith) is frequently played down, and this playing down has a certain superficial justification, for the whole history of the West presents itself at first glance as an attempt to harmonize, or to synthesize, the Bible and Greek philosophy.¹⁴⁷

Nonetheless, Strauss continues, the intrinsic nature of philosophy and the Bible preclude this synthesis.

...the one thing needful according to Greek philosophy is the life of autonomous understanding. The one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love. The harmonizations and synthesizations are possible because Greek philosophy can use obedient love in a subservient function, and the Bible can use philosophy as a handmaid; but what is so used in each case rebels against such use, and therefore the conflict is really a radical one. Yet this disagreement presupposes some agreement. In fact, every disagreement, we may say, presupposes some agreement, because people must disagree about something and must agree as to the importance of that something. But in this case, the agreement is deeper than this purely formal one.¹⁴⁸

The agreement to which Strauss refers is the fundamental concurrence of both philosophy and the Bible on the importance of ethics. Strauss, later in this essay, as well as in other works, will explain that in this one way, both classical philosophy and the biblical worldview share

¹⁴⁷ Leo Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, 104.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

between themselves a common opposition to modernity and the infamous “fact-value distinction” which Strauss sees as peculiarly modern and the impetus behind modern nihilism and barbarism.

While this dimension of Strauss’ thought will be examined later in this section, it is essential at this juncture to examine how Strauss believes the philosophical and biblical worldviews radically diverge from one another – especially as regards their common concern for the ethical. Not only do the biblical and philosophical worldviews agree upon the importance of ethical understanding; they also agree that ethics is identical to justice, or in other words, acting in accord with divine or eternal law. The essential difference between them arises as to how the problem of divine law, or justice, is solved.¹⁴⁹ In this regard, Strauss sees philosophy and the Bible as polar opposites.

A sign of this opposition is that the Bible alone uses the poor and wretched as moral exemplars, and paradigms of piety and justice. This is immediately contrasted with Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics in which virtue can be thought in terms of *magnanimity*. “Magnanimity presupposes a man’s conviction of his own worth. It presupposes that man is capable of being virtuous, thanks to his own efforts. If this conviction is fulfilled, consciousness of one’s shortcomings or failings or sins is something which is below the good man.”¹⁵⁰

Biblical justice is essentially about humility with respect to the divine. For it is precisely, “humility, a sense of guilt, repentance, and faith in divine mercy...” which is the cornerstone of Biblical morality.¹⁵¹ While philosophical morality is based upon seeking the human good

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

through contemplation and understanding, biblical morality is about humbling oneself before a radical Other, a God who is wholly beyond human understanding.

Human aggrandizement, namely, seeking the good for ourselves, also must therefore have an opposing place in philosophical as contrasted to biblical morality. Again, referring to Aristotle's conception of *magnanimity*, (though Strauss may have just as easily cited Epicurean conceptions of pleasure), it is clear that Greek philosophical thought affirms human self-aggrandizement as a good unto itself. Statecraft, the arts, and crafts are thus human powers and talents which are to be perfected in the pursuit of the good. Compare this to the biblical account of the first city founders and city dwellers. These are the progeny of Cain, the first murderer in all of creation. Also Sodom and Gomorrah serve as exemplars for the "wicked city." Again, though not cited by Strauss himself at this juncture, the idolatrous crafting of the Golden Calf, as well as the audacious construction of the Tower of Babel irresistibly comes to mind. And yet, Strauss does cite biblical examples of the arts and crafts, as well as statecraft, which are considered entirely holy – namely the temple decorations of Bezalel and the holy city of Jerusalem.¹⁵² How can this be accounted for in the biblical worldview? The answer Strauss points to is the following: Human aggrandizement through whatever medium is essentially impious. It presumes a negation of the sort of humility which the Bible demands as necessary for living in accord with divine law and justice. Yet, these human powers and talents can be redeemed if, and only if, they are put into service for God Himself, and the sanctification of His name alone. Only in this way can Jerusalem be made distinct from Sodom and the temple decorations of Bezalel be distinguished from the Golden Calf.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 115-116.

It is precisely this distinction between means and ends that is crucial for understanding Strauss' thought on this question of modernity, and its project for synthesizing philosophical with biblical thought. Strauss recognizes that the relationship between these two worldviews can only ever be one of asymmetrical authority, and never one of harmonious synthesis. We can therefore better understand the aforementioned quotation, where Strauss asserts that, "Greek philosophy can use obedient love in a subservient function, and the Bible can use philosophy as a handmaid; but what is so used in each case rebels against such use, and therefore the conflict is really a radical one."¹⁵³

It is perfectly understandable that biblical morality, which posits our humbling ourselves before God as the end of divine justice, can make use of human intelligence, understanding, and talent in this pursuit. Thus, just as statecraft can be considered holy if it is in the service of constructing the holy city of Jerusalem, so philosophy can be subsumed under biblical authority as such a means to an end – namely, this is philosophy as apologetics. The inverse of this asymmetrical relationship is, of course, also possible. Reason can make use of religious imagery and ritual, and even a certain conception of God, and subsume these as a means to achieving its ethical end of the intelligible, human good.¹⁵⁴ However, the possibilities of these relationships between reason and the biblical worldview only highlight their radical incompatibility.

The biblical God, Strauss asserts, cannot allow itself to be subsumed as a mere means towards an intelligible human end. The biblical God – insofar as this is the one, omnipotent God of Abraham - just is the radically unintelligible Other. Similarly, human reason necessarily cannot be *a priori* limited by humble obedience to any given entity, let alone a purely

¹⁵³ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵⁴ Indeed, it is exactly this conception of religion in the service of earthly happiness and a rationally ordered society that is advocated in Spinoza's *TTP*.

unintelligible entity such as the Abrahamic God. Thus, while revelation may perennially make use of reason as a tool, and reason may perennially make use of faith in an analogous manner, in fact there is an inherent tendency for said tools to revolt against their respective masters. At last, the tension between reason and the Bible is an irresolvable one.

Of course, all of this depends heavily upon Strauss' radically transcendent understanding of the Abrahamic God, and the reasons behind, and implications of this assertion warrant greater investigation. One place in which God's radical otherness is highlighted is in Strauss' treatment of the *Akeida* – the binding of Isaac.¹⁵⁵ Abraham, in agreeing to sacrifice his only son, is the model for our obediently humbling ourselves before a thoroughly transcendent, unintelligible God. Of course, the unintelligible nature of God's command in this instance involves said command's apparent contradiction of God's earlier covenant to make Abraham a great and populous nation. Following closely to Kierkegaard's treatment of this Biblical episode, Strauss affirms that the *Akeida* represents the Biblical model for acting in accord with divine law. Abraham not only transcends his human interests as a father, and his community's human morality which proscribes murder and human sacrifice; Abraham also acts in a way which transcends his knowledge of God as a just God who keeps his covenant. Indeed, God in this instance is no longer even held to basic rules of logical thought. For He can freely contradict Himself – at once promising to make Abraham a great nation, and then instructing him to kill his only son! Abraham's faith in God at the time of the binding of Isaac can therefore not be understood as belief – i.e. belief that the Lord will, in the end, be a just and forgiving Lord, a Lord who will not contradict his earlier promises. Rather, Abraham's faith is better translated as humble obedience – obedient because he is before God, and humble because this faith makes no

¹⁵⁵ Leo Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, 110.

pretense to understand this God at all. Thus, Abraham may have faith that God will stand by his earlier covenant, but he certainly can have no predictive belief to this effect.

Strauss asserts that the incompatibility of this Biblical worldview with that of reason and philosophy is most clearly delineated by Maimonides in his famous *The Guide of the Perplexed* which proclaims that: "...philosophy teaches the eternity of the world, and the Bible teaches the creation out of nothing."¹⁵⁶ Strauss continues, "The root of the matter, however, is that only the Bible teaches divine omnipotence, and the thought of divine omnipotence is absolutely incompatible with Greek philosophy in any form."¹⁵⁷ We may ask, nevertheless, what the relationship is between divine omnipotence, *creatio ex nihilo*, and this supposedly fundamental incompatibility with philosophy?

The answer, put forth by Strauss, involves the concept of intelligible natures. Let us unpack these concepts. Divine omnipotence is perhaps the most easily defined of the three. Divine omnipotence, in Strauss' sense of the term, simply denotes the absolute absence of any limitation on God's power understood as will. Strauss seems to imply that omnipotence, a basic and essential characteristic of the Abrahamic God, necessarily implies *creatio ex nihilo*, and necessarily precludes the Aristotelian and philosophical notion of an eternally existing universe. The reason is that a God with truly limitless power cannot exist in a definite universe which pre-exists Himself. If this were the case, then there would have been an intelligible order and existence which were not subject to God's own power. However, this would already contradict our basic, Biblical definition of God as omnipotent.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

While *creatio ex nihilo* is a necessary presupposition for the biblical God, it is not sufficient. Not only must the biblical God preclude an intelligible universe which pre-existed Himself, such a God must also preclude *any* nature at all which pre-exists the free determination of his own, limitless will. In short, the biblical God, to be truly omnipotent, must not have an intelligible nature of His own which pre-exists his power to decide and act.

Yet, it is precisely this concept of intelligible nature which is the necessary presupposition of Greek philosophy and reason. For as we may recall, philosophy, like the Bible, regards the ethical as being of utmost importance – and yet these two worldviews fundamentally differ as to what completes ethics. While the Bible claims that humble obedience to an unintelligible Other is what completes ethics, Greek philosophy seeks this answer from an understanding of the beginning of the universe itself. “The works of the Greek philosophers are really books, works, works of one man, who begins at what he regards as the necessary beginning, either the beginning simply or the best beginning for leading people up to what he regards as the truth. And this one man - one book was characteristic of Greek thought from the very beginning: Homer.¹⁵⁸”

The philosopher has to derive the good for man through an investigation of the eternal universe, and its immutable laws – or in other words, its essential, intelligible nature. One should not be confused here as regards the eternity of the universe within the philosophical worldview. The philosopher looks to the beginnings of things for the essential answers to crucial questions. It may appear at first, therefore, that the prospect of an eternal universe would actually preclude this sort of philosophical quest for the beginning of things. For how could we ever understand the beginning of a universe which lacks a definite point of commencement?

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

Nevertheless, the eternity of the world, as seen for example in Aristotle, is not a hindrance to this quest, but rather a necessary precondition. For the philosopher, I take it Strauss intends to say, searches for the ontological beginnings or foundations of the universe, and not its chronological starting point, when attempting to satisfy pressing ethical dilemmas. Indeed, only an eternal universe with eternal immutable laws and an eternal and intelligible nature can possibly provide consistent answers to such philosophical queries. A universe freely willed into existence *ex nihilo* would, conversely, preclude any philosophical quest for this aforementioned ethical understanding.

Thus, it is just here that we see the radical opposition between philosophy and the Bible. What the one needs, the other precludes. Philosophy requires an immutable, eternal, intelligible order to the universe so that it can provide the answer to ethics through human understanding. In other words, human understanding must necessarily presuppose a consistent intelligible nature as its object. Otherwise, the understanding simply cannot function reliably. The Bible precludes such a universe because it must, at its core, affirm an omnipotent God who necessarily pre-exists such an intelligible order. Again, for such a God to truly be omnipotent, it must have prior, willful control over the nature of all that is, including His own nature. He must, further, be able to freely will that nature, even His own nature, be radically different at any moment. Conversely, what is needed for the completion of religious ethics is humble obedience to that which is truly omnipotent, or in other words, the radically transcendent Other. Of course, no such transcendent being can possibly exist if the reason and nature of Greek philosophy exists. For this philosophical scheme of intelligibility precludes the biblical God, and thus biblical ethics.

It is for this reason that, even when the omnipotence of the gods is spoken of in the Greek tradition, this omnipotence is of a qualitatively different kind than that of the biblical worldview. Indeed, for Strauss, omnipotence in Greek thought is not, and necessarily cannot be omnipotence in the fullest sense:

Now in this context (of Homer's *Odyssey*), the gods can do everything, the gods are omnipotent, one can say, but it is very interesting what this concept means in context. Why are the gods omnipotent? Because they know the natures of all things, which means, of course, they are not omnipotent. They know the natures of things which are wholly independent of them, and through that knowledge they are capable of using all things properly. In all Greek thought, we find in one form or the other an impersonal necessity higher than any personal being; whereas in the Bible the first cause is, as people say now, a person.¹⁵⁹

By way of contrast, the biblical God is mysterious just because he is omnipotent. The God of Abraham hides his face. He cannot be fully intelligible, and so cannot have a definite nature, because this would negate his omnipotence. For to know God is to be able to control God.¹⁶⁰ "... 'I shall be What I shall be,' is the most radical formulation of that. It is just the opposite of the Greek notion of essence, where it means the being is what is and what was and will be. But here the core, one could say, is inaccessible; it is absolutely free: God is what He shall be.¹⁶¹"

However, God, that is the God of the Bible, is not omnipotent in the same way that the gods of Homer were omnipotent – i.e. through knowledge of the nature of all things. For this

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

would imply that intelligible, permanent natures pre-exist God's will. The final import, then, of the Biblical worldview is not merely that God is mysterious, and hides his face. It is more so that the whole of reality is made mysterious and unintelligible – since it necessarily lacks any immutable, intelligible nature. The opposition between these two worldviews takes many forms in Strauss' work: reason or revelation, Athens or Jerusalem, philosophy or the Bible, and so on. However, the most comprehensive and revealing way of expressing this fundamental opposition is of that between deed and thought. In Strauss' consideration, human understanding and the intelligibility of nature is always a constraint upon the free will, and the free exercise of a limitless will cannot exist in an altogether intelligible world.

Ultimately, I think, one would have to go back to a fundamental dualism in man in order to understand this conflict between the Bible and Greek philosophy, to the dualism of deed and speech, of action and thought – a dualism which necessarily poses the question as to the primacy of either – and one can say that Greek philosophy asserts the primacy of thought, of speech, whereas the Bible asserts the primacy of deed.¹⁶²

That God is wholly transcendent is thus a fundamental presupposition of the biblical worldview. There can be no philosophical justification for such a God, and thus no natural theology can exist which adequately proves the existence of the Abrahamic God. However, it is also intrinsic to biblical, revelatory faith that no such proof for existence is even attempted. This would be an act of impiety and, indeed, would be contra the ontological parameters of the biblical worldview. For the God of Abraham, and God's word are precisely that which is originary – that which came at the beginning. God and His word not only constitute the

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 120.

beginning of things chronologically, and ontologically, but also, and for this reason, come prior to any biblical reasoning. God is always a presupposition, an unquestionable premise, and never an inference or conclusion. To treat God otherwise would be not only logically fallacious, but also arrogantly impious.

From Classical to modern reason & liberalism

Strauss recognizes that reason, as well, has its own necessary presuppositions. The fatal evolution of reason, however, is that it has overstepped its necessary bounds in the modern era. Strauss identifies the transition from Classical reason to modern reason especially in the seventeenth century as this pernicious moment. For it is only with the advent of modern reason that philosophy moves away from the humble, ongoing quest of Plato for wisdom and the humble disposition of Socrates which led him to be silent on that which he knew was beyond the scope of human understanding. Instead, modern reason had now claimed to have comprehensive and unlimited knowledge – at least in principle. Strauss asserts that this modification found in modernity has, at once, radicalized the idea of intellectual progress and as a consequence of this radicalization, destroyed the idea of progress – thereby leading to contemporary nihilism and barbarism. One may ask, however, why the supposed radicalization of the idea of progress as seen in modern reason ultimately led to something wholly destructive of not only itself, but of society as well? Fortunately, Strauss clearly delineates two essential points which mark this crucial divergence of modern reason from its Greek counterpart which we can presently analyze.

First, modern philosophy claims a parallelism between intellectual progress and social progress.

...in the classical statements about progress the emphasis is on intellectual progress rather than on social progress. The basic idea can be stated as follows: science or philosophy is the preserve of a small minority, of those who have “good natures,” as they call it, or who are “gifted,” as we say. Their progress, the progress of this tiny minority, does not necessarily affect society at large – far from it.¹⁶³

The fact that modern philosophy can claim such a parallelism is the product of the seventeenth century focus upon philosophical method. The notion that the discoveries of philosophical inquiry can be accessible to all moderately intelligent people resulted in a great leveling effect. The pursuit of knowledge no longer required special genius, but rather the general adherence to methodological rigor. This modern modification was thus necessary to make intellectual progress the preserve of the many, and not the gifted few. In short, it enabled the intellectual progress of a special minority to be generalized, and tethered to the social progress of society at large.

Second, modern reason is distinguished from Classical reason in that it denies any future limit upon its own progress.

The human race had a beginning but no end, and it began about seven thousand years ago – as you see, that man did not accept the biblical chronology. Hence, since mankind is only seven thousand years old, it is still in its infancy. An infinite future is open, and look what we have achieved in this short span – compared with infinity – of seven thousand years! The decisive point is then this: there is a beginning and no end.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

Now, our original question was why modern philosophy, that is, modern reason, has led to a crisis of belief in the idea of progress, even as it has radicalized this very idea. Certainly, the notion that intellectual progress is tethered to the progress of society at large, and secondly that this progress has no identifiable limit, are each augmentations of the concept of progress itself. And yet, they have led to the destruction of the belief in progress for just this reason. Namely, it has become empirically untenable to affirm such a bold notion of progress in our modern era.

Strauss asserts that modern technical advancements, very much a byproduct of modern reason, have actually endangered our future in many cases. The present existence of the hydrogen bomb is merely one, vivid example of this fact.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, there is no reason whatever to suppose that advancements in intellectual knowledge have corresponded with any advancement in social progress. Modern intellectual advancement has made man the absolute master of nature, truly a giant. And yet, he lacks both direction and coordination. “Modern man is a giant in comparison to earlier man. But we have also to note that there is no corresponding increase in wisdom and goodness. Modern man is a giant of whom we do not know whether he is better or worse than earlier man.”¹⁶⁶ And just as the modern existence of atomic weaponry, mechanized warfare, and nature-killing heavy industry stand as counterexamples to the thesis that intellectual progress is parallel to social progress; the second thesis of the unlimited nature of human progress is also thrown into question. For now it seems more plausible than ever that the catastrophic destruction of humanity is at hand. At the very least, there is no apparent guarantee that our future is indefinitely open. This would require a radically non-empirical and

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

non-natural covenant, of the sort which existed between God and Noah after the flood.¹⁶⁷ “The availability of infinite time for infinite progress appears, then, to be guaranteed (only) by a document of revelation which condemns the other crucial elements of the idea of progress. Progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term is a hybrid progress.¹⁶⁸”

Put more boldly, modern progress is itself a self-negating contradiction. In its augmentation, it promises more than reason and empirical evidence can possibly allow. It thus either begs-the-question, or requires help from that which is intrinsically incompatible with it – namely, divine, revelatory guarantees. This, then, is the source for modern nihilism and barbarism. These are, Strauss contends, the products of an arrogant reason’s self-destruction.

Therefore, we see as well that each of these two fatal characteristics of modern reason arise from the same problem – a fundamental lack of humility. This is an anti-Socratic impulse to claim comprehensive and apodictic knowledge of the whole, and Strauss submits that it is peculiar to modern reason. This claim to comprehensive knowledge necessarily implies not only the negation of that which contradicts modern reason, i.e. any contradictions and tensions in thought or society; it also implies that reason can give full account for its necessary presuppositions. In this way, modern reason differentiates itself from both Greek philosophy and biblical orthodoxy. Of course, as explained above, biblical orthodoxy never could give an account of its necessary presupposition, since this was God who necessarily pre-exists all understanding. Yet Greek philosophy as well, especially in its Platonic form, never sought to give an apodictically certain account of its own necessary presupposition – namely human intelligence and intelligible nature. The conceited attempt to do so in modernity has, in Strauss’

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

mind, led to the arrogant self-aggrandizement of philosophical understanding, and with it, its two deadly symptoms of claiming a social parallel to intellectual progress, and secondly the denial of any limit to intellectual progress. Of course, the self-destruction of philosophy is not merely a suicide, but a homicide as well. Since philosophy has become, in the modern era, tethered to politics – especially in the form of modern liberalism – the futile quest for the intellectual erasure of all contradictions has mirrored a political quest of the same sort. The fallout from this quest's ultimate failure has, therefore, not only led to the degradation of modern philosophy, but also the nihilistic and violent degradation of politics and society as well.

Liberalism and modern reason's failure to resolve all difference

Leo Strauss' preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion offers us a dual insight into Strauss' thought in this regard. On one level, the preface outlines a theologico-political history of Central Europe – a region of the continent which gave birth to modern rationalism and to liberalism. At the same time, this historical reconstruction reveals Strauss' view as to the social and political consequences of this intellectual development. The historical narrative which Strauss constructs is, therefore, as much a political story as it is an account of the history of ideas. Specifically, the preface treats the way in which modern rationalism, represented by Spinoza, necessarily demands the resolution of all contradictions. It lacks the humble character of its Classical ancestors, and thus seeks to defend its own necessary presupposition – namely, a fully intelligible world. In doing so, modern rationalism not only fails to accommodate any contradictions in its own account of reality, it moreover denies any place for revelation or orthodoxy – i.e. that apparently contradictory realm which lies outside of the scope of human reason. It fails to understand that both reason and orthodoxy each have their own unanswerable presuppositions. In short, modern reason has lost its Socratic humbleness. In addition,

liberalism, the social correlate of modern, intellectual rationalism, cannot live with the contradictions which manifest themselves inside the political realm – namely, inside liberal regimes. Therefore, Strauss concludes, modern rationalism tends towards self-destruction – either in the form of a passive nihilism, or in the form of barbaric reaction or absolutism.

The scope of the preface's history reaches as far back as the Medieval Period in Germany, and progresses through the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, the apex and demise of Imperial Germany, the birth and death of the Weimar Republic, and ultimately the subsequent rise of the Third Reich. Strauss' method of historical narration is familiar to students of European history in general. For him, the contingencies of history follow the logic of a pendulum. Socio-cultural antecedent and political effect are not accidental, but neither are they teleological. Rather, the excesses of the former produce the emergence and excesses of the latter. The Napoleonic Wars and the subsequent hegemony of universalistic republicanism produced the reaction of the Romantic School in Germany. In a similar way, the universalistic liberalism of Weimar proved to be the precursor to Hitler's Germany.

For this narrative to be consistent, Weimar cannot be seen as merely one stage in an inevitable progression of German history. Rather, it must properly be viewed by Strauss as a contrived excess which, in turn, produced an excessive reaction. Hence, Strauss notes that modern liberalism is not defined negatively against the despotic regimes of the 17th and 18th centuries. It is not, as is popularly believed, a natural response to totalitarian power. Rather, it is defined negatively against the middle ages. Modern liberalism, being essentially opposed to medieval society, is the negation of a revelatory, poetic civilization – and specifically a civilization which was fully accepting of the supra-rational contributions of revealed religion. To put a fine point on the matter, modern liberalism (according to Strauss) is shaped largely by

Spinoza. It represents the supposition that reason is the only natural end of man, and that any apparent contradiction of established reason should therefore be eliminated for the sake of man. This, Strauss contends, is a grave excess and flies in the face of the good sense of the Middle Ages.

Like the Marxists whom he rejects Strauss notes that modern liberalism either leads to socialist revolution or reactionary barbarism – in the case of Weimar Germany, National Socialism was that barbarism. However, unlike in the Marxist account, this transition is not one of economic necessity. Rather, it is intrinsic to the way in which modern liberalism treats that which it deems irrational. For the defining feature of liberal democracy is two-fold. First, it is the affirmation of the universal bond of rational morality. Second, it is the distinction between society and state (i.e. the affirmation of the private sphere). Liberalism, being a product of modern rationalist, (i.e. Spinozist) thought cannot live with contradictions, and yet its essential structure produces contradictions. Namely, the universal bonds of morality cannot extend to the private sphere which is intrinsic to liberalism qua liberalism. It therefore allows immoral, non-egalitarian relations to flourish through its self-limitation. This manifest contradiction is corrosive to the liberal democratic state and its ethos. Eventually, the state must enforce its human morality and thus destroy the sovereignty of the private sphere – either through revolutionary means as in Russia, or via reactionary means as in Germany.

Section Two: Conclusions and Tensions of the Straussian Position

Modern, Spinozistic liberalism is self-annihilating since it cannot live with the contradictions which it inevitably produces. Consequently, Strauss affirms liberalism's alternative – namely, a non-rationalist conception of society which can tolerate contradictions.

His affirmation of the Middle Ages is a way to avoid the contrived excesses of Progress and Reaction. For the contradictions in universalistic Progress necessarily bring about the bloody consequence of Reaction. For Strauss, the solution is not to finally eliminate contradiction (for this would be to fall into the same old pattern, and is in any case impossible), but rather to eliminate the compulsion to eliminate contradiction. It necessarily means the return “teshuvah” to a pre-rationalized conception of politics and society. For this cultural conservatism, this teshuvah, is the one alternative to Progress and its necessary correlate – Reaction.¹⁶⁹

The conservative conclusions of Progress or Return, Preface

Strauss’ discussion of modern Zionism is his concrete illustration of this imperative of return.¹⁷⁰ For Zionism came about through the failure of liberal democracy to safeguard Jews in the private sphere. It began as a strictly Political Zionism. In defending the conservative credentials of this Zionist project, Strauss wrote in a critical letter to the editorial board of the *National Review*:

Finally, I wish to say that the founder of Zionism, Herzl, was fundamentally a conservative man, guided in his Zionism by conservative considerations. The moral spine of the Jews was in danger of being broken by the so-called emancipation, which in many cases had alienated them from their heritage, and yet not given them anything more than merely formal equality; it had brought about a condition which has been called “external freedom and inner servitude”; political Zionism was the attempt to restore that inner freedom, that simple dignity, of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate are capable.

¹⁶⁹ It should also be noted that Strauss’ title, *Progress or Return* is very likely a play on words. “Return” is the literal translation of the Hebrew *teshuvah*. Yet in Jewish liturgy *teshuvah* carries the strong connotation of “repentance” in the sense of “turning from one’s past ill deeds.” One can, therefore, posit that Strauss’ work (presented to Jewish university students) is not only meant to be descriptive but prescriptive as well. Strauss is arguing normatively for a turning back from the misdeeds of modern liberalism and rationalism.

¹⁷⁰ Leo Strauss, *Preface to Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 142.

Political Zionism is problematic for obvious reasons. But I can never forget what it achieved as a moral force in an era of complete dissolution. It helped to stem the tide of “progressive” leveling of venerable, ancestral differences; it fulfilled a conservative function.¹⁷¹

Political Zionism was a productive answer to the failure of the “liberal solution” to the Jewish question. Liberalism, in its rationalist and universalist manner, sought to emancipate the Jews in a formal and political sense. Yet the granting of full citizenship, property rights, and suffrage merely served to enslave the Jews internally. Economic dependence meant spiritual servitude.

Worse than this, liberal enfranchisement of the Jews meant tethering the Jews to the inevitably suicidal course of modern progress. It meant enfolding the Jewish people within the overall narrative of Progress and Reaction. For those Jews who remained in Germany in the 1930’s this Reaction would be unimaginably brutal. Political Zionism, therefore, represented to Strauss a conservative “breaking away” from this violent pendulum of modernity.

Yet, Strauss contends, “Political Zionism is problematic for obvious reasons.” Namely, it is ahistoric and primarily concerned with the concrete survival of the extant Jewish community. It is, consequently, not even intrinsically tied to the state of Israel, let alone the revival of the Temple and its sacrifices as per religious, messianic Zionism – the Zionism of the Talmud for instance. Strauss contends that Political Zionism is for this reason insufficient. It lacks any particular *raison d’être*. Political Zionism, to truly constitute a return and not merely a hollow modification of liberalism, requires a Cultural Zionism (something the young Strauss, we may

¹⁷¹ Leo Strauss, “Letter to the National Review” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Green (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997), 414.

recall, found in Jabotinsky's program). This Cultural Zionism must supply the necessary life-blood and impetus behind any such political movement.

Nonetheless, Judaism is dissimilar from any of the various "high-cultures" of Europe. Understanding its intellectual inner life, (i.e. its culture) necessarily means understanding its chosenness, its relationship to a personal, transcendent God who acts in history and its hope for a future messiah. While Cultural Zionism attempts to imitate the cultural consciousness of other European peoples, it cannot succeed in doing so. Rather, Cultural Zionism, when it understands itself correctly, finds Religious Zionism and the Torah. It is this Religious Zionism which undergirds all forms of Cultural Zionism, and thus all attempts at Political Zionism. Religious Zionism, though, just is the denial that a contradiction-free society can be produced by humans. Religious Zionism is the ultimate affirmation that the one, transcendent God and his revelation are essential. It is further the denial that all lasting, ultimate problems can be solved by mere humans. Strauss concludes, therefore, that the Jews can be considered the chosen people insofar as this lesson is a lesson for all of humanity.¹⁷²

We therefore see, once again, the central thesis of Progress or Return manifesting itself in concrete, political terms in this preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion. Modern liberalism is doomed to failure because it arrogantly attempts to stamp out all contradictions, even those contradictions which it itself produces. This is merely a symptom of modern reason itself. The only way to avoid the nihilistic and violent reaction to liberalism's inevitable failure is a return to the humble, good sense of the Middle Ages. We ought to accept that contradictions will always be a feature of the human polis, and that there will never be a purely human (that is, knowledge based) solution to all human problems. In short, we need a form of reason which understands its

¹⁷² Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 143.

own limitations, or in other words, we need to regain the reason of the Greeks. For it is only this sufficiently humbled sort of reason which can allow a place for revelation. Of course, for Strauss to be consistent here, Classical reason cannot synthesize or subsume revelation. For these are intrinsically in tension with one another. It must instead be Strauss' contention that the virtue of Classical reason as opposed to modern reason is simply that the former knows when to be quiet. Classical reason, like Socrates, knows when it does not know. Thus, the tension between philosophy and the Bible is never resolved, but neither does philosophy violently attempt to stamp out this contradiction by negating or subsuming the Bible either.

The concrete illustration of this "post-critical" relationship is, as mentioned, contemporary Zionism. Political Zionism is the attempt to solve a human problem, i.e. the oppression of European Jewry, with a purely human solution, i.e. political resettlement. However, the practical problem with this solution is that a purely political Zionism, Strauss contends, lacks any sufficient reason for its own existence. It requires, ultimately, religious Zionism and God to fulfill its own secular project. Yet, it does not subsume God! It does not make God simply an intelligible tool for the construction of a Zionist state. For God to be effective at all, He cannot be debased in such a manner. God must be left as the fully transcendent, fully omnipotent Other. Thus, the essential tension is never resolved, and yet the tension is vitalizing and productive. This, finally, is the conservative essence of *teshuvah*.

The actual resolution of Straussian tension & the final affirmation of particularism

Toward the end of the preface, Strauss states rather clearly the basis for his rejection of Spinoza, and thus his critique of universalistic, rationalized politics. His method is a familiar one amongst post-Enlightenment scholars. Leo Strauss first aims at parity. He appears to humbly

and prudently deny the hegemony of Spinoza, naturalism, and reason. In his words, the presupposition of Reason is just that – a presupposition. The system as a whole is therefore merely hypothetical as it is conditional upon said presumption. Strauss admits, of course, that naturalistic reason and Spinoza's system in particular can certainly make a lot of sense of the world. Nonetheless, it is based upon axioms which are not self-evident, but rather chosen in light of a preexistent, rationalist bias.

Similarly, orthodoxy (i.e. faith in the transcendent, in revelation and the denial of a fully intelligible universe) may as well be hypothetical. Orthodox faith is also based upon certain assumptions and presuppositions. Hence, Orthodoxy is not *a priori* superior to Reason. Yet neither is Reason *a priori* superior to Orthodoxy. Indeed, Strauss argues, they have the very same cognitive status as 'hypothetical.'

For all assertions of orthodoxy rest on the irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God, Whose will is unfathomable, Whose ways are not our ways, Who has decided to dwell in the thick darkness, may exist. Given this premise, miracles and revelations in general, and hence all Biblical miracles and revelations in particular, are possible. Spinoza has not succeeded in showing that this premise is contradicted by anything we know. For what we are said to know...has been established based on the assumption (of naturalism)... The orthodox premise cannot be refuted by experience or by recourse to the principle of contradiction.¹⁷³

Strauss' stunning conclusion is the following: Since both Reason and Orthodoxy (or stated alternately, Spinoza and Judaism) are each essentially hypothetical, the affirmation of one over the other would necessarily mean first accepting the presuppositions of either system over

¹⁷³ Leo Strauss, *Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 170.

the other. There are no independent criteria for the choice between Reason and Orthodoxy. Therefore, in Strauss' own words: "...the quest for evident and necessary knowledge rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral."

It is a free, moral decision between Reason and Orthodoxy. However, it is just here that Strauss stacks the deck in favor of Orthodoxy and against Reason. Strauss will argue next that Orthodoxy ultimately does prevail since Reason is self-destructive. Reason (in the modern, Spinozist sense) necessarily claims objectivity and certitude while shunning contradiction, bias, and prejudice. Orthodoxy, in contrast, has the upper hand insofar as it is epistemically more humble. On page twenty-eight of the preface, Strauss admits that Spinoza may have refuted orthodoxy had orthodoxy itself claimed apodictic certainty, or even substantial evidence, regarding God, revelation, scripture, the soul, and so forth. However, orthodoxy by its nature never claims any such binding knowledge. It merely claims belief in these aforementioned items. These items are perhaps un-provable, yet they are also irrefutable. They require a free moral choice, a radically free affirmation of the will. Insofar as orthodoxy has never attempted to prove its items of belief, but that Spinoza and Reason have positively tried to refute them and failed, Orthodoxy has triumphed by virtue of Reason's self-destruction.¹⁷⁴ To put it neatly, Reason has failed while Orthodoxy did not lose.

A careful reader will notice that this pattern of thought closely mirrors the historical reconstructions seen at the very beginning of the preface. Namely, those universalistic, rationalized regimes – for instance the liberal democracy of the Weimar Republic, fail simply because they necessarily shun all prejudice and contradiction while at the same time giving rise

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

to contradiction and making room for prejudice (especially in the private sphere). This, as we have seen, leads to the emergence of totalizing states – either communist or fascist in nature, which destroy the private sphere in said liberal democracies in order to purge any contradiction. By contrast, the Medieval estate, like Orthodoxy itself, feels no obsessive need to purify itself of contradiction. In this way it is not self-destructive like Reason or self-defeating like the rationalized politics of liberalism.

However, the conceit in Strauss’ own reasoning lies with his implicit metaphysical commitment to voluntarism. While appearing to innocently and humbly argue for cognitive parity between Reason and Orthodoxy, and thus a free choice between the two, he is actually affirming a very specific conception of the will and of the universe. He necessarily affirms a de-intellectualized will which can possibly make such a criterion-less decision. This “free, moral decision” for it to truly be free must literally be made for no reason.

Indeed, it is Spinoza who best critiques Strauss’ conception of such a voluntaristic will approximately three hundred years earlier in the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect. In Section Sixty of said treatise Spinoza rightly points out that such a free will would necessarily also be able to “perceive in a variety of ways, not itself nor things which exist, but only things which are neither in itself nor anywhere else, in other words, that the soul can, by its unaided power, create sensations or ideas unconnected with things.” Furthermore, such a will would have to, on the one hand, be absolutely free to create such fictions and at the same time be able to somehow limit its future creations to cohere and remain in harmony with its original ones. Essentially, a totally free will would have to somehow be both radically free and scrupulously self-consistent.

Strauss may never explicitly advocate such a conception of the absolutely free will. Nonetheless, in suggesting that the will make a radically free choice (in this case between Reason and Orthodoxy), he commits himself to such a radical voluntarism all the same. Moreover, this voluntaristic will must subsist in a universe which lacks full, objective definition and is not subject to basic rules of thought –the principle of sufficient reason chief among them. Only if these basic principles are expelled from the universe can a totally free will exist and proceed to make criterion-free decisions.

Aside from such a thoroughly particularist and nominalist metaphysical scheme giving rise to obvious absurdities, it also prejudices one against Reason and in favor of Orthodoxy from the very start. Again, while Strauss appears to cautiously and neutrally argue against the imperialistic hegemony of modern Reason by proposing cognitive parity between Reason and Orthodoxy, this “neutrality” actually calls the match in favor of Orthodoxy itself. One is left to ask, therefore, what can be left of the “humble” reason of Greek philosophy which Strauss claims to affirm. For by Strauss’ own definition, Orthodoxy is the realm of belief, rather than knowledge. It is the realm of the acceptance of contradiction, rather than the denial of it. Therefore, the very way in which Strauss sets up the “free, moral decision” between Orthodoxy and Reason commits one, in reality, to the choice of Orthodoxy alone. The decision itself is wholly voluntaristic, and thus in its very essence contra Reason – not merely modern reason, but any reason at all.

Strauss is basically correct about one thing. Reason cannot admit of contradictions, and moreover, it cannot admit the limitation of itself. That is another piece of evidence as to why Strauss’ limitation of Reason to merely one of two possible systems is really, from the beginning, a prejudice against Reason as such. Indeed, one may wonder just what the character

of Greek philosophy and Classical reason (which, again, Strauss apparently affirms as a live option) would be given Strauss' apparent voluntarism and nominalism. This Classical reason would have to be even more humble than described in Progress or Return. Classical reason would not merely have to accept its own limitations, and its own hypothetical status. It would also have to admit of contradictions even within its own rightful domain. Strauss' voluntarism, robust as it is, cannot be constrained by this logical rule of non-contradiction, nor other such strictures including, once again, the principle of sufficient reason. Yet what sort of reason can dispense with these? What sort of argumentation can do without a law of identity, the denial of contradiction, or the notion of sufficient reason? It appears that Strauss' humility is actually a false humility. While his philosophy seems to merely claim epistemological parity between reason and orthodoxy, this parity is actually deadly for reason alone. The free choice between reason and unreason will always affirm the latter since any "free" choice in Strauss' sense necessarily takes place in a world which lacks eternal natures, full intelligibility, and thus reason itself.

The clash of orthodoxies

There is, however, one contest which is truly left undecided for Strauss. While the tension between orthodoxy and reason seems a foregone conclusion, there is always the possibility for a clash of orthodoxies. In the preface, this problem is conceptualized in the following manner: "The victory of orthodoxy through the self-destruction of rational philosophy was not an unmitigated blessing, for it was a victory, not of Jewish orthodoxy, but of any

orthodoxy, and Jewish orthodoxy based its claim to superiority to other religions from the beginning on its superior rationality (Deut. 4:6).¹⁷⁵”

Essentially, Strauss admits here of reason’s destruction. This is not the destruction of modern reason alone, but reason as-such. But this poses a problem for the defense of one, particular immanent criterion, i.e. one orthodoxy, against another. This is why Strauss describes his return to orthodoxy as a “post critical” return, and not necessarily a return to the ancient past in a “whole-cloth” manner. Strauss knows that he cannot return to simple orthodoxy, because it is naive in its own way. Yet reason has self-destructed in an ever more complete fashion. So Strauss must make use of a post-Enlightenment defense of particularist orthodoxy. Essentially, a will to power, a will to nostalgia for ancestry, and not necessarily a defense of Judaism for being the most rational is the current Straussian strategy. It is thus a neo-orthodoxy insofar as it is self-aware of the voluntaristic bases of its own self-affirmation. If Strauss can be credited with being the forefather of neo-conservatism, then it must be traced to this particular move – namely, the affirmation of tradition which is self-reflectively based in a free decision rather than innate belief.

In Progress or Return, this clash of orthodoxies is conceptualized as the problem of multiple divine laws. “Now turning to the biblical alternative, here the basic premise is that one particular divine code is accepted as truly divine; that one particular code of one particular tribe is the divine code. But the divine code of all other allegedly divine codes is simply denied, and this implies a radical rejection of mythology.”¹⁷⁶”

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 172.

¹⁷⁶ Leo Strauss, *Progress or Return?*, 119.

Strauss explains that this problem of multiple, divine codes is solved primarily through a conceptual reliance upon God's omnipotence – i.e. since our God is omnipotent, there cannot be other Gods and other codes. The “rejection of mythology” he speaks of is simply the rejection of a realm of natural necessity that supposedly lies behind any personal notion of an omnipotent God. This, Strauss asserts, amounts to a natural philosophy which is antithetical to the biblical God. Mythology is the cognition of God, which is made possible since mythology itself asserts that God (i.e. the personal God) is merely an illustration or emanation of the true, impersonal, and necessitarian God of Nature. Strauss denies this alternative since any cognition of God along natural-theological lines implies that God is intelligible, and thus controllable – as we have discussed above. Only the biblical account of God can prove that theirs is the one, true God since, in the biblical view, God necessarily is prior to any cognition, prior to intelligibility, and thus beyond our control. Only the biblical God can be truly omnipotent in this voluntaristic sense, and for this reason, only the biblical God can claim to be the one and only God since, to assert otherwise, would be to fallaciously assert knowledge to the contrary, i.e. knowledge of other deities, or in other words, knowledge of the negation of God's omnipotence. This denial of the biblical God is thus problematic for two reasons. First, no knowledge can be prior to God, and thus describe or limit God. Second, God, as omnipotent cannot admit of limitations, and this is simply a matter of the original presupposition of biblical faith.

Of course, it seems that we have here a flagrant instance of question-begging. The Bible asserts the omnipotence of God. Omnipotence, in this case, is deemed analytically identical to the ‘unlimited will.’ Therefore, omnipotence, in turn, implies that we do not have decisive knowledge of God. But for what reason can we affirm that we do not have this decisive knowledge? The answer seems to be that we lack said knowledge because of God's

omnipotence as per the Bible's own contention. Ultimately, the whole scheme is based upon this one, biblical assertion. Moreover, this assertion can neither be denied, nor refuted by reason since the assertion itself is intrinsically contra the strictures of reason as-such. Omnipotence understood as pure, unlimited will, namely, the free will of a being who does not even act by virtue of its own, intrinsic necessity, is simply mutually exclusive of reason insofar as reason is, if nothing else, inextricably tied to the necessary concept of sufficient reason – or in other words, the concept that for any act, object, event, or idea 'x', there has to be a sufficient reason for 'x' to occur.

It seems that Strauss' move is to boldly accept the circularity of this biblical account. However, for Strauss, circularity and question-begging is only a deadly problem for reason and not orthodoxy. It is perfectly alright for orthodoxy to base itself upon the faith in an unevident premise – namely, the omnipotence of God – for that just is the nature of orthodoxy. It is only reason that cannot admit of contradictions, and moreover, cannot admit of the affirmation of unevident premises. Of course, Strauss will always be quick to assert, reason has its own unevident premises for which it cannot account except in a flagrantly question-begging manner. The difference is that orthodoxy is not destroyed by this phenomenon, while reason is, since only reason necessarily militates against the lack of sufficient reason.

To return to our problem at hand, we have still yet to delineate just how Strauss intends to support one orthodoxy, one God, the God of Judaism, above all other competing orthodoxies. Part of the answer, we have seen, is that God is simply a presupposition of Jewish orthodoxy, and that this unevident presupposition is perfectly licit by orthodoxy's own lights. Second, we have also seen that part of Strauss' argument for the veracity of Judaism's one, true God is that, intrinsic to the assertion of God's omnipotence, is God's necessary uniqueness. In other words,

the God of Judaism must be the one true God since any omnipotent God cannot coexist alongside other, competing gods. The possibility of other gods would negate our original, presupposed omnipotence of the one, true God.

Yet, the problem is not sufficiently solved. Even if we grant to Strauss the entire argument thus far, he has certainly proven at the very most that there is but one God, and that, insofar as the orthodoxy of Judaism affirms this one God, then it affirms the only, and thus correct God. But this is a hypothetical statement. How does Strauss know that Judaism has affirmed the correct God, as opposed to a manmade fiction of a God which is, in fact, nonexistent? Supposing he can meet this objection, one may ask this further question: If the orthodoxy of Judaism does affirm the one, true God, how do Jews therefore know that they also affirm a correct comprehension of God's moral code and divine law, as opposed to, for instance, other adherents of this same Abrahamic God – namely, Christians and Muslims? In short, even if Strauss can argue that the orthodoxy of Judaism has necessarily gotten God right, how can he argue further that this orthodoxy has gotten religion right – and not only gotten religion right, but exclusively right as compared with the other, contradictory, Abrahamic traditions? Strauss' answer to this essential question is revealing as to his true metaphysical commitments and method:

If we now assume that this idea of the “way” is really the prephilosophical equivalent of nature, we have immediately to add this very obvious observation: that there is one way, among the many ways, which is particularly important, and that is the way of the group to which one belongs: “our way.” Now, our way is, of course, the right way. And why is it right? The answer: because it is old and because it is one's own, or, to use the beautiful expression of Edmund Burke, because it is “home-bred and

prescriptive.” We can bring it altogether under the term “ancestral.” Hence, the original notion is that the ancestral is identical with the good.¹⁷⁷

Strauss simply affirms that the good, or the correct comprehension of the divine code, is identical to that which we deem ancestral. While earlier it had appeared that the unevident proposition behind orthodoxy was simply the assertion of an omnipotent God, it is actually the case that all assertions of orthodoxy as to the specific nature, will, and code of God are necessarily in the form of fundamentally unevident propositions. It is not as if Strauss argues that from the sole assertion of God’s omnipotence, the specifics of Jewish orthodoxy follow. He knows, or at the very least should realize, that the intricacies of the Jewish tradition and heritage cannot be deduced from such a parsimonious foundation as simple omnipotence. (How are the dietary laws of Kashrut deduced from simple omnipotence, or the necessity of hearing the Shofar at Rosh Hashanah, or any number of other rituals and beliefs?) Rather, each and every affirmation of one’s orthodox heritage (and every facet thereof) is a free, moral, and voluntary act. It is not only free in the sense that the choice of orthodoxy over reason, or one’s own orthodoxy over a competing orthodoxy is free. It is, additionally, a radically free choice in the sense that every affirmation of one’s heritage is a free interpretation of that heritage. Just what Jewish orthodoxy, for instance, even means is the product of the free, moral choices of all presently extant Jews.

So why is the good the ancestral and the ancestral good? As if to say that this question lacks sufficient intellectual “probity,” Strauss merely answers this question with reference to a

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

Greek myth: “I would only refer to a Greek myth according to which Mnemosyne, memory, is the mother of the muses, meaning the mother of wisdom. In other words, primarily the good, the true, however you might call it, can be known only as the old because, prior to the emergence of wisdom, memory occupied the place of wisdom.¹⁷⁸”

In many ways, this apparent non-answer is consistent with Strauss’ conception of the biblical worldview. Since God Himself is necessarily prior to any one theologian’s knowledge of the beginning, biblical texts and biblical revelation cannot be the product of one man’s original, rationalist pursuit, but rather, the collective memory of a cohesive community, jointly loyal to one God, and thus one History. It is clear, therefore, that the good is ancestral, and the ancestral good simply because it cannot be otherwise. Any given conception of the good will necessarily be posterior to our given, collective memory. Since our particular collective memory just is what constitutes our collective identity, it becomes the case that what is good is simply identified with who we are as a community of orthodox believers. The way to pursue the good is simply to be true to one’s authentic identity.

Therefore, while one may be tempted, as above, to ask why the good is to be identified with the ancestral, there is, in fact, a more pertinent question which must be asked. Namely, one ought to ask what rightly counts as the ancestral. For by defending orthodoxy as-such along voluntaristic lines, Strauss seems to deny any stable definition of any one, particular orthodoxy. In other words, there seems to be no stable criterion by which a given orthodoxy comprehends itself, and thus the good. For it is an open question as to what is essential¹⁷⁹ for Judaism and what is not, and moreover, just what essential aspects of Judaism warrant the appellation “great.”

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 120.

¹⁷⁹ See especially Strauss’ treatment of Rosenzweig’s conception of biblical exegesis and the liberal conception of the “essential,” Ibid., 152-153.

Ultimately, Judaism defends its own orthodoxy for the purely simple fact that it is Judaism! Judaism does not respect its heritage because of its antiquity. On the contrary, Judaism's antiquity is of great worth because it is its heritage.

But what of the future? Here, finally, we begin to see the logical limitations of Strauss' thoroughly particularist theory. For, on the one hand, Strauss must claim that the future is radically open. He must deny the supposedly "mechanistic" and necessitarian view of the universe common to modern reason. What's more, Strauss must, and for the same reason, deny that there are any naturally sufficient reasons for our deciding to live or act in one way versus another. Thus, even if we are to remain in our orthodoxy, this can never be the orthodoxy of our ancestors. We can no longer naively follow tradition since it is now terribly unclear what there is in our tradition that is definite and essential. Again, all that we can certainly affirm of our tradition is that it is ours, and for this reason, that it is good. We see, therefore, that Strauss' cultural particularism – his focus upon the immanent features and normative criterion of the ethnic group – seamlessly and inexorably melts into an empty, yet extremely consistent decisionism. This is for the reason that, even a sincere adherence to the orthodoxy of our tradition requires a radically free choice – both in the initial decision to be orthodox, but also, and perhaps more crucially, in the radically free decision as to what orthodoxy is, and how it is to be lived. The fact that this radically free decision is made communally does not negate that it is, in the robustly voluntarist sense of the term, free and thus lacking any sufficient condition outside of the act of deciding itself.

Relativism versus Existentialism and Decisionism

That Strauss' cultural particularism logically disintegrates and gives way to a species of decisionism is perhaps most evident in his polemic against modern relativism in the essays, Relativism and Social Science and the Humanities. Strauss identifies contemporary relativism as a fallacious synthesis between universal understanding on the one hand, and particularist existentialism on the other. The relativist at once wants to sincerely regard the autonomy and authenticity of particular cultural entities, and yet at the same time wishes to accomplish this via a universal sympathy and comprehension of the diverse multiplicity of said communities. Consistent with Strauss' own position, he rejects this synthesis as inherently unstable in its concept. Moreover, this instability of contemporary relativism is the very catalyst of contemporary nihilism. It is largely this critique of relativism that, I contend, justifies my own assertion that Strauss' own position is the logical consequence of the kinds of internal contradictions characteristic of Sartre's early work (esp. in Anti-Semite and Jew).

Sartre's work is, more than anything, an attempt at the above sort of synthesis – at once affirming universal reason and universal norms of freedom and equality, while at the same time asserting the importance of the immanent normative criterion of one's particular culture for the sake of existential authenticity. That these two ends militate against one another allows for the Straussian solution of a purified particularist stance, one which disavows any universal criterion – normative or descriptive.

However, it is also my contention that the manner in which Strauss identifies and solves this essential contradiction in Sartre's position (and those like his) lead to still further contradictions. While Strauss' thoroughly particularist position is, indeed, more consistent than the abovementioned Sartrean synthesis, it also tends towards an voluntarist formalism which negates even the immanent features and criterion of a given orthodoxy or culture. This, in turn,

results in decisionism. Yet this logical progression to decisionism is a transgression and movement beyond Strauss himself who wished to retain some stable affirmation of a culturally-specific orthodoxy.

Especially in the essay Relativism, we can see this logical progression quite nicely. Here, the concepts of liberalism and negative liberty are discussed in light of the works of Isaiah Berlin. Essentially, at stake is the notion inherent in contemporary liberalism that there are no absolutes whatsoever, and thus a wide range of liberties ought to be defended. Many questions arise from this conception of liberalism. For instance, one may ask whether the particular range of lifestyles allowed for under liberal regimes may not conflict with the apparently universal affirmation of liberty itself. Certainly, within formally liberal societies, a number of traditional, hierarchical, and deeply patriarchal communities subsist and often thrive. Moreover, the question can be posed as to whether fidelity to any number of particular cultures tolerated within a liberal regime may not conflict with loyalty to this permissive regime itself. Additionally, does this fidelity ever contradict liberal permissiveness to other, competing cultural worldviews? Strauss, though, identifies the most essential question of all. Namely, he asks whether this universal defense of liberty is not itself a necessary absolute that liberalism must, in the end, affirm.

Yet the primary question concerns, not the location of the frontiers, but their status. Those frontiers must be “sacred” (ibid., p. 57) They must be “absolute”: ‘Genuine belief in the inviolability of a minimum extent of individual liberty entails some... absolute stand’ (ibid., p. 50). “Relativism,” or the assertion that all ends are relative to

the chooser and hence equal, seems to require some kind of “absolutism.” Yet Berlin hesitates to go quite so far.¹⁸⁰

Thus, Strauss critiques contemporary liberalism for ignoring its own need for absolutes, for universal normative affirmations. “Berlin’s statement seems to me to be a characteristic document of the crisis of liberalism – of a crisis due to the fact that liberalism has abandoned its absolutist basis and is trying to become entirely relativistic.”¹⁸¹ Liberalism’s ultimate defense of a wide range of human activity and expression cannot itself be thought of in relativist terms, for this would destroy liberalism. A regime cannot regard human liberty as merely relatively sacred and still call itself liberal. On the other hand, the defense of civil liberties and a wide range of private lifestyles cannot be thought of in absolutist terms either, since absolutist thought itself is an anathema to that permissiveness which undergirds liberal ideology. That is for the reason that liberalism, in this view, is entirely based upon the fundamental proposition that there are no final answers to the great metaphysical or ethical questions. That is precisely why liberalism is liberal, that is, permissive of a wide variety of culturally mediated answers to said questions. “Liberalism, as Berlin understands it, cannot live without an absolute basis and cannot live with an absolute basis.”¹⁸² In many ways, liberalism and its contradictions are simply the most evident symptoms of the emergence of History.

History, Strauss asserts, is both what allowed for the idea of progress, and also what destroyed it. History, with a capital ‘H,’ was the deadly insight of Hegel. It is the assertion that, first, the future is ultimately open, and second, that any one epoch of history only gains its full

¹⁸⁰ Leo Strauss, “Relativism” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 15.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 16.

meaning from the perspective of a later, and thus more complete and rational epoch. The supposed decay of this notion of History in the nineteenth century, Strauss claims, was the necessary catalyst for modern nihilism.¹⁸³ That is for the simple reason that we can never comprehend what, in our present time, is truly good. For it may well be the case that what we view as good, or just, or ethical today will be shown, in fact, to be evil or unjust in light of a more complete, future understanding. Thus, we are deprived of any definite comprehension of good versus evil, and instead are left with the relatively empty concepts of objective history – namely, progress or reaction. In essence, normative thought is replaced with historical, purely directional thought. This is the necessary byproduct of an historical philosophy of progress. Yet it is clear, as well, how this scheme destroys progress and brings about relativism. Once the concept of the good is replaced by mere progress, or at the most, progress plus increased rational understanding, then it becomes an open question as to why one ought to affirm progress at all? On the contrary, we may just as well wish to inhibit progress, so long as we can, with every fiber of our being. For there is nothing inherently good about the progression of history. It has become a purely descriptive affair, and we have lost our ability to transcend the fact-value distinction.

Under this condition, as Nietzsche saw, our own principles, including the belief in progress, will become as relative as all earlier principles had shown themselves to be; not only the thought of the past but also our own thought must be understood to depend on premises which for us are inescapable, but of which we know they are condemned to perish. History becomes a spectacle that for the superficial is exciting and for the serious is enervating. It teaches a truth that is deadly. It shows us that culture is possible only if men are fully dedicated to principles of thought and action which they do not and cannot question, which limit their horizon and thus enable them to have a

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 25.

character and a style. It shows us at the same time that any principles of this kind can be questioned and even rejected.¹⁸⁴

Liberalism, since it is tied to this notion of progress is thus necessarily tied to the relativistic nihilism which is its correlate. The solution to the decay of liberalism has thus to be a rejection of its underlying relativism and historicism. Strauss outlines two possible ways for this task to be accomplished. First, there can simply be a rejection of History altogether. One can simply ignore the deadly insights shared by Hegel and the historicists who have revealed to us the utter contingency of our most cherished beliefs. “The only way out seems to be that one turn one’s back on this lesson of history, that one voluntarily choose life-giving delusion instead of deadly truth, that one fabricate a myth. But this is patently impossible for men of intellectual probity.¹⁸⁵”

However, Strauss asserts that this is not truly a live option for the intellectually sincere. We cannot delude ourselves so much that we actually believe our own lies as to the truth of History. Instead, at least for the intellectually self-aware, Strauss affirms a second solution:

But an entirely different conclusion must be drawn from the realization of this objective truth. The different values respected in different epochs had no objective support, i.e., they were human creations; they owed their being to a free human project that formed the horizon within which a culture was possible. What man did in the past unconsciously and under the delusion of submitting to what is independent of his creative act, he must now do consciously.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

These passages reveal, at last, Strauss' true answer to the modern problem of relativism. The answer cannot be Reaction, namely, a naive return to the past and its naive forms of orthodoxy. This would mean to remain within the Reaction-Progress dichotomy indicative of the historical mindset. It would mean the continuance of the replacement of normative language (i.e. good vs. evil) with chronological language. In any case, for the truly conscious, this is not a real option. The lessons of History, namely, the utter contingency of our deepest principles, cannot be unlearned. The only solution, therefore, is a better understanding of what History does teach us.¹⁸⁷ While a popular understanding of history suggests that our belief systems are the contingent products of environmental factors and the necessary strictures of nature, Strauss denies just this. In other words, objective reality does not form the horizons of subjective freedom. On the contrary, a better understanding of History allows one to see that it was always man's subjectivity, his "creative act" which formed its own horizons.

Notice, therefore, that in Strauss' view the past deeds of men were not relative in the sense of having been determined by their environment. Rather, human beings were always radically free of the supposed necessities of nature. Thus, their cultural endeavors were always free human projects which, themselves, constituted the horizons of their culture. Only these free creations were not free in a self-reflective manner. Rather, man's radical freedom was always subconscious and implicit, if not altogether denied.

¹⁸⁷ This relates to another important excerpt from the same essay: "The true solution comes to sight once one realizes the essential limitation of objective history or of objective knowledge in general. Objective history suffices for destroying the delusion of the objective validity of any principles of thought and action; it does not suffice for opening up a genuine understanding of history." – Leo Strauss, *Relativism*, 25.

This radically new project – the revaluation of all values – entails the rejection of all earlier values, for they have become baseless by the realization of the baseless character of their claim, by which they stand or fall, to objective validity. But precisely the realization of the origin of all such principles makes possible a new creation that presupposes this realization and is in agreement with it, yet is not deducible from it; otherwise it would not be due to a creative act performed with intellectual probity.¹⁸⁸

Relativism, in its original nihilistic form, is thus flipped on its head. Originally, the insight of History was that all great cultural projects were contingent creations of nature and human prejudice. Yet, when this relativism is taken at its most consistent, when contingency is understood to be omnipresent, then there is an important transformation. No longer can there be, in the background, a necessitarian view of nature which forms the horizons of human creativity. Indeed, human creativity itself is seen to be absolutely free of any necessity whatsoever, even the necessity of its own nature. In short, the lesson of History can be summed up in one word: contingency. The utter contingency of reality, in turn, makes man absolutely and radically free. The upshot is this; we can no longer diminish the importance of past cultural endeavors because of their contingency. For, perhaps ironically, all acts are necessarily contingent. Put another way, the realization of contingency, once contingency is made radical and complete, is no longer a source for relativistic nihilism. Contingency, the lesson of History, only tends towards nihilism if there is some measure of necessity next to which those acts deemed contingent can be found wanting. Yet a universe of radical, omnipresent contingency precludes this nihilistic “measuring up” of human acts. All that is left for us is to affirm our free, human actions as free human actions. We are now in the position of turning a deadly truth into a most life-giving one. The

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

trans-valuation of all values becomes a real possibility, indeed the only possibility, against the specter of nihilism.

However, Strauss is quick to point out, this realization of the contingent basis of every cultural endeavor allows for the genesis of new values, “... **yet (this set of new values) is not deducible from it**; otherwise it would not be due to a creative act performed with intellectual probity.” This, then, is the key clause to Strauss’ solution to nihilistic relativism. The utter contingency of all cultural pursuits makes them all free, and allows us the opportunity to freely create and affirm such cultural pursuits today. Still, the present-day creation and affirmation of culture cannot itself be deduced from this lesson of History. It is only made possible by said lesson. For to deduce the radical freedom to affirm a given value on the basis of this lesson of History would, in fact, negate the freedom of this very act. Indeed, a free act cannot be deduced from any lesson or any insight whatsoever. Deduction is intrinsically contra freedom insofar as that which is deduced is thought to be the necessary product of that from which the deduction is made. Thus, the deadly truths of History may be said to be a necessary pre-requisite for the most life-affirming trans-valuation of all values.¹⁸⁹ Yet the fact and form of this trans-valuation must itself remain free, uncaused, and thus somehow also independent of this very insight of History which makes it possible. Accordingly, in Relativism, Nietzsche is praised for pointing the way out of modern nihilism and relativism through his radicalization of contingency, and thus the trans-valuation of all values. Nevertheless he is, in the end, critiqued by Strauss for “lapsing” back into metaphysics as Nietzsche affirms that this will-to-power, and will to freely create values is a universal feature of nature and mankind. For Strauss, there cannot be any such talk of

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

natures or universals, as this would negate the radical freedom which was gleaned from the lessons of History in the first place.

We can therefore see that Strauss is not an advocate for a return “whole-cloth” to the orthodoxy of his ancestors. Strauss’ orthodoxy cannot be the acceptance of earlier values, but the free rejection, affirmation, and trans-valuation of all values – now armed with the knowledge that these will necessarily be, and have always been, human creations. At most, this is a return to orthodoxy in the sense that it was biblical orthodoxy which first supplied the kind of “free will” concept necessary for this post-critical move. However, we are no longer tethered necessarily to our, or any other specific orthodoxy. Any affirmation of values will necessarily be a free, creative affirmation. What had started as a project that emphasized the purely immanent criterion of orthodoxy over any universal criteria has now morphed into a denial of any criteria whatsoever. For it is only degenerate relativism which seeks the explanation of human acts in the necessary, nature-given horizons of a particular culture. Nietzsche has pointed out, to the contrary, that it is the wholly free and creative human act which forms these cultural horizons. In short, Strauss overcomes relativism with a species of decisionism. Relativism, considered by Strauss to be essentially nihilistic, can only survive if it juxtaposes some contingent actions alongside something deemed necessary. Once contingency is made complete, however, there can be no room for nihilism, but only the free affirmations of man. Yet, for this solution to be in any way consistent, these free affirmations must be understood as entirely without sufficient reason, including the reason of contingency itself. In other words, this freedom must be decisionistic in the very fullest sense of the term. For Strauss, only decisionism can overcome relativism.

The consequences for toleration theory

Of course, the overall goal of this present work is to determine the necessary basis for a robust theory of toleration. It is indispensable, then, to investigate what conception of political toleration can possibly be affirmed by the abovementioned Straussian position. Certainly, Strauss cannot affirm the pluralist conception of political toleration represented in Sartre's early work. For Sartre's position requires a trans-cultural empathy which is far too robust and universal to be consonant with the thoroughly particularist conception of identity affirmed by Strauss.

In many ways, Strauss' position on political toleration has to be understood negatively against the quasi-existentialist affirmations of universal empathy just described. Strauss will argue that this sort of universal empathy is simply a species of nihilistic relativism, and is moreover, a symptom of modern, hegemonic theories of political liberalism. Exegetical evidence that this is, in fact, Strauss' position is readily seen in Social Science and Humanism, and I hope to be forgiven for quoting at length this text which so handily proves this point.

First, it has to be understood that the position which Strauss rejects grows out of the very same historicism which constitutes his own position. All acts and values constituted by a given society are so constituted in an entirely free manner, and thus come about contingently. This form of relativism fundamentally agrees with Strauss that the horizons of a given culture are freely self-imposed, and that contingency is omnipresent rather than punctuated by the necessities of nature.

Yet, this form of relativism parts ways with the Straussian position at this point. While the relativist sees contingency everywhere and thus no sufficient reason for affirming one sort of society over another, the Straussian sees contingency everywhere and thus the ability to freely

affirm his chosen society in a life-affirming, creative act. The relativist is thus infected with a universal sympathy for all manner of diverse lifestyles. As such, said individual is paralyzed, unable to adjudicate between various societies, and unable even to choose civilization over cannibalism.

Let us briefly examine this (relativist) position, which at first glance recommends itself because of its apparent generosity and unbounded sympathy for every human position. Against perhaps an outdated version of relativism one might have argued as follows. Let us popularly define nihilism as the inability to take a stand for civilization against cannibalism. The relativist asserts that objectively civilization is not superior to cannibalism, for the case in favor of civilization can be matched by an equally strong or an equally weak case in favor of cannibalism. The fact that we are opposed to cannibalism is due entirely to our historical situation. But historical situations change necessarily into other historical situations. A historical situation productive of the belief in civilization may give way to a historical situation productive of belief in cannibalism. Since the relativist holds that civilization is not intrinsically superior to cannibalism, he will placidly accept the change of civilized society into cannibal society.¹⁹⁰

Now Strauss moves to another, more sophisticated contender. He tackles an account of value affirmation far more similar to his own. Like the above mentioned form of “outdated” relativism, this new form also has learned the lesson of History, namely, the absolute contingency and free creation of human culture. Yet unlike the above form of outdated relativism which cannot take a stand against cannibalism and for civilization, this more robust, “sophisticated” relativist, to whom Strauss now turns his attention, takes the Straussian cue and feels that she can freely decide to affirm her culture, her civilization against all competitors. Thus far, this sophisticated relativist is identical with the Straussian position.

¹⁹⁰ Leo Strauss, *Social Science and Humanism*, 9.

Yet the relativism which I am now discussing denies that our values are simply determined by our historical situation: we can transcend our historical situation and enter into entirely different perspectives. In other words, there is no reason why, say, an Englishman should not become, in the decisive respect, a Japanese. Therefore, our believing in certain values cannot be traced beyond our decision or commitment. One might even say that, to the extent to which we are still able to reflect on the relation of our values to our situation, we are still trying to shirk the responsibility for our choice. Now if we commit ourselves to the values of civilization our very commitment enables and compels us to take a vigorous stand against cannibalism and prevents us from placidly accepting a change of our society in the direction of cannibalism.¹⁹¹

We see, therefore, that this more formidable manifestation of relativism is, indeed, a stronger contender for one definite reason. Namely, this sophisticated relativist has dropped the inconsistent, universalistic tendencies of the “outdated” relativist. There is no more talk about universal sympathy, and the un-decidable relationship between one’s own society and another, or between civilization and cannibalism. Instead, this more robust relativist verges on decisionism. She understands the utter contingency of all cultural horizons and value schemes, and for this reason feels free to affirm her chosen culture as a creative act. For Strauss, this is a marked improvement. Yet, even here Strauss has a critique, and the manner of his critique is especially revealing as to his own position.

This sophisticated relativist has learned the lesson of contingency so well that she enters into discourse with her cultural competitors, the cannibal for instance, on a purely sophistical and rhetorical basis. She understands the free, decisionistic manner in which she has affirmed her culture. She, consequently understands that the cannibal, as well, exists in this very same

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

universe of contingency, a universe in which the nature of all cultural schemes is necessarily contingent and free. Thus, the debate between herself and the cannibal is actually a contest of propaganda, and she is fully cognizant that her propaganda is of no greater veracity than the cannibal's – for each have freely chosen, without sufficient reason, their cultural commitments.¹⁹²

This is precisely where Strauss mounts his criticism. He rejects the idea that this sophisticated relativist can understand the comparable contingency of her beliefs alongside other beliefs and belief systems. For even this cognition of the universal nature of value affirmation as decisionistic is itself dependent upon a conception of universal sympathy. (We understand that the cannibal is existentially free, just as we are free, only by virtue of our sympathizing with the cannibal himself.) Of course, the free affirmation of one's existential identity is completely antithetical to said universal sympathy. Actually, Strauss' move here mirrors his aforementioned critique of Nietzsche at the end of the essay, Relativism. One cannot posit that the will-to-power is universal to nature and be consistent; for the concept of the will-to-power is just the negation of any talk about "nature" and "universals." Analogously one cannot be a decisionist and affirm that all self-aware civilizations are decisionistic as well. For this affirmation comes dangerously close to affirming a "universal nature" of decisionism which pertains to all cultures. The recognition that one's own cultural claims are supported merely by the same sort of propaganda as opposing cultural claims is essentially the admittance of the "universal nature" of decisionism. This is, in Strauss' view, a lapse back into metaphysics which ought to be avoided.

The upshot is the following: Given Strauss' critiques of relativism, and even quasi-decisionistic relativism, we can trace a general trajectory of his own thought. First, Strauss

¹⁹² Ibid., 10.

wishes to affirm a thoroughgoing particularism against the universalist and quasi-universalist theories which he finds lead to modern nihilism (by way of modern liberalism). The Jew should be a proud Jew because of reasons and normative criteria wholly immanent to her particular identity. Yet, when Strauss is at his most conceptually consistent, as in Social Science and Humanism, he understands that even wholly immanent criteria must, in the end, be understood as free decisions. For the very same move which rids oneself of the sufficient reason of nature and universal reason, (and universal sympathy) also necessarily nullifies any conception of sufficient reason within a given, particular identity. There can be no more talk about what, specifically, one ought to do as a Jew since any talk of natures or what is essential is necessarily jettisoned. The Jew is simply he who freely affirms himself as a Jew. What this amounts to, regarding particular dietary laws, cultural obligations, ethical injunctions, and the like, is likewise subject to the free, non-necessitated, decision of the individual or community. Finally, for this decisionism to be complete and consistent, it must not even regard the comparable decisionism of other cultures, for this would be a lapse back into universals and rational metaphysics.

What we are left with is thus a fully consistent (because fully radical) decisionism. This may be surprising as Strauss is often thought of as affirming a robust, historically situated form of cultural orthodoxy. Yet we now see that his affirmation of this orthodoxy through the mechanism of the “free will” actually evacuates this very cultural orthodoxy of all of its definite, essential features. Not only is there no room for the universal and quasi-existentialist, sympathetic understanding of the relativist, liberal, or Sartrean; There is, moreover, no room for even a purely immanent, culture based affirmation of charity and hospitality towards the other. At least, any such immanent, cultural injunction cannot be seen to be necessary, or essential to one’s own culture. For there simply can be nothing which is eternally essential to one’s culture.

Moreover, even if one's culture did affirm charity or hospitality towards the other, it is terribly unclear what form this would or could take given Strauss own conditions. Strauss seems to limit any understanding of "the other" by positing that sympathetic comprehension is parasitic upon a prior, existential self-understanding and a prior commitment to one's own culture. So the Jew can only enter into an ethical relationship with the Arab should this ethical relationship spring from his own Jewishness.¹⁹³ The German, likewise, can only ethically regard the Jew insofar as this ethical stance emanates from his German-ness. Yet, just what is essential to Jewishness or Germanic culture is left absolutely vacuous since all cultural commitments are freely chosen. Thus, Strauss does not allow himself the conceptual tools to speak of toleration for the cultural minority within society at large. At most, he can speak of only himself, and his particular commitments at this particular moment. What's more, these particular commitments cannot be said to be necessitated by either universal understanding, a conception of human nature, or even Strauss' own cultural obligations – for even these are always freely chosen without sufficient reason.

To recall the epigraph for this chapter:

¹⁹³ In fact, problematic as it may be, this line of reasoning is positively adopted by many theorists even today. For instance, we can examine Judith Butler's proposition as expressed in her interview with the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz: Udi Aloni, "Judith Butler: As a Jew, I was taught it was ethically imperative to speak up," Haaretz, February 24, 2010

In the article, Butler expresses that Jews, drawing on their own cultural heritage and collective memory, should treat the Palestinian people ethically. Butler avoids any argument from shared humanity or universal normative criterion (utilitarianism, Kantian imperative, etc.). Rather, it is Jewish particularity which, for her, is supposedly sufficient to motivate ethical behavior towards the other. In fact, in this interview, Butler fondly recalls her youthful question of whether "Kant and Hegel led to National Socialism" while later basing her sympathy for the Gazans in what "as a Jew I was taught."

Genuine understanding of other commitments is then not necessarily conducive to the reassertion of one's own initial commitment. Apart from this, it follows from the inevitable distinction between serious understanding and histrionic understanding that only my own commitment, my own 'depth,' can possibly disclose to me the commitment, the depth, of other human beings. Hence my perceptivity is necessarily limited by my commitment. Universal sympathetic understanding is impossible. To speak crudely, one cannot have the cake and eat it; one cannot enjoy both the advantages of universal understanding and those of existentialism.¹⁹⁴

It is clear enough how Strauss' consistent particularism precludes universal, sympathetic understanding. For all such understanding is necessarily dependent upon a prior commitment to one's own cultural affirmations. Yet, following this line of reasoning through to its end, we understand that even one's own cultural commitments are necessarily the contingent products of wholly free, creative decisions. Thus, if there is any sympathetic understanding, any toleration, between cultures – this sympathetic understanding must be posterior to a radically free, existential self-affirmation. Moreover, there is no necessary reason why this cultural self-commitment will either allow for sympathetic understanding, or if it does, why this sympathetic understanding will be permanent or lasting. For Strauss, all cultural commitments are free, and thus ephemeral. Any toleration which is the side-product of these commitments will thus be every much as ephemeral. No stable toleration can be imagined under these conditions.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

CHAPTER FIVE: SCHMITT and Political Decisionism

“When the decisive moment arrives, the legitimating foreground vanishes like an empty phantom.¹⁹⁵”

It was briefly mentioned earlier that Carl Schmitt, who became a leading jurist for the Third Reich, was a teacher and mentor of the young Leo Strauss. Indeed, the similarities and discrepancies between the thought of these two contemporaries has been a matter of increasing academic speculation in recent years.¹⁹⁶ In this work, it will be argued that Carl Schmitt occupies not only an important personal relation to Leo Strauss, but also a critical conceptual relation as well. Nonetheless, Schmitt’s own life-story is itself illuminating and helps to give historical context to the ideas which will be discussed in this chapter.

Carl Schmitt was the son of Catholic parents, and grew up largely in the town of Plettenberg, Westphalia. Much of his childhood was marked by the experience of living in a Protestant majority locality. Specifically, the German educational system, largely organized around the Protestant conception of *Bildung*, had in Schmitt’s view, structurally disadvantaged the Catholic populations. *Bildung*, as a concept, came to connote for the young Schmitt the drive for liberal secularization in Germany. Far from bringing about equality and educational access for all, in Schmitt’s view this was a political movement spearheaded and meant to benefit the Protestant majority alone. For the secularization of the state entailed a confiscation of Catholic

¹⁹⁵ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 81.

¹⁹⁶ This is especially the case as it relates to the correspondences sent by Strauss to Schmitt in the early 1930’s – the beginning of the latter’s Nazi career. See, for instance: Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The hidden dialogues*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995)

Church property, and thus an expropriation of the property of the traditional Catholic university system. The idea that apparently universal, secular, and liberal measures always, in truth, conceal particular interests of a politically motivated sector of society would be wholly formative for Schmitt's thought into his maturity.

Also entirely consequential for the young Schmitt's worldview was the parallel opinion that the Protestant drive for secularization benefited not only Protestants themselves, but also (unintentionally) the Jewish population as well. The Jews, disproportionately wealthy and traditionally excluded from the Catholic university system, were able and eager to assimilate into the Protestant-secular state, taking full advantage of its educational and economic opportunities. Indeed, the relative success of the Jewish minority as opposed to the sizeable Catholic minority in the context of German secularization would forever mark Schmitt's political thought, and his early identification as a "Political Catholic." That is to say, Schmitt's initial allegiance was to his Catholic community as a people as opposed to simply its doctrinal tenets. As he stated, "For me, the Catholic faith is the religion of my forefathers. I am not only confessionally a Catholic but one through historical origin – if I may say so, of race."¹⁹⁷

Schmitt completed his *Habilitation* (a "second dissertation" which allows one to teach in the German university system) in 1916 and, following this, taught in a number of universities. As he grew in notoriety, the political context in Germany was rapidly changing. The traumatic defeat of World War I saw the ushering in of the perennially unstable, liberal Weimar government. It was in these early years of Weimar that Schmitt began to publically identify and promote his political Catholicism. This was the time when he wrote *Römischer Katholizismus*

¹⁹⁷ Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt and the Jews: The "Jewish Question," the Holocaust, and German Legal Theory*, trans. Joel Golb (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 10.

und politische Form (1923, 1925). His major political concern seemed to revolve around the inherent instability and self-destructive nature of liberalism, a form of government which, because of its formalistic universalism, was incapable of defending itself against internal enemies destructive to the state. Increasingly Schmitt argued in favor of amplified and undivided authority for the executive, the Reich President, and the use of Article 48 of the Weimar constitution which granted essentially dictatorial powers to the executive in times of emergency.

In 1932, with approximately six million Germans unemployed and the bans on the SA and SS overturned, Schmitt's theses seemed to be proven correct. The following year, 1933, Adolf Hitler is appointed Chancellor of Germany by President von Hindenburg. It was this same year, in May, that Carl Schmitt decided to join the Nazi party. (Incidentally, this was the same month that Martin Heidegger also joined the party.) This proved to be a professionally advantageous move for the young academic. In November of that year Schmitt became the president of the National Socialist Jurists Association.¹⁹⁸

While his party membership would undoubtedly aid his professional aspirations, Schmitt nonetheless famously faced criticism from within quarters of the Nazi party itself. The most serious instance of this came in 1936 in *Das Schwarze Korps* (an SS periodical), though Schmitt was protected by his political ally, Herman Göring.¹⁹⁹

Nonetheless, it should be noted that criticism of Carl Schmitt never revolved around any doubt of the jurist's sincere anti-Semitic beliefs. Indeed, promulgation of such anti-Semitism, and the construction of a legal system which would enshrine racist sentiment, would be a major

¹⁹⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), vii.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, viii.

activity of Schmitt during his time as Reich jurist. Most notably, in Berlin, October 3rd and 4th 1936, Schmitt organized and chaired a conference for the *Reichsgruppe Hochschullehrer des Nationalsozialistischen Rechtswahrerverbund* (Reich Group of University Teachers in the National Socialist Association of Legal Guardians) entitled, “Judaism in Legal Studies.” The topic of the conference revolved around the supposedly nefarious and secretive influence of Jewish thought which burdened the German legal system and how to eradicate it.²⁰⁰ Indeed, up until his death Schmitt never expressed any regret for his anti-Semitic activities nor his complicity or membership in the Nazi party.

After the end of World War II, Schmitt was detained for thirteen months by the allies and accused of actively promoting Hitler’s policies, but was ultimately released without charge. Following this he retreated to his family house which he would name “San Casciano” after the town near which Machiavelli exiled himself after his expulsion by the Medici.²⁰¹

A persistent theme amongst contemporary supporters of Carl Schmitt, many of whom worked with him personally towards the end of his life (such as George Schwab), is that Schmitt cannot be dismissed upon the basis of his “supposed” anti-Semitism. (Indeed, even the fact of Schmitt’s anti-Semitism is often downplayed, cast as idiosyncratic, opportunistic, incidental, or confined to merely a small portion of Schmitt’s political career in the 1930’s.) As evidence to this claim, it is common for such supporters to cite the reception of Carl Schmitt amongst a wide ideological array of theorists, both during Schmitt’s own lifetime as well as today.

²⁰⁰ Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt and the Jews*, 68.

²⁰¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 2.

From the beginning of his career, Schmitt was taken seriously on all parts of the political spectrum. The young Carl Friedrich (later to become a central author of the postwar German constitution, a Harvard professor, and president of the American Political Science Association) cited him approvingly, in 1930, on Article 48 of the Weimar constitution, which permitted commissarial dictatorship, a step that Schmitt had urged on Hindenberg. Franz Neumann, the socialist and left-wing sociologist author of *Behemoth*, drew extensively upon Schmitt, as did his colleague and friend Otto Kirchheimer. Indeed, all of the Frankfurt School (especially Walter Benjamin) spoke highly of him, often after 1933. More recently, the Italian and French Left, as well as those associated with the radical journal *Telos*, have approvingly investigated his nonideological conception of the political.²⁰²

It is certainly a fact that Schmitt's reception has been mixed: Though met with controversy and occasionally vitriolic criticism, Schmitt has nonetheless found warm and favorable receptions throughout nearly all political and ideological terrains as well. Indeed, even during Schmitt's own productive life he carried on cordial, sometimes even friendly professional relationships with a very wide range of theorists - sometimes leftist, occasionally liberals, and sometimes even Jews. For instance, in the 1920's Schmitt befriended the Social Democrat legal theorist Hermann Heller and had rather extensive correspondences with him. After the Nazi assumption of power, he wrote a letter on behalf of his Jewish colleague, Erwin Jakobi, so as to protect Jakobi from the new racial laws targeting Jewish professionals employed by the state, "Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service." For a time, Schmitt also carried on a personally cordial relationship with the politically conservative Jew, Erich Kaufmann as well as the liberal Hans Kelsen who would come to be his most noted scholarly adversary.²⁰³

Nonetheless, this present work will not focus upon these bibliographical and historical details of Schmitt's own life. Historians, political scientists, and philosophers have already

²⁰² Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, x-xi.

²⁰³ Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt and the Jews*, 5.

accomplished (in some cases exceedingly well) a meticulous reconstruction of the various twists and turns of Schmitt's personal and professional career. What I aim to do here is altogether different. While recognizing the subtle changes in Schmitt's political and philosophical thought throughout his productive life, and while recognizing the severe changes of the political context in which he lived and worked, I endeavor here to extract what is essential and consistent. What defines, indelibly, the fundamental thought of Carl Schmitt? What premises, and what patterns of argumentation form the consistent background of his political theory? Only by way of this sort of distillation (one which will inevitably appear to dedicated Schmittians as "violent") can we finally become clear about the actual content and not merely the fascinating form of Schmitt's thought. For it is entirely true, as George Schwab will often point out, that Carl Schmitt is often taken seriously by both the Left and the Right, and even by Jewish scholars within both domains. This is an undeniable, empirical fact. My question, however, is whether this should be the case.

Section One: Carl Schmitt's Relationship to his Student, Leo Strauss

Integral to answering this question will be the settlement of Schmitt's relationship to his student, Leo Strauss. However, this present work will not endeavor to reconstruct the personal relationship between Schmitt and Strauss, so much as their theoretical relationship. Where does the thought of Carl Schmitt, the "Schmittian position," stand relative to that of Strauss?

Both Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss can, of course, be found on the same intellectual continuum – that which departs from the rationalist monism of Baruch Spinoza. Both Schmitt and Strauss affirm a sort of heroic salvation from the degraded yet hegemonic, (and in their eyes rationalistic) liberalism of their day. However, what truly defines Carl Schmitt's thought as

being more radical than that of Strauss is his decisionistic emphasis upon *polemos*, i.e. war. For Schmitt, it is not enough that a people freely create and affirm their own particular, cultural identity. It is not enough, subsequently, to merely exclude (passively) the possibility of “universal sympathetic understanding” between unique identities. Rather, for Schmitt, the true decisionism and particularity which goes into each unique identity implies, positively and actively, a constant state of potential battle and antagonism between peoples. This, moreover, is the very locus of value and meaning for human existence. “Whatever value human life has does not come from reason; it emerges from a state of war between those who are inspired by great mythical images to join battle, and depends upon a state of war that the people agree to participate in which is reflected in a certain myth.”²⁰⁴

That this Schmittian position truly amounts to a radicalization and a movement beyond the neo-conservatism of Leo Strauss will be the object of the remainder of this Chapter. As a corollary to this, it will be determined that the inner nature of Schmitt’s thought is thus unsuitable for consumption by the political Left, not because of Schmitt’s own racial and reactionary views, but rather because of the inner conceptual dynamics of his thought which can never be fully extracted.

The tensions and dualisms in Strauss call for a solution

We concluded the last chapter with the realization that Strauss’ political philosophy, because it precludes any stable comprehension of the other, is likewise unable to consistently affirm a doctrine of toleration for the other. Apart from failing to secure the grounds for such a stable conception of toleration, there is also an internal instability within Strauss’ own thought.

²⁰⁴ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 71.

Namely, this is the tension between tradition on the one hand, and free, existential decision on the other. In very many ways, Strauss solved the dualistic tension we saw in the “left-existentialism” of Sartre, but in so doing posited a no less problematic dualism himself. Leo Strauss rejected the Sartrean notion that universalism (specifically “universal sympathy”) could ever be compatible with existentialism (free, inner commitment). Clearly he opted for the latter to the exclusion of the former. At the very least, he made the former wholly dependent upon the latter. All universals are expelled from Strauss’ universe; for the personal, free decision of the existentialist mandates a nominalist universe lacking sufficient reason, and in a wholly parallel manner, the existentialist character of Strauss’ neo-orthodoxy (his fundamental affirmation of the omnipotent, free-willing God of the Bible) precludes any natures prior to the momentary will of this God. In this way, no bridge can span the gulf between distinct identities. For identities are not part of any one, universal substance; they are not mere modifications of any singular thing, nor are they subject to any universal criterion of goodness. Strauss thus purifies political existentialism of any residue universalistic notions and makes more consistent and pure his commitment to commitment itself.

And yet Strauss seems to strongly valorize heritage and tradition. Constantly, the “free, inner commitment” is cast as a commitment to one’s own heritage. We saw that, for Strauss, one’s own heritage is considered good, first and foremost because it is “one’s own.” The very essence of Strauss’ neo-conservatism is the wholly self-reflective manner in which he affirms this fact. He counsels us that we must pay heed to the lesson of History. We cannot forget that one, eternal truth – namely, that all is contingent and that all human creations (culture, religion,

nationhood, morality) are totally free inventions.²⁰⁵ Yet it is not illegitimate to take pride in “one’s own” creation (or collective creation) since, in Strauss’ universe, there is nothing else apart from this pure contingency and free creativity. There are no universals, no eternal forms of the good, and no natural necessities next to which our freely chosen, freely fashioned heritage can appear deficient. Thus for Strauss, the free, existential decision and commitment are wholly compatible with a veneration of heritage and culture – so long as one always recalls that this veneration of one’s culture as good is derived, first and foremost, because it is one’s own.

In this way we can see how Strauss replaces the “universalism-existentialism” complex of Sartre with an “existentialism-traditionalism” complex of his own. A given culture is not defined merely as relative to other cultural groupings within one universe. One’s culture is, rather, independently extant and independently affirmed in its own particularity. But it is worth asking if this new synthesis is not, itself, ultimately unstable? In the essay Relativism, specifically, we saw that Strauss admitted that we cannot simply “unlearn” the lessons of History and blindly continue within our given tradition as though it were somehow necessarily and objectively superior to some other tradition. Yet, claims Strauss, we can and should persist within our tradition fully aware of its utterly contingent and creative origins. “What man did in the past unconsciously and under the delusion of submitting to what is independent of his creative act, he must now do consciously.”²⁰⁶

But is this actually possible? Can individuals truly adhere to a tradition, a culture, or a heritage with full knowledge of the sheer contingency of said convention? Again, the Straussian answer seems to be something like “why not?” After all, everything is contingent. The whole

²⁰⁵ In fact, following his critique of Nietzsche discussed above, Strauss might even object to calling this an “eternal truth.”

²⁰⁶ Leo Strauss, *Relativism*, 25-26.

point of the essay Relativism is that we cannot feel bad about adhering to traditions which lack sufficient reason or justification simply because nothing at all in this world carries such necessity or justification. However, if this is the extent of Strauss' defense of tradition, it seems to be a very weak defense indeed.

First, it is not enough to merely have “no reason not to” abandon your tradition. The fact that your tradition is “no less” contingent and unnecessary than any other is not a sufficient incentive to maintain it. This is especially true, for instance, in the case of 19th and 20th century European Jewry who were murdered *en masse* in pogroms and gas chambers because of their tradition. In this case, assimilation into some dominant culture and tradition may very well have saved the lives of those Eastern European Jews (or their grandchildren) with whom Strauss so sympathized during his childhood in Kirchhain.²⁰⁷

Something else must be at work within Strauss' thought. We saw, in the transition from Chapter Three to Chapter Four, that Strauss in fact differs from Sartre in positing a wholly positive affirmation of a particular and unique Jewish identity. Whereas Sartre (in order to maintain his politically universalistic ends) maintains a negative and situational definition of Jewish identity, Strauss does the opposite. He valorizes the Jews for specific, positive qualities. “That [the Jewish people's] past is all the more heroic, one could say, since its chief characters are not the glitter and trappings of martial glory and cultural splendor, although it does not lack even these.²⁰⁸” So it does appear that there are concrete reasons for affirming a given tradition or heritage, for calling a culture “heroic.”

²⁰⁷ For an alternative (but still existentialist) argument against Jewish assimilation (to save oneself or one's grandchildren) in the face of genocide and atrocity see Emil Fackenheim *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University, 1970)

²⁰⁸ *Progress or Return?* (92)

Yet if we follow Strauss' line of argumentation in both the essays Relativism and Social Science and the Humanities, we seem to be told that the goodness of such positive qualities is something which is wholly *posterior* to the existential commitment to the community in which they inhere. Indeed, there are no universal, objective, and trans-cultural standards or criteria by which the characteristics of the Jewish people can be deemed good. "Martial glory," "intellectual achievements," "economic prosperity" are all given positive evaluation only from within a community, and thus from within a community of accepted norms, to which one must first commit oneself.²⁰⁹ This, then, is the apparently irresolvable tension within Strauss' thought. On the one hand is an emphasis upon the positive, concrete, specific qualities about which a culture can sincerely feel "legitimate pride." On the other is the existential statement that affirmation of these specific, positive qualities are always posterior to the free commitment to that culture as-such. But if the initial cultural commitment is truly free, then why are the positive qualities of that culture of any real import? Or, conversely, if these positive, concrete qualities do have real import, then can it really be said that affirmation of the culture in which they inhere is truly a free, criterion-less choice?

Schmitt's decisionistic solution

What Carl Schmitt adds to this dialectic is the following: He first recognizes along with Strauss (and contra Sartre) that an existentially genuine affirmation of one's identity entails that this identity is affirmed for concrete and positive reasons. One's own identity is not merely the formal result of negative relations to the other.

²⁰⁹ This is, incidentally, strikingly similar to the assessment of the thought processes of the anti-Semite in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 34. For the anti-Semite also conceives of virtues held by a Jew to be "Jewish virtues," such that the valor or charity of a Jewish person is of a qualitatively different kind than the valor or charity of a gentile.

Yet, (closely reflecting Sartre's position) Schmitt asserts that what necessarily sustains the group identity is a certain situational relationship to the "other." In Schmitt, this amounts to the real potential for violent conflict with and against the other. An existential identity cannot exist without both of these elements: First, the free commitment and creation of the specific and positive identity with all of its positive qualities; and second, the will to maintain said identity over and against existential foes.

So the conceptual movement can be summarized as the following:

Sartre: A culture is the product of situation, context, and relation to the "other." There is no permanent, inner identity or worth, no "metaphysical" identity, but only a social-relative one.

Strauss: Cultural identities are sui generis, unique, and positive things. They are comprehensible and commendable only from within the committed community. Neither external relations with other cultures nor historical/ natural "necessities" constitute identities or their worth.

Schmitt: Identities are always the product of relations, (potentially violent, existentially negating, friend/enemy relations) to some "other." However, what is primary in this relationship is one's own positive and concrete identity and not that of the other. This is summed up nicely in Tracy Strong's foreword to Schmitt's 1922 work, Political Theology: "Underlying the state is a community of people – necessarily not universal – a "we" that, as it defines itself necessarily in opposition to that which it is not, presupposes and is defined by conflict. It derives its definition from the

friend/enemy distinction. That distinction, however, is an us/them distinction, in which the “us” is of primary and necessary importance.²¹⁰”

In this way, we can see that Schmitt resolves a tension in Strauss’ thought, namely, between an affirmation of the specific, positive qualities of a tradition, and the free, existential nature of this commitment. For Schmitt, inherent in every fully realized identity is always, already the existential commitment. The fullest existential commitment (which we will shortly see is the commitment to a political identity or state) is one which potentially involves killing others to preserve one’s own (collective) identity. As such, the multifarious, particular antitheses of the social sphere only become fully realized as identities once they attain this intensity of the friend/enemy antithesis, or in other words, “the political.” “Every religious, moral, economic, ethical, or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy.²¹¹”

Yet, Schmitt asserts, the “other” does not constitute one’s own identity in a negative fashion. Rather, one’s own identity is the primary term in this relation. Whatever was the original genesis of one’s own group (whether this be shared economic interest, religious tradition, or social position) comes to constitute the primary term to which one commits oneself absolutely. In essence, both shared, specific, positive interests and existential commitment to one’s group over and against all others are the two necessary ingredients for the formation of all authentic identities.

The conceptual movement from Strauss’s position to that of Schmitt can be restated, in a final variation, this way: In Strauss the lingering tension consists of how to approach a persistent

²¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, xv.

²¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 37.

dualism. The dualism is that of veneration of a positive, particular identity as opposed to free, existential affirmation and creation. There is always this remaining question of whether one adds one's free, existential commitment to a particular, unique, positive identity which has for itself certain specific and positive qualities, or alternatively, if one adds the recognition of specific, positive qualities to an identity which is first, and without specific reason, freely affirmed.²¹² In the former situation, the particularity and goodness of a cultural identity is dominant, and the "freeness" of the existential affirmation is called into question. In the latter situation, the free, existential affirmation is fully dominant, and the actual goodness of a cultural identity's specific qualities seems to be an essentially empty and formal matter; these are simply named as being good "because they are ours." There is thus a constant tension in Strauss between particularity and volitional freedom – though both are elements of his existentialism.

In Schmitt the problem is at long last resolved. There is never any question of "adding" one's volitional affirmation to a particular identity. For there simply is no identity prior to existential commitment. The free, existential affirmation is always, already constitutive of any real, authentic identity. Schmitt thus resolves Strauss' problem of affirming both "positive, concrete qualities" of a given identity, and also the "free affirmation" of said identity. This is because all real, stable, and lasting identities (as opposed to mere transitory, unstable, societal

²¹² One might object, in hermeneutic form, that in fact we are always, already "thrown into" a community of belief or "thrown into" a given culture. There is never a free choice between cultural identities, but neither do we choose our culture for necessary, universalistic, rational reasons either. Rather, we already affirm our culture for some immanent reason, steeped within our pre-existent identity.

Whether or not this is a genuine solution to this problem goes beyond the scope of this present work. However, it is important to note that it does not in any way help to resolve the tension within Strauss' work. For Strauss does not allow himself the "second naiveté" of the hermeneutist or of a certain sort of existentialist. Rather, to pretend that we cannot be wholly critical of our own culture (even to the point of rejecting it completely) lacks a certain "intellectual probity." It is to ignore the lesson of History. For Strauss, this is therefore an illegitimate solution. Instead, we have to fully and self-reflectively face the fact that it is entirely *our* decision to accept or reject our culture, and indeed *our* decision as to how to interpret our culture. For Strauss, and this is vitally important for understanding his cultural and political philosophy, there is simply no escape from this free and moral choice – neither rational/ natural necessity nor hermeneutical "situatedness" can relieve us of this existential burden.

groupings and antitheses) are always, already committed to. That is precisely why they stably subsist as such.

However we should not be fooled. Schmitt's move is certainly not one of more delicate mediation and synthesis. He is not trying to "balance" the specificities of tradition/identity/culture on the one hand, and free decision/commitment on the other. Neither is Schmitt attempting to synthesize the Sartrean position of "external/relational" definition of identity with the Straussian position of purely internal, *sui generis* identity creation.

To the contrary, Schmitt is even purer of a decisionist than Strauss appears to be, and he places particular cultural, religious, economic, artistic, and moral identities as mere antecedents to the production of the one, truly existential sort of identity, the identity based wholly in existential conflict, agonism, and free decision: what Schmitt calls "the political."

...religious, moral, and other antitheses can intensify to political ones and can bring about the decisive friend-or-enemy constellation. If, in fact, this occurs, then the relevant antithesis is no longer purely religious, moral, or economic, but political. The sole remaining question then is always whether such a friend-and-enemy grouping is really at hand, regardless of which human motives are sufficiently strong to have brought it about.²¹³

The human groupings which come about because of economic, religious, or moral situations in fact are not identities in the fullest possible sense until they ascend to the point of

²¹³ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 36.

potentially violent, life-negating situations with regard to other constituted groups²¹⁴. At this point, the particular economic, religious, moral, and etc. reasons for the group as originally constituted almost seem to not matter for Schmitt. These become, to use an epistemological analogy, like Wittgenstein's ladder; they served the purpose of creating a political totality, as Schmitt would call it, a "fighting collectivity," a group which has assumed the proper "intensity" such that it would use violence against another group to maintain its own existence.²¹⁵ The original particular and common interests can now, more or less, be discarded. At the very least, these original, nascent identities or social "antitheses" assume a wholly secondary role to the newly created, authentically political identity.

The political can derive its energy from the most varied human endeavors, from the religious, economic, moral, and other antitheses. It does not describe its own substance, but only the **intensity** of an association or dissociation of human beings whose motives can be religious, national (in the ethnic or cultural sense), economic, or of another kind and can effect at different times different coalitions and separations. **The real friend-enemy grouping is existentially so strong and decisive that the nonpolitical antithesis, at precisely the moment at which it becomes political, pushes aside and subordinates its hitherto purely religious, purely economic, purely cultural criteria and motives to the conditions and conclusions of the political situation at hand.**²¹⁶

²¹⁴ In fact, my use of the word "identity" here is novel when it comes to Schmitt scholarship. I use it in order to more easily compare the philosophies of Schmitt, Strauss, and Sartre – for all three in fact do speak on this question of identity creation (though use varied vocabulary to do so). But it is particularly appropriate in the case of Schmitt to say that only those social groupings which are stable and robust in their existence can count as identities proper. This is because Schmitt's evaluations of societal entities are almost always strictly descriptive. That is to say, human groupings, political formations, social antitheses – these are all real inasmuch as they, in fact, have the power to persist in their actual existence. Hence we have Schmitt's famous statement in *Political Theology* (51) that "Royalism is no longer because there are no kings."

²¹⁵ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 28.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

And what marks this newly emergent political identity most of all is not some specific value or virtue, interest or characteristic, but rather the existential commitment to defend itself, potentially by killing other human beings. As such, the identity of the political may have particular social antecedents, but it is derived and defined purely existentially, by way of a concrete antagonism to the “other” and the ever-present potential for combat. What is vitally important in all this is that, should combat actually occur, this will not be the result of any of the particular, antecedent values of religion, morality, or economics. For the political “pushes aside and subordinates” the content and logic of these antecedent antitheses. Thus, the decision to kill is never, for Schmitt, deducible in such a manner. It is always the result of the free and unreserved commitment to the political identity itself along with the necessarily free and sovereign decision of that identity.

The essence of a weapon is that it is a means of physically killing human beings. Just as the term enemy, the word combat, too, is to be understood in its original existential sense...The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing.²¹⁷

On the other hand, it would be senseless to wage war for purely religious, purely moral, purely juristic, or purely economic motives.²¹⁸

For Schmitt, killing never reasonably takes place because of specific moral, practical, or hedonistic interests. This most radical negation of an enemy’s existence can only ever be, itself, the result of a free existential decision. Indeed the determination of just who is a friend and who is an enemy is never reducible to any other specific interest - religious, economic, or otherwise.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

This determination and this possibility of combat (or more specifically, the power to command others to die and kill) thus necessarily mark the political entity and the political entity alone.

In contrast to the various relatively independent endeavors of human thought and action, particularly the moral, aesthetic, and economic, the political has its own criteria which express themselves in a characteristic way. The political must therefore rest on its own ultimate distinctions, to which all action with a specifically political meaning can be traced...The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.²¹⁹

As if to overemphasize this point, Schmitt continues in explaining precisely how autonomous the realm of political decision and friend/ enemy distinction is relative to the other social antitheses. It is not due to the objective criteria of economics, aesthetics, and so on that one becomes your enemy. In an austere existentialist formulation, the enemy becomes such simply because they are “existentially other” than yourself. What’s more, the conclusion that this “otherness” is in fact the case can only ever be decided upon by oneself alone. No “third party” and no objective criterion can yield such a judgment.

The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

Only the actual participants can correctly recognize, understand, and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict. Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence.²²⁰

Shortly thereafter there is, once again, a repetition of this point that the denotation of someone as "enemy" is completely and pristinely independent of any influence from the social antitheses discussed above.

The friend and enemy concepts are to be understood in their concrete and existential sense, not as metaphors or symbols, not mixed and weakened by economic, moral, and other conceptions, least of all in a private-individualistic sense as a psychological expression of private emotions and tendencies. They are neither normative nor spiritual antitheses.²²¹

This definitive statement finally establishes, without a shred of ambiguity, the complete autonomy and transcendence of the political identity. It is not merely an intensification of other social antitheses (moral, aesthetic, economic), but it also transforms and goes beyond each of these. The economic or religious social grouping, once it becomes sufficiently intense so as to defend its very existence by way of the "ultimate means" of killing, becomes not simply economic or religious in nature, but rather political. Schmitt's point is that once this decisive transformation occurs, the old calculations and logic of the economic or religious groupings lose all relevance. Once the decision has been made to constitute a robust identity, one that is willing

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

at all costs to defend its own existence (and thus become political), a whole new set of values and priorities come into play and displace the antecedent ones. For to seriously commit, at the possible expense of human life itself, to the existential maintenance of one's own collective identity, entails that existence itself becomes the new, overriding logic and the new priority. What's more, it is a priority which, by its very nature, cannot be balanced or mediated alongside competing priorities or interests. Consequently, the demarcation of friends and enemies – those who are, and are not existentially alien so as to be an existential threat – becomes the essential world outlook.

A characteristic example of this is Schmitt's analysis of the Christ's imperative to "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27). For Schmitt, it is clear that this can only ever amount to a private, spiritual imperative. It is indeed a Christian command to love your enemy, but only when "enemy" is meant in the interpersonal sense of *inimicus*. Yet this imperative certainly cannot mean that one must love one's public, political enemy – one's *hostis*. Once Christianity becomes a properly political, world-crusading, state-founding entity, it thereby becomes a political identity. It necessarily cares most of all about its own existence and survival. It is here where all things change. Schmitt writes: "Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens or Turks. The enemy in the political sense need not be hated personally, and in the private sphere only does it make sense to love one's enemy, i.e., one's adversary."²²²

Schmitt's point is that whichever of the many nascent identities eventually makes the decisive move into the domain of the political; each and every one of these sheds their original

²²² *Ibid.*, 29.

natures and becomes, first and foremost, political actors. It matters not whether this be the Christian church or the revolutionary proletariat. In each instance of politicization the calculations are changed. Christians can fight to the death against their enemies; universalist-minded proletariat can identify class-enemies and seek their utter destruction. The religious imperative to love your enemy, or the universalist-moral imperative to embrace all humanity as one are subordinated to the prime political motive of existence itself.

As Schmitt also mentions, it may even be the case that political identities can reorient the original demarcations of friend and enemy.²²³ It may be to the advantage of the Catholic Church to conduct business with certain Muslim or Jewish communities, yet repress the doctrinally faithful Jesuit order. Similarly, it may be in the political interests of the Soviet Union's bureaucracy to support bourgeois liberals during the Spanish Civil War while violently opposing revolutionary socialists (especially Trotskyists) and mark them as "social fascists." In each case the original economic or spiritual constellation does not matter as much as existential survival over and against a chosen enemy. Schmitt's assertion is that once the political identity has been constituted, such shifts in alliances, such reshuffling of friend/ enemy demarcations are not accidental but actually inevitable – for the political is the sovereign realm which surpasses any of the strictures and criteria of the merely "relatively independent" social antitheses.

A religious community which wages wars against members of other religious communities or engages in other wars is already **more** than a religious community; it is a political entity. It is a political entity when it possesses, even if only negatively, the capacity of promoting that **decisive** step...The same holds true for...an industrial concern or a labor union. Also a class in the Marxian sense ceases to be something purely economic and becomes a political factor when it **reaches** this **decisive point**, for

²²³ Ibid., 27.

example, when Marxists approach the class struggle seriously and treat the class adversary as a real enemy and fight him either in the form of a war of state against state or in a civil war within a state. The real battle is then of necessity no longer fought according to economic laws...Should the proletariat succeed in seizing political power within a state, a proletarian state will thus have been created. This state is by no means less of a **political** power than a national state, a theocratic, mercantile, or soldier state, a civil service state, or some other type of political entity.²²⁴

To this end Schmitt also provides concrete, historical examples of this thesis – especially focusing upon the revolutionary struggles of communists and anarchists. The following excerpts are from The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy (1923), yet closely prefigure his conceptual argument made nearly one decade later in The Concept of the Political (1932):

Even if the Marxist dictatorship of the proletariat still retains the possibility of the rationalist dictatorship, all modern theories of direct action and the use of force rest more or less consciously on an irrationalist philosophy.

The rationalism that also incorporated world history into its construction certainly has its great dramatic moments; but its intensity ends in a fever... The new rationalism destroys itself dialectically, and before it stands a terrible negation. The kind of force to which it must resort cannot any longer be Fichte's naive schoolmasterly "educational dictatorship." The bourgeois is not to be educated, but eliminated. The struggle, a real and bloody struggle that arises here, requires a different chain of thought and a different intellectual constitution from the Hegelian construction, whose core always remained contemplative. The Hegelian construction remains the most important intellectual factor here, and almost every work by Lenin or Trotsky demonstrates how much energy and tension it can still generate. **But it has become only an intellectual instrument for what is really no longer a rationalist impulse.**²²⁵

²²⁴ Ibid., 37-38.

²²⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 64, 65.

Schmitt's point in this illustration is that while universalist reason may be the antecedent for the supposedly universalist politics of socialist revolution, the requirements of revolution (a political act which demands the demarcation of friends and enemies) ultimately destroys the original, idyllic, and abstract nature of universal reason itself. This, as Schmitt conveys it, occurs in three stages: There is first the notion that the most perfect morality and most perfect social constitution are the mirror of the most complete and perfect truths. In this optimistic, early rationalism of Condorcet and Fichte it is believed that mankind must simply be properly educated in order to bring about a new, more humane and just social order.

Yet when this inevitably fails, the dialectically-mediated reason of Hegel comes to the fore instead. The notion of progress and unity remains. However, progress is now seen as the result of bloody oppositions and contradictions. Individuals, nations, and classes are annihilated along the winding road of progress. Each rational subsumption follows a certain brute negation.

Finally, however, it is seen that the method of Hegel usurps the supposed ends of Hegel. The understanding that education and "schoolmasterly dictatorship" are not sufficient to emancipate mankind reveals how necessary the violent, brutal negations of Hegel really are. Just at this point, Schmitt asserts, the Hegelian-dialectical defense of terror no longer truly exists as a mere tool of reason, or the realization of an objective world spirit. Instead, terror is now used by properly political entities (worker's states and revolutionary vanguards) which care first for their own political survival. The sanction of Hegelian dialectics, used now to justify revolutionary violence, is transformed, in the final instance, into, "only an intellectual instrument for what is really no longer a rationalist impulse."

Finally, it has to be stated that the logic and constitution of Schmitt's conception of the political, and in particular the friend/enemy antithesis, is revealing of his underlying conceptual schema and pattern of argumentation. His argument appears to be that there are no practical, religious, juristic, or moral reasons for ever going to war, that is, for committing oneself to the physical destruction of other human lives. However, just because this is the case, any instance of "justified war" can only ever be justified in the political-existential sense alone. That is, war can only be justified when it amounts to a defense of one's own way of life.

To demand seriously of human beings that they kill others and be prepared to die themselves so that trade and industry may flourish for the survivors or that the purchasing power of grandchildren may grow is sinister and crazy...There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men in killing each other for this reason. If such physical destruction of human life is not motivated by an existential threat to one's own way of life, then it cannot be justified. Just as little can war be justified by ethical and juristic norms. If there really are enemies in the existential sense as meant here, then it is justified, but only politically, to repel and fight them physically.²²⁶

One senses immediately that there is something very remarkable about this formulation. At first, it appears that Schmitt is putting forth a just war theory which is far more strict and demanding than any other offered by theologians or political philosophers. Nothing can justify war apart from existential threat to one's own existence. Yet the austerity and formalism of this requirement is precisely what affords Schmitt his irrational and unaccountable conception of *jus belli*.

²²⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 49.

Recall that “the political” is always sovereign and always surpassing the antecedent social antitheses from which it originally grew. The political decision is not motivated by aesthetic, economic, moral, or religious claims, but only political claims. What’s more these political interests never refer to anything else – they are solely about the survival of “one’s own way of life” over and against one’s existential enemies. The question then becomes, if Schmitt claims that war is ever only justified for political reasons, and is never justified because of specific practical, spiritual, or hedonistic interests, then what exactly are his actual criteria for going to war? If the specificities of “one’s way of life” are always subordinate to the political disposition towards friends and enemies²²⁷, and wars are justifiably fought only to defend one’s own way of life – then it seems that a circular pattern has emerged. Wars are fought against political enemies for their own sake.

It seems that Schmitt is claiming that “There is no good reason to ever go to war, so therefore all wars must be fought for no good reason.” Yet, in an almost sinister way, this is said in a normative tone! Schmitt finds it monstrous (or at least absurd) to fight over resources, land, spiritual ideals, or economic freedom. Yet he seems to find it perfectly unproblematic, perhaps even laudable, to fight and to kill one’s enemy simply because (for no specific reason) you have decided to mark him as such. This decision does, and it seems that Schmitt is saying should, occur without recourse to any additional legitimation principle. “When the decisive moment arrives, the legitimating foreground vanishes like an empty phantom.”²²⁸,

Schmitt’s political theology transcends tradition

²²⁷ Schmitt, in *The Concept of the Political* (30), plainly states that the state (i.e. the political order) always “encompasses and relativizes” all domestic, political antitheses.

²²⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 81.

What Schmitt's stance on war illuminates is precisely the very heart of his political theology. The decision of the political is free and sovereign, and therefore implies a sovereign who is volitionally free. "The juridic formulas of the omnipotence of the state are, in fact, only superficial secularizations of theological formulas of the omnipotence of God."²²⁹ Thus free political decision necessitates the existence of a mortal god, nothing less.

Schmitt's more consistent decisionism (relative to Strauss) means that, though he frequently cites the struggles and values of the past in order to embellish his own arguments, (especially drawing upon the figures of the counter-Enlightenment, the Inquisition, and counterrevolutionary monarchists of the 18th century), he is not nearly as genuinely concerned with tradition as is Strauss. This is especially revealed in Schmitt's Weimar-era work, Political Theology (1922).

Speaking on the conservative Restoration following the French Revolution, Schmitt touches on the twin topics of sentimentalism and traditionalism. He admits that one of his favored counterrevolutionary Catholic theorists, Vicomte Louis Gabriel Bonald, "showed himself to be surprisingly German," in that the traditionalist school he founded was typically accused by theologians of being wholly infected by the *sentimentalisme allemand*.

Nonetheless, in defending the conservative political legacy of Bonald, Schmitt asserts that his traditionalism was not of the same kind as "Schelling's philosophy of nature" or "Adam Müller's mixture of opposites" or even "Hegel's belief in history." This latter set of philosophies offer a romantic conception of tradition and emphasize a constant and indeterminate play of opposites, a fuzzy synthesis or tapestry of the dissimilar, or at the very least a rejection of

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

unmediated, unsynthesized truth. Schmitt plainly rejects this pattern of thinking as robbing the world of all real distinctions and disjunctions, and thus of robbing men of all genuine volition. “In the final analysis, extreme traditionalism actually meant an irrational rejection of every intellectually conscious decision.²³⁰”

Individuals and nations infected with this sentimental sort of traditionalism are, in effect, paralyzed. The result is ultimately “a complete negation of natural reason and...an absolute moral passivity that would have considered becoming active altogether evil.²³¹” Yet, again, Schmitt stresses that the active Catholic counterrevolutionaries he draws upon (Bonald, Juan Donoso Cortés, and Comte Joseph Marie de Maistre) are of an entirely different breed.

Their traditionalism and their use of theology were not meant to bring about a pluralistic society. The point was not to resurrect the medieval feudal society of indirect powers, of shared authority between lords, kings, and the Church. Less was their design for a sort of mediation or amelioration of reason with divine revelation in some new, but ultimately paralyzing synthesis. Instead, what theology gave these Catholic counterrevolutionaries, and in turn gave Schmitt himself, was the ability to make disjunctions – particularly moral disjunctions. While Schelling’s philosophy of nature poses “indifference points” and “mere dialectical negations” within history, Bonald sees only an either/or decision.²³² Quoting Bonald, Schmitt writes, “I find myself constantly between two abysses, I walk always between being and nothingness.” Schmitt continues, “Such moral disjunctions represent contrasts between good and evil, God and the

²³⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 54.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

²³² *Ibid.*, 55.

devil; between them an either/or exists in the sense of a life-and-death struggle that does not recognize a synthesis and a ‘higher third.’²³³”

Thus what differentiates Schmitt (along with these Catholic counterrevolutionaries) from the sentimentalists and romantic traditionalists is a focus upon strictly unmediated disjunctions. Perhaps more interestingly, what distinguishes Schmitt and his forebears from Leo Strauss is the very nature of these disjunctions. We can recall that for Strauss, society is upheld by a sort of “vital tension” constantly held between two un-synthesizable, yet individually valid polarities. In particular, for Strauss, these polarities consist of “classical reasoning” on the one hand and “biblical revelation” on the other. Like Schmitt, Strauss denies that these opposites can or even should be mediated or subsumed into some higher, third term.

However, as we have said, Strauss proposes that this duality of individually valid opposites must remain in continuous tension.²³⁴ It is quite important to note that, by contrast, for Schmitt the duality is not between two individually valid terms (reason and revelation), but rather it is a wholly moral disjunction (God and the devil). There is no sense in Schmitt, as there is in Strauss, that the vital tension is somehow good in itself, that it must be maintained against the illicit “overextension” of one of its terms. Quite the opposite, for both Schmitt and his Catholic counterrevolutionary forerunners, the important part of the “either/or decision” is the “decision” itself! What’s more, it is precisely here where the political-theological notion of the sovereign comes into play.

²³³ Ibid., 55.

²³⁴ Of course, we saw at the end of Chapter Four that Strauss in effect “stacks the deck” in favor of non-rational, Biblical revelation to the actual exclusion of reason. However, this is not his explicit statement, and what I refer to here is merely Strauss’ “exoteric” philosophy – and not its ultimate, logical consequences.

De Maistre spoke with particular fondness of sovereignty, which essentially meant decision. To him the relevance of the state rested on the fact that it provided a decision, the relevance of the Church on its rendering the last decision that could not be appealed. Infallibility was for him the essence of the decision that cannot be appealed, and the infallibility of the spiritual order was of the same nature as the sovereignty of the state order.²³⁵

What matters is not the vital and continuing tension between God and the devil. What matters is the clear disjunction between the two, and the subsequent and infallible decision for God and against the devil. It is only a unitary being, free of normative strictures which can recognize such a radical disjunction, and make such a radically free decision.

It should be clear, therefore, that Schmitt's political theology is not traditionalist in the sense of being sentimentalist, that is, of hearkening back to some idealized and bygone Catholic tradition. As such, Schmitt does not share the same conceptual problem that plagues Strauss, namely, of having to balance the particularities of a venerated cultural-religious heritage alongside the free invention and commitment of one's identity. Rather, Schmitt's traditionalism falls within the lineage of the Catholic counterrevolutionaries who wished to employ the theological concepts of the Catholic Church (most especially that of divine infallibility) and to transfer these unto the secular realm so as to combat the rationalism, anarchism, and social leveling of the coming revolution. The end-product of political theology is not a post-critical, neo-conservative return to one or another heritage; it is, instead, the imbuing of the state leader with the secular equivalent of divine infallibility. The sovereign becomes as a mortal god, he

²³⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 55.

who decides freely upon the exception. What's more, as we saw above, the most paradigmatic example of this exception is that of going to war against a chosen enemy.

But if Schmitt's political theology involves a secularization of theological principles, and their subsequent application to the political realm, one last and very important question still remains: Exactly which theological tradition does Schmitt hope to utilize for his political ends? Fortunately, Schmitt is entirely open and unambiguous on this point. Schmitt himself is of Catholic origin, and as explicated above, much of his political and theological inspiration comes from the Catholic counterrevolutionaries of the Restoration and post-Restoration periods. Indeed, a defense of the doctrine of papal infallibility, initially proposed by Jean Bodin, and then de Maistre, was later prominently taken up by Schmitt in his 1923 work, Roman Catholicism and Political Form, and reworked into a defense of the political infallibility of the state sovereign.²³⁶

Nonetheless, it is the underlying metaphysics of Protestant theology which ultimately marks Schmitt's political thought. This should not be surprising as even those Catholic counterrevolutionaries just cited tended to be doctrinally heterodox and opt instead for Lutheran or even Calvinist conceptions of original sin²³⁷, salvation, and most importantly, divine omnipotence. It was the Calvinist conception of God's *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* which were of political use for Europe's radical conservatives of both the 18th and 20th centuries.

²³⁶ Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt and the Jews*, 95 – 96.

²³⁷ From *Political Theology* (57): "But Donoso Cortés radicalized this polemically into a doctrine of the absolute sinfulness and depravity of human nature. The dogma of Original Sin promulgated by the Council of Trent is not radical in any simple way. In contrast to the Lutheran understanding, the dogma asserts not absolute worthlessness but only distortion, opacity, or injury and leaves open the possibility of natural good. Abbé Gaduel, who criticized Donoso Cortés from the standpoint of dogma, was therefore right when he voiced misgivings about his exaggeration of the natural evil and unworthiness of man. Yet it was certainly not right to have overlooked the fact that for Donoso Cortés this was a religious and political decision of colossal actuality, and not just the elaboration of dogma."

(More accurately, it was an exaggeration of the Calvinist view which was of political use.) What's more it was the Calvinist conception of God that Schmitt found at the heart of his beloved Hobbes' political philosophy. Schmitt states that "...the God of Calvinism is the leviathan of Hobbes, an omnipotence that is unchecked by law, justice, or conscience."²³⁸

Specifically, Calvinist theology posits the unknowable nature of God's absolute nature (*potentia absoluta*) precisely because of God's divine omnipotence. In other words, God's omnipotence is unlimited such that it is not even constrained by His own nature. God's faculty to perform providential acts (*potentia ordinata*) is thus perfectly free, and additionally, is the only way through which we can come to know God – yet solely as He is right now, expressing Himself this moment through the constant, volitional creation of the world, or else through direct revelation. All of this, of course, runs contrary to traditional Catholic doctrine and the Catholic natural law tradition which does emphasize God's unchanging, absolute nature and the indelible nature of God's created universe through which, partly by use of our natural reason, we can come to perceive and positively know God's *potentia absoluta*.

Again, this is further evidence that the political tradition from which Schmitt emerges is not primarily concerned with the veneration of a certain orthodoxy, but rather the simple use of theological concepts for conservative and authoritarian political ends. The Calvinist conception of a volitional God is applied to the state sovereign precisely because it is this theological doctrine which has the power to imbue said sovereign with real political potency.

Meanwhile, in his political opponents, Schmitt sees the secularization of far inferior theological principles. This is especially evident in his critique of constitutional liberalism.

²³⁸ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 32.

The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world. This theology and metaphysics rejected not only the transgression of the laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign's direct intervention in a valid legal order.²³⁹

Liberalism, in Schmitt's view, is no less the product of a secularized theology than is his own politics. Yet the theological principles of deism are inferior in that their banishment of God from the world precludes the volitional and free action of God to affect the world. When this is applied to the sovereign, the political effects are devastating. To this end, Schmitt frequently makes reference to the ultimately unstable "July Monarchy" of France, the liberal constitutional monarchy which followed the *Trois Glorieuses* of 1830. "The insecurity and immaturity of the liberal bourgeoisie of the July Monarchy can be recognized everywhere. Its liberal constitutionalism attempted to paralyze the king through parliament but permitted him to remain on the throne, an inconsistency committed by deism when it excluded God from the world but held onto his existence..."²⁴⁰

Just as with deism in which the world proceeds automatically, as if it were a grand mechanism, apart from the grace, providence, or intervention of God, so does the constitutional legal state operate automatically and mechanistically independent of any sovereign political will. The application of laws to specific cases is here something wholly automatic. It is, to quote Condorcet, merely the act "of pronouncing a syllogism in which the law is the major premise; a

²³⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36–37.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

more or less general fact is the minor premise; and the conclusion is the application of the law.
241,,

No actual “decision” was any longer possible – for this would appear irrational and extralegal. Law became entirely formulaic. It is for this reason that Schmitt energetically opposes the theology of deism with that of a decisionistic Calvinism – not because the latter is more cosmologically accurate, or adheres closer to revealed doctrine, or even because it springs from the tradition of Schmitt’s venerated ancestors (it did not), but because the latter can more adequately support a truly political form of state. Schmitt’s political conservatism consists in the idea that the volitional decision upon the exception (as opposed to the merely automatic application of laws) is the very essence of the political which must be preserved. Theology is merely the handmaiden of this conservatism. “The rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form. Conservative authors of the counterrevolution who were theists could thus attempt to support the personal sovereignty of the monarch ideologically, with the aid of analogies from a theistic theology.”^{242,,}

Yet as mentioned, the conservative opposition to rationalist liberalism (which after all, for Schmitt, is not in any way objective or neutral but merely a secularization of a deistic form of theology) had to take the form of the embrace of an altogether different theology. This theology had to stress, above all else, the *potentia ordinata* of God, and the analogous *liberum arbitrium*, the free will and decision, of the sovereign. Not only this, but what also had to be established was the normative goodness of the free, sovereign decision. All of this was summoned to oppose, not merely the politics, but also the underlying metaphysics of his liberal opponents.

²⁴¹ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 44.

²⁴² Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 37.

Speaking on Hans Kelsen's liberalism, Schmitt writes: "At the foundation of his [Kelsen's] identification of state and legal order rests a metaphysics that identifies the lawfulness of nature and normative lawfulness. This pattern of thinking is characteristic of the natural sciences. It is based on the rejection of all 'arbitrariness,' and attempts to banish from the realm of the human mind every exception."²⁴³

Liberal metaphysics contains, from Schmitt's view, not one but two theological flaws. First, there is the insufficient respect paid to the free will of God. Related to this, however, is an over-admiration for God's creation. The positive, created order of nature is imbued with not only a scientific, but also a "normative lawfulness" according to the liberal. Again, a peculiarly radicalized form of Protestantism is adopted by Schmitt to oppose this supposed flaw. That is, the utter fallenness of nature is affirmed over and above either the neutral-mechanical view of deism, or the largely positive view held by the Catholic natural law tradition. Nature cannot be inherently good or self-subsisting, but instead requires the constant willful creation and re-creation by a personal God. It is from God, and not nature, that both existence and goodness originate. Analogously, it is from the state sovereign, and not the existing legal order, from which a state's existence and also the goodness of its laws are constantly derived. "The prince develops all the inherent characteristics of the state by a sort of continual creation."²⁴⁴

It should thus be clear that Schmitt's denial of the natural law tradition does not entail that he advocates anarchy and the absence of hierarchical organization or law. Schmitt is not opposed to there being a positive legal order. Quite the opposite; Schmitt values obedience and

²⁴³ Ibid., 41.

²⁴⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46 – 47.

Schmitt is here quoting French theorist Frédéric Atger's *Essai sur l'histoire des doctrines du contrat social* (1906), 136. The quote is interesting because it finds even in the early rationalist spirit of Descartes a conception of a voluntaristic God.

order above nearly everything else. It is rather his point that, as per Calvinist theology, order and law must always be imposed freely by a sovereign. They must be created *ex nihilo* as it were.

“In the cited remarks of de Maistre we can also see a reduction of the state to the moment of the decision, to a pure decision not based on reason and discussion and not justifying itself, that is, to an absolute decision **created out of nothingness**.²⁴⁵”

The order of society, like the order of nature, cannot be deduced (in a normative fashion) from society or nature itself. Laws are always posterior to a given created nature or state. The forms of legitimacy cannot, likewise, arise from within a state. That would amount to a circular contradiction whereby the created order justifies itself and its own creation normatively. To the contrary, legitimacy always demands a sovereign decision by the one who exists within but also above the state. Therefore, this sovereign “... decisionism is essentially dictatorship, not legitimacy.”²⁴⁶

Since sovereignty defines the borders and boundaries between state and anarchy, the sovereign-legal order cannot be deduced from *within* the normative or positive-legalistic strictures of the state itself. That is why a sovereign is needed – in some cases to found a state and in other cases to maintain or save it. These relate to Schmitt’s central conceptions of “the exception” and “the state of emergency” in politics, and depend on the essentially “miraculous” abilities of the sovereign as he who can decide upon the exception, and intervene in the political, transcending all established legal norms whenever he deems necessary. “The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.”²⁴⁷

Section Two: Carl Schmitt’s Concrete Politics

²⁴⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 66.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

This work began with a speculative examination on Spinoza's ideal state. It may sound perverse to perform the same exercise for Carl Schmitt, especially because he so consistently describes himself as a "realist." Schmitt constantly bemoans the sort of reactionary who longs for bygone days of kings and queens as simply unrealistic. Yet he criticizes, equally, the present-day utopians and political "visionaries" for their idealized political projects, and moralistic defenses of the "best" form of state.

For Schmitt, "Royalism is no longer because there are no kings," and "...the democratic notion of legitimacy has replaced the monarchical."²⁴⁸ These are simply the facts of the present-day situation. This is not pronounced in a normative tone, and it is not derived from an idealized notion of man, or freedom, or of social relations. The *de facto* absence of persons who would assume the throne against or despite popular will is the whole justification for monarchy no longer being a viable option.

Thus, to speak of Carl Schmitt's "ideal state" appears to run counter to Schmitt's own political thought. His work is always meant to be, first, a sober assessment of the present conditions and, second, itself a political act – a decisionistic statement on the correct way forward from the present, clearly understood situation. "The theoretician of the political must be a political theoretician. A treatise about the political can only be – of this conclusion Schmitt is convinced – a political treatise, determined by enmity and exposing itself to enmity."²⁴⁹ Political works, for Schmitt, are always an act of *polemos*, grounded in real-life struggles, and never mere idle speculation or idealistic abstraction.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 51.

²⁴⁹ Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The hidden dialogues*, 4.

Yet, perhaps for just this reason, attempting to delineate exactly what form of state would emanate from Schmitt's political theology is so very appropriate. This sort of thought experiment holds Carl Schmitt to account for the concrete political order which is naturally implied by his political-theological statements. It draws our attention out of the clouds of theological abstraction, and forces us to focus upon the political realities of Schmitt's always political theology. This is important; for though Carl Schmitt's politics seem unambiguous enough (namely, his membership in the Nazi party, his postwar resistance to all "de-Nazification" efforts, his active involvement in the construction of the Third Reich's racial laws), contemporary political theorists and philosophers who wish to appropriate elements of Schmitt's philosophy insist upon muddying the waters. Most popular, for instance, are claims that Schmitt sincerely wished to save the Weimar Republic as a liberal democratic state in the 1920's.²⁵⁰ Along similar lines are claims that during the Nazi period, Schmitt became disillusioned, and that he even intended his 1938 work, Leviathan as a sort of act of resistance to the National Socialists (this despite it being rife with anti-Semitic themes). To this end, Tracy Strong, in the foreword to the English edition of Political Theology, even prominently recalls Schmitt's self-pitying portrayal of himself as Benito Cereno, a character in a Melville novel of the same name: "The title character in *Benito Cereno* is the captain of a slave ship that has been taken over by the African slaves. The owner of the slaves and most of the white crew have been killed, although Don Benito is left alive and forced by the slaves' leader, Babo, to play the role of captain so as not to arouse suspicion from other ships."²⁵¹

Whether Schmitt actually saw himself as having been "taken hostage" during the Nazi regime is, of course, entirely beside the point. The only thing of interest is whether the elements

²⁵⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, xli.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

of his political theology, his secularization of a decisionist conception of God, and the transference of this to a secular politics, indeed necessarily results in the horrors of Nazi genocide, or alternatively, if this is merely an accident of history and an entirely different political order can emanate from Schmitt's favored theology.

Anti-Liberalism

Perhaps the least controversial assertion one could make regarding Schmitt's politics is his unequivocal opposition to contemporary liberalism. As discussed above, the sort of political theology adopted by Schmitt, one which accepts a variation of Calvinist metaphysics, runs counter to the supposedly "deistic" metaphysics which Schmitt claims underlies classical liberalism. To banish God from the world, to banish his interventions, revelations, and miracles is to banish the sovereign decision from the workings of the state; it is to totally undermine the political.

The concrete political effect of such deism, and thus of liberalism, is the total inability to make definite decisions. "Liberalism, with its contradictions and compromises, existed for Donoso Cortés only in that short interim period in which it was possible to answer the question "Christ or Barabbas?" with a proposal to adjourn or appoint a commission of investigation. Such as position was not accidental but was based on liberal metaphysics.²⁵²"

Continuing his discussion on Cortés, Schmitt clearly describes what the alternative to liberalism, in fact, is – dictatorship.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 62.

Donoso Cortés considered continuous discussion a method of circumventing responsibility and of ascribing to freedom of speech and of the press an excessive importance that in the final analysis permits the decision to be evaded. Just as liberalism discusses and negotiates every political detail, so it also wants to dissolve metaphysical truth in a discussion. The essence of liberalism is negotiation, a cautious half measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion.

Dictatorship is the opposite of discussion.²⁵³

The indecisiveness of liberalism is, at once, the effect of a degraded metaphysics and theology, and at the same time it has very specific effects when it comes to the nature and distribution of political power. This can most easily be seen by way of examining the two aspects of liberalism which Schmitt finds most fundamental to its essence, and most problematic. These are “individualism” and “normativism.”

Since everyone can choose for himself, then no one can choose for another. No prince or magistrate has the right to impose his private, personal will upon the state. All “political decision” must therefore be entirely impersonal and mechanical. It must take the form, in other words, of an absolute imperative. Yet how to decide upon the specific application of such a universal rule? This is a dilemma which cannot forever be avoided. It seems that Schmitt’s critique of liberalism, though, is that it necessarily tries to do just that. For the concrete and specific application of a rule always requires one or another decision by an actual human being. However, this genuine, authentic decision – this personalistic, political decision – is something which is completely incompatible with the basic, impersonal tenets of liberalism. Thus, liberalism always finds itself in a holding pattern, forever forestalling the final decision via

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 63.

endless debates and committees. Consequently, liberalism is never, itself, a political program but always at most a critique of some already extant, genuinely political position.

The negation of the political, which is inherent in every consistent individualism, leads necessarily to a political practice of distrust toward all conceivable political forces and forms of state and government, but never produces on its own a positive theory of state, government, and politics. As a result, there exists a liberal policy in the form of a political antithesis against state, church, or other institutions which restrict individual freedom. There exists a liberal policy of trade, church, and education, but absolutely no liberal politics, only a liberal critique of politics.²⁵⁴

It is vitally important to understand what Schmitt thinks is behind this depoliticizing force of liberalism. As mentioned, it is grounded in the basic idea of individualism, which entails that all laws be the product not of a particular, impassioned, interested person, but rather of all citizens together. Of course, for this to be the case, laws must be normatively derived in the sense of being the product of reason. For only reason can unite the plurality of citizens while the passions are always a concrete, individualistic, and often incommensurable affair.

The universal criterion of the law is deduced from the fact that law (in contrast to will or the command of a concrete person) is only reason, not desire, and that it has no *passions*, whereas a concrete person 'is moved by a variety of particular passions.' In many different versions, but always with the essential characteristic of the 'universal,' this concept of legislation has become the foundation of constitutional theory.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 70.

²⁵⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 42.

Schmitt's position is unambiguous. What destroys the political is the central liberal notion that legitimacy is derived from universality (and thus reason) as opposed to particular decree (and thus the passions). "The crucial distinction always remains whether the law is a general rational principle or a measure, a concrete decree, an order."²⁵⁶ Whereas "Emergency law was no law at all for Kant" Schmitt counters instead that, "All law is "situational law."²⁵⁷ All law involves the concrete application of a rule to specific circumstances, and thus the concrete, singular decision by a sovereign. The pluralism and permissiveness of liberal parliamentarism presupposes the mediation of a multiplicity of persons and interests via the impersonal normativism of universal reason (or at the very least, generally accepted and mechanically applied rules). "To an absolutist it is obvious 'that Law is not Counsel but Command,' essentially authority and not, as in the rationalist conception...truth and justice: *Auctoritas, non Veritas facit Legem* ('Authority, not truth, makes the law')."²⁵⁸

Concretely, Schmitt's affirmation of command and legitimation through personal authority (as opposed to universal reason) entails a political opposition to the supremacy of the discussing parliament over the active executive. It entails, in other words, an overturning of a key legacy of the French revolution. "The rationalism of the French Enlightenment emphasized the legislative at the expense of the executive, and it found a potent formula of the executive in the constitution of 5 Fructidor III (Title IX, 275): 'No armed force can deliberate.'²⁵⁹" What had to be restored, against liberal demands, was a true unity of power, and this could only mean a singular power which is at once legislative, executive, and armed. Yet the infallibility, unity, and

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁵⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 13–14.

²⁵⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 43.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 45.

personal nature of such a sovereign imply the negation of other liberal mechanisms as well.

Such a sovereign cannot, for instance, be substantially limited by a written constitution. Hence Schmitt recalls Bolingbroke's distinction between "Government by constitution" and "Government by will."²⁶⁰ That is, the decisive will of the sovereign can necessarily not be limited by any inviolable legal order which precedes it. In Political Theology, published the previous year, Schmitt proclaimed that "All tendencies of modern constitutional development point toward eliminating the sovereign in this sense."²⁶¹ For Kelsen and the neo-Kantian, Liberal Jurists: "The decisive argument, the one that is repeated and advanced against every intellectual opponent, remains the same: The basis for the validity of a norm can only be a norm; in juristic terms the state is therefore identical with its constitution, with the uniform basic norm."²⁶²

But again, this degraded non-politics of waiting and endless discussion emanates from these twin liberal principles of "individualism" and "normativism." The only complete remedy, therefore, is a political order which is illiberal in the sense of not only denying the liberal mechanisms of constitution and parliament, but also of fully denying these underlying core principles. The political decision is only possible if the *summum bonum* is not conceived as being the ultimate worth of each, individual human being. The authentic decision, since political, must always be made by one political entity over and against another. The normative universalism of liberalism is at odds with this notion; but so is the principle of individualism itself. For the decision, to be a genuine decision with real import, cannot be in the hands of an absolute plurality of different individuals with their variable particular interests, motives, proclivities, and allegiances. By the very nature of the sovereign decision, it cannot be universal,

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 43.

²⁶¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 7.

²⁶² Ibid., 19.

but rather singular; it cannot be plural but only unitary. Schmitt's central political concept thus precludes a liberal form of state based first in the individual rights and interests of every person.

None of this should be terribly surprising. However, what should be illuminating is the way in which Schmitt argues against liberal individualism (and all that this entails). It seems that Schmitt in fact denies that liberal regimes actually operate according to the principle of the "universal human being." Genuinely political forces persist, even thrive within the private, interested spheres of civil life. These, moreover, do not disappear inside the halls of parliament.

In the domain of the political, people do not face each other as abstractions, but as politically interested and politically determined persons, as citizens, governors or governed, politically allied or opponents – in any case, therefore, in political categories. In the sphere of the political, one cannot abstract out what is political, leaving only universal human equality; the same applies in the realm of economics, where people are not conceived as such, but as producers, consumers, and so forth, that is, in specifically economic categories.²⁶³

The pronouncement of human equality, a necessary correlate to liberal individualism, merely masks the actual, political situation within any given state. The pronouncements of a parliament or a congress, therefore, do not in fact spring from any genuinely universal reason. Instead, the supposition that this is the case actually hides the truly political and egoistic interests which give rise to legislative outcomes. The same can be said of the norms established by a written constitution.

²⁶³ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 11.

The parties (which according to the text of the written constitution officially do not exist) do not face each other today discussing opinions, but as social or economic power-groups calculating their mutual interests and opportunities for power, and they actually agree compromises and coalitions on this basis. The masses are won over through a propaganda apparatus whose maximum effect relies on an appeal to immediate interests and passions. Argument in the real sense that is characteristic for genuine discussion ceases. In its place there appears a conscious reckoning of interests and chances for power in the parties' negotiations...²⁶⁴

Of course, to admit any of this is to deny the core principle of liberalism – namely, that the brute assertion of one's power is evil, the “way of the beasts” as Locke puts it.²⁶⁵ It is, moreover, to deny that discussion is a true remedy for this evil; that public discourse can guide humanity out of a self-destructive, total war of all against all and onto a path of progress. For public discussion and transparency are, in the liberal formulation, equated with public reason itself.²⁶⁶

And yet this is precisely what Schmitt wants to oppose. True to his form, he does not explicitly critique discussion or public reason as being normatively bad. Instead, Schmitt merely points out that these no longer exist, at least in any robust sense. “The situation of parliamentarism is critical today because the development of modern mass democracy has made argumentative public discussion an empty formality.²⁶⁷” Schmitt pronounces the liberal god dead because nobody believes in him anymore.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 49., Quoting Locke's “*Second Treatise*” in *Two Treatises*, sect. 172.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 49.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 6.

The reality of parliamentary and party political life and public convictions are today far removed from such beliefs. Great political and economic decisions on which the fate of mankind rests no longer result today (if they ever did) from balancing opinions in public debate and counterdebate. Such decisions are no longer the outcome of parliamentary debate.²⁶⁸

Disbelief in genuine, rational, parliamentary debate, in turn dissolves the other liberal beliefs in freedoms of communication, the press, and assembly. For the latter freedoms, in liberal doctrine, are useful inasmuch as they can enlighten a citizenry, such that it will have an effect upon the representative bodies of government. Yet if government does not operate according to rational deliberation, then the very point of the liberal freedoms of press and communication is largely abolished.

There are certainly not many people today who want to renounce the old liberal freedoms, particularly freedom of speech and the press. But on the European continent there are not many more who believe that these freedoms still exist where they could actually endanger the real holders of power. And the smallest number still believe that just laws and the right politics can be achieved through newspaper articles, speeches at demonstrations, and parliamentary debates. But that is the very belief in parliament.²⁶⁹

We can see, therefore, that Schmitt's opposition to constitutionalism, the separation of governmental powers, the supremacy of a legislative "discussing" body over the executive, and the traditional liberal freedoms of speech and press emerge from two distinct but related sources. First, each of these liberal mechanisms are meant to repress the emergence of a truly personal,

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

decisionistic sovereign, and thus to repress the political as such. Secondly, at least contemporarily, Schmitt finds the liberal claims of universalism and neutrality to be simply farcical. They do not so much destroy the political outright as they do limit its public, accountable appearance. What remains within the contemporary liberal state are robustly political interests operating within the private sphere. The supposedly deliberative legislative bodies only christen the realized interests of these shadowy entities with the good name of universal legality and legitimacy. What motivates Schmitt's real opposition to liberalism is not so much the threat of liberalism itself, which Schmitt sees as merely a hollow, self-destructing shell. What motivates Schmitt's anti-liberalism is in fact the very powerful and pernicious powers which he sees as hiding behind the neutral facade provided by liberal discourse.

Abolition of the "hidden"

Whenever the depoliticalizations of liberalism manifest themselves, this is always, really, a political act. What's more it is invariably, in Schmitt's view, a political act which merely uses the jargon and institutions of individualistic liberalism, but which in fact conceals an altogether different power or interest.

Like any other significant human movement liberalism too, as a historical force, has failed to elude the political. Its neutralizations and depoliticalizations (of education, the economy, etc.) are, to be sure, of political significance. Liberals of all countries have engaged in politics just as other parties and have in the most different ways coalesced with nonliberal elements and ideas.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 69.

Schmitt famously states in The Concept of the Political that, “The *protego ergo obligo* is the *cogito ergo sum* of the state.²⁷¹” The public accountability and stewardship of the sovereign is what entails his right to obedience from the people.²⁷² Yet the mechanisms of liberal parliamentarism negate this essential prerequisite of the state. Indeed, it seems to be Schmitt’s consistent thesis that secret political forces use liberalism in order to negate the integrity of the state. For these liberal mechanisms and ideals, as explicated above, do not so much destroy the political, but allow it to fester, concealed from public attention, in the unaccountable, non-transparent private sphere.

This is especially relevant when it comes to the political decision to go to war. Because of the underlying ideology of liberalism, liberal states are loath to publically declare war for concrete, existential, self-interested reasons. That sort of passionate, personal decision to engage in mortal battle for openly political reasons smacks too much of the Calvinist decisionism of which deistic liberalism has sought to rid itself. There is invariably, whether one consults the speeches of a Woodrow Wilson, the charter of the League of Nations, or the press releases from the George W. Bush Whitehouse, a defense of war only upon universalist-humanitarian grounds – that is, the defense of liberty, the spread of democracy and civilization, the overturning of tyranny, the protection of human rights, and so on. Yet, Schmitt protests:

Humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy, at least not on this planet...That wars are waged in the name of humanity is not a contradiction of this

²⁷¹ Ibid., 52.

²⁷² We shall see in the next sections that this idea of “public accountability” will not entail for Schmitt the idea of democratic recall from office, or any limitation of sovereign power by the people. The notion here means, more closely, the identity of “publicity” of authority with “legitimacy” of authority. One can only command obedience if one is a public commander.

simple truth; quite the contrary, it has an especially intensive political meaning. When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy.

The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism.²⁷³

The pattern of Schmitt's argument now reveals itself more consistently. There are no such things as universal, neutral positions in politics. Throughout all of Schmitt's major texts, there is a consistent pairing of the universalistic terms of the enlightenment with romantic or otherwise personalistic words to discredit them. Schmitt will often speak, for instance, of the "pathos of objectivity,"²⁷⁴ or in earlier works of the "rationalist faith of the Enlightenment"²⁷⁵ or cast the rationalist hope for the withering away of the state as merely "...an anthropological profession of faith."²⁷⁶

There is no such thing as the universal, no such thing as humanity, and consequently, no such thing as going to war "for humanity" or for genuinely humanitarian reasons. It is always the case that particular, political motivations are at the secret heart of such declarations, and states that use such terms merely do so at the political expense of their opponents, and very often for the political ends of "imperialist expansion."

But this is not all. Such supposedly universalistic declarations, especially when it comes to the ultimate act of war, are not only deceptive on an international level; they are positively

²⁷³ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 54.

²⁷⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 41.

²⁷⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 52.

²⁷⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 58.

destructive, *internally*, for the state itself. Hence Schmitt's counsel that, "it is necessary to pay attention to the political meaning..." of supposedly universal declarations.²⁷⁷ "To demand of a politically united people that it wage war for a just cause only is... a hidden political aspiration of some other party to wrest from the state its *jus belli* and to find norms of justice whose content and application in the concrete case is not decided upon by the state but by another party, and thereby it determines who the enemy is."²⁷⁸

So, aside from concealing crass political interests between nations, universalist reasoning also degrades the aggressor state itself. We know, by now, precisely why such universalist reasoning (especially when it comes to the war decision) is so threatening to Schmitt. The essential character of the state, as this emanates from his underlying political theology, is derivative of the concept of the sovereign decider. ("The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political."²⁷⁹) This is particularly important in the key moment of existential decision between friend and enemy, peaceful relations or killing. Indeed, for Schmitt, this exceptional decision of friend or enemy is wholly bound up with the very *raison d'être* of the state sovereign as an obedience-commanding protector. In Schmitt's own words, "The protector then decides who the enemy is by virtue of the eternal relation of protection and obedience."²⁸⁰ These two elements (obedience and decision) are wholly inseparable. Therefore, when sectors of private society attempt to justify war by economic or moral means, they deprive the state of this necessary, supposedly inseparable element. From the shadows of the private realm they serve to decapitate, "cut up," and internally divide the public state sovereign.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

This immediately brings to mind imagery from Schmitt's 1938 work, The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes, and specifically the anti-Semitic portrayal of Jews as secretly hostile to state sovereignty. According to Schmitt, (though this is difficult to substantiate), the Jewish conception of the leviathan and the behemoth, Hobbes' symbols of the state, are quite different from the European and pagan view. Instead of powerful, sometimes benevolent creatures, the leviathan and behemoth become, for the Jew, antagonistic symbols of the great nations and empires which enveloped and threatened them.

Jewish representations of the leviathan and the behemoth are, in essence, of a different kind. It is commonly known, however, that both animals became symbols of the heathen world powers that were hostile to Jews, a designation that can be applied to the Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, and other pagan realms. But less well known are the interpretations that arose in the Middle Ages, in which the unique, totally abnormal condition and attitude of the Jewish people toward all other peoples became discernible, a condition that cannot be compared with that of any other people. Here we are confronted by political myths of the most astonishing kind and by documents often fraught with downright magical intensity. They are produced by cabbalists and have naturally an esoteric character.²⁸¹

Important for our current discussion is that the supposed Jewish antipathy towards authority, sovereignty, and the state is a matter of esoteric knowledge. The Jew is not an openly political actor who is threatened by a great power, and openly seeks to defeat it. Rather, through apparent liberalism and universalism, by seeking to make the state justify its actions by way of universal norms, the Jew cuts-up, divides, or decapitates the leviathan.

²⁸¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 8.

According to cabbalistic views, the leviathan is thought of as a huge animal with which the Jewish God plays daily for a few hours; however, at the beginning of the thousand-year kingdom, he is slaughtered and the blessed inhabitants of this kingdom divide and devour his flesh. All this is very interesting and could well be the mythical prototype of some communist theory of state and of the stateless and classless condition that are supposed to emerge after the abolition of the state.²⁸²

Again, in the midst of Schmitt's paranoid anti-Semitism, there is this same juxtaposition of the elements of state destroying secrecy, political agendas, and universalism. The secret Jewish will to destroy the state is not born of a genuine, universal love for all mankind. It is instead born of the particular and clannish instinct of the Jew. He must work in secret. He must conceal his plan to destroy the state beneath an apparently universal, ethical façade. The Bolshevik is no different. He too is "Jewish" in this sense. He too seeks, for his own particular, political ends, the destruction of the state. Yet this is all done under the name of universal brotherhood and an ethical imperative to end exploitation. In each case, the leviathan is not opposed externally. There is no "clash of leviathans" or an epic battle between the leviathan (representing sea powers) and the behemoth (representing continental land powers). Instead, the Jew, like the Bolshevik, uses deception and seeks to cut up and divide the sovereign power internally.²⁸³ These hidden, parasitic forces do not merely conquer the leviathan, they consume it.

²⁸² Ibid., 95.

²⁸³ This might be revealing as to this pattern in right wing anti-Semitic thought which easily equates Jewish conspiracy with *both* international socialism *and* international capitalism. For in the right-wing anti-Semites imagination, both the socialist and capitalist (like the Jew) freely transcend national boundaries, and so also local traditions and customs. They are "invisible actors" in a society to which they are truly alien.

But the Jews stand by and watch how the people of the world kill one another. This mutual ‘ritual slaughter and massacre’ is for them lawful and ‘kosher,’ and they therefore eat the flesh of the slaughtered peoples and are sustained by it...Still others say that to save the world from the fierceness of this beast God has cut up the male leviathan in order to provide a feast for the righteous in paradise.²⁸⁴

Importantly the Jew’s hidden, esoteric “cutting up” of the state always involves, for Schmitt, also the “splitting of hairs” the “cutting of distinctions,” the clever “dividing of concepts” via a peculiarly “Jewish” faculty of reason. Reason, which is supposed to be universal, is in fact wholly political. Even Schmitt’s celebrated leviathan uses reason for political ends:

Under each arm, the secular as well as the spiritual, there is a column of five drawings; under the sword a castle, a crown, a cannon; then rifles, lances, and banners, and finally a battle; to these correspond, under the spiritual arm: a church, a mitre, thunderbolts; symbols for sharpened distinctions, syllogisms, and dilemmas; and finally a council. These illustrations represent the characteristic means of using authority and power to wage secular-spiritual disputes. The political battle, with its inevitable and incessant friend-enemy disputes that embrace every sphere of human activity, brings to the fore on both sides specific weapons. The fortresses and cannons correspond to the contrivances and intellectual methods of the other side, whose fighting ability is by no means inferior.

The important realization that ideas and distinctions are political weapons, in fact, specific weapons of wielding ‘indirect’ power, was thus made evident on the first page of the book.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 9.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 18.

So while the use of reason is always political, the Jewish use of reason is political in a singularly and uniquely “Jewish” manner. It is, put otherwise, only ever used for the hidden designs of Jewish interests. These hidden designs, (namely the blunting and internal division of sovereign powers), moreover arise from, “the peculiarity of the Jewish people (*die Eigenart des jüdischen Volkes*), who for thousands of years have lived not as a state on a piece of land (*auf einem Boden*), but solely in the law and norm, hence which in the true sense of the word is ‘existentially normativistic.’²⁸⁶” The last phrase is utterly illuminating. The universal normativism of the Jew is merely an existential condition peculiar to him. It is not derived from any objective reality, or any “pure reason” accessible by all. It is the product of a miserable, centuries long, Jewish existence – at once marked by a semi-nomadic homelessness and an alien (*artfremd*), parasitic disposition towards its host peoples.

Thus Spinoza uses reason for his own, Jewish political ends. Following this “cutting” and “dividing” imagery, Schmitt casts Spinoza, the Jew, as exploiting the small “fissure” in Hobbes philosophy (i.e. the personal proviso for private conscience in matters of religion) and then expands this into an all out “separation” of the public from private, inner from outer.²⁸⁷ But this liberalism was for his own, hidden Jewish ends. The liberal tradition which he bore was followed later by Mendelssohn and other Jews in a persistent drive to kill the state for the benefit of the Jews, but under the guise of universal liberalism, individualism, and humanism.

The self-destructive nature of liberalism was therefore a feature since nearly its very beginning. Ultimately, in the 20th century, under the pressures and contradictions posed by mass democracy, liberalism lost its vitality, its inner spirit which justified its continued existence. As

²⁸⁶ Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt and the Jews*, 42.

²⁸⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 57.

Schmitt notes in his earlier The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy, “Indeed, a feeling for the specificity of principles seems to have disappeared and an unlimited substitution to have taken its place.²⁸⁸” Liberalism was now defended upon largely pragmatic reasons, for it had lost its inner spirit given the persistent, slow, unseen Jewish attempt to separate the state’s soul from its body via increased secularization and mechanization. In its twilight, the liberal state, “...only remains standing through sheer mechanical perseverance as an empty apparatus.²⁸⁹”

There is, as such, not merely one layer of concealment at play, but two according to Schmitt. On the one level, the Jew for particular interests supports a liberal, individualistic conception of state for ostensibly universalistic, humanitarian reasons, but in fact supports it secretly for his own Jewish interests as an “outsider.” The genuine, naive liberal, then supports this neutral, de-spiritualized form of state in the name of the freedom of conscience, open discussion, and progress. Yet this form of state, itself, only conceals the myriad of particular political interests left hidden in the private sphere – churches, labor unions, Bolsheviks, capitalist interests, and so on.

In the end, a mere mechanical artifice of a state is left standing – one which, by necessity, must conceal the crass political interests which really move society, but at the same time cannot conceal this fact in any truly convincing way. For, in the final stage, the completely farcical nature of liberal neutrality is apparent to all.

Many norms of contemporary parliamentary law, above all provisions concerning the independence of representatives and the openness of sessions, function as a result like a

²⁸⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 3.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

superfluous decoration, useless and even embarrassing, as though someone had painted the radiator of a modern central heating system with red flames in order to give the appearance of a blazing fire.²⁹⁰

Quoting Cavour, Schmitt enunciates the classical liberal view that “The worst chamber is still preferable to the best antechamber.²⁹¹” That is to say, the public way of conducting national business, however flawed, is nonetheless preferable to the secret dealings of crass private interests behind the backs of the citizenry. Nonetheless this degradation was, in Schmitt’s estimation, the eventual fate of liberal regimes in the 20th century and onward. “Today parliament itself appears a gigantic antechamber in front of the bureaus or committees of **invisible rulers.**²⁹²”

The impression based on long familiar observations has gradually spread: that proportional representation and the list system destroy the relationship between voters and representatives, make fractions an indispensable means of government in parliament, and make the so-called representative principle...meaningless; further, that the real business takes place, not in the open sessions of a plenum, but in committees and not even necessarily in parliamentary committees, and that important decisions are taken in secret meetings of faction leaders or even in extraparliamentary committees so that responsibility is transferred and even abolished, and in this way the whole parliamentary system finally becomes only a poor façade concealing the dominance of parties and economic interests.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 6.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 7.

²⁹² Ibid., 7.

²⁹³ Ibid., 20.

The neutrality of the liberal state merely paved the way for private interests to, in fact, co-opt the state. The problem is that these private interests, utilizing the concealing nature of liberalism itself, did not rise fully to the level of the political. They remained private and unaccountable. Importantly, they never assumed the role or function of the state sovereign – offering protection in exchange for obedience. Instead of a unitary, public power, a sheer plurality of unaccountable interests arose to acquire what they could through parliamentary maneuvers, all the while splintering state sovereignty.

The “private” sphere was thus withdrawn from the state and handed over to the “free,” that is, uncontrolled and **invisible** forces of “society.” Those mutually entirely heterogeneous forces formed the political party system whose essential core...was composed of churches and trade unions. From the duality of state and state-free society arose a social pluralism in which the “indirect powers” could celebrate effortless triumphs...It is in the interest of an indirect power **to veil** the unequivocal relationship between state command and political danger, power and responsibility, protection and obedience, and the fact that the absence of responsibility associated with indirect rule allows the indirect powers to enjoy all the advantages and suffer none of the risks entailed in the possession of political power.²⁹⁴

This ultimate splintering of the polity, and thus the ultimate splintering of state sovereignty, was the final effect of the original, secret carving done by the “Jewish philosopher” Spinoza. (Though Schmitt’s notion that liberalism is “hollowed out” by secret, hidden forces is manifest in his earliest of works, the anti-Semitic focus on the Jew as a primary, secret actor is best seen in Schmitt’s The Leviathan [1938] itself.) The Jewish dissection of the state’s soul from its body set liberalism on a path towards absolute neutrality and mechanization. This is

²⁹⁴ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 73–74.

what allowed the liberal state to be so easily co-opted by the plurality of semi-hidden forces of the private sphere. In many ways, according to Schmitt's view, this second and final division and disintegration of the state in the 20th century was only possibly because of the initial, Jewish dissection accomplished in the 17th. The leviathan, once fully mechanized and deprived of its spiritual vitality, bound by chains of neutrality and respect for the individual conscience, was entirely powerless to act decisively against private interests and their parliamentary representatives who were, in fact, anti-liberal and anti-individualistic.

The Leviathan, in the sense of a myth of the state as the "huge machine," collapsed when a distinction was drawn between the state and individual freedom. That happened when the organizations of individual freedom were used like knives by anti-individualistic forces to cut up the leviathan and divide his flesh amongst themselves. Thus did the mortal god die for a second time.²⁹⁵

In an ironic, if not wholly perverse twist, the destruction of the liberal Weimar state, the splitting of its polity between anti-liberal left wing and anti-liberal right wing elements, and the subsequent ascension of absolutist Nazi rule is cast by Schmitt as merely an "after effect." It is the after effect, specifically, of that first, secret, and peculiarly Jewish blow to the power and stability of the liberal form of state in the 17th century – traced back to Spinoza's exploitation of Hobbes' personal proviso.

The question, especially for those who wish to cast The Leviathan, in particular, as an act of literary resistance to the Nazi regime is whether the Nazis are here depicted by Schmitt as complicit in this "second" division and cannibalization of the state, or alternatively, if the Nazis

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 74.

in Schmitt's view were that heroic force who emerged from a doomed and fractured situation to once again wield power, emerge from the safety of the private sphere, offer protection in exchange for absolute obedience, and dare to suppress the remaining plurality of hidden, private-sphere interests, so as to win back "the political" for Germany?²⁹⁶

The supremacy of "the political" over pluralities

When the hidden interests behind parliamentary liberalism become too obvious to ignore, the old, principled defenses of liberalism fail. The lesson of Weimar (as expressed in Schmitt's major works in the 1920's – Political Theology and The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy, as well as his latter The Concept of the Political) was that this signals, ultimately, the end of the liberal state itself. However, there is in Schmitt's view as well a sort of interim period. Between the wholehearted affirmation of classical liberal ideals and liberalism's total degradation is a period in which liberal individualism is defended in new ways - either through a bland pragmatism (i.e. the claim that liberalism simply "works"), or else via a new theory of pluralism. That is, the principles of open and free debate, since no longer believable, are replaced in many instances with a valorization of multiplicity for multiplicity's sake. While the 18th century belief in meaningful discourse and the rationalist path of progress is shown to be a lie in light of the real hegemony of diverse, private interests; the 19th and 20th centuries see liberalism as instead defended upon the grounds of diversity itself! Schmitt's attitude towards these pluralist theories of state at once emanates from his own political theology, and at the same time reveals his own, concrete political positions.

²⁹⁶ A preliminary answer to this question might involve citing Schmitt's admiration for Hitler's decision to assassinate the SA leadership in the so-called "night of long knives." That is to say, Schmitt admired the *political decisiveness* of Hitler to oppose previous ideological allies in order to purge the landscape of the splintering plurality of viable forces.

As a point of reference, Schmitt will often critique pluralist and association theories of state through the persons of G.D.H. Cole and Harold Laski. (Though Cole and Laski were nominally socialists, their views generally fall more naturally within the Left-liberal category. Cole was a libertarian socialist and a member of the non-Marxist, Fabian Society in Britain. Laski, though a self-described Marxist, was a perennial member of the British Labour Party, supporter of the League of Nations, and was generally enthusiastic about parliamentary politics and individual civil liberties.) The main thrust of the pluralistic and association theories which these figures came to represent is that, in fact, human beings always belong to a plurality of societal groupings. The whole network of these diverse social structures is jointly sufficient to maintain a stable and orderly society as a whole.

Their (Cole and Laski's) pluralism consists in denying the sovereignty of the political entity by stressing time and again that the individual lives in numerous different social entities and associations. He is a member of a religious institution, nation, labor union, family, sports club, and many other associations. These control him in differing degrees from case to case, and impose on him a cluster of obligations in such a way that no one of these associations can be said to be decisive and sovereign.²⁹⁷

Consequently, there is simply no need for a powerful and decisive state sovereign. This is merely a holdover from a bygone era and a less mature, less self-sufficient humanity. This "associationist" line is also seen by Schmitt in the construction of the liberal Weimar constitution itself – that document created by the much maligned Hugo Preuss.²⁹⁸ In both cases, the

²⁹⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 40.

²⁹⁸ It is significant that Schmitt singles out Preuss as another representative of the pluralist/association theory line. That is because Preuss, in general, was a favored target of the Nazi party, both because he was instrumental in the

pluralist/association theories deny the absolute sovereignty of the state because of a liberal, optimistic belief that society has progressed such that, in all of its rich and diverse layers of social obligations, it can function semi-autonomously, without the traditional absolutism of ages past. “On the basis of...association theory, Preuss rejected the concept of sovereignty as a residue of the authoritarian state and discovered the community, based on associations and constituted from below, as an organization that did not need a monopoly on power and could thus also manage without sovereignty.²⁹⁹”

Schmitt’s initial suspicion regarding these pluralist/association theories is that, if man truly subsists in a self-sufficient plurality of social networks, then what is the need for any universal grouping at all? In a word, what is the need of a government? Yet Preuss, Cole, and Laski all argue for government, indeed even to the point of constructing constitutions, joining national political parties, and actively advocating for positive increases in government run social programs. (Preuss, after all, was the major architect of the Weimar constitution.) And so, an apparent contradiction exists between the pluralistic premises of these political theories, their denial of the need for sovereignty, and the actual political activities of these individuals. Schmitt’s conclusion is that these association theorists and so-called “pluralists” are not, in fact, pluralists in the fullest sense of the word. Instead, there is an unstated, hidden monism which runs through each of their theories.

crafting of the Weimar constitution after the defeat of World War I, and also because of his own Jewish background. Indeed, Preuss was featured in the infamous Nazi propaganda film, *Der Ewige Jude* (1940). The general idea being that this was evidence of the Jewish conspiracy to destroy the German state (the “stab in the back” theory), and that the subsequent legal state enshrined in the Weimar constitution was not truly German, but actually Jewish.

²⁹⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 25.

Above all, it has to be explained why human beings should have to form a governmental association in addition to the religious, cultural, economic, and other associations, and what would be its specific political meaning. No clear chain of thought is discernible here. What appears finally is an all-embracing, monistically global, and by no means pluralist concept, namely Cole's 'society' and Laski's 'humanity'.³⁰⁰

Both Cole and Laski support the maintenance of an active government because, in fact, they are not pluralists at all, but rather are they monistic universalists. Their conception of humanity guides their superficially "pluralist" political philosophy. Humanity is conceived as a common entity, with common goals and aspirations. The plurality of relatively free, relatively autonomous associations in civil society is merely taken as an important means to the far more important end of a free and happy humanity.

Only arguing in this way, reasons Schmitt, can one maintain such a moderate, stable, and indeed liberal "pluralism." It is only through this deceptive method of argumentation, using the hidden postulate of a "universal humanity," that one can, *a priori*, affirm the maintenance of a multiplicity of diverse, semi-autonomous, and non-hegemonic civil associations. (For a key but also implicit assumption of such a so-called pluralism is that the plurality will maintain itself as such; that is, not one of the diverse multiplicity of entities will become too "serious," too "decisive" and co-opt or conquer all the others.³⁰¹) A truly robust and consistent pluralism could

³⁰⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 44.

³⁰¹ Schmitt notes in *The Concept of the Political* (72), for instance, that "Outside of the political, liberalism not only recognizes with self-evident logic the autonomy of different human realms but drives them toward specialization and even toward complete isolation...The most important example of such an autonomy is the validity of norms and laws of economics. That production and consumption, price formation and market have their own sphere and can be directed by neither by ethics nor aesthetics, nor by religion, nor, least of all, by politics was considered one of the few truly unquestionable dogmas of this liberal age."

So the supposed anti-dogmatism of liberalism was grounded in this one, secretly monistic, all-encompassing dogma of isolation and autonomy between the multiplicity of societal domains. Indeed, this is reminiscent of Sartre's talk of decision making always being reliant on one or another freely chosen criterion. Yet for Schmitt, his

in no way guarantee such a thing. Along these same lines, Schmitt could not conceive of how the political association of the government could simply co-exist in a condition of mutual parity with these other civil groups. This assumption of parity between state and society amounts to “the political” being taken in way which is less than deadly serious – an absurd contradiction for Schmitt. “Only as long as the essence of the political is not comprehended or not taken into consideration is it possible to place a political association pluralistically on the same level with religious, cultural, economic, or other associations and permit it to compete with these.”³⁰²

Schmitt thus juxtaposes this *faux* pluralism with the truly robust pluralism of his own political theology. His concept of the political is the only absolutely pluralistic theory of state. “As we shall attempt to show below...the concept of the political yields pluralistic consequences, but not in the sense that, within one and the same political entity, instead of the decisive friend-and-enemy grouping, a pluralism could take place without destroying the entity and the political itself.”³⁰³

Yet if Laski’s pluralism is no pluralism at all for Schmitt, then in what sense does he call himself, and his own concept of the political “pluralist?” With his emphasis upon sovereignty and dictatorship, i.e. the unparalleled authority of the state, Schmitt’s politics hardly sounds in any way pluralistic to the theoretically (or theologically) uninitiated.

Nonetheless, this bold claim of his is actually the very essence of Schmitt’s political existentialism, and it should not be dismissed as mere bluster or wordplay. Schmitt is indeed a

political theology is self-described as being based in purely “existential” concepts (see *The Concept of the Political*, 27, 33, 49.), and will thus have none of this. Indeed, it is the sheer consistency of his pluralist-existentialism which leads him to reject the non-serious, liberal version of pluralism in which all civil domains are autonomous, independent, and thus safe from interference of any one by any other.

³⁰² Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 45.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 45.

true pluralist in that he recognizes with all sobriety and seriousness the many entities and, to use his favored terminology, the many “domains” existing within a given society. Yet it is the very consistency and gravity of his pluralism, his absolute denial that there is any objective, neutral concept or standpoint from which to mediate, isolate, tame, and “control” this plurality of domains, which ultimately results in his authoritarian political existentialism. In other words, because the consistent pluralist cannot make recourse to such unifying, universal concepts as “humanity” or “society,” then there is nothing to guard against the possibility of one of these many entities gaining decisive hegemony over all the others. Indeed, this is not merely a live possibility. For Schmitt, it is a matter of brute, historical fact. “In its literal sense and in its historical appearance the state is a specific entity of a people. *Vis-à-vis* the many conceivable kinds of entities, it is in the decisive case the ultimate authority.”³⁰⁴

Precisely why the political, for Schmitt, is the decisive association (of all the plurality of extant associations) was briefly touched on earlier. The political is independent and superior to the other associations and identities within society simply because it is the most “intense” and the most “committed to.” The political is that one realm which involves the friend/enemy distinction, and the possibility of both dying and killing.

However, this is not all. Schmitt’s analysis of the hegemony of the political over all the other plurality of human associations does indeed rest upon the political’s unique intensity; yet inquiring as to just why the political is the most intense allows us to see Schmitt’s entire argument. It is true; the political is the most intense because it involves the possibility of killing. Yet, other spheres of activity may also include the possibility of death and killing. Ordinary economic decisions, even those which Schmitt would not recognize as rising the level of the

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

political, involve the predicted end of human life. For instance, every year automobile companies must decide how much reinforced steel should go into the frame of a certain model of car. More steel will make it less likely that a head-on collision will result in fatality. However, it will raise costs, hurt fuel efficiency, and possibly also the aesthetic quality of the vehicle. Car companies spend millions of dollars in order to very accurately predict these outcomes, so as to weigh them against one another, and arrive at a reasonable production decision. Yet this is not, in the minds of most individuals or for Schmitt himself, a political decision – this despite the very real life-and-death consequences of the decision at hand.

The key difference is that the production decision, though it involves human life, is not a truly autonomous and free decision. It is a calculation. (Whether we agree to the reasonableness of such a calculation or not is irrelevant.) There is, in practice, a formula for comparing profitability, human lives, efficiency, and so on. The outcome is determined by this agreed upon formula, and these agreed upon goals. The truly political decision, by contrast, is autonomous in the sense that it is made entirely for its own sake. As explicated above, a political entity may come into existence for any number of antecedent reasons – economic, religious, etc. However, once it has reached the level of the political, its sole imperative is to maintain itself as a political entity. There is no further goal, and no stable criterion apart from this formal imperative.

The decision to assign another political entity as “enemy” and to kill this enemy is therefore never determined by profitability, morality, or aesthetics. It is always, solely, a political decision which can never be defended by recourse to any other domain. In this sense the political decision is the only truly free decision, as it is neither guided by assigned goals, nor restricted by set criteria which exist external to it. The political is supreme because, simply put, it is “the most decisive.” There may be many important human groupings and consequential

human decisions extant within a pluralistic society, but, “The political entity is **by its very nature the decisive entity**, regardless of the sources from which it derives its last psychic motives. It exists or does not exist. If it exists, it is the supreme, that is, in the **decisive** case, the authoritative entity.³⁰⁵”

The way Schmitt argues for this fact is both empirical, in the sense of arguing from brute, historical fact, (e.g., “It exists or does not exist.”) but also conceptual and indeed highly formalistic. His conceptual argument appears to begin with the claim of mutual autonomy between the various domains of human life. Again, this is the mark of Schmitt’s true, robust pluralism. There are a multiplicity of truly unique human endeavors and associations, and each of these has their own presuppositions and normative requirements.

One must pay more attention to how very different the anthropological presuppositions are in the various domains of human thought. With methodological necessity an educator will consider man capable to being educated. A jurist of private law starts with the sentence “one who is presumed to be good.” A theologian ceases to be a theologian when he no longer distinguishes between the chosen and the nonchosen. The moralist presupposes a freedom of choice between good and evil.³⁰⁶

Schmitt explains that the domain of the political is initially no different from these other diverse and unique areas of human life. Whereas the private jurist necessarily presupposes innocence, and the moralist necessarily presupposes human free will, the political has its own presupposition: the fallenness of man. That is, it assumes man’s aggressiveness and enmity towards other men. “Because the sphere of the political is in the final analysis determined by the

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 43-44.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 64.

real possibility of enmity, political conceptions and ideas cannot very well start with an anthropological optimism. This would dissolve the possibility of enmity and, thereby, every specific political consequence.”

It is very important to note that Schmitt does not, in any way, argue for the veracity or accuracy of the political conception of man over and above those of the other realms. He offers no empirical evidence that man is in fact a largely violent, self-interested creature. This is simply, by definition, a necessary presupposition of the political. Or put more accurately, the necessary presupposition of the political is the actual possibility of man’s enmity towards man; for the hostile action of man against man cannot be conceived as a necessary effect of man’s desires for wealth, prestige, or security. The precondition of the political is not mere violence (which can optimistically be controlled or abolished through increased production, and the absence of scarcity and need). No, the precondition of the political is hostility, that is, the free decision to attack and kill other human beings beyond any natural, bodily imperative.

The second step in Schmitt’s conceptual argument appears to be the crucial one. There is, we have said, an absolute parity and autonomy between the various social realms – including that of the political. Yet it is precisely this autonomy and parity which leads directly to the hegemony of the political. For since each human domain has its own, sovereign criterion of good and bad, its own necessary presuppositions, then there can be no necessary choice between them. There can be no rational deduction which guides one to act either morally, religiously, aesthetically, or politically, as there is no neutral standpoint from which to make such a deduction. The choice between human domains is always a purely volitional and free decision.

This is where the hegemony and indeed the sovereignty of the political assert themselves. As the choice between human associations is a free decision, then the domain which is supreme is that which is “most decisive.”

In any event, that grouping is always political which orients itself toward the most extreme possibility. This grouping is therefore always the **decisive** human grouping, the political entity. If such an entity exists at all, it is always the **decisive** entity, and it is sovereign in the sense that the **decision** about the critical situation, even if it is the exception, must always necessarily reside here.³⁰⁷

At first glance, the supremacy of the political over all other domains appears to be argued for, by Schmitt, on the sole basis of some ill-defined notion of “intensity.” Schmitt appears to be arguing, rather brutishly, that the political is supreme and sovereign because it is “powerful” or it involves death and killing. While this may be true, what we find in The Concept of the Political is actually something far more formalistic and, at the risk of sounding droll, “conceptual.” The intensity of the political decision to kill and choose enemies is, of course, not denied. Yet the reason behind the labeling of this choice as “intense” is now fully explained. It is not merely that an action results in the predictable loss of human life. Rather, the political antitheses of friend and enemy, and the uniquely political decision to kill for political reasons is uniquely intense primarily because it is the most decisive! This decision is the most free and the most voluntaristically cleansed of any external criteria or standards. Industrial, economic calculations may have greater impacts, may even cause greater, intentional loss of human life – but

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

nonetheless these are not the intense, sovereign, political decisions which Schmitt lionizes and calls supreme. For these are mere calculations.

It is only by first understanding this formalistic pattern of argumentation that we can then comprehend Schmitt's granting of hegemony to the political over and above the other autonomous associations and antitheses which he, indeed, also recognizes.

The real friend-enemy grouping is existentially so strong and **decisive** that the nonpolitical antithesis, at precisely the moment at which it becomes political, pushes aside and subordinates its hitherto purely religious, purely economic, purely cultural criteria and motives to the conditions and conclusions of the political situation at hand...This grouping is therefore always the **decisive** human grouping, the political entity.³⁰⁸

What is interesting is how similar this pattern of argumentation is to that which we found in Leo Strauss' writings. Recall that Strauss also set up a sort of autonomous plurality between spheres of human thought. For him, the important domains were that of "philosophy" and "biblical revelation." Also like Schmitt, Strauss denies the liberal quasi-existentialists who attempt any sort of synthesis or empathetic understanding between these autonomous domains. Against this, Strauss demands a more consistent pluralism – one which precludes empathetic, universal understanding between domains, as there is no neutral, objective ground from which to affect such an understanding. Every domain has its own necessary presuppositions. And finally, just as we see in Schmitt, we recall that this "free decision" between philosophy (the domain of

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 38.

necessity) and revelation (the domain of free decision) always yields only one answer – the latter, that is, a return to revelation and belief.

The conceit which is common to both theorists is that the form of the choice inevitably entails the content of the choice. This is vitally important. For this pattern of thinking, which appears to mark so much of “right-wing epistemology” from Sartre to Schmitt, structures the whole dialectic which leads from a moderate rejection of deterministic monism to an outright affirmation of pure, authoritarian decisionism.

The mark of right-wing epistemology is to “innocently” propose that we have a “free decision” before us: A free choice between a domain of necessity and a domain of voluntaristic freedom. Yet a choice between two realms is already to imply a given idea about reality. It is to assume, positively, a universe in which voluntaristically free decisions are indeed possible! It is, in other words, to claim that at least in this one instance, the principle of sufficient reason has no efficacy. The decision is, only in this way, considered properly to be voluntaristically free. But to limit the principle of sufficient reason at all is to limit it entirely. The PSR, by its very nature, does not admit of limitation. What’s more, a universe without sufficient reason is a universe which is, by definition, nondeterministic, pluralistic to the point of disintegration, lacking natures or substantial forms, and thus in need of some free will to positively constitute it.

Thus, when this “free decision” is posed between a belief in a world constituted by philosophical reason on the one hand, and a world created freely, *ex nihilo* by a free willing God on the other –the choice was already made before the question was even fully asked.³⁰⁹

Similarly, the “free decision” between the domain of economic necessity and the domain of free

³⁰⁹ Alternatively, the voluntaristic constituting will can be the individual human ego (instead of the creating God). This is what we see, for instance, in Sartrean atheism. However, this a fairly uninteresting distinction. In both cases, the same sort of ultimately nominalist universe is assented to.

political decisionism is rigged from the very beginning. One assents to the latter option by default. The form of the question controls the content of the decision.

It thus matters not at all that Schmitt never bothers to argue for the veracity of the political domain's necessary presuppositions. Schmitt never needs to give anecdotal or statistical evidence that man is, in fact, decisively hostile towards other men. It is only necessary that he define the political in such a way, and then argue "humbly" for pluralistic parity with the other domains (religious, moral, economic, etc.). Once these two premises are in place, the conclusion follows automatically. *The free choice between domains always chooses the domain of free choice.*

Indeed, this is why, though Schmitt argues for the sovereignty and hegemony of the political, he never does so by claiming that the political is "best" or most advantageous, most popular, humane, traditional, holy, beautiful, righteous, or anything else of that sort. No, Schmitt consistently and with the utmost restraint only ever argues for the supremacy of the political by way of calling the political the most "decisive." It is solely because of the political's definitional decisiveness that Leo Strauss, in his notes to The Concept of the Political realizes that:

...this orientation, which is constitutive for the political, shows that the political is *fundamental* and not a 'relatively independent domain' alongside others. The political is the 'authoritative' (39; 39). It is in this sense that we are to understand the remark that the political is 'not equivalent and analogous' to the moral, the aesthetic, the economic, etc. (26; 26).³¹⁰

³¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 104., Leo Strauss' Notes on Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*

And indeed this insight is correct. For the most robust and true pluralism of Schmitt results not in the perfect stability of this plurality, but rather in the hegemony of the political alone. As Schmitt unequivocally writes, “...one can speak of a state’s domestic, religious, educational, communal, social policy, and so on. Notwithstanding, the state encompasses and relativizes all these antitheses.³¹¹”

Of course, the austere formalism of Schmitt’s conceptual argument does not in any way imply that his conclusions lack political import. Quite the opposite; the sheer, consistent formalism of Schmitt’s political hegemony results in a very definite conception of the best state. First among these is the requirement of absolute unity and dominance of the political.

The *faux* pluralism of left-liberals like Cole or Laski implies the preservation of a rich, varied, and semi-autonomous private sphere in which the plurality of social groupings can remain within a sort of stable homeostasis. As a corollary to this, such pluralists and association theorists necessarily support a liberal (or left-libertarian) form of parliamentary government by which this diversity can maintain itself. Thus, not only is the state limited vis à vis the private sphere; the state itself is divided and balanced to reflect the plurality of the private sphere.

Nevertheless, (in the liberal view) parliament should not be just a part of this balance, but precisely because it is the legislative, parliament should itself be balanced. This depends on a way of thinking that creates multiplicity everywhere so that an equilibrium created from the imminent dynamics of a system of negotiations replaces absolute unity.³¹²

³¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 30.

³¹² Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 40 – 41.

Schmitt's more consistent pluralism implies the exact opposite. The real autonomy of each domain results in a hegemony of just one (the most decisive one) over all the others. The domain of the state requires internal obedience and uniformity, and as such, the liberal conception of parliament, which allows for the diverse interests of the private sphere to subvert and divide the political, can in no way be tolerated. Indeed, toleration of internal division is precisely what, in The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy, Schmitt identified as the destroyer of Weimar constitutional democracy. "The wonderful armature of a modern state organization requires uniformity of will and uniformity of spirit. When a variety of different spirits quarrel with one another and shake up the armature, the machine and its system of legality will soon break down."³¹³

Secondly, Schmitt denies the possibility of one, global government, or the end to the nation-state system. Necessarily, one political entity always stands in opposition to at least one other political entity. It is surely the case that Schmitt argues for the unitary nature of the state sovereign, as well as the absolute dominance of political sovereignty over and above the pluralistic private sphere. Nonetheless, it pertains to the nature of the political, this "most decisive" domain, to oppose itself constantly to its equals. The political is hegemonic, but it can never be neutral. It must, because of its inner spiritual nature, subsist in a pluralistic and agonistic environment. This is not the half-pluralism of the liberal, by which the state limits itself to make room for a diverse flourishing of human groupings, acting only as a referee. It is rather a consistent and absolute pluralism by which the state sovereign, in all of its unitary

³¹³ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 74.

power, opposes itself to other unitary political powers in a life or death struggle, one which can live up to the mythic image of the leviathan versus the behemoth.³¹⁴

We recognize the **pluralism** of spiritual life and know that the central domain of spiritual existence cannot be a neutral domain ...For life struggles not with death, spirit not with spiritlessness; spirit struggles with spirit, life with life, and out of the power of an integral understanding of this arises the order of human things. *An integro nascitur ordo.*³¹⁵

That life struggles with life, and not with death, may appear a poetic embellishment on Schmitt's part. However, this is actually a polemical statement with specific political implications. It is Schmitt's denial of the rational-socialist conception of humanity's collective struggle against scarcity and need, and its collective striving for domination over the caprice of nature's contingencies alone. On this rationalist view, it is precisely by humanity uniting across national borders that it can collectively throw off the chains of the old, exploitative system, and thus make a technological leap forward, eliminating all scarcity – which is, after all, a mark of the exploitative, profit motivated system of production and distribution. This universalist notion of struggle (anticipated in Part Five of Spinoza's *Ethics*, “the more we strive to live according to the guidance of reason, the more we strive ... to conquer fortune as much as we can”³¹⁶) conceives of humanity united as in “one mind and one body” in a bond of common reason, as a universal entity with only impersonal enemies: scarcity, want, disease, hunger and death (in a

³¹⁴ The very best depiction of such imagery comes in Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 8-9.: “The leviathan, symbolizing sea powers, fighting the behemoth, representing land powers. The latter tries to tear the leviathan apart with his horns, while the leviathan covers the behemoth's mouth and nostrils with his fins and kills him in that way.”

³¹⁵ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 95-96.

³¹⁶ *Ethics* (4 Proposition 47 Schol.)

word, “fortune”). For the present-day socialist, the overthrow of capitalism is simply the penultimate task before this eternal, impersonal enemy, which springs from nature’s contingencies, can be finally dealt with. Yet this conception of impersonal struggle is what is precisely denied by Schmitt. For Schmitt, the pluralistic essence of the political demands that one finds equals as one’s enemy. That life struggles with life, and not impersonal death or mere “fortune,” pertains, moreover, to the decisiveness of the political itself. Neither the rational republicanism of Spinoza, nor the universalist-socialism of the twentieth century embraces this political decisiveness.

In fact, one need not make any interpretive or exegetical leaps here. Schmitt unambiguously denies the possibility of the end of a plurality of nation states, or indeed an end to the antagonistic “struggle” between nation states, so long as there is still something which we rightly call “the political.” Neither is he ambiguous about the conceptual-metaphysical substratum upon which this political position lies – namely a consistent pluralism.

The political entity presupposes the real existence of an enemy and therefore coexistence with another political entity. As long as a state exists, there will thus always be in the world more than just one state. A world state which embraces the entire globe and all of humanity cannot exist. The political world is a pluriverse, not a universe. In this case every theory of state is pluralistic...³¹⁷

Thus far we have seen both the conceptual pattern of Schmitt’s argument (the free decision between “decisionism” and something else leads to the choice of decisionism) and also the concrete, authoritarian, political stance which emanates from it. Importantly, however,

³¹⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 53.

Schmitt does not only make conceptual arguments which lead to one or another political stance; he more often shows historically how his concepts in fact have played themselves out upon the world-political stage.

Right I win, Left you lose.

This is perhaps best depicted in Chapter Three of The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy. An example of this synthesis between a presentation of history and a presentation of concepts can be seen, specifically, in Schmitt's analysis of the revolutionary year of 1848, a year Carl Schmitt obviously thought had parallels to his current epoch of parliamentary crisis in Weimar Germany.

Against the degraded and moderate politics of liberalism, two truly political forces emerge, one from the political right, the other from the left:

Discussing, balancing, engaging in principled negotiations, this thought stood between two adversaries who opposed it with such energy that the very idea of mediating discussion appeared to be only an interim between bloody battles. Both opponents answered with a destruction of balance, with an immediacy and absolute certainty – with dictatorship. **There is, to use crude catchwords for a provisional characterization, a dogma of rationalism and another of irrationalism.**³¹⁸

One can see, immediately, that the depiction of this battle follows very closely the form of both Strauss' and Schmitt's fundamental, conceptual argument. There is the affirmation of parity between the two sides – that of the right's belief in authority, faith, and fidelity to an

³¹⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 52.

absolute monarch, as well as that of the left's faith in equality. This parity and equality presents to us the reflective image of a mirror. Both the left and the right are said to be the representatives of dogmas, the left representing the dogma of rationalism, and the right of irrationalism.

Then Schmitt goes on to ask how it is that the left, specifically the Marxist left, ever rose to the level of the political. His answer is that the Marxist left developed science – not in the sense of the experimental, fallibilist natural science – but rather a metaphysics of certainty. The left moved beyond utopian, idealistic, and moralistic arguments and passed into the truly political domain of certain decisiveness. In what must be an oblique reference to the doctrine of papal infallibility (of which Schmitt took great interest), he writes in Section One, “Marxist science is a metaphysics,” and that “Only when it was scientifically formulated did socialism believe itself in possession of an essentially infallible truth, and just at that moment it claimed the right to use force.³¹⁹” This leaving behind of the 18th century conception of reason, and the technically-minded drive to simply make government “work for all” by way of making it more mathematically precise, meant a new affirmation of force. This new rationalism, raised to the level of a truly political dogma, is one which fully feels its own strength and legitimacy. It leaves aside all moderate claims to balance and individual choice, and makes the political decision to lead, to “enforce the objectively necessary³²⁰,” – regardless of popular consent. “The result must be, as with all rationalisms, a dictatorship of the leading rationalists.³²¹” For only “a few minds” are privy to the *Weltgeist* at any given stage of historical development.³²²

³¹⁹ Ibid., 53.

³²⁰ Ibid., 57.

³²¹ Ibid., 54.

³²² Ibid., 58.

However, the raising of the ideal of rationalism to the level of a political “dogma” entails an internal transformation, a mutation of reason’s DNA. When reason becomes dictatorial, feels itself infallible, and makes the decision to use force, it becomes unlike the idealistic and speculative reason of Enlightenment philosophy. Referring to Napoleon’s decisive victory over the Kingdom of Prussia at the battle of Jena-Auersted, Schmitt writes: “The world soul that Hegel saw riding by in Jena in 1806 was a soldier, not a Hegelian. It was the representative of the alliance between philosophy and the saber but only from the side of the saber.”³²³

Hence, the final section in Schmitt’s The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy is aptly titled “Irrationalist theories of the direct use of force.” It does not, primarily, deal with the Right’s “dogma of irrationalism” which opposed the political Left. Rather, true to the form of Schmitt’s conceptual argumentation, it shows historically and concretely how the political Left, since becoming political, necessarily gave itself over to the power of the irrational. Specifically, this section explains in concrete, historical terms how even the supposedly rational use of force and the rational dictatorship of Bolshevism really gives way to its opposite in the end. “Even if the Marxist dictatorship of the proletariat still retains the possibility of the rationalist dictatorship, all modern theories of direct action and the use of force rest more or less consciously on an irrationalist philosophy.”³²⁴

In fact, it was not, as Schmitt points out, something inherent in rationalism itself which, through overemphasis causes reason to become its antithesis. The new affirmation of dictatorship and irrational force comes rather from an external alliance of reason with “the saber.” Reason is now conceived as being political, and thus becomes open to all of the brute,

³²³ Ibid., 58.

³²⁴ Ibid., 65.

decisive irrationality which comes with the political identity. “The explanation can be found in the presence of a new irrationalist motive for the use of force that was also active there: This is not a rationalism that transforms itself through a radical exaggeration into its own opposite and fantasizes utopias, but finally a new evaluation of rational thought, a new belief in instinct and intuition...³²⁵”

In this way, the newly politicized form of rationalism which marked the Bolshevik success actually went beyond traditional, Marxist thought itself (as Marx was still beholden to traditional, bourgeois speculative reason). Reason, at the intensity of a political dogma, becomes displaced by new dogmas of intuition and irrationalism. The Left, so as to maintain and increase its political success, necessarily makes use of these new dogmas for their own purposes.

It is just here that Schmitt makes a decisive “pivot” in his presentation of this final section. He moves from a discussion of Marxism and Bolshevism, to that of anarcho-syndicalism: “Benedetto Croce believes that Sorel has given the Marxist dream a new form...The foundation for Sorel’s reflections on the use of force is a theory of unmediated real life, which was taken over from Bergson and, under the influence of two anarchists, Proudhon and Bakunin, applied to the problems of social life.³²⁶”

For Sorel and the anarchists, the activity of the political is reassigned from being subordinated to reason, to the creative expression of the imagination. “The ability to act and the capacity for heroism, all world-historical activities reside, according to Sorel, in the power of myth.³²⁷”

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

Only in myth can the criterion be found for deciding whether one nation or a social group has a historical mission and has reached its historical moment. Out of the depths of a genuine life instinct, not out of reason or pragmatism, springs the great enthusiasm, the great moral decision and the great myth. In direct intuition the enthusiastic mass creates a mythical image that pushes its energy forward and gives it the strength for martyrdom as well as the courage to use force. Only in this way can a people or a class become the engine of world history.³²⁸

The anarchist, now seen to be the true standard bearer for the active Left, realizes that the enthusiasm for decisive political action cannot be deduced from reason, but only received, faithfully, from myth itself. This Bergsonian line of thought marks the initial point of erasure of any substantive difference between the dogma of the Left and that of the Right. Both sides are reliant upon faith to a mythical image – the image of an epic and decisive battle between good and evil. Recalling once again the decisive year of European revolutions, Schmitt writes: “In 1848 this image rose up on both sides in opposition to parliamentary constitutionalism: from the side of tradition in a conservative sense, represented by a Catholic Spaniard, Donoso-Cortés, and in a radical anarcho-syndicalism in Proudhon. Both demanded a decision.”³²⁹”

This is clearly meant as a parallel to the situation of Weimar Germany. The crisis of parliamentary democracy was, at that time, similarly opposed by the truly political and decisive elements on both the Left and the Right. The portent of this event Schmitt finds in the words of Donoso- Cortés, though they just as easily articulate the position of the Left in Weimar as well.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

‘The day of radical rejection and the day of sovereign declarations is coming.’ No parliamentary discussion can delay it; the people, driven forward by its instincts, will smash the pulpits of the sophists – all of these are opinions of Donoso-Cortés, which might have come word for word from Sorel, except that the anarchist stood on the side of the people’s instinct.³³⁰

As in 1848, the two sides, Left and Right, now stood opposed to one another – not as semi-private, parliamentary opponents, but as openly dictatorial, truly political forces. It is only that the anarchist Left of the 1920’s takes this to a new level of intensity, and thus consistency. “In contrast to the dialectically constructed tensions of Hegelian Marxism, here it was a matter of the direct, intuitive contradiction of mythic images.³³¹” In this short quotation we have two important elements. First, we have a repetition of the idea that a fully politicized Hegelian Marxism must ultimately give way to an irrational, mythic anarchism. Second, one cannot help but to relate this to his later book, Leviathan and one of Schmitt’s most favored images – the Leviathan and the Behemoth. Unlike the secretive Jew, or the average liberal-socialist-democrat slowly dissecting the state from within, the anarchist is political enough – that is, irrational, mythic, decisive enough – to, himself, become one of these fierce, political monsters. Not properly a leviathan or a behemoth – because these refer only to states – but something similar, something which is political, which could potentially rise to the level of a leviathan or a behemoth should it win the decisive battle for state power.

The lesson, of course, is that the dogma of rationalism gives way to mythic, irrationalist anarchism should it become properly political; but that this anarchism, in turn, comes to affirm

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

something like its own opposite. “Sorel hated all intellectualism, all centralization, all uniformity, as did Proudhon, but he demanded nevertheless, like Proudhon, the strictest discipline and morale.³³²” We see Schmitt unambiguously assert this point several pages later, namely, that the very form of the political mandates its eventual supremacy over all other domains and ideals. The Leftist need not consciously make the decision to abandon reason, egalitarianism, and anti-authoritarianism. He simply inevitably does so by default. This pertains to the inner logic of the political decision (i.e. the decision to become political), and the thoroughly pluralistic realm of political agonism. “If anarchist authors have discovered the importance of the mythical form an opposition to authority and unity, then they have also cooperated in establishing the foundation of another authority, **however unwillingly**, an authority based on the new feeling for order, discipline, and hierarchy.³³³”

Still, Schmitt is a staunch partisan of the Right, and he will not rest contented in the belief that, eventually, the Leftist becomes his own opposite “in the long run.” He thus does give his own positive objection to the anarchist position. Predictably, Schmitt’s critique of the irrationalist anarchist position is, simply, that it is not consistently irrationalist enough. The anarchist affirms violence and myth as a matter of necessity – these are the prices of admission to the domain of the political. Yet Schmitt realizes that underlying even the mythic anarchism of Sorel is a basic reliance upon Marx. The opposition to authority and hierarchy are, in the final analysis, grounded in something like an economic argument. Yet this economism is properly the domain not of the authentically political, but of the depoliticizing bourgeois theorist. Just as Marx was forever steeped in the intellectualisms of bourgeois theory, so Sorel, an indirect legate of Marx, cannot escape these bourgeois influences. It is precisely these rationalistic

³³² *Ibid.*, 71.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 76.

influences, however, which contradict and sap the intuitive, irrationalist, and mythic power of the anarchist.

If one may reply to an irrationalist theory as decisive as this one with argument, one must point out its numerous discrepancies – not its logical mistakes, but its inorganic contradictions. Above all Sorel sought to retain the purely economic basis of the proletarian standpoint, and despite some disagreements, he clearly always began with Marx... (However) If one followed the bourgeois into economic terrain, then one must also follow him into democracy and parliamentarism...Just like the bourgeois, it will be forced, through the superior power of the production mechanism, into a rationalism and mechanistic outlook that is empty of myth.³³⁴

The problem is much the same in the Soviet Union which saw a decisive victory for the Bolshevik Marxists over their anarchist competitors. Schmitt explains the persistent political victory of the Bolsheviks in an entirely consistent manner. Just as with the anarchists in Western Europe, the communists of Russia largely shed themselves of any residue rationalism held over from the Hegelian thought of Marx and Engels. It is only because of this more or less total purge of reason that the communists could come to wield state power. Yet it is precisely this shedding of reason, which made politics possible, that transformed Russian communism into, ultimately, its opposite. In Schmitt's view, Russia proves that a politicized communism – originally dedicated to ideals of egalitarianism and internationalism – transforms by necessity into the most authoritarian and virulent sort of nationalism. What's more, this is supposedly proof of the superiority of nationalism, as this expresses the true essence of the political.

³³⁴ Ibid., 72-73.

The difference was that today Russia **no longer assimilated West European intellectualism**, but on the contrary, the proletarian use of force here at least had reached its apotheosis - namely, that Russia again could be Russian, Moscow again the capital, and the Europeanized upper classes who held their own land in contempt could be exterminated. Proletarian use of force had made Russia Muscovite again. **In the mouth of an international Marxist that is remarkable praise, for it shows that the energy of nationalism is greater than the myth of class conflict.**³³⁵

Only towards the very end of this chapter does Schmitt turn from an analysis of communism and anarchism, to the politics of the Right. This second “pivot” is accomplished through a transition from the “mythic” quality of anarchism, to the power of the national/racial myth.

Sorel’s other examples of myth also prove that when they occur in the modern period, the stronger myth is national...In national feeling, various elements are at work in the most diverse ways, in very different peoples. The more naturalistic conceptions of race and descent, the apparently more typical *terrisme* of the celtic and romance peoples, the speech, tradition, and consciousness of a shared culture and education, the awareness of belonging to a community with a common fate or destiny, a sensibility of being different from other nations – all of that tends toward a national rather than a class consciousness today.³³⁶

³³⁵ Ibid., 75.

It should be noted here that Schmitt’s analysis of Russian Bolshevism is simply incorrect. Far from shedding the “residue bourgeois intellectualism” of Marx, Lenin can be seen to be an avid supporter of the idea of “bourgeois science.” Indeed, Lenin’s insistence on the *necessity* of proletarian struggle to be led by a vanguard schooled in bourgeois science is a theme repeated constantly in the popular essay, V.I. Lenin, *What is to be Done: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna, ed. Victor J. Jerome (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 24-97.

³³⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 75.

Of course, the more powerful racial myth naturally lends itself better to the far Right than to the Left. In a reciprocal movement, the Right (bearer of the stronger myth) has therefore a tendency to win more political victories than the Left. (Though, it seems to be Schmitt's thesis that even in cases where the Left wins, as in the Soviet Union, it ultimately transforms itself into its irrational opposite.) The bourgeois-economic residue still present in the largely irrationalist mythos of the anarchist is still weaker than the thoroughly irrational mythos of the far Right. The racial myth, cleansed of all moderating universalisms and paralyzing abstractions, simply has greater power to martial the sentiments, fears, and passions of the masses – and convert these to action. Schmitt's favored example of this phenomenon is the advance of Mussolini's fascism in Italy, (Mussolini was elected to the Italian Chamber of Deputies just a year before the first publication of The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy). Though initially ideologically mixed³³⁷, what ultimately led to the fascist's political victory, Schmitt surmised, was the simple superiority of their myth. The fascist opposition to socialism was not based primarily in a consistent ideology or economic plan, but an affirmation of the myth of Italian nationhood. As Mussolini declared in a speech in 1921, "We declare war on socialism, not because it is socialist, but because it has opposed nationalism..." The myth of the nation, Schmitt believes, is inherently more decisive and political than any other political myth. "Italian Fascism depicted its communist enemy with a horrific face, the Mongolian face of Bolshevism; this has made a stronger impact and has evoked more powerful emotions than the socialist image of the bourgeois."³³⁸

³³⁷ The *Fascisti* originally had a strong feminist wing, supported universal suffrage, and an eight-hour work day, while nonetheless enforcing class collaboration through integralism, law and order vigilantism, abolished luxury and inheritance taxes, and supported widespread privatization of industry.

³³⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 75.

It is through this historical example that we see, finally, the ultimate unity of Carl Schmitt's formalistic conceptual argument and his right-wing and racial political stance. The one reinforces the other. The most decisive, by definition, is the most free (free of all the objective strictures of economics, morality, calculation, and reason). The most decisive is therefore that which is based upon intuition and myth alone – the totally irrational. The irrational and intuitive feelings of culture and race are therefore that which naturally rises in intensity to the decisive level of the political most easily and most directly. It is the best engine for amassing political victories. For these always depend upon a hegemonic domination of others in the “pluriverse” of political entities, a labeling and destroying of enemies as radically and existentially “other” - and all of this for no set reason or criterion. As Adolf Hitler himself said,

Faith is harder to shake than knowledge, love succumbs less to change than respect, hate is more enduring than aversion, and the impetus to the mightiest upheavals on this earth has at all times consisted less in a scientific knowledge dominating the masses than in a fanaticism which inspired them and sometimes in a hysteria which drove them forward.³³⁹

Democracy as popular feeling, not quantitative measurement

As mentioned earlier, Schmitt's affirmation of democracy is in part due to his self-described “political realism.” Democracy simply *is* the dominant source of political legitimacy in the current epoch. Whatever political ideology one holds, whichever direction one wishes society to go, it is *de facto* indispensable to make common cause with democracy. “It is proof of

³³⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 337-338.

the remarkable self-evidence of democratic ideas that even socialism, which appeared as the new idea of the nineteenth century, decided in favor of an alliance with democracy.³⁴⁰”

While Schmitt accepts the formal (and literal) definition of democracy, that is, “rule by the people,” he nonetheless denies that this necessarily implies any specific form of popular representation. For this claim, Schmitt will use the “general will” concept of Rousseau. “In democracy the citizen even agrees to the law that is against his own will, for the law is the general will and, in turn, the will of the free citizen.³⁴¹” Democracy, therefore, need not involve anything like proportional representation or private voting – for the aggregated desires of all individuals, respectively (*volonté de tous*) is not necessarily the true will of the whole citizenry (*volonté générale*). Thus, Schmitt concludes in The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy that democracy can just as easily be absolutist as liberal. What’s more, in order to protect the General Will against both private interests and the mere “will of all,” Schmitt surmises that all genuine democracies naturally call for a “democratic elite.” This “Jacobin logic,” as he calls it, entails the justification of the “rule of a minority over the majority, even while appealing to democracy.³⁴²”

Indeed, Schmitt very quickly will associate democracy not with parliamentarism, but rather with dictatorship. “In opposition to parliamentary constitutionalism, not to democracy, the idea of a dictatorship that would sweep away parliamentarism regained its topicality. The critical year 1848 was a year of democracy and of dictatorship at the same time. Both stood in opposition to the bourgeois liberalism of parliamentary thought.³⁴³”

³⁴⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 23.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 51.

In a rhetorical strategy typical of Schmitt, he uses as a defense of this authoritarian and right wing analysis a historical example from the tradition of left wing politics, namely the revolutions of 1848. (Much the same could be said of his use of the term “Jacobin logic” seen above.) This rhetorical strategy appears to be a way to bolster his own legitimacy while at the same time putting forth radically right wing, and at times overtly racist political positions.

In the end, Schmitt will for instance argue in favor of democracy – even of saving democracy – though what he means by “democracy” is not commonly recognizable. Specifically, there is a consistent denial of the quantitative method for calculating the general will. Drawing on the very foundations of his political theology, Schmitt sets up an antithesis between calculation and decision. All calculations and rational deductions destroy the volitionism which is a prerequisite for the political. Thus, any politically democratic regime which is based upon the quantitative calculation of votes will result ultimately in a degenerate form of state - something more or less self-destructive. This line of thought is seen, as well, in Schmitt’s earlier work, Political Theology, published the previous year.

The general will of Rousseau became identical with the will of the sovereign; but simultaneously the concept of the general also contained a quantitative determination with regard to its subject, which means that the people became the sovereign. The decisionistic and personalistic element in the concept of sovereignty was thus lost. The will of the people is always good...³⁴⁴

Every element of the argument is present even here. The democratic notion of General Will becomes (through the mediating influence of the liberal form of government) tied to

³⁴⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 48.

quantitative measurement (i.e. proportional representation and voting). Yet quantitative measurement is intrinsically anti-political. This is specifically the case as it contravenes the pure decisionism of the sovereign. Again, the truly sovereign decision can be neither a deduction nor an aggregate. However this is precisely, according to Schmitt, what universal suffrage voting entails – namely, the deduction of political decision based upon the aggregate of a plurality of disjointed, private interests. For the political to truly assert itself, it must be both volitionally free and unitary. Democracy, the expression of the General Will, is not harmed, but rather can be saved, when quantitative voting is done away with. “The will of the people is of course always identical with the will of the people, whether a decision comes from the yes or no of millions of voting papers, or from a single individual who has the will of the people even without a ballot, or from the people acclaiming in some way.”³⁴⁵

Related to this unitary requirement is a new element touched upon in the aforementioned excerpt. That is the personal nature of the sovereign. Here we have further confirmation that, though Schmitt often uses historical examples from Left wing political struggles, his political theology is uniquely suited to be a tool for the Right alone. The unity of the sovereign, its transcendence of quantitative voting procedures, is not something which is compatible with any republican form of government, nor even the most authoritarian conception of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” For even in the latter case, political sovereignty belongs to a whole class conceived as the universal in embryo. Its interests are economically-derived class interests, and not the absolutely free volitions of a unitary sovereign. Nor for that matter is popular or even universal suffrage abolished.³⁴⁶ Yet the sort of unitary sovereign which Schmitt apparently

³⁴⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 27.

³⁴⁶ As a matter of historical fact, both the 1871 Paris Commune as well as the nascent soviet system in Russia (prior to the Stalinist repression) depended upon quantitative voting in local councils or “soviets” in order to derive

supports cannot, in fact, be merely the unity of an economic class with shared material interests. Rather, the sort of unity which rises to the level of absolute decisionism must be the unity of an individual person alone. Only the singularity of a personal ruler can guarantee the homogeneity and uninhibited decisiveness that Schmitt demands.

Thus, when Schmitt talks of dictatorship, we ought to take him literally. For while Schmitt knows that society can never return to the days before democratic legitimacy, his political ideal always involves the essence of monarchical absolutism and restoration over and against the aggregation of “the people.” This is, again, not a matter of Schmitt’s own idiosyncrasy, but a direct result of his decisionistic form of political theology.

But the necessity by which the people always will what is right is not identical with the rightness that emanated from the commands of the personal sovereign. In the struggle of opposing interests and coalitions, absolute monarchy made the decision and thereby created the unity of the state. The unity that a people represents does not possess this decisionist character...³⁴⁷

‘One sole architect’ must construct a house and a town; the best constitutions are those that are the work of a sole wise legislator, they are ‘devised by only one’; and finally, a sole God governs the world. As Descartes once wrote to Mersenne, ‘It is God who established these laws in nature just as a king established laws in his kingdom.’³⁴⁸

Schmitt’s conception of democracy as the rule of “general will,” and his subsequent and radical claim that the general will has nothing to do with the calculable interests of individual

political decisions. The Paris Commune, meanwhile, instated universal suffrage, as well as the right of the people to immediately revoke its representatives. In both situations, it was merely the exclusion of counterrevolutionary elements which accounted for the “dictatorial” nature – not the abolition of quantitative measurement, or of factional and pluralistic participation in political decision making.

³⁴⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 49.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

citizens is, of course, a result of his underlying political theology. The political will cannot be something aggregate or composite. For these same reasons, Schmitt will come to affirm a unitary and indeed personalistic conception of the state sovereign as dictator.

The Führerprinzip and Gleichartigkeit – A sole sovereign before his homogenous people

It is vital to recall that Schmitt's political theology is not, in the first instance, an ethnography of the German *Volk*. Again, Schmitt surpasses Strauss in his more thorough and formalistic decisionism, and is not under constant pressure to venerate the particular traits of his own people. What is primary in Schmitt's political theology is simply "the political" in all of its decisive austerity. The bearer of a given political identity cannot be composite and heterogeneous, but must be completely unitary. To wield political power means to act decisively in the political "pluriverse," without internal calculation, mediation, or limitation. Thus, not only is quantitative voting an anathema to Schmitt's conception of politics; so too is an overly determining, biologicistic conception of race. For the free political actor cannot be determined by any internal strictures – economic, moral, or even racial.

Instead, it pertains to Schmitt's secularized theology that "the people" are wholly secondary to and derivative of the unitary, personal sovereign – one single person. For it is the sovereign, as if through a miraculous act, who freely instantiates the political *ex nihilo*. Prior to the sovereign assuming public command, offering protection in exchange for obedience, neither the political nor the public exist. It is only within this political realm of "publicity" in which the people as a constituted people actually manifest themselves as such. "The people exist **only** in the sphere of publicity. The unanimous opinion of one hundred million private persons is neither the will of the people nor public opinion. The will of the people can be expressed just as well

and perhaps better through acclamation, through something taken for granted, an obvious and unchallenged presence...³⁴⁹”

It is this “obvious and unchallenged presence” of the personal, commanding sovereign which allows a people to, in fact, become a people in the first place. Whether a politically constituted people express their unity in racial, economic, moral, or religious terms – these expressions are only possible after a political unity is, in fact reached. Yet, as we have said, such a political unity can only be the free, continual creation of “one architect.”

That Schmitt’s concept of the political is largely non-biologistic is often used by his defenders as evidence that Schmitt was something of a dissenting voice within the Nazi party. The truth, however, is quite the opposite. This shows rather Schmitt’s complete consonance with the Nazi line of thought as opposed to the more “populist” and “romantic” schools of revolutionary conservatives in Weimar Germany. As Gross points out:

Nazi law did not, in fact, derive from biology. With the *Führerprinzip* standing at the very heart of Nazi ideology, Hitler not only protected that (racial) law, as Schmitt asserted in one of his more notorious essays [“Der Führer schützt das Recht,” in *Positionen und Begriffe*, 227-32], but also – mostly by way of the *Führerbefehl*, i.e., direct command – he created it as well.³⁵⁰

Schmitt would ultimately find his concept of the singular dictator in the person of Adolf Hitler. Hitler’s direct command was never “derived from” the racial laws of Nazi Germany. No, these laws – indeed the German *Volk* itself – existed because of, and for the glory of, the person

³⁴⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 16.

³⁵⁰ Raphael Gross, *Carl Schmitt and the Jews*, 102.

of Adolf Hitler and his historical mission. This logic can be seen in the whole juristic structure of Nazi laws, and even in Hitler's own Mein Kampf: "Those who want to live, let them fight, and those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live."³⁵¹

There is no particular racial quality which makes a people inherently deserving or worthy.

Rather, the racial superiority of a people is merely a property or subsequent characteristic of their true greatness – and this greatness itself is identical to the totally unified construction of, what Schmitt calls, a "fighting collectivity."³⁵²

It is the actual decision to engage in existential combat, the decisive political fight, which is the origin of all human value. However, to engage in this decisive struggle, the "fighting collectivity" must have priority over the individual people, and even their shared culture. The Party and its decisions are not determined by the multiplicity of cultural characteristics and opinions; rather the Party is the creator of the legal order, and the constant creator of the German people – transforming a historically divided family of cultures (Prussian and Bavarian, Protestant and Catholic) into a united and active *Volk*. "The NSDAP (Nazi party) should not become a constable of public opinion, but must dominate it. It must not become a servant of the masses, but their master!"³⁵³ What's more, it pertains to the nature of the truly political party to be, itself, the creation of one man. Again, we see in Mein Kampf an articulation of this very principle: "For there is one thing we must never forget... the majority can never replace the man... And no more than a hundred empty heads make one wise man will an heroic decision arise from a hundred cowards."³⁵⁴ For it pertains to the singularity of one man, one sole architect, to make the political decision, and assume the responsibility of the sovereign. Finally, we see in the pages of

³⁵¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 289.

³⁵² Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 28.

³⁵³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 465.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

Mein Kampf a political statement which could easily be mistaken with one of Schmitt's own:

“There must be no majority decisions, but only responsible persons, and the word 'council' must be restored to its original meaning. Surely every man will have advisers by his side, *but the decision will be made by one man.*³⁵⁵”

Again, the state sovereign is not dependent upon the people, nor are his decisions determined by their collective, cultural will. Before the sovereign, they are nothing. Nonetheless, this hyperbolic conception of the personal sovereign is something which Schmitt seeks to square with his affirmation of democracy. Schmitt will use Hobbes' own account of the social contract for this end.

This covenant is conceived in an entirely individualistic manner. All ties and groupings have been dissolved. Fear brings atomized individuals together. A spark of reason flashes, and a consensus emerges about the necessity to submit to the strongest power...What comes about as a result of this social covenant, the sole guarantor of peace, the sovereign-representative person, **does not come about as a result of but because of this consensus.** The sovereign-representative person is much more than the sum total of all the participating particular wills...To that extent the new god is transcendent vis-à-vis all contractual partners of the covenant...³⁵⁶

Schmitt's Calvinist political theology entails that the singular sovereign is wholly primary and infallible. He does not come about “because of” a people's covenant, but “as a result of” this covenant. In other words, Schmitt asserts that the people coming together in a simultaneous “spark of reason” is the necessary condition for the manifestation of a sovereign power. Yet the sovereign power is not deduced from this experience. For all this experience

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 449.

³⁵⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 33 – 34.

contains is the coincidence of a disintegrated, “atomized” populace – wholly incapable of constructing anything. The covenant of the people only serves to open the gates to the sovereign’s arrival. Once in place, the sovereign is wholly transcendent above his people.

This does not imply, of course, that the specific character of the people is of no importance. It is only that the true character of the unified people is something which arises after their political constitution. It is an effect – if not chronologically then ontologically - of the sovereign’s creative power. The realization of a sovereign power constitutes the people as a people. Thus when Schmitt talks of “equality” as a characteristic of a democratic populace, this is a feature which flows from the state sovereign himself. Equality is not something derived from nature or heaven. All men are not created equal, and true equality does not spring up from the earth. Rather, equality is something which comes about only following the political demarcation of a political group over and against other such groups. One citizen is equal to another only in the sense of also having membership in the political group – something denied to aliens and foreigners. For Schmitt, equality is always meant as “*Gleichartigkeit*” – equality of a certain kind. The unitary nature of the sovereign and the sovereign’s democratic identification with his people jointly imply the equality and homogeneity of the people themselves. It implies the unity of the people against its existential enemies. “Every actual democracy rests on the principle that not only are equals equal but unequals will not be treated equally. Democracy requires, therefore, first homogeneity and second – if the need arises – elimination or eradication of heterogeneity.”³⁵⁷

If in a democracy the sovereign is supposed to be identical to the people, then a truly decisionistic sovereign must command a people uniform in their will and their identity.

³⁵⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 9.

However, this cannot be, for Schmitt, a matter of mere abstraction. Uniformity of will cannot be mere uniformity for its own sake. It cannot mean simple “agreement” of a geographically enclosed people, or a common “sticking together” against the contingencies of nature or fortune. Just as we saw that Schmitt denies that life can struggle merely with death, but only with life, so an equal people must assert its equality over and against others whom it deems unequal.

A democracy demonstrates its political power by knowing how to refuse or keep at bay something foreign and unequal that threatens its homogeneity. The question of equality is precisely not one of abstract, logical-arithmetical games. It is about the substance of equality. It can be found in certain physical and moral qualities, for example, in civic virtue, in *arete*, the classical democracy of *vertus* (*vertu*)...Since the nineteenth century it has existed above all in membership in a particular nation, in a national homogeneity.
358

As Schmitt will go on to say, equality is only “interesting” if there is also the risk of inequality. Moreover, it is a historical fact that democracies have indeed excluded certain peoples from equal citizenship. Here Schmitt cites the slave class in Athens, as well as counterrevolutionaries and aristocrats (in what are likely references to the Soviet Union and the Paris Commune).³⁵⁹ But if equality is never universal, nor determined by “abstract, logical-arithmetical games,” but always instead a matter of “substance,” then precisely what is it that constitutes this substance for Schmitt? Here we finally see the racial element in Schmitt’s apparently formalistic thought. What, in fact, most effectively separates one group of internally equal individuals from an excluded class of people is race. And indeed, it is the separation of

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

racial non-equals which is, in fact, necessary for the maintenance of democracy. “Does the British Empire rest on universal and equal voting rights for all of its inhabitants? It could not survive a week on this foundation; with their terrible majority, the coloreds would dominate the whites. In spite of that the British Empire is a democracy. The same applies to France and the other powers.³⁶⁰”

It is not by virtue of mere pragmatic necessity that Schmitt lauds the exclusion of the so-called “coloreds” from democratic equality within the British Empire. It is true that the immediate effect, Schmitt believes, would be the destruction of the Empire through a voting majority of the colonized people. But more fundamentally, it is the very fact of racial exclusion from equality which sustains the very spirit of the nation. Democracy and equal rights only make sense in the context of homogeneity, and even the idea of the political state itself is dependent upon a certain sort of exclusion – namely, the idea of excluding the foreigner. “Even a democratic state, let us say the United States of America, is far from allowing foreigners to share in its power or its wealth. Until now there has never been a democracy that did not recognize the concept “foreign” and that could have realized the equality of all men.³⁶¹”

Schmitt’s point is that a democracy which, according to liberal individualist values, seeks a truly universal form of equality thereby destroys not only equality, but the state itself. For just as equality only makes sense in the face of inequality, a state which recognizes all people’s as citizens, and thereby opposes no other political enemies nor has any external, political friends, ceases to be, itself, a political entity anymore. In fact, behind this reasoning is Schmitt’s polemic against his true opponent – the Marxist. For it is the universal enfranchisement of all people’s,

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

beyond particular national sovereignties, that Schmitt sees as the core of principle of his archenemy.

Matters that are dealt with by the methods of an empty equality would also become insignificant. Substantive inequalities would in no way disappear from the world and the state; they would shift into another sphere, perhaps separated from the political and concentrated in the economic, leaving this area to take on a new, disproportionately decisive importance.³⁶²

In Schmitt's view, the total political equality of all human beings (and the end to all political inequality) means simply the destruction of the political altogether. The result is this new distortion whereby the economic sphere is unduly politicized – for it remains the sole domain of real, antagonistic differences. The “internationalism” of serious Marxists is the real threat, and the best bulwark against such internationalism is a new and greater emphasis upon national and racial homogeneity. This is the meaning of Schmitt's democratic “equality.” It is necessarily not the uniform equality of all, but rather the homogeneous equality of some against others, that is, *Gleichartigkeit*. Only this form of equality can support the political which, itself must be uniform while also opposing itself to external enemies.

We see, therefore, that while Schmitt's conception of state is not primarily “*völkisch*” or biologicistic, it nonetheless naturally accommodates itself to such sentiments. For the democratic equality of Schmitt's state is dependent upon a unitary and homogenous identity which can, in a properly political manner, oppose itself to those who are existentially “alien.” The unitary sovereign must be both the commander and singular embodiment of such a homogeneous people.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 12–13.

Moreover Schmitt's "homogeneity of kinds" in no way precludes stratification or hierarchy within the "equal" group. Schmitt constantly speaks, rather, of the absolute need for an elite. One of his constant criticisms of parliamentarism is that it has thus far failed to provide such an elevated class. ("Whether parliament actually possesses the capacity to build a political elite has since become very questionable...³⁶³") Schmitt's democratic equality can thus be reduced to the principle of racial or cultural exclusion, and a remaining homogeneity of will which uniformly supports a personal sovereign.

In his forward to Schmitt's Political Theology, Tracy Strong correctly notes that Schmitt's political stance, though nominally democratic and based upon a principle of equality and identity of ruler with ruled, in fact is a bold statement of social hierarchy and political elitism. Against the formalistic and state destroying equality of the French Revolution of the 18th Century, and the international socialist of today:

...it was necessary to oppose a myth of a hierarchically ordered and unified people, which the exceptional acts of the sovereign would instantiate. One might think of this as a kind of right-wing Leninism, where the Party is replaced by the *Volk* and the sovereign becomes the Party-in-action. The sovereign is the action of "us" against "them" – friends versus enemies.³⁶⁴

While Strong is right to notice that "equality" in Schmitt fully allows for hierarchy, and that it also implies an identity of the volitional ruler with a culturally-defined *Volk*; he nonetheless falls into Schmitt's own bad habit of presenting these ideas in the language of left-

³⁶³ Ibid., 4.

³⁶⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, xxviii.

wing politics. We know by now that a “right-wing” Leninism is no Leninism at all. It cannot represent the material interests of a class; it cannot admit of universal suffrage and factions in the form of soviets, and it cannot even admit of the “internal democracy” of the Party. There is no such thing as “right-wing Leninism” by Schmitt’s own standards, because the very concepts involved militate against one another. There can only be fascism and dictatorship.

Neutralization and Toleration – The Imperative for Racial Intolerance

Given what we have just delineated about Schmitt’s political theology, and the specific political stances which emanate from this, it may be surprising to find that Schmitt in fact does seriously examine the topic of toleration. Though it should be noted that, apart from scattered references in his other works, nearly all of his analysis of toleration is to be found within the pages of the rather abbreviated Chapter Four of The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes.

Nonetheless, toleration is a topic which Schmitt takes rather seriously. It is treated, first of all, as a parallel yet wholly distinct phenomenon of that other key concept in Schmitt’s work, “neutralization.” Understanding “toleration” therefore means first comprehending how it is not the same as “neutralization.”

According to Schmitt, the notion of neutralization of state power was first given systematic voice in Hobbes’ Leviathan. While we saw above that this neutralization of the state, and the increasing tendency to conceive of the state as simply a mechanism would ultimately lead to political disaster; Schmitt finds Hobbes’ introduction of these concepts as wholly innocent, and even necessary for the augmentation of sovereign political power. The sovereign

as no longer beholden to specific religious and spiritual interests was a necessary prerequisite for the new, powerful form of modern state to emerge.

Accompanying this new form was a new image – that of the *machina machinarum*.

While Hobbes indeed affirmed the notion of the state as a huge machine or mechanism, the truly devastating separation of inner spirit from outer, “dead” mechanism was only affected by German Idealism in the late 18th and 19th century, specifically after Kant’s pivotal 1790 Critique of Judgment.³⁶⁵ Hobbes’ own mechanization image was never meant to be mutually exclusive of the state having, as well, a vital, inner spirit or soul. The state, for Hobbes, could reasonably be conceived as both machine and man, mechanism and giant creature. “For Hobbes... mechanism, organism, and work of art are still parts of the machine, conceived as products of the highest human creativity. Mechanism and the machine therefore had for him and for his age thoroughly mythical meanings.³⁶⁶”

Put otherwise, Hobbes’ machine imagery did not entail a de-mystification of the political world. Rather, the notion of the technical neutrality of the state was proposed for largely pragmatic reasons which arose in the face of devastating and apparently irresolvable religious warfare. (Hobbes’ produced Leviathan while in exile in Paris during the first English Civil War, and was also influenced by the largely concurrent Thirty Years War on the continent which pitted the Holy Roman Empire and its Catholic allies against the Protestant powers, including the United Provinces, Sweden, and Denmark-Norway.)

³⁶⁵ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 41.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

The decisive first step in the process occurred in one century that was filled to the point of despair and nausea with religious and theological strife, disputes, and bloody wars. After a century of fruitless theological strife in which each party defamed the other and none managed to convince the other, the endeavor to find a neutral territory in which it would finally be possible to arrive at an understanding or reach a compromise leading to security and order is utterly comprehensible.³⁶⁷

Schmitt traces the intellectual antecedents of this secular concept of neutralization to the theological and metaphysical arguments of the previous century. Schmitt notes that, “This first approach, which deviated from traditional theology, did not always distinguish between tolerance and neutralization. Consequently the first and foremost task of theorists was to avoid quarreling theologians.³⁶⁸” As a forerunner in the development of such a pragmatic quasi-secular, quasi-theological doctrine, Schmitt cites Thomas Erastus.

As early as the sixteenth century, one of the first representatives of this approach, the famous Heidelberg professor Erastus, was looking for government protection from the advocates of ecclesiastico- theological dogmatism and from the ecclesiastical thirst for power that wielded such efficacious weapons as “discipline” and “excommunication,” or, as stated in modern parlance, of moral terror and social boycott. **Nevertheless, Erastus did not cease to think like a believing Christian. Turning from the church toward the state did not yet signify to him the basic neutralization of every truth, which is the climax of the mechanization process.**³⁶⁹

Crucially, for Schmitt, the more or less tolerant position taken up by Erastus had to be taken in context. Erastus was still a believing Christian with personal inner devotion and piety to

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 43.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 43.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 43.

the state faith. By comparison, a similar, pragmatic position vis-à-vis the relationship between state and church power can be seen to be uttered as well by Spinoza. Indeed, Spinoza's initial defenses of state power over religious authority were not only pragmatic, but moreover they were every bit as Scripturally-based as those of Erastus. For instance, in the Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus, Spinoza states that, "... it is not contrary to God's rule to choose a supreme magistrate who will have the sovereign right of government." (TTP 222) (The statement referred to God's empowerment of Moses to undisputed civil and spiritual rule over the Israelites as described in Exodus.)

Nonetheless, it is the spirit and intention behind such apparently similar claims which makes all of the difference for Schmitt. While Erastus' "innocent" and pragmatic turn towards state power does not lead to absolute mechanization of the state (on account of his sincere religious piety), it is precisely Spinoza's impiety which sets the modern state on such a self-destructive path.

While this is the crucial distinction made by Schmitt on this topic of toleration, and will be discussed at length, it presently returns us to the original bifurcation put forth by Schmitt – that between "toleration" and "neutralization." For the difficult thing about properly delineating these two phenomena is their apparently constant accompaniment, one with the other. As Schmitt notes, "To be sure, both tendencies, tolerance and neutralization, can coexist for a good stretch of history."³⁷⁰

However, this is merely a historical and accidental accompaniment, and not a necessary one. The neutralization of the state, its independence of church power, interests, and dogma, is

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

again a necessary requirement for the state realizing its own, undivided authority. While this often entails a sort of neutrality with regard to the private religious, metaphysical, or ideological beliefs of individual citizens; this is not always the case.

Neutralization, which is the culminating point in the process of general mechanization, can also combine with tolerance. One naturally and easily fuses into the other. But through advancing the goal of its inner logic, through elevating its ideal of achieving exact mechanization, the modern segment of “occidental rationalism” is just as distinct from all the various kinds of “tolerance” as it is from the many cases of skepticism, agnosticism, and relativism that are present at all times.³⁷¹

In terms of a contemporary example (for Schmitt) we have Hitler’s purge of the SA leadership in the so-called, “Night of the Long Knives” in June and July 1934 – a political move lauded by Schmitt himself.

Hitler’s purge of the SA in June was for Schmitt an affirmation that his thinking was correct and that Hitler understood that a true state could not tolerate a militantly ideological armed force of Röhm’s ilk. In the confrontation between Hitler and Röhm, which culminated in the emasculation of the SA, the 300,000-strong *Reichswehr* (regular state army) appeared victorious.³⁷²

In this instance the endeavor to wield state power, the desire to control the technical and efficient armature of the German state, meant that Hitler necessarily could no longer tolerate the

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, xxxviii. (Introduction by George Schwab)

ideological (and disorderly) activities of the Brownshirts - despite the largely sympathetic content of their inner beliefs. Neutrality entailed intolerance – even, in this most illuminating example, intolerance of a sort of an “inner piety” which was more or less in spiritual accord with Hitler’s own.

We can see now that neutralization simply aims at the decisionistic supremacy of the state in its power to command. It has nothing to do with personal belief or truth claims (i.e. the realm of toleration). Neutralization, for Schmitt, has only to do with administrative efficiency and preeminence. In this sense, Schmitt asserts that Pilate’s infamous question, “What is Truth?” (John 18:38) can have two entirely distinct meanings – either a personal disposition to belief, or an official position of neutrality.

For example, the famous question of Pilate: *quid est veritas?* may equally be an expression of a considerate (i.e. personal) tolerance as if a general, weary skepticism or of an “open”-ended agnosticism. Also, it is possible to see it as an expression of state-administrative neutrality vis-à-vis the religious beliefs of subjugated peoples. Inasmuch as the administrative organization of the Roman Empire by Pilate’s day had become to a large extent technically rationalized, the projection of neutrality corresponds to the apparent technical perfection of the state machine.³⁷³

This designation of toleration as something wholly personal can, as well, be clearly found in Schmitt’s earlier work, The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy: “People know that it is better most of the time to tolerate one another than to quarrel and that a thin settlement is better

³⁷³ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 44.

than a thick lawsuit. That is without a doubt true, but it is not the principle of a specific kind of state or form of government.³⁷⁴

By contrast, neutralization is always a concept of state, and never personal. Interestingly, this is also affirmed in Schmitt's discussion of the phenomenon of "tolerance" in the Roman Catholic Church's administration. In Roman Catholicism and Political Form, published nearly sixteen years before Leviathan, Schmitt writes:

From all sides there is a remarkable consensus that that Roman Catholic Church as an historical complex and administrative apparatus has perpetuated the universalism of the Roman Empire...To every worldly empire belongs a certain relativism with respect to the motley of possible views, ruthless disregard of local peculiarities as well as opportunistic tolerance for things of no central importance.³⁷⁵

Of course, we must now understand that such "opportunistic tolerance" is not "toleration" in the personal or truly theological sense, but is rather the manifestation of bureaucratic neutralization. It does not imply the agnostic or open-minded denial of Catholic dogma by the Church itself, but rather it is an administrative policy of a vast, diverse, organization made for the ultimate ends of institutional efficacy.

Similarly, much the same can be said of Frederick the Great's religious policy of official "toleration."

³⁷⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 6.

³⁷⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, trans. G.L. Ulman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 5-6.

When Frederick the Great said in his political testament of 1752: *Je suis neutre entre Rome et Genève*,” he was alluding to his pride in the perfection of the Prussian state rather than his “philosophical” attitude toward taking sides in theological controversies. What is discernable in his statement is neutrality in the technical-political (*staatlichen*) sense rather than tolerance or personal skepticism.³⁷⁶

In all cases, state neutralization is an endeavor to hold up the Hobbesian principle of “*Auctoritas non veritas facit legem*” – i.e. that the law depends on the decision of the sovereign alone, and not upon the law’s own theological content, nor its compliance with the position of the church, or any other societal authority. Again, in some cases the achievement of this neutralization will entail official toleration towards sectarian interests and practices (so long as these do not attempt to co-opt state authority); in other instances neutralization calls for intolerance, such as was seen in Hitler’s 1934 “Röhm-Putsch.” “A technically neutral state can be tolerant as well as intolerant; in both instances it remains equally neutral.”³⁷⁷

The main requirement which springs from Hobbes is simply that legitimate authority can no longer be divided from actual power; no longer can one separate *auctoritas* from *potestas*. The church, in the context of the modern mechanized state, no longer retains its independent authority over its adherents merely because of a supposed claim to spiritual rectitude. Religious precepts can no longer, as in the Medieval community, confer upon individuals a “right to resist” state power.³⁷⁸ For a situation in which individual elements of society claim “right” for themselves risks going back to a “pre-political” state of security, which is really no security at

³⁷⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 44.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

all. For each will claim his own right, and it will be a war of all against all once more.³⁷⁹ As such, the neutralization process in Hobbes ends, finally, in the positive-legal state (“*Gesetzesstaat*”³⁸⁰) in which what is right is simply identical to the positive, written law.³⁸¹

However, this honest and naive move towards the decisionistic perfection of the state (i.e. its neutralization with regard to church interests) was at the same time, from nearly its very beginning, exploited by the qualitatively different interests and spirit of the Jews – most notably Spinoza, who did not share the same character, interests, or “instinct” as an Erastus, Hobbes, or Frederick the Great.

We have seen that neutrality initially brought about the very height of sovereign power attained first in the modern era. By evacuating the laws of specific religious content, the modern state denies the need for the church’s consent, and denies the medieval “right to resist” state authority. Neutrality, the simple demand that state authority must be obeyed and that the state has the power of deciding right without consultation from any other entity, only adds to this power.

Nonetheless, it is this same neutralization process which brings about the deadly mechanization of the state – a mechanization which far surpasses the still mythical imagery of Hobbes, and passes onto a vision of the state which is wholly instrumental and lifeless.

³⁷⁹ Schmitt appears to be purposefully equivocal here in his use of the term “right” (*Recht*). His point seems to be that, if civil “right” is not to be divided, then also the claim to be “right,” as in correct, (*richtig*) can also not be divided. In this context, “*Auctoritas non Veritas*” has a new and possibly stronger meaning in Schmitt than it ever did in Hobbes.

³⁸⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 45.

³⁸¹ This is of course different than Spinoza’s conception of right which asserts that (civil) “right is merely coextensive with power” and has nothing to do at all with “rectitude.”

But at this place, at the zenith of the sovereign power that brings about the unity of religion and politics, occurs the rupture of the otherwise so complete, so overpowering unity, the decisive point, concerning miracles and belief, that Hobbes evades. Concerning the question of the belief in miracles, he made his non-eradicable, individualistic proviso...At this point enters the differentiation between inner faith and outer confession into the political system of the *Leviathan*. Hobbes declares the question of wonder and miracle to be a matter of “public” in contrast to “private” reason; but on the basis of universal freedom of thought – *quia cogito omnis libera est* – he leaves to the individual’s private reason whether to believe or not to believe and to preserve his own *judicium* in his heart, *intra pectus suum*. But as soon as it comes to public confession of faith, private judgment ceases and the sovereign decides about the true and the false.³⁸²

At issue is the question of “inner belief” specifically concerning miracles, and more particularly concerning the ability of the sovereign himself to perform miracles. According to English monarchical tradition, it pertained to the divine favor of kings to be able to heal subjects with the laying on of hands. Hobbes’ however recognized the futility of actually coercing subjects into actual belief in the efficacy of such supposed “miracles.” Nonetheless, he affirmed the state’s right to “outward obedience” of its citizens, and thus the public affirmation of the miracle, regardless of inner belief. “In (this) one segment of his work (*Leviathan*, Chapter 42), Hobbes reinforced his conception of the state’s right to demand ‘lip-service confession’ of Christendom as well as the individual’s right to observe his ‘inner faith’ beyond any compulsory encumbrance.³⁸³”

Of course, this distinction between inner belief (which is beyond all enforceability) and outer action (which pertains to the right of the sovereign) is a distinction also found in Spinoza, especially the *Tractatus*. Fully aware of this fact, Schmitt identifies this Hobbesian proviso of personal conscience as decidedly destructive for the modern state. “This contained the seed of

³⁸² Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, 56.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 56.

death that destroyed the mighty leviathan from within and brought about the end of the mortal god.³⁸⁴ There is here a decidedly unconcealed allusion to the charge of Jewish deicide.

Only a few years after the appearance of the *Leviathan*, a liberal Jew noticed the barely visible crack in the theoretical justification of the sovereign state. In it he immediately recognized the telling inroad of modern liberalism, which would allow Hobbes' postulation of the relation between external and internal, public and private, to be inverted into its converse. Spinoza accomplished the inversion in the famous Chapter 19 of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which appeared in 1670. Already in the subtitle of his book he speaks of the *libertas philosophandi*. He begins his exposition by maintaining that in the interest of external peace and external order, the sovereign state power can regulate the public religious cult and that every citizen must accommodate himself to this regulation.³⁸⁵

The key term here is of course "external." The sovereign's maintenance of the public cult is, explicitly, for the utilitarian ends of public peace and security. All at once, the personal proviso established by Hobbes, one grounded (Schmitt thinks) in a genuine Christian faith and sincere fidelity to the state, is exploited for opposite ends. Precisely because the "state cult" is reduced to mere external formalities, it thereby loses all of its spiritual vitality. What was meant by Hobbes as a mere proviso for the non-believer, a way to maintain outer confession while inner piety was impossible, becomes something far more radical in Spinoza. The state religion, itself, becomes something agnostic, purely formal, external, and ceremonial – lacking all pretense to inner belief.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

Everything that refers to religion receives its legal validity, *vim juris*, only through the command of the state's power. The state's power, however, determines only the external cult. Hobbes laid the groundwork for separating the internal from the external in the sections of the *Leviathan* that deal with a belief in miracles and confession. The Jewish philosopher pushed this incipient form to the limit of its development until the opposite was reached and the leviathan's vitality was sapped from within and life began to drain out of him. 'I am speaking explicitly,' says Spinoza, 'only of the external cult, not of piety itself or of the internal worship of God.' Inner conviction and 'piety itself' belong to the private sphere of individuals. 'Internus enim cultus et ipsa pietas uniuscujusque juris.'³⁸⁶

Yet Spinoza did not rest there. Since the state cult is sapped of all of its intrinsic, spiritual meaning, and left with only the utilitarian function of providing cohesiveness and security, then the whole orientation of ends and means undergoes a dramatic changing of places. While for Hobbes the people exist for the state, are united in will and deed for the state, and the sovereign, far from being "deduced" or "created" by the people, instead asserts itself transcendentally following a "spark of reason;" the opposite is the case in Spinoza. In Spinoza's theologico-political philosophy, the state exists for the people, as does the state cult. It serves merely a utilitarian purpose. It is true that, even in Spinoza, this involves something like a principle of cohesiveness. Nonetheless, it is cohesiveness for the ends of the happiness and welfare of individual citizens. Individuals, not the political sovereign, become the *summum bonum*. This, in Schmitt's estimation, is the decisive mark of liberalism. It is a reversal of Hobbes original intent, cleverly exploiting a minor proviso.

Hobbes focused on public peace and the right of sovereign power; individual freedom of thought was an implicit right open only as long as it remained private. Now it is the

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

inverse: Individual freedom of thought is the form-giving principle, the necessities of public peace as well as the right of the sovereign power having been transformed into mere provisos. A small intellectual switch emanating from the nature of Jewish life accomplished, with the most simple logic and in the span of a few years, the decisive turn in the fate of the leviathan.³⁸⁷

What is illuminating here is Schmitt's explanation as to why this reversal ever came about. He owes it to the particular nature of Spinoza's "Jewish life." This is entirely consequential, and should not be set aside as simply Schmitt's "playing to his National Socialist audience." This statement, in fact, unifies Schmitt's views on liberalism, homogeneity, sovereignty, and "the hidden," and in turn jointly help to explain his views on political toleration.

In an even more straightforward statement, Schmitt asserts:

"Spinoza's treatise is strongly dependent on Hobbes. But the Englishman did not endeavor with such a proviso to appear out of context of the beliefs of his people but, on the contrary, to remain within it, whereas the Jewish philosopher, on the other hand, who approached the religion of the state as an outsider, naturally provided a proviso that emanated from the outside."³⁸⁸

We see that Schmitt places a premium upon the spiritual sincerity of the political theorist. Hobbes, like Erastus and Frederick the great, was a loyal and native member of his nation and a believing Christian. His move towards neutralization and even his personal proviso were meant to serve these spiritual interests and genuine loyalties. In the hands of the Jewish Spinoza,

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 58.

³⁸⁸ Ibid, 57-58.

however, no such spiritual fidelity can exist. The personal proviso is now put into to the service of a spiritual and racial “outsider.”

Consistent with Schmitt’s unvarying skepticism about “the universal,” the personal proviso was, in fact, never a truly neutral mechanism. Yes, the form of the proviso, the guarantee of the freedom of inner piety, is technically neutral. However, it is always in the service of some particular, spiritual end. In Hobbes (as in Erastus), this end was Christian and national – the maintenance and stability of the kingdom. In Spinoza, the particular end was, in Schmitt’s view, only Jewish subversion.

Working secretly, never openly opposing the state as an honest political enemy, the Jewish philosopher used his cleverness and peculiarly “Jewish reason” to dissect the state from within. This was what Hamann identified as, “the Jewish tactic of drawing distinctions,” a sign more of the “certainty of animals” than the dignified “uncertainty of men.”³⁸⁹ Spinoza’s eschewing of the sword for instead the sharpening of concepts, and his use of universal principles to this end, merely confirms Schmitt’s thesis. The dissection and division of the liberal state’s inner soul from its outer mechanism was the product of “above all, the restless spirit of the Jew who knew how to exploit the situation best until the relation of public and private, deportment and disposition was turned upside down.”³⁹⁰

What’s more, Schmitt is clear that the peculiarity of Spinoza’s logic and reasoning do not pertain to his individual genius alone. These are the products of the Jewish national spirit, the perennially nomadic, always parasitic spirit of the constant outsider. It transcends persons and

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

even generations such that the same “Jewish instinct” can be located in the 17th century’s Spinoza just as well as in the 18th century’s Moses Mendelssohn.

In the eighteenth century it was Moses Mendelssohn who in his work *Jerusalem. A Treaty on Religious Power and Judaism* (1783) validated the distinction between inner and outer, morality and right, inner disposition and outer performance and demanded from the state freedom of thought; he was of no great mind, intellectually not comparable to Spinoza, but endowed with the unerring instinct for the undermining of state power that served to paralyze the alien and to emancipate his own Jewish folk.³⁹¹

It matters not, for Schmitt, whether the Jewish theorist was a republican, as was Spinoza, a liberal individualist, like Mendelssohn, or even a conservative legitimist, as Friedrich Stahl. Indeed, even the profession of faith does not matter for Schmitt. (Stahl, whom Schmitt insists upon calling Stahl-Jolson so as to emphasize his Jewish parentage, in fact was baptized within the Lutheran Church at the age of nineteen, and in the course of his legal career actually saved the Prussian Evangelical Church from certain dissolution.) This was all a matter of simple concealment, another manifestation of “the hidden,” and a symptom of the persistent racial “instinct” of the Jewish folk. Schmitt clearly believed that the continuity of state-destroying Jewry, the use of clever reasoning and concept-sharpening, rested not upon confession or political alignment, but rather upon something far more intuitive, subterranean, and ethnic.

The nineteenth-century Jewish philosopher, Friedrich Julius Stahl-Jolson immediately recognized and utilized the gap. He compromised the concept of the by no means

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

neutral constitutional state concept of the German liberals...Using many beautiful words to justify the “Christian state” and antirevolutionary ‘legitimacy,’ the Jewish philosopher, with a sure goal and instinct, extended the line drawn by Spinoza and advanced by Moses Mendelssohn.³⁹²

Stahl-Jolson was the boldest in this Jewish front. He penetrated the Prussian state and the Evangelical church. The Christian baptismal sacrament provided him with not only a ‘ticket of entry’ into ‘society,’...but with an identity card that admitted him to the sanctuary of the still respectable German state. From high governmental positions he was able to confuse ideologically and paralyze spiritually the core of the commonwealth, kingship, nobility, and the Evangelical church...Stahl-Jolson, in accordance with the line developed by his people, used a deceitful manner to mask his motivation, which became all the more horrible the more desperate he became to be somebody other than he actually was.³⁹³

Indeed, for Schmitt, the Jew can never be “other than he actually is.” If there was ever any question as to whether Schmitt’s anti-Semitism was genuinely racial (as opposed to merely nationalistic) his treatment of the figure of Friedrich Stahl should conclude this debate. Stahl is not an individual actor, but rather part of a common Jewish lineage. The Jews, in the context of the liberal state, merely use the concepts of individualism for their own, secret ends as a people. It pertains to the Jewish ethnic spirit to tear apart the leviathan from within, especially by perverting the liberal mechanisms innocently proposed by loyal (if naive) gentiles. It is entirely inconsequential if, as with Stahl, one explicitly argues on behalf of Christianity and Monarchy. “But in the great historical continuum that leads from Spinoza by way of Moses Mendelssohn into the century of ‘constitutionalism,’ Stahl-Jolson did his work as a Jewish thinker – that is, he did his part in castrating a leviathan that had been full of vitality.³⁹⁴”

³⁹² Ibid., 69.

³⁹³ Ibid., 70.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 70.

The overall, combined effect of Schmitt's political positions (his identification of the political with the unitary sovereign, his emphasis upon the "spiritual unity" of the sovereign and its homogenous people, his drive to abolish the hidden, and his insistence that all apparently universal, liberal, and individualistic concepts are in fact always in the service of one or another national-ethnic interest) come together so as to define Schmitt's stance on toleration.

We recall that Schmitt recognizes toleration (especially confessional toleration) as a necessary innovation of the modern state in the 17th century; a way to affect its technical-administrative perfection. Toleration was merely the accompaniment of the primary phenomenon – neutralization. For the state to gain its true political sovereignty, it had to affirm its unitary (and therefore decisionistic) ability to legislate, without regard for the specific religious content of the laws. "Right" had to pertain only to the command of the state sovereign. However, in doing so, (and with much help from subversive Jewish influence) this neutralization ended with a total mechanization – a total sapping of all inner vitality of the liberal state. What's more, Schmitt cites the specific origin of this degradation as the misuse and exploitation of Hobbes personal, individualistic proviso.

What is necessary, therefore, is a return to the self-conscious national spirit, a revitalization of the very soul of the people and the sovereign. Schmitt is clear, this cannot entail a return to the pre-modern, pre-liberal medieval conception of society in which the Church retained its own claim to "right" and people possessed a religious "right to resist" state authority.³⁹⁵ This amounts to a quasi-pluralist situation in which sovereignty is divided and the political cannot truly assert itself. Instead, the gains of neutralization (which conferred unitary

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

decisionism upon the sovereign) have to be maintained without the after-effect of total mechanization and consequent depoliticalization.

The answer, for Schmitt, is the assertion of a personal sovereign who is at once unitary and decisionistic (not bound to any temporal or ecclesiastical authority outside of itself) but at the same time is itself robustly spiritual. The infallible state sovereign must not only be infallible in terms of outer acts, but moreover must command the very souls of his people. That is why national, (if not outright racial) homogeneity is so very important for Schmitt's conception of democracy. Democracy for him entails not equality (we saw that Schmitt affirms both hierarchy and elites), but rather identity. A certain homogeneous kind of people must identify with their spiritual equal as leader.

Of course this sort of decisionism, that which retains the gains of 17th century neutralization without its bad aftereffects, needn't have anything to do with toleration. While Early Modern neutralization, in order to achieve bureaucratic efficiency and true sovereignty of the state, allowed for toleration in matters of personal piety; Schmitt's decisionism demands, in fact, the very opposite. In his political theology, the personality, unity, and infallibility of the state sovereign demand a positive homogeneity – not only in terms of outer act, but also in inner spirit.

In Strauss' political philosophy toleration became impossible because of an overriding particularism. There could be no neutral ground from which to affect "universal sympathy." In Schmitt, the move against toleration is all the stronger. As a consequence of the inner logic at work in this epistemological dialectic, toleration becomes not merely impossible, but decidedly absurd and undesirable.

Schmitt's most consistent pluralism demands a free, criterion-less decision between domains of human endeavor. The most "decisive" domain, the political, is therefore supreme. Yet the political, for it to be truly decisionistic and truly autonomous, must possess its own, inner spirit. What's more, this cannot be the spirit of bourgeois science, of economics, or universal morality – all of which presuppose some objective, trans-historical realities, inherently at odds with the irrational and intuitive logic of the pure decision. No, the soul and vital power within political decisionism must be national, ethnic, or racial. Only these categories of existence can give rise to the truly autonomous political will; for only these rely solely upon the irrational, instinctive feelings of peoplehood, commitment, action, and loyalty.

Only in myth can the criterion be found for deciding whether one nation or a social group has a historical mission and has reached its historical moment. Out of the depths of a genuine life instinct, not out of reason or pragmatism, springs the great enthusiasm, the great moral decision and the great myth. In direct intuition the enthusiastic mass creates a mythical image that pushes its energy forward and gives it the strength for martyrdom as well as the courage to use force.³⁹⁶

The political spirit cannot descend from rational heights, but only arise out of mythic depths. Yet it necessarily cannot do so in serene isolation. Schmitt's dictum is that "life struggles with life, not death." The political spirit, inherently national or racial, must constantly struggle with another – whether this enemy be internal or external. It is not enough to destroy the Jews so as to maintain the state. The political state in fact requires its constant enemy – an

³⁹⁶ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 68.

enemy which is not merely an economic or geographic rival, but instead a locus of hostility which is truly political, spiritual, and thus national.

Schmitt's consistent pluralism and decisionism yield a doctrine of "anti-toleration" as opposed to mere "intolerance." The latter is the effect of mere parochialism and personal hatred. No doubt Schmitt suffered from such parochialism, but he raised this to the level of a self-consistent political theology. A state defiantly opposed to toleration of the "spiritually alien" is a state which has once again found its inner life. Only in this way can the political be reclaimed.

CHAPTER SIX: Concluding Thoughts

By way of conclusion we should take a large step back and see the ideological spectrum before us, not for its minute details but for its broad strokes. At two opposing ends are the figures of Baruch Spinoza and Carl Schmitt – divided in time, personality, social station, and culture, as they were in their metaphysics and politics. On the one hand we have the Jewish-pantheist dissident, dissident even in his own community, who advocated egalitarian wealth redistribution, a participatory democracy, broad personal liberties of expression and thought, and an end to pointless wars. On the other end we have Carl Schmitt, Nazi jurist and architect of racial laws, advocate of a new state intolerance, opponent of individualistic conceptions of liberty, critic of “mechanistic” voting, defender of dictatorship and the unitary executive, and above all else, advocate of a conception of politics fundamentally based in antagonism and war.

Nonetheless, there are apparent coincidences between these two opposites. Both Schmitt and Spinoza (drawing on Hobbes) affirm something like the indivisibility of state sovereignty. Both deny that the state can or should share its authority with sectarian churches, and finally, both affirm that “right” is something wholly posterior to the extant state itself.

Yet it is just here, in the apparent coincidences, that we can really see how Spinoza and Schmitt not only differ but, on a fundamental level, are mutually exclusive of one another. The very reason as to why the state should remain undivided in its sovereignty is derived, in each of these theorists, from wholly opposite ways of thinking. For Spinoza, it is simply the case that a state which divides its authority with a church or some other social organization will be inherently unstable. It will naturally become encumbered with the multiplication of religious rules and edicts; all transparency will be lost, and with it, all accountability. In turn, the state

will become merely a tool of the powerful and connected to fulfill their own private desires. Superficially, this has something in common with Schmitt's drive to uncover the "hidden" – those secret but powerful private interests which lurk behind the government armature, while all the while using it for personal gain. Nonetheless, the essential difference is that Schmitt holds the existence of "the political" as a sort of highest good in itself. Since it is the domain of the volitionally free decision, this realm of the political is the "most decisive" and thus supreme.

None of this odd formalism can be found in Spinoza's thought. For Spinoza, the state has to be maintained against powerful private interests (both secular and ecclesiastical) for reason of the public good. Spinoza's dictum is that "nothing good can exist without the state;" and by this he does not mean anything mystical or esoteric. Simply, the state is that human organization in which the intellects and bodies of individuals combine so as to form a more powerful whole. Coordination and cooperation within a state is what allows for roads and hospitals, increased food production, museums, libraries, schools, and universities. In other words, the state is that organization which is the material prerequisite for the rational flourishing of the human body and mind – that highest sort of happiness. In Spinoza, state is equated with civilization.

All of this is simply an anathema to Schmitt and his revolutionary conservative milieu whose aesthetics are marked by a revival of the *Sturm und Drang* of Hamann, and the "Storm of Steel" of Ernst Jünger. In all, the calm tranquility, the emphasis upon peace, security, welfare, and most of all comfort are derided by Schmitt as relics of Enlightenment-era Rationalism, and primary causes of the degeneration of society. For Schmitt and his ilk, such ideals are symptomatic of a morbid preoccupation with the corporeal, material, and mechanical, and a fundamental disrespect for the decisionistic freedom of the will.

This, then, brings us to the primary difference between Schmitt and Spinoza. While Schmitt's political theology is essentially grounded in a valorization of the voluntaristic will – cleansed of all intellectual strictures, Spinoza's political philosophy emanates from a robust rationalism which takes such a conception of "free will" to be merely an absurd illusion. This basic division, while constituting an interesting philosophical debate, has real and serious implications for the form of state each advocates.

Schmitt's valorization of the decisionistically free will is what leads directly to his theory of dictatorship. For, unlike universal reason, the entirely free will is something which cannot be generalized or held in common amongst several subjects. It is not stable, discursive, containable, reproducible, or even comprehensible. The free will is necessarily something which is always unique, freely changing, and uninhibited by anything external to it, or even its subject's own nature. If "the political" is truly the domain of freedom, then only one person can assume supreme political command in any given realm. For, again, this sort of decisionistic freedom cannot be shared or restricted by commonly observed laws.

Schmitt's notion of the indivisibility of political sovereignty, in light of this conception of the will, must therefore necessarily be understood as dictatorial autocracy. The people, meanwhile, must be homogeneously constituted in their unanimous support for this willful dictator. Though contemporary "pluralists" may wish to make use of Schmitt for their own purposes in advocating for an agonistic, participatory democracy – this is an untenable project. For Schmitt, necessarily, the people must all be of one accord, and civil society must, in fact, be "drained" of all "political forces."³⁹⁷ The people, likewise, cannot owe their allegiance to the personal sovereign for positive-legalistic reasons as written down in a constitution, nor can they

³⁹⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, li.

base their allegiance on rational self-interest. For discursive reasons of these sorts, once again, restrict and are incompatible with the total freedom of the political will. Rather, as Schmitt explicates at length, the people must be united under their *Führer* by way of a common myth – an intuitive, irrational belief or feeling which binds them to the one, remaining free will. For it pertains to the totally free will to not be controlled, but rather to dominate all others.

Once more, none of this can be found in Spinoza's conception of undivided state sovereignty. The sovereignty and stability of the state have nothing to do with enshrining and preserving "the political." Such a concept would appear to Spinoza, correctly, as merely an imaginative and dangerous holdover from theology. In Spinoza, the sovereignty of the state simply follows his more general theory of the conatus. An individual conatus, (whether this be an individual person, an individual building, or an individual state), can be said to remain intact so long as its composite parts remain in constant relative motion to one another. Put in simpler terms, Spinoza holds a largely functional conception of the state. A state can be said to be stable if the individuals who compose the state remain in relative coordination with one another, and allow the whole to continue to function as a whole. Sovereignty cannot be split between the state and another entity because this would threaten its functionality. For similar reasons, the state ought to allow for a wide degree of personal liberty (in thought, communication, inner piety, and philosophy) for individual citizens. The unenforceable nature of laws which restrict these simply harms the continued functioning of the state.

Intrinsic to Spinoza's rationalist doctrine of state is the idea that each individual citizen is, as well, subject to their own respective conatus. That is to say, each individual citizen, so long as they are rational, inherently desires their own welfare, power, and general continuance of their existence. Inasmuch as the commonwealth is a material prerequisite for the increase in

individual human flourishing and welfare, then it is in the rational self interest of all individuals to support and participate in the state – and indeed to reform the state so as to function more perfectly.

In this way, under Spinoza’s theory, the flourishing of individual reason is good for the state, not bad. There is no concern for discursive reason limiting the “radical freedom” of a decisionistic sovereign. No such will and no such individual can possibly exist in the first place. What does potentially exist is a rational social coordination which is only ever aided by individuals sharing in common with one another a universal reason – participation in a universal intellect. Hence we see in Spinoza’s discussion of the ancient Hebrews in his Tractatus something like a state religious cult – but this “religious” education is not, ultimately, indoctrination into a myth – it is more nearly civic education. People must be communally educated as to the laws of the state, the form of state participation, and to see that it is in their own, best (rational) interest to support the state, or else reform it.

The Schmittian will likely object that regimes of “schoolmasterly dictatorship” are nonetheless not sufficient to maintain an orderly and just commonwealth. Some people will simply never benefit from civic education, and will persist in their antisocial, rapacious, and even self-destructive behavior regardless of the earnest efforts of educators or the state. The remedy, for Schmitt, can only ever be active dictatorship, an exclusion of the recalcitrant as enemies of the state, and a subsequent unification of the remaining homogeneous population under a strong, intuitively appealing myth. Indeed, this attitude toward the supposed naïveté of Enlightenment-era rationalism as being merely “hopeful” and “utopian” is present more than ever today. However, this is a gross mischaracterization. Spinoza, specifically, understood with perfect clarity that most people act for irrational, impassioned reasons most of the time. Wisdom and

reason are, rather often, overcome by the external influences of bodily urges and enflamed senses.

Spinoza's solution, however, does not consist of foisting upon the masses an irrational myth. Instead, the remedy is an even more rational construction of the state. Specifically, Spinoza's conception of the ideal state as having an independent judiciary, elected and accountable representatives, an army conscripted from the whole populace, and perennial redistribution of the means of production (i.e. the equalitarian reapportioning of productive farmland during the jubilee year), meant that princes and magistrates were structurally precluded from seeking their own private interests at the expense of the state. Whether these individuals saw that it was in their best common interest to remain honest was aside from the point. The genuine participatory democracy which comes only from equality in material wealth was simply an external bulwark against corruption. Even universal state education would serve this purpose – not in the sense of educating the magistrate “to be good” – but rather in the sense that the great mass of people being educated, were at once also the workers and the army as well. A militant, educated populace was meant to be the greatest structural deterrence to personal greed.

It should be clear, now, that despite surface similarities the state theories of Schmitt and Spinoza are entirely incompatible as they arise from mutually exclusive metaphysical propositions. The endeavor of the contemporary, post-structuralist Left to make use of Schmitt, to appropriate him for their own Left-liberal agenda, is a doomed project.³⁹⁸ Schmitt himself would say as much. While the post-structuralist and deconstructionist Left may wish to move beyond “rational consensus” and reaffirm in politics a sort of “agonistic pluralism,” they are

³⁹⁸ In the introduction to Chantal Mouffe, ed., *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London and New York: Verso Books, 1999) for instance, Mouffe describes all of the contributors to the book as being of a Left-liberal orientation.

mistaken to think that these can lead anywhere apart from authoritarian, irrational dictatorship. It has nothing to do with the personal intentions or backgrounds of these contemporary theorists. The very concepts of agonism and pluralism themselves are steeped in a metaphysics of the will which, as we have seen, necessarily destroys all stable pluralities in the name of a truly robust pluralism. The decisionistically free will is something so sui generis and unique that it cannot admit of any law, order, consensus, cooperation, respect or solidarity – apart from that which it freely and spontaneously creates on its own. What’s more, it pertains to the nature of such a will to tend towards domination of the other rather than cooperation – for its very life-instinct arises from a vitalizing *polemos*, a constant struggle of life with life within the “political pluriverse.”

Of course, the partisans of the contemporary Left are not the first ones to use Schmittian concepts for supposedly liberal-democratic ends. No, the first to attempt this was Carl Schmitt himself. At least, this is what his supporters would assert – namely, that Schmitt, for ideals of sovereignty and “the political” urged the Reich president to invoke Article 48 of the constitution and declare a state of emergency so as to save the liberal Weimar Republic. By now, however, it must be perfectly clear to us that Schmitt could not have sincerely wished to save the republic. Yes, it is possible that he wished to maintain, against its internal enemies, the name of Weimar, the office of Reich president, the location of the Reichstag, and the like. Yet these are all obvious superficialities.

The constant lesson of Carl Schmitt is that the move towards active dictatorship, the declaration of a state of exception, the affirmation of “the political,” in every instance indelibly changes the very nature of the political actor who does so. From his example of the rise of nationalism within the Soviet dictatorship, to the anarchists’ ultimate affirmation of hierarchy and discipline – the pattern is wholly invariable. The affirmation of the political means a

shedding of all previous ideals – first amongst these are the apolitical ideals of liberal democracy and parliamentary representation. That Schmitt urged the use of Article 48 is not evidence that he was a loyal supporter of the liberal Weimar Republic. To the contrary; Schmitt’s own writings confirm that this was but the first necessary step in the complete and utter transformation of the republic into something like its opposite. Article 48 was a self-destruct button, and nothing less.

There can be no synthesis of the metaphysics of will with the politics of freedom and solidarity. What Schmitt (as well as Strauss) has correct is that a choice must be made. There can either be a return to Spinoza or an honest affirmation of the will, myth, and dictatorship. Everything else has been merely a stalling tactic, a playful shifting around of incompatible concepts, or as Schmitt himself so nicely put it, a “short interim period in which it was possible to answer the question ‘Christ or Barabbas?’³⁹⁹”

No middle ground – The conceptual movement from Sartre, to Strauss, to Schmitt

The most provocative aspect of this thesis is the notion that there can be no middle ground. Our choices are binary – either we affirm Spinoza, monism, determinism, and rationalism, or else we commit ourselves to Schmitt, *polemos*, dictatorship, and the strong will. The superficially easy, moderate pluralism which exists between these poles is nothing but an unstable void. For even a minor departure from the monistic, rationalist metaphysics of Spinoza leads inexorably to its polar opposite, both metaphysically and politically.

This is the most challenging part of my thesis simply because it is so absolutely unpopular. Very few political theorists, let alone actual politicians, are committed Schmittians.

³⁹⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 62.

Thus, very few politically minded individuals (outside of the academy) will mind very much my critique of Carl Schmitt and his writings. Yet the overwhelming majority of political discourse indeed exists in this dubious “middle ground” between the consistent positions of Spinoza and that of Schmitt. Modern liberal democracy, especially of the sort practiced in Anglophone countries, consciously prides itself on being “post-metaphysical” or “non-metaphysical.” It is all a matter of a plurality of voices in constant dialogue, and never about claiming any absolute truths grounded in universal reason (except, perhaps, universal but formalistic and procedural rules about debate itself). And so the uncomfortable implication of my thesis is that the pragmatic, pluralistic form of democracy practiced in most Western societies today is totally shot through with deep, metaphysical contradictions, and is thus inherently unstable. There is, in other words, a built-in tendency for polities not self-consciously based in universal, monistic reason to degrade into a Schmittian, will-based tyranny.

The proof for this is, of course, a priori and conceptual. However, I hope that I have given additional credence to this tendency by way of examining the relative political positions of the historical figures of Jean-Paul Sartre, Leo Strauss, and Carl Schmitt (in Chapters Three, Four, and Five respectively). The systems of these political theorists are fitting illustrations as to how minor departures from a consistent, monistic rationalism inherently degrades into the radical a total rejection of reason altogether.

As we look back to the specific “order and connections” of these theorists, we will first notice in Chapter Three the very tempting, very intuitively appealing position of Sartre and his moderate critique of Spinozist, (or as he called it, “analytic”) rationalism. The critique, found especially in Sartre’s political pamphlet Anti-Semite and Jew (1944), is in the first place practical. It objects to the universal, analytic-rationalist position because of its inability to

combat the irrational and racist anti-Semite. For the analytic universalist, the whole world operates according to objective, mechanical laws. Human beings are merely a certain modification of the great mechanism that is the universe. No people, no subculture, ethnicity, gender, or faith community is inherently unique; rather they are all composed of natural human beings endowed with the same sort of natural reason, and thus deserving of the same formal and universal rights (freedom of speech, assembly, and so on). While Sartre clearly affirms these abstract, liberal rights, he nonetheless sees them as insufficient. They are too abstract, too universal to safeguard those individuals who, in fact, are singled out and persecuted for their particular ethnicity, religion, or race.

For example, the universal and abstract right to the freely express oneself protects the anti-Semite just as much as his Jewish victims, or perhaps more so. Popular, irrational hate speech becomes safeguarded by supposedly rational, universalist laws. What is needed, in Sartre's estimation, is an honest recognition of the particular facticity and unique identity of a cultural group. Only then can we ably defend the rights and welfare of said group.

Of course, as Sartre readily admits, this means adopting the more particularist and synthetic methodology of the anti-Semite himself. This methodology always looks at individual cultural identities in terms of their concrete uniqueness, rather than their abstract participation in a "universal humanity." Yet, for Sartre, the end of this methodology is totally unlike that of the anti-Semite. An honest recognition of a culture's unique place in society is the prerequisite for demanding specific and unique protections for that cultural group as against equally specific enemies. Moreover, whereas the racist views cultures in their particularity because he always desires segregation and exclusion, Sartre dares to confront the concrete particularities of cultures for the ultimate goal of universal emancipation and brotherhood.

In essence, sincerely confronting the actual facticity of a cultural identity, how that culture came to be, how it is threatened, and how it relates to the surrounding populace, is precisely what allows for that culture to be no longer trapped within said facticity. Honest recognition of one's place in the world is just that thing which allows for the self-determination of oneself beyond historical situatedness. Again, in Lukács' words, this is a prime example of fusing "Left ethics" with "Right epistemology."⁴⁰⁰ In other words, an epistemology which emphasizes concrete particularities beyond rational universals is put to the practical end of founding a society based upon universal principles of brotherhood, equality, and non-exploitation. "We learned to turn pluralism (that concept of the Right) against the optimistic, monistic idealism of our professors – in the name of a Leftist thought which was still ignorant of itself. Enthusiastically we adopted all those doctrines which divided men into watertight groups."⁴⁰¹,

As tempting as this strategy may be, however, there is a fatal tension within Sartre's system. Put simply, the poles of "Right epistemology" and "Left ethics" can never be fused. There are a number of distinct reasons for this fact:

First, there is the problem of sincerity. Sartre counsels the Jews to honestly and sincerely embrace their Jewish cultural identity for the ultimate end of human emancipation. Jews must confront their own facticity not because there is anything inherently wonderful about it (in terms of its literature, music, morality, or mysticism). Rather, Sartre's imperative for the Jews to embrace their own culture is wholly pragmatic; it is a means to the ultimate end of social emancipation. Indeed, as we have seen, Sartre is provocatively candid about this point: "But we

⁴⁰⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 22.

⁴⁰¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 19.

have shown that the Jews have neither community of interests nor community of beliefs. They do not have the same fatherland; they have no history. The sole tie that binds them is the hostility and disdain of the societies which surround them.⁴⁰²

But, ironically, there is a pragmatic problem here with Sartre's pragmatic advice to the Jews. Namely, why would a whole people mobilize to "sincerely" embrace their cultural heritage while, at the same time, be fully cognizant that there is nothing of substance to embrace? There is an almost definitional absurdity here, and consequently a practical problem of mobilization.

This is then tied to a second flaw. Precisely because the Jewish identity lacks positive, intrinsic definition, and precisely because Sartre's ultimate goal is a Left-wing, universalist one, the Jewish identity as an identity becomes a de facto object of sacrifice. Sartre is absolutely clear that while he feels free to use "right wing" epistemologies of particularity as a means, his ends are perfectly universal. So analogously, in speaking of Marxism and the workers' movement, Sartre clearly denies that his stance is in any way "Manichean." In other words, as a practical means, he advocates for worker self-consciousness, or put otherwise, that workers clearly see and affirm their particular identity as a worker – and not merely as an abstract human being. Nonetheless, the end of this project is nothing like an eternally celebrated "worker identity" over and above the antagonistic identity of the capitalist. Quite the opposite – the practical end of worker self-consciousness is the total dissolution and abolition of the worker identity along with the identity of the capitalist. In other words, worker class consciousness is put in the service of revolution, and the founding of a classless society where the antagonistic and unique identities of "worker" and "capitalist" will have no relevance or meaning whatsoever. "Let us compare for a

⁴⁰² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 91.

moment the revolutionary idea of the class struggle with the Manichaeism of the anti-Semite. In the eyes of the Marxist, the class struggle is in no sense a struggle between Good and Evil...the results of its victory will necessarily involve the **abolition** of the class structure.⁴⁰³

Consistently, Sartre must take a similar stance with reference to Jewish identity. The analogy is clear. The worker is to the capitalist as the Jew is to the anti-Semite. Just as the worker affirms his particular identity as a worker so as to ultimately create an egalitarian society free of classes; the Jew must affirm his identity as a Jew so as to create a society free of anti-Semitic antagonism. But if Jewish facticity is defined only negatively (i.e. not because of a shared history, fatherland, or belief system, but only “through the hostility and disdain of the societies which surround them”), then it is starkly evident that Jewish identity, like worker identity, will not survive this new and tolerant society. For Jewish identity is nothing but this negative relation to the hostile other. Thus, this second flaw in Sartre’s stance is that it is unclear as to why, or even how, Jews can proudly and authentically affirm their own cultural identity when they know full well that the ultimate aim of this procedure is to dissolve this identity altogether.

This is a troubling problem because it is exactly in light of this realization that we see Sartre’s analogy between worker and Jew totally break down. In a way it makes perfect sense for the worker to affirm his identity as worker even though he knows that, if successful, that identity will dissolve away. For the worker, as Sartre himself puts it, at least has, “a profound unity of material ...interests” with his fellow workers.⁴⁰⁴ Organized, revolutionary workers do not simply want to be respected “as workers” in some formalistic sense. They have material

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 41-42

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

interests. They want job security, food for their families, adequate housing, medical care, education for their children, and autonomy in the workplace. The Jew, defined entirely negatively, does not even share these. So while the worker can reasonably look forward to a day when there are no more “workers and capitalists,” but only an egalitarian society of producers; what can the Jew look forward to as a Jew? He shares no material interests (nor any other interests) with all other Jews. Nothing of him can remain once the antagonism which solely defines him is gone. So once more, the question must be asked: Can the Jew sincerely affirm his identity for the end of its ultimate dissolution? Is this even psychologically possible?

Lastly, there is the fatal problem of “normativity” in Sartre. Specifically, Sartre’s “Left ethics” seems to suggest a universalist, versus a thoroughly particularist, ethics. Again, Sartre’s stated goal is not the endless perpetuation of antagonistic identities – but rather the universalist goals of egalitarianism and non-exploitation. Of course, it is right to question whether the affirmation of these universalist goals are in any way compatible with Sartre’s underlying existentialism. If Sartre is sincere in his existentialism, and specifically the notion that our identities, our sense of self, and our sense of right and wrong are produced from within the context of a given facticity, then how does Sartre arrive at these apparently universal moral ideals?

One likely answer is that Sartre can retain universal moral ideals, while still being an existentialist, through recourse to the “will.” The argument would be that Sartre doesn’t need a monistic metaphysics, or even a singular conception of human nature, in order to affirm a robust ethics which spans all cultural identities everywhere. For no matter what facticity shapes one’s particular identity, one’s identity is always the product, at the same time, of a free will. In semi-Kantian fashion, Sartre can claim that, though there is no single, objective human nature, all

humans nonetheless share the subjective faculty of free volition. It is this faculty of the free will which, therefore, provides the foundation for a supposedly universalist, but also existentialist, ethics.

In a formal sense, it is always wrong to abrogate the will of others because this immediately results in a contradiction. For to do so would mean that you, yourself, will that another's freedom be annulled, and thus affirm freedom while at the same time denying it. It is easy to see, however, that this formal reasoning is actually vacuous and formalistic.

The "free will" (especially the sort of de-intellectualized free will as imagined by the existentialist) is not the sort of entity which can ever be universalized. In other words, by its very nature (or, perhaps more appropriately, its "anti-nature"), the free will is something which is always *sui generis*, unique, un-categorizable, and thus unfathomable. Consequently, how do we even know that this will exists in others as it does in ourselves? Moreover, how can we know when we are annulling the free will of others? What does this look like?

Perhaps the commonsensical answer is that we, of course, do know when the freedom of others is being threatened. We see it all the time, whether this be in economic exploitation in the workplace, the denial of opportunity because of skin color, gender, or sexual preference, the needless poverty of the third world, or simply the violent maiming and killing of innocents around the globe in any number of brutal conflicts. We may immediately feel that these are prime examples of the free will of human beings being negated. Though this may be true, such a claim is actually parasitic upon a very rich conception of human nature. Starvation, economic exploitation, the denial of education, and physical violence are ethically odious precisely because all people are, (as Spinoza confirms) bodily and intellectual creatures.

Moreover, we necessarily care about the bodily and mental welfare of others because they share in the same intelligible, objective nature as ourselves. While we, by virtue of the logical principle of the conatus, necessarily care about our own wellbeing, insofar as we are rational, we just as immediately care about the mental and physical wellbeing of others – precisely because rational monism tells us that, in the strictest sense, they are not truly other.

Of course, all of this is wholly denied by Sartre in his initial departure from Spinozist (i.e. Analytic) rationalism. Yet, devoid of a universal (and universally intelligible) human nature, it is entirely unclear how we are to know what is ethical and what is not. The formalistic rule of “respecting the free volition of others” gives us no aid whatsoever because, as stated, it pertains to the totally free will to be unfathomable and un-categorizable beyond its concrete, particular manifestations. It is just that thing which constantly breaks through all stable, intelligible categories, and so cannot be categorically detected in all people.

Moreover, there is this corollary problem of motivation – namely, the open question as to why we should care about the welfare of others. Simply affirming one’s own freedom while denying the freedom of others does not appear to be a strict contradiction after all. This is for the same basic reason that the will (especially as conceived by the existentialist) is never the sort of thing which can be said to be identical to other wills. The solution to the problem of normative motivation is indeed solved only by metaphysical monism. For only monism posits a strict identity of all beings within an intelligible whole, and thus determines our egoistic self-regard to be fully generalized to all human beings, insofar as we are rational.

The same problem of Sartre’s recourse to the will rears its head on the more positive question of “solidarity.” Cultural identity, one’s facticity, is said by Sartre to be partially the

product of objective social, economic, and historical situations. However, in keeping with his robust conception of the de-intellectualized, free will, Sartre claims that a given person's facticity can be imagined and freely expressed in any number of radically different ways. So, for instance, the Jews are Jews because of their social context of being surrounded by any number of hostile host cultures. This much is objective and unchangeable. However, if we take Sartre at his word, the individual Jew should be able to freely conceive of his particular facticity in any number of different manners depending on his particular, free will.

The pitfall here is that there seems to be no basis for a shared identity within the cultural community of Jews. For any two Jews may freely express and conceive of their Jewishness (their Jewish "facticity") in radically divergent ways. That is, after all, the very nature of radically free volition – it may result in radically deviating decisions. However, if this is the case, then all that these two Jews will have in common is this totally empty signifier – i.e. that they are "called Jews." Or, as Sartre put it, "In effect, the Jew is to another Jew the only man with whom he can say 'we.'⁴⁰⁵" But why would he want to?

In Sartre's own historical context there were a number of French collaborators who willingly, out of fear or sincere conviction, worked with the occupying Germans and their Vichy counterparts. There were also many French citizens who worked underground in the Resistance, actively undermining the occupation with sabotage and assassinations. No one would claim that their mutual facticity of simply being French implies the imperative of solidarity between collaborator and Resistance fighter! What matters in this context is rather the set of discursive beliefs about freedom, democracy, and specific military and political ends. Why, then, should matters stand differently for the Jews? Why should I take up arms alongside a fellow Jew if all

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

we have in common is this vacuous, formal designation? Indeed, the more radical problem for those interested in Jewish solidarity is how I can even begin to recognize another Jew as such, given that his free expression of that facticity may be radically, even unimaginably, different from my own.

Lastly, this problem of solidarity has implications between identities as well. Suppose that, somehow, all of the individual Jews with all of their individual, radically free and unaccountable wills, nonetheless arrived at a single expression of Jewishness to which they could all (more or less) agree. Even in such a miraculous situation, there is still the question as to how those who do not share in this facticity can comprehend who the Jews are, let alone have sincere, meaningful solidarity with them. In other words, how could gentiles, (such as Sartre), ever approach the Jews from the position of the outsider “looking in?” For here there is no possibility for a common facticity. Again, if facticity is partly the product of a free, and thus unintelligible will, then the facticity of the other must, likewise, not be fully intelligible or comprehensible. But if this is the case, then what hope is there for sincere solidarity between cultural identities? Thus it is very telling (though not uncontroversial), that Sartre would late in life admit that “to be able to understand the Jew from within – that I really cannot do. I would have to be one.”⁴⁰⁶ Ultimately, his existential principles of unique identities (and the free volitions which conceive them) run contrary to the universal principles of ethical solidarity and recognition.

In the final analysis, all the consistent existentialist can do is to affirm his or her own identity, that is to say, his or her own unique facticity. This has consequences not only for those “looking in” at the Jewish people from the outside, but also for the Jews themselves and their outer relationship to non-Jews. The consistently existentialist Jew cannot be genuinely in a

⁴⁰⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Levy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, 102.

position of sympathetic solidarity with the non-Jew. His sincere commitment must be only to his own, sui generis identity. All subsequent relations with “the other” merely flow from this original, existential commitment. The political result of this more consistent existentialism will be the shedding of all universalist, socialist pretenses, and the “authentic” affirmation of specifically Jewish self-determination, apart from the ethical relation to non-Jews. In a word, the result is political Zionism. It is telling that this is, indeed, where Sartre himself ended up toward the end of his life – though this may have been largely due to the influence of those around him. This shift within Sartre, nonetheless, mirrors exactly the necessary, conceptual movement from a tenuous fusion of universal ethics and existential-pluralist methodology to a position of more consistent, particularism.

However, the truly clear and unequivocal expression of this “next logical moment” is not to be seen within Sartre himself, but rather in the figure of Leo Strauss, as seen in Chapter Four. It is in Strauss that we confront the Jewish existentialist who affirms his own Jewish identity, unabashedly, because it is his own. Once again, the constant advice of Strauss to those “ethical existentialists” is that this fusion is a pipe dream. “Universal sympathetic understanding is impossible. To speak crudely, one cannot have the cake and eat it; one cannot enjoy both the advantages of universal understanding and those of existentialism.”⁴⁰⁷

For Leo Strauss, there is no need to show that existential affirmation of one’s own identity is compatible, or somehow leads to, a universal ethics. He states from the very beginning that it does not and cannot. The only remaining imperative is to be what we are. We must authentically and mindfully choose what is good – and by “good” Strauss always means,

⁴⁰⁷ Leo Strauss, *Social Science and Humanism*, 11.

following Edmund Burke, that which is “home-bred and prescriptive.”⁴⁰⁸ In other words, what is normative is traditional and what is traditional is normative. All that is left for us to do is to choose the authentic life by affirming it.

Consequently, we see the young Strauss’ affirmation of an explicitly conservative and Revisionist form of Zionism (first modeled after Jabotinsky, and then maintained throughout his mature works such as his 1952, Progress or Return). It makes perfect sense, once the Straussian epistemological premises are accepted, to affirm a political project for the Jews such as Revisionist Zionism which is, at once, both “home-bred” and “prescriptive.” Unlike Political Zionism (which focused on official, legal recognition of the State of Israel) or Practical Zionism (which focused upon merely increasing the numbers of Jewish immigrants in Palestine), Strauss’ brand of Revisionist Zionism was neither primarily legalistic nor quantitative. Rather, its primary goal was the affirmation of a culturally Jewish nation, based on a positive and hegemonic endorsement of the spirit of Jewish nationhood. And lest anyone ask why the Jews should affirm their Jewish nationhood in this unqualified manner, even at the direct expense of the Arab and non-Jewish inhabitants of the region; the answer is by now more than obvious – because it is theirs! The Jews share in a positive, communal identity, “not second to that of any other group anywhere on earth” and authenticity demands that they freely, but unreservedly, assert this identity above and beyond all others.⁴⁰⁹

As wholly consistent as Strauss’ position may at first appear (and it is indeed far more consistent than that of Sartre), there is nonetheless a remaining tension. Namely, there is still the question as to how “Jewish identity” is formed. Unlike Sartre, Strauss affirms a bold, valorized,

⁴⁰⁸ Leo Strauss, *Progress or Return*, 112.

⁴⁰⁹ Leo Strauss, *Preface to Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 92.

and above all else, positive identity for the Jews. He thus avoids the problem of sincere motivation – namely, why the Jews would ever wish to affirm their Jewishness. For Strauss, they do, in fact, have specific things to be proud about.

However, like Sartre, Strauss holds that a given cultural identity is not merely the product of objective historical, social, and economic contexts. We do, in an existential sense, choose who we are. Similarly, we also freely choose what we take to be right or prescriptive. This much Strauss and Sartre have in common – specifically, their quintessentially existentialist and anti-rationalist denial of objective, universal, and intelligible natures, and therefore, the necessity of free choice. As Strauss puts it, the “lesson of History” is that we have never had objective legitimation, grounded in an intelligible and rational nature, for our cultural characteristics or normative values. Indeed, various cultures have always been shaped, not by necessity, but rather by the absolute contingency of existence. While, as Strauss asserts, this is horrifying to the committed Enlightenment rationalist (who demands necessity), and may drive her to a sort of pessimistic nihilism and relativism, the strong existentialist position need not crumble so. Rather, “*What man did in the past unconsciously and under the delusion of submitting to what is independent of his creative act, he must now do consciously.*”⁴¹⁰

In other words, Strauss counsels that we must boldly accept that the sort of culture we affirm, and the cultural characteristics that we normatively valorize over and above those of other cultures is not, truly, objectively superior. For no objective scale exists. Yet, at the same time, Strauss insists that we truly affirm it to be normatively superior just because it is ours! This is all we can do once the lesson of History (i.e. absolute contingency) is learned, and cannot be un-learned. In the end, the Straussian position, for all of its erudition and sophistication,

⁴¹⁰ Leo Strauss, *Relativism*, 25-26.

results in a sort of willful cultural chauvinism – entirely consistent with Strauss’ own neo-conservative politics.

Again, though, the problem Strauss does not solve in Sartre is one of identity formation. If we take Strauss at his premises, and agree that there is no objective or universal nature of Jewish identity, then how is it that Jewish identity actually comes to be? Supposedly, it is through the free, existential affirmations (both descriptive and normative) of the Jewish people themselves. However, if this is the case, then how do the voluntaristically free wills of the plurality of Jewish people ever become reconciled? How do we know who is truly Jewish, and participates in Jewish nationhood? For Strauss, the answer cannot be merely nominalist – involving a sort of empty signifier. It cannot, either, be simply negative and contextual as it sometimes appears to be in Sartre. For Strauss explicitly emphasizes that we do choose to valorize and affirm a positive, heroic Jewish identity. But then from where does this identity spring, and perhaps more importantly for political considerations, where are its limits?

At long last, this is the point at which the cultural-particularist position of Sartre gives way to the yet more consistent decisionism of Carl Schmitt. As we saw in Chapter Five, only Schmitt gives a coherent, and consistently will-based, existentialist answer to the question of identity formation. Schmitt realizes that voluntaristic wills cannot be reconciled. Existential commitment cannot, in the final analysis, be discursive, communicated, replicated, categorized, or intelligibly confirmed by universal principles. It is, intrinsically, *sui generis* and singular. Strauss clearly had this same instinct. It was his motivation for critiquing what he saw as the “quasi-existentialists” who wanted both to have their cake and to eat it too – those self-described existentialists who futilely asserted both the authentic, free commitment and universal sympathetic understanding. But he did not go far enough.

Schmitt's contribution is that if the free will is truly free, then it must be singular. The identity which it affirms must be creatively and freely affirmed in isolation. What is needed, finally, is a sovereign. There is no possibility for reconciling wills between cultural identities. There is, likewise, no possibility for reconciling multiple wills within identities. Rather, once we depart down this road of denying universal, rational natures, we necessarily end up in a position where a single and unitary will freely determines on its own the spirit of a nation. It does so not by encouraging the free expression and creation of other wills alongside it – but by the opposite, that is, by violently subduing all other wills to its own, singular rule. The association of the existentially free will and romantic, political despotism is not accidental – it is necessary and metaphysical. The only remaining question is whether we continue down this path, or return at once to Spinoza.

A return to Spinoza?

If the choice before us is indeed either a return to Spinoza or the acceptance of Schmitt's political conclusions, then it is certainly worth asking precisely what a return to Spinoza, in fact, means?

The very first thing a return to the Enlightenment rationalism of Spinoza must entail is a proper understanding of the decision at hand. We must, above all else, refuse the supposedly “free choice” between Reason and Will. To pose the question in this way is the perennial strategy of the anti-rationalist.

It is only a false humility which supposes a parity and equality between these two options – Reason and Will. Each one is cleverly described as a dogma, a self-consistent domain, or a “non-overlapping magisterium.” Of course, in such a state of pluralistic parity, where there is no

neutral and objective criterion to decide between them, but only a free choice, then the domain of criterion-free choice always gains supremacy. That is, the Will intrinsically has the upper hand given the very form of the decision. The choice, supposedly free and lacking criteria, presupposes a universe lacking in sufficient reason, and thus positively implies a reality supportive of the decisionistic Will and not Reason.

A return to Spinoza, therefore, must begin with a changing of the very form of this question. It is not that we freely choose between Reason and the Will. Rather, we necessarily choose Reason. The Spinozist answer, in other words, must be that it pertains to the intellect itself that it only ever chooses truth by the necessity of its very nature. There are no choices which lack sufficient reason just as there are no wills which exist free of the intellect.

One must, from the start, affirm a deterministic monism— a monism given form by an unbroken and unlimited principle of sufficient reason. (See Chapter Two) It must be shown that this amounts to the necessary precondition for any possible knowledge and coherent thought, and thus to deny this metaphysics is to deny that one speaks with knowledge or coherence – an obvious contradiction.

Once rational necessity is again affirmed, then the mythical decisionism of the radically free will can, at long last, be expelled from the world and therefore also from political discourse. It can definitively and apodictically be given the status of a mere chimera – something which strikes the imagination as perhaps intriguing, but ought not to have any real import in the life and death decisions which pertain to statecraft. Work can start, once again, in constructing a more rational and thus more pleasurable, secure, and humane form of social organization.

The return of a fully robust reason emboldens the human spirit to carry on this work in earnest; for the earth is no longer a mysterious landscape whose ways are ultimately impenetrable to the human mind. Monism, properly understood, entails that the laws and mechanisms at work within our own bodies and our own minds are fully commensurate with those operating upon the highest mountains, in the blackest depths of the oceans, or even the furthest reaches of deep space. All the universe is, in principle, intelligible to us, and we can thus use the bounty of the universe (most of which is yet to be conquered or even discovered) for the benefit of mankind.

Most importantly, solidarity with other human beings once again becomes possible. For solidarity requires both knowledge of the other, and subsequently, identification with the other – both of which are granted by rationalist monism alone. We have solidarity with our fellow human beings because we are, in fact, of the same substance and participate in the same universal reason. Our original quest for the basis for “political toleration” thus appears to be too humble. Metaphysical monism gains us more than a merely negative “permissiveness” with regard to the minority (though it does grant us this). Monism implies our rational unity with the minority and an immediate identification with its interests and welfare.

With the whole world illuminated before us, our natural reason leaves behind the dull formalism of all philosophies of the will. It is therefore wholly ironic that the conservative reaction to the Enlightenment (later taken up by the existentialist and post-structuralist Left) consisted of a critique of reason as being dry and formalistic! Schmitt himself, invoking Bergson, talks glowingly of the willful creation which goes beyond the formal laws of a merely “receptive” scientific reason. For science, “... is not life, it creates nothing, it constructs and receives, but it understands only the general and the abstract and sacrifices the individual fullness

of life on the altar of its abstraction. Art is more important for the life of mankind than science.⁴¹¹” And it is only the artistic, creative will, in Schmitt’s estimation, which can finally break through this, “...crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.”⁴¹² In other words, the radically free will is what saves humanity from the boring, restrictive formality of reason.

However, what turns out to be truly formalistic is this conservative reaction itself. The radically free will mandates a totally pluralized, disintegrated world – wholly lacking in stable forms or essences. Otherwise, it cannot be said to truly be radically free and creative. What’s more, the will itself must be evacuated of all objective characteristics beyond the momentary action of the current, creative decision. (Just as the Calvinist God can have no knowable *potentia absoluta* beyond its momentary *potentia ordinata* if it is to be considered truly omnipotent) The result, of course, is a completely evacuated and hollow conception not only of the world, but also of freedom. The will acts simply to act – lacking all intrinsic purpose, motivation, or reason. The politics of the will, therefore, becomes entirely formalistic as well - incapable of supporting any robust notion of human freedom, let alone human solidarity.

A return to the rationalism of Spinoza is the necessary avenue for leaving this terrible formalism behind – as well as all of its nefarious political consequences. What’s more, this is not merely an academic question, but an urgent and timely one as well. For the rigorous formalism of Schmitt’s thought, as we have demonstrated, certainly does not imply a lack of real, political danger.

If anything, the danger is multiplied. For the virulent nationalism and anti-Semitism of Carl Schmitt cannot be easily confined to his particular time and place in history. The axiomatic

⁴¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 67.

⁴¹² Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

austerity of his thought makes it too easily transportable, conveniently suitable for grafting onto any number of different cultural and national milieus. In each case, however, the logic of “the political” will once again throw up imperatives to locate internal and external enemies, quash individual liberty, and seek a national and ethnic homogeneity.

As a practitioner of Judaism myself, most disturbing to me is Schmitt’s reported statement on the state of Israel. In an effort to downplay Carl Schmitt’s rather unambiguous history of anti-Semitism, his one time student George Schwab relates this personal confession: “On numerous occasions Schmitt expressed the view to me that the situation of the Jews dramatically changed with the creation of the state of Israel. “At last they (the Jews) again have contact with a soil they can call their own.”⁴¹³”

Genuine or not, this affirmative comment shows the real hazard of Schmitt’s political theology. It co-opts as much as it combats. Even the personally anti-Semitic Schmitt recognizes that even the Jews can, under proper circumstances, “rise to the level of the political.” But whether this redeems Carl Schmitt from his designation as a racist is largely inconsequential. What is important here is that the scrupulous formalism of his political thought can, if the right conditions are met, even be applied to his longtime racial enemy.

The Jews, once a persecuted people driven from country to country, and then, for generations after the *Haskalah* forming much of the vanguard for international liberation have now founded a state. The Jews have become “political,” and increasingly in the nationalistic sense. Meanwhile the mantle of universalist, international socialism has been largely neglected for over half a century. But the logic and metaphysics which necessarily maintain a nationalism

⁴¹³ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, li–lii.

based upon the ethnic unity of a people is too easily transformed into the virulent dictatorship of Carl Schmitt. Perhaps, then, a return to Spinoza means, specifically for the Jews, a return to a past legacy of international struggle and universalism, and a moving beyond the nationalistic particularism which is inherently given to co-optation by the very worst elements of Schmitt's politics.

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