

CHAPTER 10

When Having Too Much Power Is Harmful
Spinoza on Political Luck

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10.1 Introduction

Spinoza's celebrated doctrine of the *conatus* asserts that "each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being" (E3p6).¹ Shortly thereafter, Spinoza makes the further claim that the (human) mind strives to *increase* its power of acting [*potentia agendi*] (E3p12).² This latter claim is commonly interpreted as asserting that human beings (and their associations) not only strive to persevere in their existence, but also always strive to *increase* their power.³ Spinoza's justification for E3p12 relies (among others) on E3p6. For this reason, it seems reasonable that we strive to increase our

¹ For an illuminating discussion of the *conatus* doctrine, see Garrett, "Spinoza's *Conatus* Argument." Unless otherwise marked, all quotes from Spinoza's works and letters are from Curley's translation. I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition (*Spinoza Opera*, 4 volumes [Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1925]) for the Latin and Dutch text of Spinoza. I would like to thank Daniel Dragicevic, Zach Gartenberg, Avreimi Rot, Hasana Sharp, and the anonymous referee for their most helpful comments on previous drafts of this paper. An early version of the paper has been presented at the Chinese National Conference in Early Modern Philosophy at Renmin University, Beijing, in June 2017. I would like to thank the audience for the questions and comments.

² "E3p12: The Mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the Body's power of acting. Dem.: So long as the human Body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard the same body as present (by IIP17) and consequently (by IIP7) so long as the human Mind regards some external body as present, i.e. (by IIP17S), imagines it, the human Body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of that external body. Hence, so long as the Mind imagines those things that increase or aid our body's power of acting, the Body is affected with modes that increase or aid its power of acting (see Post. 1), and consequently (by P11) the Mind's power of thinking is increased or aided. Therefore (by P6 or P9), the Mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things, q.e.d."

³ See, Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 155–58. Spinoza's notion of power is closely related to that of virtue (see E4d8). There is also some evidence that he understood power as closely related to the notion of efficient cause. In E1p34d Spinoza relies on the claims that God's essence is the cause of himself (E1p11), and that God's essence is the cause of all things (E1p16c1) to infer that God's essence is the locus of its power. The argument of E1p34d seems to assume that (efficient) causation is power (CM II 12|1/280/25). We should also note that Spinoza is highly critical of vulgar conceptions of divine and natural power. Thus, in the sixth chapter of the TTP, he mocks those who "imagine God's power as the rule of a certain Royal majesty, whereas they imagine nature's power as force and impulse [*vim & impetum*]" (III/81/22).

power *because* having more power is likely to help us persevere in our being. The more power we have, the less likely we are to be out-powered by external causes that may conflict with our striving for persevering in our existence. The logic here is quite sound. Insofar as human beings are mere finite modes, i.e. entities whose existence is not guaranteed by their mere essence,⁴ and are distinct from other finite modes with whom we interact in various manners, it would seem that our striving for power should be insatiable.⁵ No finite degree of power can ever guarantee the continuation of our existence.⁶ For this reason, it would seem that increasing our power is always good. Indeed, in E4p8d, Spinoza seems to define good and evil as “what increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our power of acting.”

Having this sound logic in mind, we should be taken aback by a brief note Spinoza makes in passing in the seventh chapter of the *Political Treatise*. In this passage, Spinoza seems to assert that the *stability* of a state – which is one of the chief political virtues for Spinoza⁷ – is a function of having just the *right degree of power*, not less, but also, not more. The passage seems to imply that having too much power might be detrimental to the state. But how can such a view be consistent with Spinoza’s assertion and approval of our constant “will to power” in the *Ethics*?

In this chapter I will explain the tension between these two strands in Spinoza’s thought, and attempt to reconcile them. I will begin with a close examination of the passage from the seventh chapter of the TP, and its apparent contrast with Spinoza’s claim in the *Ethics* about our striving to increase our power of acting. I will then turn, in the second section, to consider whether Spinoza’s claims in TP, ch. 7 – a chapter dedicated to the exploration of the nature of nontyrannical monarchy – are valid only with regard to a monarchic state, or whether we may generalize the claim that

⁴ E1p24: “The essence of things produced by God does not involve existence.” On the distinction between the *esse* of substance and that of modes, see Schechter, *Existence and Temporality*, 61–62.

On the identity of God’s essence and existence, see Melamed, “Spinoza’s Deification of Existence.”

⁵ Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 172: “the threats are many and diverse and *it is in our own interest to accumulate as much power as possible* to be able to meet these various threats when they occur. There is, as we might say, no telling which ability, which power, may come in handy, and so our striving to persevere ourselves dictates that we strive to acquire as much power as possible.” Italics added.

⁶ See E4p3: “*The force [vis] by which a man perseveres in existing is limited, and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes.* Dem.: This is evident from A1 [“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.”]. For given a man, there is something else, say A, more powerful. And given A, there is something else again, say B, more powerful than A, and so on, to infinity. Therefore, the power of man is limited by the power of another thing and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes, q.e.d.”

⁷ See, for example, TP, ch. 1 [III/275/28] and ch. 6 [III/307/5]. Stability, however, is not the *sole*, or even the most valuable political virtue. See TP, ch. 6 [III/298/14–25].

having too much power might be harmful to other forms of the state or even other kinds of individuals. In the third and final section I will attempt to solve the tension between Spinoza's apparently conflicting claims by looking more closely at his construal of human power, and its political dimensions.

10.2 Can a State Have *Too Much Power*?

Spinoza's aims in the *Tractatus Politicus* seem to be more ambitious than in the *Theological Political Treatise* (1670). For the most part, the two works are close in spirit. Having been written about a decade apart, the TP is an attempt to rework the political parts of the TTP while mostly avoiding the discussion of scripture that clearly alarmed many of the readers of the TTP. There are, however, some significant differences between the two treatises. In the TP, Spinoza's attitude toward the common people is much less negative and more ambivalent than in the TTP. In the TP, Spinoza frequently refers to the common people – living in a nondespotic commonwealth – as a “free multitude [*libera multitudo*],”⁸ a term that would be hardly intelligible in the context of the TTP, and its highly disparaging attitude toward the “*vulgus*.” Still, the most significant difference between the two works seems to be the systematic ambition of the TP.

At the beginning of his discussion of the Hebrew State, in the seventeenth chapter of the TTP, Spinoza notes: “I do not intend to show how a state could be formed so that it might, in spite of everything, always be preserved securely” (III/203/5). In contrast, in the TP, Spinoza argues that since the fundamental laws he suggests

[a]gree both with reason and with the common affect of men, we can maintain that if any state [*imperia*] is eternal [*aeterna*],⁹ *this one must be eternal, or that it can't be destroyed by any inherent defect, but only by some inevitable fate.*¹⁰

Though the passage refers specifically to aristocracy, I tend to believe that the aim of the TP was to suggest fundamental laws that will run the state, as if it were a political *perpetuum mobile*, for all three kinds of civil order:

⁸ See, for example, TP, ch. 5 (III/297/5), and ch. 7 (III/319/19).

⁹ I have slightly altered Curley's translation, which renders “*aeterna*” as everlasting. See Spinoza's claim that the fundamental laws of nontyrannical aristocracy must be *permanent*, so that an attempt to change those laws would count as treason (TP, ch. 8| III/334/12)

¹⁰ TP, ch. 10| III/357/13–16. Italics added.

monarchy,¹¹ aristocracy, and democracy. In the TP, Spinoza's discussion of all three forms of government is highly systematic, and the concern for the establishment of a political system that will not require regular corrections is stated frequently throughout the work.¹²

Having briefly discussed these general features of the TP, let us turn now to our main topic. Both in the TTP and the TP Spinoza is mostly critical of the reliance and use of mercenaries and paid soldiers,¹³ and advocates instead the creation of a citizens' army.¹⁴ An army of citizens may restrain the capricious ambitions of the military commander, and is much less likely to collaborate with a tyrant in the repression of citizens.¹⁵ In contrast, the hiring of mercenaries "lays the foundation for an eternal warfare."¹⁶ Along these lines, Spinoza notes in the seventh chapter of the TP:

Next, professional soldiers, accustomed to military discipline, and used to putting up with being cold and without food, usually scorn the crowd of citizens as far inferior to themselves: they couldn't storm a city or fight in open battle. But no one of sound mind will say that for that reason the state is less successful or stable. On the contrary, *no fair judge will deny that the most stable state is one which has enough power to defend its own possessions, but not enough to seek those of others [quod parva tantum tueri, nec aliena appetere potest], and which for that reason tries in every way to avoid war and to preserve peace.*¹⁷

Notice that at the beginning of the passage, Spinoza accepts the claim that citizen soldiers are inferior to mercenaries in their ability to "storm a city or fight in open battle." He only objects to the further conclusion that – due to the relative physical weakness of citizen soldiers – the state is better off relying on an army of mercenaries. In fact, Spinoza argues, the relative weakness of the citizen soldiers (in comparison with mercenaries) *contributes* to the stability and well-being of the state. The wording of the last sentence in the passage makes clear that having just the right degree of power – enough to defend the state, but not enough to pursue the land of other states – is essential to the stability of the state.¹⁸ Spinoza could have argued that having a citizens' army is an unavoidable evil (insofar as it

¹¹ In one passage in his discussion of his plan for a nontyrannical monarchy in the TP, Spinoza describes this commonwealth too as "eternal [*aeterna*]." See TP, ch. 7| III/318/33.

¹² See, for example, TP, ch. 5 (III/295/17–31) and ch. 8 (III/343/14–16).

¹³ For a notable exception, see TP, ch. 8 (III/327/11–19).

¹⁴ See TTP, ch. 17 (III/212–213) and TP, ch. 7 (III/313/1). ¹⁵ TTP, ch. 17| III/213/9–13.

¹⁶ TP, ch. 7| III/313/5. ¹⁷ TP, ch. 7|III/320/19–28. Italics added.

¹⁸ In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli considers and eventually rejects a similar view because "it is impossible to adjust the balance so nicely as to keep things exactly to this middle course" (*Discourses*, I 6, p. 123 in Walker's translation).

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compromises the military strength of the state), and that this modest evil should be nevertheless preferred over the worse evil of a mercenary army, which could be easily turned by the ruler against the states' citizens. Yet, this is *not* his argument in the passage. The relative weakness of a citizens' army is presented in this passage as a clear *positive* quality of the state. In fact, Spinoza's formulation of the last sentence of the passage as a general rule implies that even if we have to choose between having a citizens' army that is so strong that it can easily "seek the possession" of the neighboring states and having a citizens' army that can only defend "its own possessions but not seek the possessions" of other states, we should still clearly prefer the latter option.

Why does Spinoza advise us not to have an army that is *too* strong? Spinoza does not elaborate much on this issue, but the very words that conclude the passage seem to provide the outline of the required explanation: "and which for that reason tries in every way to avoid war and to preserve peace." Wars undermine the stability of the state. But why does Spinoza think that having a very strong army is likely to cause war? Perhaps, a strong army is the best assurance for peace and stability? Spinoza's text does not answer our last questions, but I think that given Spinoza's notorious adherence to *realpolitik*,¹⁹ we could confidently answer these questions.

A significant and salient misbalance of power between neighboring states creates a hard-to-resist temptation for the sovereign of the stronger state (no matter whether the sovereign is a monarch, an aristocratic council, or the body of all citizens). The stronger state has the power to conquer the weaker, neighbor, state (or at least so it would appear to the sovereign of the stronger state). Since, for Spinoza, international relations among states are almost the same as the relations between individuals in the state of nature,²⁰ the strong state has no obligation to refrain from conquering and plundering a weak neighbor. Of course, were the sovereign of the strong state to act strictly rationally, she should avoid war, knowing the costs of war to the overall well-being of the state: running an occupation

¹⁹ See, for example, TP, ch. 8 (III/333/1): "No one defends another's cause except insofar as he believes that he thereby makes his own situation more stable." For a helpful discussion of Spinoza's *realpolitik*, see Curley, "Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan."

²⁰ "[S]ince (by iii, 2) the Right of the supreme power is nothing more than the Right itself of nature, it follows that two states are related to one another as two men are in the state of nature, with one exception. A Commonwealth can take precautions against being overpowered by another Commonwealth. But a man in the state of nature – a man burdened daily with sleep, often with illness or grief, and in the end with old age – that man can't provide security for himself against being overpowered by another man." TP, ch. 3] III/289/17–23.

regime, or deporting or exterminating the natives of the conquered state are all options that may seem worthwhile at first, but in the long run they are very likely to put the state under stern economic and political pressures that will constantly threaten and undermine its authority.²¹ A smart and rational sovereign would avoid conquering a much weaker neighboring state for reasons of pure long-term self-interest, *but the political mechanism Spinoza aims to establish in the TP is explicitly designed to deal with human beings of flesh and blood that are rational to a degree, but are also swayed by passions to at least an equal degree.*²² It is precisely the partial rationality of human beings that the political architect must assume. Just as the political architect must presume that some members of the state are not going to act in good faith in the absence of compulsory measures,²³ so must the architect assume that on some occasions the sovereign might be tempted by the prospect of short-term military victories, which will cost the state dearly in the long run. For this reason, Spinoza suggests that we avoid creating significant misbalance of power among neighboring states, since in the long run such a misbalance is likely to tempt the stronger state to attack and conquer the weaker states. Of course, none of this implies that the state should not take great precautions to defend itself. On the contrary, the very same consideration should motivate the state not to become weaker than its neighbors (i.e. not to count on the good intentions and benevolence of the neighboring states, and thus not create a reality that might tempt the neighbor to invade).

At the beginning of this chapter, we encountered Spinoza's claim that we always strive to increase our power of acting and our power of thinking (E3p12). At least, on first notice, this claim could be plausibly read as similar to Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power, i.e. as an affirmation

²¹ "The power and Right of the Commonwealth are diminished to the extent it provides many people with reason to conspire against it . . . Like each individual citizen, or like a man in the state of nature, the greater the reason for fear it has, the less it is its own master." TP, ch. 3 | III/288/16.

²² See Spinoza's critique of the "philosophers" who "believe they perform a godly act and reach the pinnacle of wisdom when they've learned how to praise in many ways a human nature which doesn't exist anywhere, and how to bewail the way men really are. They conceive men not as they are, but as they want them to be. That's why for the most part they've written Satire instead of Ethics, and why they've never conceived a Politics which could be put to any practical application, but only one which would be thought a Fantasy, possible only in Utopia, or in the golden age of the Poets, where there'd be absolutely no need for it." TP, ch. 1 | III/273/8–17.

²³ "A state whose well-being depends on someone's good faith, and whose affairs can't be properly looked after unless the people who handle them are willing to act in good faith, won't be stable at all. For it to be able to last, its affairs must be so ordered that, whether the people who administer them are led by reason or by an affect, they can't be induced to be disloyal or to act badly." TP, ch. 1 | III/275/26–31.

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and approval of our constant striving to increase our power.²⁴ But if an increase of power is essentially and always good, how could Spinoza argue in TP, ch. 7, that sometimes having too much power is, in fact, detrimental to the state.

Before we turn to address possible solutions to our problem, let us first consider the precise scope of Spinoza's claim that "the most stable state is one which has enough power to defend its own possessions, but not enough to seek those of others."

10.3 Generalizing Spinoza's Claims in TP, Ch. 7

Spinoza presents the claim that the most stable state is one that is capable of defending its own possessions, but not of seeking those of others in the context of his discussion of the proper constitution of a nontyrannical monarchy in the seventh chapter of the TP. An obvious question that immediately arises is whether these claims of Spinoza pertain only to monarchy, or also to the two other civil orders discussed in the TP, i.e. aristocracy and democracy. This is not a trivial question since at least in one case – Spinoza's advocacy in favor of an official national religion that appears in the context of his discussion of aristocracy²⁵ – some scholars tend to believe that these claims do *not* apply in the case of the other two civil orders.²⁶ Furthermore, the fact that Spinoza died in the midst of writing the chapter on democracy, and that the extant part is most likely no more than a quarter of the planned chapter, constitutes another obstacle for deriving any solid conclusion on the present issue.

On the other hand, there are issues that are discussed in the context of one of the civic orders while it is clear that the same claims apply *mutatis mutandis* to the other civic orders as well. Consider, for example, Spinoza's claim – in his discussion of aristocracy – that judges "should never be permitted to use torture to force anyone to confess."²⁷ Earlier in the TP, in chapter 3, Spinoza argues that human nature is averse to self-recrimination

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Werke*, Vol. VIII (*Der Wille zur Macht: I. Buch: Der Antichrist*), 218 (§2). See Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 295: "Spinoza extols the will to power as much as (perhaps more than) as Nietzsche does." Compare Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I 11: "In the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death."

²⁵ TP, ch. 8 | III/345/10–28.

²⁶ See Curley's editorial notes, in *Collected Works*, II 543, n. 40. Curley notes, however, that "it is not clear why Spinoza makes this distinction." Curley refers to TP, ch. 7 (III/319/11–23) as proving that Spinoza's model of monarchy excludes national religion. I very much doubt this text indeed supports that conclusion.

²⁷ TP, ch. 7 | III/342/27.

and torture, and that for this reason it would be foolish for the commonwealth to use these measures.²⁸ Thus, in spite of Spinoza's silence on the issue of torture in his discussions of monarchy and democracy, the passage in chapter 3 makes clear that Spinoza's objection to the use of torture applies equally to all three civic orders.

Let us return now to our original question of whether Spinoza's claim that the state might be better off not having too much power could be generalized to all three forms of civic order. While the text of the TP does not seem to provide conclusive support for either a positive or negative answer to this question, I tend to think that Spinoza's claims in chapter 7 should be generalized for two main reasons. First, Spinoza formulates his words in chapter 7 as a general claim, and nothing in the context of this passage indicates that it is restricted merely to the case of monarchy. Second, the reasoning that motivates Spinoza's claim in TP, ch. 7 – at least if we accept the reconstruction of the reasoning I have offered – applies equally well to the cases of aristocracy and democracy. Aristocratic and democratic states may just as well be tempted by the excess of their power, and the facility of conquering a neighboring state. True, Spinoza thinks that democratic states have a tendency toward peace.²⁹ Yet, human nature does not change in democracy, and if the misbalance of power is significant enough, the temptation to seek the possessions of the weak neighboring state would be equally strong, and thus annul the natural peaceful tendency of the democratic state.

Let us move now one step ahead and ask whether other individuals, apart from states, could be better off not having the maximal degree of power.³⁰ Is it, for example, the case that my well-being and felicity is a function of having just the right amount of power, i.e. enough to defend my possessions but not enough to seek the possessions of others? At least at first sight, it would seem that the case of individual human beings should be different from that of independent states. My share of power is regulated by the state that grants me certain rights/powers.³¹ In contrast, independent states are not part of any international body that regulates the distribution of power among states; recall that for Spinoza the relationship between states is virtually the same as between human beings in the state of

²⁸ TP, ch. 3 | III/287/25–27. ²⁹ TP, ch. 7 | III/310/8.

³⁰ In TP, ch. 2 (III/278/30), Spinoza reminds the reader that human beings, just like all other individuals, strive to persevere in their being.

³¹ For Spinoza's claim that one's right extends as far as one's right does, see ch. 16 (III/189/25); TP, ch. 2 (III/277/7–8), ch. 7 (III/314/28), ch. 9 (III/347/20); Ep. 50 (IV/239/23).

nature.³² Still, one may wonder why this difference between individual human beings and states should count as a reason to hold that for human beings, unlike states, having more power is always beneficial. Perhaps, one may even argue in the following, opposite, manner. If states, which are in a state of nature and as such have no superior sovereign that is supposed to impose peace between them and guarantee their safety, are still sometimes better-off not having maximal power, it would seem that *a fortiori*, human beings that enjoy the security and peace imposed by the sovereign would be even better off without having maximal power (under certain circumstances). States have better reasons to be mutually suspicious and anxious (than citizens of a well-governed state), and if, in spite of these mutual threats, we admit that at least sometimes states are better off without maximal power, it would seem that individual citizens whose security is mostly guaranteed by the sovereign should have even better reasons not to act anxiously, and thus be better-off not having too much power, which might tempt them to foolish, aggressive, actions.

The back and forth arguments in the last page can, and should, be further developed if we are to reach any robust answer to our question. Still, I think it is fair to say that it is not trivially clear that Spinoza's claims in TP, ch. 7, cannot be generalized to the cases of other individuals, besides the state. With these modest and tentative conclusions, we will wind up our discussion of the scope of Spinoza's claims in TP, ch. 7. In the following, final, section of the chapter, we will attempt to resolve the tension between Spinoza's claims in TP, ch. 7, and those of the *Ethics* (E3p12).

10.4 Four Possible Solutions

In this section, I would like to consider some possible solutions to the tension between Spinoza's claim (in TP, ch. 7) that having too much power could be detrimental to the state, and his claims in E3p12 that we always strive to increase our power of action, and that any increase in our power of acting is, *by definition*, good.³³

The first solution I would like to consider suggests that in TP, ch. 7, Spinoza does not make any claim about having more or less power [*potentia*], but rather about having one ability, rather than the other. The passage

³² TP, ch. 3| III/290/1.

³³ See E4p8d: "We call good, or evil, what is useful to, or harmful to, preserving our being (by D1 and D2), i.e. (by IIP7), what increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our power of acting."

translated by Curley as “[the most stable state is one] which has enough power to defend its possessions, but not enough to seek those of others,” reads in Latin: “*quod parva tantum tueri, nec aliena appetere potest.*”³⁴ The Latin does not contain, indeed, the noun “*potentia*,” and the passage could just as well be translated by: “[the most stable state is one] which is capable of defending its possessions, but not of seeking those of others.”³⁵

Still, in spite of the fact that “*potentia*” is not explicitly stated in the Latin, the content and context of the sentence makes clear that the most stable state has a certain *degree* of capability, not more, but also not less. We are not dealing here with two unrelated abilities, but rather with one ability that is *stronger* than the other: a state that is capable of seeking the possessions of other countries is clearly capable of defending its own possessions. A difference in the degree of one’s capabilities seems to me quite clearly a difference in one’s power, and thus even though the plain Latin does not include the noun “*potentia*,” I think Curley’s translation reflects well the content of the sentence as a whole.

The second “solution” I will consider is not truly a solution, but rather an admission that the tension between Spinoza’s claims in TP, ch. 7 and in E3p12 results from irreconcilable, opposite, strands of Spinoza’s philosophy. Tensions and sometimes even flat contradictions do occur in the works of good philosophers. The fact that the tension here does not result from conflicting claims in the context of the same discussion, nor indeed even in the same work, may give even more credence to this, somewhat desperate, suggestion. Still, I think we should not rush to accept this conclusion. As Della Rocca rightly pointed out, Spinoza was a highly systematic philosopher;³⁶ he clearly invested much effort in trying to clean his system from inconsistencies.³⁷ It is also worth noting that the TP and the *Ethics* represent more or less the same late stage³⁸ in the development of Spinoza’s philosophy, and thus it is not very likely that the claims of the TP indicate that Spinoza withdrew from his assertions in

³⁴ TP, ch. 7 | III/314/11–12.

³⁵ Compare Wernham’s translation (Spinoza, *Political Works*, 361): “[No state is more stable to the impartial eye than one] which is just powerful enough to preserve its own possessions, without being able to covet those of others.”

³⁶ Della Rocca, “Interpreting Spinoza,” 535.

³⁷ Spinoza’s writings are frequently quite polemical. In many cases, the primary objects of Spinoza’s criticism are *his own views in his earlier period*. See, for example, TP, ch. 8 (III/319/24–320/18), which are clearly targeting Spinoza’s own claims in E4p54s (II/250/17).

³⁸ The TP was written in the last year, or year and half, of Spinoza’s life. Spinoza worked on the *Ethics* for almost two decades (roughly, from 1660 till his death in February 1677). Still, for all we know, the version of the *Ethics* published in the 1677 *Opera Posthuma* represents his views in his very late period.

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the *Ethics*. Thus, I would not completely rule out this solution, but rather keep it only as an option of last resort.

The third solution suggests that Spinoza is somewhat equivocating in his use of the terminology of “power [*potentia*].” Thus, one may argue that for the state to have more power in one sense is not the same as having more power in a different sense. Therefore, if one sense of “having power” is just having military power (call it: M-Power), and another sense of “having power” is having the most secure existence, all things considered (call it: G-Power), then Spinoza’s claims in TP, ch. 7, should be interpreted as stating that the most stable state must have just the right amount of M-Power, no more and no less, but he may well still hold that the state is *always* better off having more G-Power, and that it is not the case that the most stable state is one which has just the right amount of G-Power. Per our definition of G-Power, the state must become more secure by having more G-Power.

The main problem I find with this solution is that at least at first sight we have no textual evidence showing that Spinoza consciously drew such a conclusion. Still, I suspect this suggestion puts the finger on something essentially right, and it is likely that in TP, ch. 7, Spinoza used “power” in its more colloquial sense, while the discussions of power in the *Ethics* are more restricted to Spinoza’s philosophical explication of power. Let me turn then to the fourth solution, which could be considered as a variant of the third, and might have good textual support.

Our fourth and last solution begins with the observation that neither in E3p12 nor in any other passage in the *Ethics*³⁹ does Spinoza argue that we always strive to have more power *simpliciter*. Instead, E3p12 – and the propositions that rely on it – argue that we strive to increase our *power of acting* [*potentia agendi*]. But, what is a “power of acting”? A possible answer to this question appeals to a crucial distinction Spinoza introduces in E3d2:

I say that we **act** when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are **acted on** when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause. (Italics added.)

In E3d1, Spinoza defines an adequate cause as a cause “whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it.” A thing is said to act, according

³⁹ Or, to the best of my knowledge, in any other passage in Spinoza’s writing.

to E3d2, when the nature, or essence, of the thing can fully explain what happens to the thing or to something else. Given this definition of action, we may suggest that “power of acting” is just the ability to be the adequate cause of something that happens in us or outside us. In other words, the more power of acting we have, the more our essence provides the explanation for what is happening to us and our surroundings.⁴⁰ Since part of Spinoza’s definition of freedom is “being determined to act by itself alone” (E1d7), we may further add that an increase in our power of acting is also an increase in our freedom.⁴¹ Power of acting may thus indicate a certain degree of causal autonomy, or self-determination.⁴²

Let us now return to the case of the state that has enough power to defend its own possessions but not enough power to seek the possessions of its neighbors. When the state increases its power by subordinating a neighboring state, it will in all likelihood produce a strong resentment and hatred by the population of the subordinated state. In so doing, the powerful state becomes *more dependent* upon the subordinate population. It must allocate significant resources in order to secure itself from the threat of rebellion and violent reaction by the subordinated population. Did the powerful state increase its power of action by occupying the new territories? The occupying state must now allocate huge resources – which would otherwise be used for the well-being of its citizens – in order to arm itself, recruit bribed collaborators among the occupied population, and create a regime of spies, prisons, electronic surveillance, military tribunals, internal and external propaganda agencies, and so forth (this is a very rudimentary list of the requirements of running a well-functioning occupation regime). It would be thus quite difficult to make the case that occupying new lands made the state any more independent, or increased its power of acting. Every rebellion, or intifada, by the subordinated people is likely to tank the economy of the subordinating state. Thus, the state that is too

⁴⁰ Viljanen, *Spinoza’s Geometry of Power*, 81.

⁴¹ In the “General Definition of the Affects” section at the conclusion of part III of the *Ethics*, Spinoza identifies the body’s power of acting with its “force of existing [*vis existendi*]” (II/204/12). Presumably, a thing with a higher degree of causal autonomy depends less for its existence on something else, and therefore has more “force of existing.”

⁴² At this point we may raise the following objection. Spinoza’s discussion of our striving to increase our power of acting in E3p12d makes clear that even an external cause may increase our power of acting. Would that not contradict our explanation of the power of acting as the ability to provide the adequate explanation for what happens to us? No. Our power of acting indicates indeed the degree to which we are causally autonomous. However, insofar as we are not substances (E2p10), we cannot avoid being caused from outside. Thus, the state and properties of our bodies and minds – including our degree of causal autonomy – are at least partly caused from outside, but this does contradict the claim that we can have more or less of our states explained through our nature.

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powerful in terms of Spinoza's discussion in TP, ch. 7, might have, in fact, less power of acting, and the apparent contradiction between the two texts seems to be resolved.

Having presented a solution to the problem that stands at the center of this chapter, let me note that for Spinoza our striving to increase power of acting has clear limitations. Our striving is always limited by our particular nature: "a man neither strives to do, nor desires, anything unless it can follow from his given nature. So no man desires that there be predicated of him any power of acting, or (what is the same) virtue, which is peculiar to another's nature and alien to his own" (E3p55cd). My striving to increase my power of acting is not a striving to be like God, or achieve a virtue peculiar to God. Insofar as our nature is so vastly different from God,⁴³ my striving to be like God is not any better than my striving to become a rhombus.

10.5 Conclusion

In the current chapter, we have studied closely Spinoza's surprising claim in the seventh chapter of the TP that the most stable state is one that has just the right amount of power: enough to defend its own possessions, but not enough to seek those of others. In the first section, we explained the reasoning motivating this claim. In the second section, we showed that though Spinoza presents this claim in the context of his discussion of monarchy, they should be equally valid with regards to other civic orders, and perhaps also with regards to other individuals, apart from the state. In the last section of the chapter we addressed the tension between Spinoza's claim in TP, ch. 7, and his assertion in the *Ethics* that we always strive to increase our power of acting (E3p12), and that any increase in our power of acting is, by definition, good (E4p8d). We considered several solutions to this problem, and eventually suggested that, for Spinoza, "power of acting" denotes the causal self-sufficiency of a thing. When speaking – in TP, ch. 7 – about a state that has enough power to defend its possession but not enough to pursue those of others, Spinoza seems to be using "power" in its more colloquial sense. For this reason, we suggested there is no genuine contradiction between Spinoza's claims in TP, ch. 7 and in the *Ethics*, since the state that has too much power has in fact less "power of acting"; it is more dependent upon others.

⁴³ See Melamed, "Crescas and Spinoza on Actual Infinity," 214.

Having just the right degree of power seems to be a very delicate business. Moreover, it seems to make much of the felicity of a state: a matter of *political luck*. This observation, however, should not surprise us, as Spinoza openly describes the success of the ancient Hebrew state, Spinoza's "Divine Republic," as due mostly to "God's external aid," i.e. fortune.⁴⁴ Along the very same lines, he notes that if not for the womanish nature of the Jewish religion, he would believe that under certain circumstances, or fortune, they will reestablish their state.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ TTP, ch. 3 | III/48/1. On Spinoza's reconstruction of the ancient Hebrew republic, see Melamed, "Spinoza's *Respublica divina*."

⁴⁵ TTP, ch. 3 | III/57/2-5.