

# THE CONSOLATIONS OF SPINOZISM

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**Abstract:** Reflecting on the practice of being a Spinoza scholar and Spinozist in Trump's Pandemic America, I argue that we can find consolation in Spinoza's insistent norm -- to understand rather than to blame, to banish free will as explanans so we can fully understand the explanandum. Just as Boethius reflected on human misunderstanding of luck, so Spinoza teaches that we need, in moments of despair, to look not to superstition, but to the recognition of the causal forces that yield our triumphs and failures, and to understand them. While we are unmoored in the chaos of Trump's America, in the joyful expression of popular emancipatory power in the Black Lives Matters mass demonstrations and marches through American cities and suburbs, and the nightly horror of demonstrators murdered by police, I reach back to another moment of chaos with liberatory and nightmarish potential -- the years just after the U.S. Civil War described in *Leaves of Grass*. We can find Spinozist moments in Whitman's poem and philosophical memoir -- a kind of American Spinozism. As he travels among the horrors and the new possibilities of American life, Whitman insists on seeing and feeling the world as it is -- terrible, wonderful, in all its fleshy imperfection, while finding hope in these same flawed particulars. In 2020, Trump's America, Spinoza and Spinozism are not just relevant, are not just consolations in the Boethian sense, but they are essential epistemic survival tools for a world quite obviously in motion.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Boethius, Whitman, naturalism, determinism, hope.

## 1. This is America

I began writing this on the 4th of July, America's Independence Day. Four years into the Trump regime, over a hundred thousand Americans dead from COVID-19, after months of a politically charged quarantine where politicians and courts struck attacked basic public health safety measures, with another video of a Black man killed by police, celebrating the 4th seemed to me particularly perverse, even if there had been a place to do so safely. Significant days create their own pull, however, and I felt I needed to do something to mark the day, to think about it, and to think through the chaos of 2020. Tired of staring out the window feeling useless while the country burned, I picked Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* off my bookshelf.

Whitman wrote the poems in *Leaves of Grass* in the Late 19th century, reflecting on the Civil War and the times before. He wrote during some of the worst moments of Reconstruction — when the hope of the Emancipation Proclamation that ended

Slavery in the United States was dulled by the early Jim Crow era's terror and legal limitations on Black Americans.

The lack of respect for the dignity of Black and indigenous lives that continues today is told in Whitman's *I Sing the Body Electric*, where he writes of the slave auctions and the lack of recognition of the value of human lives and miscalculation of the value and sacredness of bodies. In Whitman's rhapsody for life, for all of life, in *Leaves of Grass* he answers ignorance, hate and political turmoil with an extended appreciation for bodies and what bodies are capable of, reminding us, that in a world that refuses to celebrate the life of all existing human beings, we can. We must. There is no one else. It's just us.

I'm writing about Whitman because reading Whitman reminded me of the Spinozist lessons that had become hazy through months of quarantine and pandemic. Like most of my fellow Americans, by July 2020 and likely much earlier, I had become overwhelmed by anger, fear, frustration, indignation and finally despair. Whitman's Spinozism helped me back to my own.

I find three major lessons in Spinoza:

Lesson 1: We are not free, and neither are those who commit the horrors that steal our hope through their brutality, stupidity and craven actions and inaction.

Lesson 2: We don't know where this all going; we do not know how it will end. We can, at minimum, understand. This understanding may lead to better ideas, but it will increase our power and diminish our despair. Sadness and its correlates diminish our power to act and think and are in themselves harmful. Despair, fear and sadness themselves can be endless — there is endless horror if we look at the present or the past. But looking only at this horror in despair diminishes the little power that we have as humans. When hope seems impossible, when the world's ugliness and horror is unavoidable — dig in. Look at the horror and ugliness and try to understand, to list, to feel, and to see what it is, without marking what is good and bad. Remember that we are all part of a system of Nature we barely understand. We are not free, and we become less free the less we understand. Do not fear or hate, understand.

Lesson 3: Chastened hope is essential for understanding, which is necessary for effective collective action and collective liberation. When one understands and can act with others, one can create an individual with the power of all to make change. Successful intervention requires both understanding and acting with as large a group of individuals one can organize.

In this essay, I want to set out the Spinozist lessons that Whitman reminded me of, and to set them out with the passages that woke me from a pessimistic slumber in the summer of 2020, and reminded me of what I first found in Spinoza and what it means

to be a Spinozist. I propose that Whitman, in *Leaves of Grass*, breathes life into these Spinozist lessons: that we are part of nature, along with every other individual; that judgment of good or evil only yield misunderstandings of what exists; that we have some power, as embodied, and that since we do not know yet what the body can do, so we must investigate and understand. Whitman's words are like the gorgeous weeds growing through the bars of the geometric method. While they feed on the essential insights of Spinoza, they bloom in ways that remind us what an application of these lessons looks like.

Without, perhaps, ever having read Spinoza, he is a Spinozist.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Whitman's Spinozism

Whitman's America of late 19th Century was a time of war, hope, destruction, hate, freedom and terror. The Abolition movement, chaos and finally war, slavery, fugitive slave bounty hunters, the Underground railroad, the Emancipation Proclamation, Juneteenth and the devastation of the southern states. The terra nullius justifications of 'westward expansion' -- like breath in the lungs after suffocating in the battlefields and cities of the east, hungry European Americans grasped at the west, grabbing what they could. The west pulled the humans of the pressurized east, creating new problems for old peoples. To the ugliness of his own time, Whitman responded and rebelled with joyous rhapsodies on the inherent value of every living thing. William Carlos Williams describes Whitman's approach as a "rebel viewpoint and American viewpoint."<sup>2</sup> In Whitman's free verse, I propose, we can find moments of Spinozism, and Spinozism expressed in ways that inspire and revive a Spinozan spirit necessary for surviving these times.

Whitman traveled through the war zones, the pre-War south, and watched the reinforcement of racial status in the reconstruction and the genocidal western expansion. In *Leaves of Grass* he refers to these moments of horror and destruction and debasement of human lives. Although Whitman clearly abhors these events, it is not anger that he expresses through his poems. We find in his poems not despair, but rather a unique and ecstatic appreciation for the human beings and natural world. Jane

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<sup>1</sup> [Unknown]. "[Review of *Leaves of Grass* (1855)]." 18 February 1856. *The Walt Whitman Archive*. Gen. ed. Matt Cohen, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price. Accessed 2 July 2020. <<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>2</sup> William Carlos WILLIAMS, *An essay on Leaves of Grass*, in *Leaves of Grass: A hundred years after*, M. HINDUS (ed.) Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif 1955, p. 22.

Bennet calls it a ‘sympathy’.<sup>3</sup> Whitman writes of us as part of Nature, of the body as sacred and of all bodies as equal. In what follows, I will set out some pieces of *Leaves of Grass* that exemplify Whitman’s Spinozism.

In “To Think of Time” we can see a Spinozist movement from the recognition of the worth of each being, to the recognition of a soul in each — where we know the soul and the body are one for Whitman.<sup>4</sup> Whitman uses the term ‘perfect’ which we know Spinoza rejects as a normative term,<sup>5</sup> but does use in this way that Whitman does — that each thing is ‘perfect’ in itself. From this recognition Whitman moves to reject the idea of good and sin — writing that what is called good and sin are ‘just as perfect’. He then moves to attribute to each natural object a soul, an immortal soul at that, and one that all are part of a continually regenerating nature.

How beautiful and perfect are the animals! How perfect is my soul!  
 How perfect the earth, and the minutest thing upon it!  
 What is called good is perfect, and what is called sin is just as perfect;  
 The vegetables and minerals are all perfect... and the imponderable fluids are perfect;  
 Slowly and surely they have passed on to this, and slowly and surely they will yet pass  
 on. [...]  
 I swear I see now that every thing has an eternal soul!  
 The trees have, rooted in the ground... the weeds of the sea have... the animals.  
 I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!  
 That the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous float is for it, and the cohering is for  
 it, And all preparation is for it... and identity is for it... and life and death are for it.<sup>6</sup>

These themes are made more or less explicit throughout *Leaves of Grass*, but here we find the movement from the equal worth of each natural being, from humans to the *corpora simplicissima*, to the notion of a soul or idea of each, to the rejection of the reality of objective values of good and evil, to the idea of the immortality in Nature — that as all are in nature, and nature is immortal, so are we all. Since the idea of immortality here and the reference to an immortal soul do not have as evident a naturalism as one finds elsewhere in Whitman, I’ll add this quotation from “Song of Myself”, where the idea that immortality is fully naturalized is clearer:

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

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<sup>3</sup> Jane BENNETT, *Influx and Efflux: writing up with Walt Whitman*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2020, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Walt WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass: the “Death Bed” Edition*, Modern Library, New York 1993, p.1/pp.119-130.

<sup>5</sup> SPINOZA, *Complete Works*, Shirley (trans.) Hackett, Indianapolis, 2002, 240 (Ethics, Part 1, appendix).

<sup>6</sup> WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 545-546.

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,  
 And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.  
 All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
 And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.<sup>7</sup>

Whitman's identification of the soul and body, while found above and in the Invocation to Leaves of grass, made explicit in "Song of Myself", "I have said that the soul is not more than the body,"<sup>8</sup> is set out at length in section 9 of "I Sing The Body Electric":

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you,  
 I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are the soul,)  
 I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,  
 Man's, woman's, child's, youth's, wife's, husband's, mother's, father's, young man's, young woman's poems,  
 Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,  
 Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking or sleeping of the lids,  
 Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,  
 Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,  
 Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck-slue,  
 Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders, and the ample side-round of the chest,  
 Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,  
 Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-joints, finger-nails,  
 Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone, breast-side,  
 Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the backbone,  
 Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root,  
 Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,  
 Leg fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,  
 Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel;  
 All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's body, male or female,  
 The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean,  
 The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,  
 Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,  
 Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from woman,  
 The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-looks, love-perturbations and risings,  
 The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud,  
 Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming,  
 Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving and tightening,  
 The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the eyes,  
 The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,

<sup>7</sup> WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>8</sup> WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 39.

The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body,  
 The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,  
 The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the knees,  
 The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,  
 The exquisite realization of health;  
 O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,  
 O I say now these are the soul!

This listing of the parts of the body and identifying them with the soul shows not just one possibility of what a Spinozan soul might be, but it expresses Whitman’s valuing of each part of nature as ‘sacred’, as worthy of note, or in his words as worthy of his ‘singing’. Each part of the body gets its due — and this reflects one of Whitman’s overall goals — to express the equality of all beings and all parts of all beings and to celebrate them by this listing or, what Whitman calls “tallying”. This is one way that we might think of what a thoroughgoing naturalism might look like, what it might mean to use the term ‘soul’ and mean body. There are no doubt some who are tallying Whitman’s divergences from Spinoza, here, and that is, of course, possible. My aim here is not to prove Whitman’s Spinozism, but to show how we can see in his work an expression of a variety of Spinozism. This version of Spinozism reinvigorated my own, and so I ask the reader’s indulgence to follow the next step, from the idea that we are each part of nature, our bodies our souls, and each action and movement worthy of note to the insistence that any refusal to recognize the value of each part of the human body, or any part of Nature is a mistake.

From this listing of all the parts of human bodies that Whitman calls the soul we can then turn to the first part of this poem — Whitman’s reflections on the slave markets before the war, and his insistence that the value of enslaved humans cannot be valued high enough — that there is no price that would be adequate for a human body and soul. He seems to argue with those who clearly think that there is a hierarchy of beings, which he rejects.

The man’s body is sacred and the woman’s body is sacred.... it is no matter who, Is it a slave? Is it one of the dullfaced immigrants just landed on the wharf?  
 Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the welloff.... just as much as you, Each has his or her place in the procession.  
 (All is a procession,  
 The universe is a procession with measured and beautiful motion.)  
 Do you know so much that you call the slave or the dullface ignorant?  
 Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight.... and he or she has no right to a sight?  
 Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffused float, and the soil is on the surface and water runs and vegetation sprouts for you... and not for him and her? [...]

Exquisite senses, lifelike eyes, pluck, volition,  
 Flakes of breast muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, good sized arms and  
 legs,  
 And wonders within there yet.  
 Within there runs his blood... the same old blood... the same red running blood; There  
 swells and jets his heart.... There all passions and desires... all reachings and  
 aspirations:  
 Do you think they are not there because they are not expressed in parlors and lecture-  
 rooms? [...]  
 “Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for him,  
 For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant, For  
 him the revolving cycles truly and steadily rolled.”<sup>9</sup>

“I sing the body electric” is about witnessing a slave auction in pre-Civil War America. While we find in his poem an implicit rejection of the notion of putting price on human life and the practice of unequally valuing human life, we might hope for something stronger — for example, a condemnation of slavery. We know that Whitman was an abolitionist, but we don’t get that intensity of condemnation for the evil of slavery here. Instead, we get a celebration of human bodies. We might see the lack of judgment, this lack of denunciation of the horrors of his time as perverse and immoral. Surely, we might think, one ought to explicitly reject slavery at the very least. This is the kind of critique one finds of Spinoza, as well,<sup>10</sup> and Spinoza wrestled with the problem that Nature does not seem to forbid the terrible things we find in the world.

Whitman hated slavery. Spinoza hated superstition and religious bigotry. But to simply say something monstrous ‘ought not’ exist does not change the fact of its existence. Whitman makes clear that he is watching efforts to dehumanize immigrants and indigenous peoples and enslaved humans, but instead of condemnation he appears to be engaged in a process of rehumanizing, but in a way that avoids species chauvinism and moral judgment — we might as well judge the sun.<sup>11</sup> In her book on Whitman’s, Jane Bennett examines Whitman’s view of judgment as one that avoids ‘trigger-happy’ moralism, but that Whitman is by no means insensitive to the horrors he sees.<sup>12</sup> Whitman recognizes humans and animals and all of nature as interconnected. Whitman’s restraint on negative judgment in order to understand, explore and lovingly describe, is not an easy restraint — he clearly finds the destruction of human life in all its forms painful. He argues for the equality of all beings, offering rebuke to those who

<sup>9</sup> WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 119-130.

<sup>10</sup> Edwin CURLEY, *Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, Don GARRETT (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, pp. 315–342. Curley defends Spinoza from such arguments.

<sup>11</sup> BENNETT, *Influx and Efflux*, pp. 45-59.

<sup>12</sup> BENNETT, *Influx and Efflux*, pp. 58-59.

would treat them unequally. I find Spinoza and Spinozism not just in the content of these reflections but also in their defiance of the utility of judgment. What goes beyond Spinoza is Whitman's defiant appreciation and encomium to those reviled parts of nature and human lives that are disrespected and degraded. Whitman's Spinozism gives us a flamboyantly active naturalism, one that does not just describe but "sings" and praises and appreciates the world as it is. While there is, no doubt, room here for further academic study, there is nothing dead about Whitman's matter, and we might take Whitman to be offering an extended study of what a Spinozist vital materialism might look like, wherein, as Charles Wolfe puts it, "Matter is active but not spiritualized".<sup>13</sup>

While I cannot do justice to a full engagement of the question of the connections and similarities of Spinoza and Whitman, it would be foolish not to note the apparent and real differences. Whitman is a poet. He's writing about the world he finds in free verse — unencumbered by even the relatively loose restrictions of poetry. He is lusty, earthy, and wild. His writing is rhapsodical, indulgent, meandering and sensual. (Who can imagine Spinoza using so many exclamation points?) We do not use any of these words to describe Spinoza. Spinoza chose the formal structure of the geometry proof, the strict and somewhat unnatural mode of exposition. Spinoza sought to preserve truth through the structure of this geometric method. As Euclid survived centuries, so would the Ethics. Even in the form of their work it would appear that we have two diametrically opposed spirits— the Dionysian Whitman to the Apollonian Spinoza. Can the man who insisted on the geometric method have anything in common with this sensualist writing in free verse? The image we have of the cautious Benedict, as he chose to call himself, is not a Whitmanesque wild man, indulging in passion or passionate exploration and appreciation of nature. However, there are hints of this version of Spinoza if we follow just a few paths. If some look at Spinoza and find a God-intoxicated man, we need only to substitute (*salva veritate*) for Deus, Nature, making Spinoza a Nature-intoxicated man, an appellation that would surely suit both Spinoza and Whitman.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Charles WOLFE, *Varieties of Vital Materialism*, in John Zammito and Sarah Ellen Zweig (eds.), *The New Politics of Materialism: History, Philosophy, Science*, Routledge, London 2017, pp. 44–65.

<sup>14</sup> The source of this quotation, Novalis, would have no doubt have been open to the latter interpretation. One of the difficulties of the present moment in Spinoza studies is rescuing Spinoza from those who would interpret him as an idealist, without losing the insight of those Romantics who understood something of the spirit of Spinoza, but resisted attributing to him what to their eyes would have seemed a base materialism. Seeing Spinoza through his echoes in Whitman, I hope, helps us recognize that spirit in the flesh.



While Whitman tells us more about himself than, perhaps, we want to know, we don't know much about Spinoza the man. One reason that we lack evidence for a full understanding of Spinoza's motivations is that after his death, his friends burned his letters, most of them. They cut off from us a piece of who Spinoza was, that we will never get back (barring some truly wonderful archival discovery). They did so, no doubt, to protect their friend's legacy, but no doubt also to protect themselves and their preferred view of what he and his work meant. What we can learn of Spinoza has been limited by his friends.

I propose that we might be able to learn something from Spinoza's enemies. One enemy in particular, Stensen, gives us an account of Spinoza and Spinoza's philosophy that paints a very different picture.

When a copy of Spinoza's *Ethics* was discovered in the Vatican archives in 2010, along with it Totaro and Spruit found the letter from Niels Stensen. Stensen, formerly a student of anatomy and acquaintance of Spinoza, had converted to Roman Catholicism and found the teachings of Spinoza a danger to the faith. In 1677, he sent the manuscript of the *Ethics* to the Vatican, for it to be placed on the Index of Forbidden Books, which it was in 1678.<sup>15</sup> In this denunciation, we find a fascinating take on Spinoza's views. Stensen writes, with liberal use of italics, that Spinoza seeks to show that there is one substance, that all individuals are part of it, that he calls this substance God, and denies to God providence freedom. While simplified, this is a recognizable gloss on Spinoza's metaphysics. But what is less recognizable are the following:

The basis of all their evil is a pretentious overestimation of their understanding and their desire of sensual joys...Concerning the joys of the senses they teach that true wisdom consists in enjoying the pleasures of each sense, and of theaters, smells, foods, etc. to the extent that they do not cause nuisance to themselves or damage to others; nor is there any need for thinking of penance or fear of God or other ways to sadden the souls...the followers of this apostasy place all their joy and happiness in the enjoyment of every sense as well as in the delight of fantasy, and in order to obtain this enjoyment they seek to learn as many natural and mathematical truths as possible.<sup>16</sup>

While mathematics is today an underrated pleasure, Stensen also notes the more conventional vices of one of Spinoza's followers: "I found him smoking a pipe, surrounded by glasses of wine and beer." And thus, "it was with great compassion that

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<sup>15</sup> Pina TOTARO and Leen SPRUIT, *The Vatican Manuscript of Spinoza's Ethica*, Brill, Leiden, Boston 2011, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> TOTARO, *The Vatican Manuscript of Spinoza's Ethica*, p. 12.

I saw a half-drunk boasting of being perfect in every virtue.”<sup>17</sup> So, to Stensen, Spinoza’s philosophy is a dangerously vice-inducing sensualism. While we might dismiss Stensen’s descriptions as denunciation buzzwords meant to categorize Spinoza’s complex views as mere sensualism,<sup>18</sup> I think Stensen’s description also shows us a version of Spinoza that is at least possible, and one that brings him closer to Whitman than their apparent differences may suggest.

## 2.1. *Ultimi barbarorum*

We have one other piece of evidence of who Spinoza was and why he wrote, which puts a bit more flesh on the bones of our Benedict and brings us back to the present moment.

In 1672, according to the story, Spinoza, enraged, he had written “*ultimi barbarorum*” on a sign and was headed into the streets in rage to combat the mobs that had murdered the leaders of his time. These leaders that had held for Spinoza some hope for the expansion of understanding of the natural world and for a more natural or democratic state. He had to be held back by his landlord, who feared he would be killed if he entered the fray. Those of us who have kept protest signs in our cars this summer, just in case, understand this desire to run into the streets and scream, hoping that throwing ourselves at the horror of our times will do something. Spinoza, though he counsels us to understand our emotions and to seek joy rather than pain, was, of course, able to feel anger and moral indignation. Spinoza would understand our times and Whitman’s. He would have understood the moment of anger, rage and despair when we want to shout moral condemnation and have that condemnation change the world. He felt fear at the political turmoil, the brief hope of progress and then rage watching the symbols of that progress be torn limb from limb in the town square. However, feeling indignation, fear, and rage is natural, but these feelings do not yield in the kind of understanding of other humans we need to affect their actions. Moreover, blame, hatred and anger diminish our power,<sup>19</sup> and we need all the power we can get to understand these phenomena.

From Spinoza’s moment of rage and indignation, we can find a central motivation of Spinoza’s that is rarely noted: that Spinoza wanted to change his world, and wanted

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> SPINOZA, *Complete Works*, (E3P11S), p.285 / (E3P59S), p. 310.

to intervene into his own political times, with his action and his writing.<sup>20</sup> I argue that he offers useful lessons for intervention.<sup>21</sup> Although we feel anger and hatred and despair about our present and the actions of humans near and far, we must follow Spinoza and “take[] great care to understand human actions, and not to deride, deplore, or denounce them.” To make real change, we need to understand “human passions (...) not as vices of human nature, but rather as properties which belong to it in the same way as heat, cold, storm, thunder and the like belong to the nature of the atmosphere.”<sup>22</sup>

### 3. The Consolations of Spinoza: Hope in Chaotic Times

In 523, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius found himself confined to house-arrest and waiting for death. His thoughts at that time have come down to us as *The Consolations of Philosophy*.<sup>23</sup> *Consolations* is an extended reflection on the role of hope, luck and knowledge in human life. In it, Boethius explains the consolation that philosophy can bring to our understanding that the universe does not lean toward our individual success, towards the satisfaction of our desires, and that to live well and to avoid despair requires knowing this. Boethius’s personification of Philosophy consoles us that we should put our trust, not in luck but in understanding, and that we should “bear philosophically” the vicissitudes of our times and fortunes.<sup>24</sup> I have argued that Spinoza offers us a similar lesson, but one that pushes us always to understand more. But it is not just the search for knowledge and understanding those that cause of our despair so that we can emerge from this enervating emotion that Spinoza teaches. Spinoza teaches us, what I have called before, a chastened hope<sup>25</sup> and an insistence on understanding. This chastened hope is not for renouncing the world and accepting our fate as Boethius must, but for understanding the world, engaging in it, and finally, for making it better.

In the United States during the summer of 2020, despair, anger and fear gripped the country in a way that was overwhelming for many. Locked down in quarantine for months, I, like many of my fellow citizens, watched as our government failed to act to

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<sup>20</sup> Ericka TUCKER, *Affective Disorders of the State: A Spinozan Diagnosis and Cure*, in “Journal of East-West Thought”, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Summer 2013): 97-120.

<sup>21</sup> Ericka TUCKER, *Spinoza’s Hobbesian Naturalism and Its Promise for a Feminist Theory of Power*, in “Revista Conatus”, Volume 7, No. 13, July 2013, pp. 11-22.

<sup>22</sup> SPINOZA, *Complete Works*, (TP 1.4), p. 681.

<sup>23</sup> BOETHIUS, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

<sup>24</sup> BOETHIUS, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Ericka TUCKER, *Hope, Hate and Indignation: Spinoza and Political Emotion in the Trump Era*, in M. B. Sable and A. J. Torres (eds.), *Trump and Political Philosophy*, Palgrave, New York 2018, pp. 157-8.

prevent the spread of the virus, watched as the US courts made it more and more difficult to vote, watched as Black citizens were gunned down by police on video, watched as protesters were run down by off-duty police SUVs and shot in the face with rubber bullets and tear-gassed for photoshoots. As we watched these things hope seemed to vanish. Isolated, alone and scared, the mood of the country was one of despair.

In this moment, when it did seem like there was so little to hope for, a group of people with seemingly nothing to lose started marching—walking in the streets. With no jobs, with sick relatives, with no hope for police protection or press interest, they marched. They marched every day. They marched in cities, in streets, over highways, and into suburbs. They are still marching. The summer of 2020 was a moment of massive public protest and political engagement — it is reckoned by some as the largest social movement in American History.<sup>26</sup> The ‘Black Lives Matter Summer’ of 2020, as it has started to be called, brought out another lesson of Spinoza, that we don’t find in Boethius. While we are small parts of nature, together we have more power than we do alone.<sup>27</sup> If we act together, we have more power to make things happen. We make change. We don’t get to decide the meaning of that change — but in June and July and August of 2020 — there was just no other option. Sit sad and afraid at home or walk in the city streets and call for change. And so, week after week this summer, with sometimes dozens, sometimes hundreds and on at least one occasions over a thousand of my fellow citizens, I knelt on hot blacktop for moments of silence. For miles, we chanted, “Black Lives Matter”, “Say Her Name”, “Say His Name”, “George Floyd”, “Breonna Taylor”, “No Justice, No Peace”, “If We Don’t Get it, Shut It Down” and “March with us.” Then, at a moment chosen by different organizers at different times, the group stopped chanting. We knelt or sat on the hot pavement and took a moment of silence to remember how many lives have been taken, families destroyed, and communities injured by police violence and organized racial hatred and anti-Black violence. In those moments, it was hard not to feel the potential power of individuals

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<sup>26</sup> Larry BUCHANAN, B. QUOCTRUNG e J. K. PATEL, *Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History*, in “The New York Times” (2020), (accessed July 9, 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>; Lara PUTMAN, J. PRESSMAN and E. CHENOWETH, *Black Lives Matter beyond America’s big cities* (Accessed: July 9, 2020) in “The Washington Post” (2020) [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/08/black-lives-matter-beyond-americas-big-cities/>].

<sup>27</sup> SPINOZA, *Complete Works*, (E4P18S) pp. 330-331; (TP 2.13) p. 694; (TP, 2.15) p. 695; Alexandre MATHERON, *Le « Droit du plus fort » : Hobbes contre Spinoza*, in “Revue Philosophique de la France Et de l’Etranger” 175 (2):149 - 176 (1985).

acting in concert — the power of a multitude shaped momentarily into an individual for the purpose of silent witness in the middle of a city street.

No one knows how this will end. Some fear the President will not vacate his office. Some fear that he will call upon militant white nationalists to take up arms against their neighbors. Some arm themselves in fear of this possibility. Others hope that the election will lead to an unexciting but competent leader who will possibly rebuild the institutions that have been destroyed in the last four years, others hope to rebuild institutions that were destroyed over the last forty. We are on the edge of our seats. Expectant, terrified, absorbed -- we are watching one of the greatest car crashes of all time in real time and with effects that span the globe, but with parts that are uniquely made in America. Anti-Black racism that is so American, stupidity and anti-intellectualism that are so American, notions of freedom that are selfish, bizarre and self-destructive that are so American, as the popular sign says of racism: these things are so American, that when you protest them, people think you are protesting America.

I live in Milwaukee, WI — one of the most racially segregated cities in the US.<sup>28</sup> The protest marches began in late June and have not stopped. I did not go every march, but I did go on some BLM marches this summer. In the middle of the march, hope exists. In the middle of that much human life, and sometimes on the edges as a little round white shield, hope exists. The marches involved sadness and tears and anger and joy. For many involved, it was the first time in a long time that we had been around other humans. This was hopeful. Even just seeing large numbers of Americans march in their own streets and post signs in their windows and lawns in white conservative neighborhoods—these were the first signs of hope many of us had had for months, or even years. This hope was, of course, limited to the time between marching and seeing protesters brutalized and sometimes killed by police and white supremacists on tv or live-streamed. This summer was one of chastened hope rising from despair. Briefly organized multitudes walked together in relatively common purpose, creating a source of power, a source of political power that changed American’s views of the Black Lives Matter movement dramatically, led to mainstream calls for defunding the police, and restructuring police organizations to combat racism.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mary SPICUZZA, *Milwaukee is the most racially segregated metro area in the country*, in “Milwaukee Journal Sentinel”, 8 January, 2019; William H. FREY, *Analysis of the 2000 Census and 2013-2017 American Community Survey*, Dec 6, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/12/17/black-white-segregation-edges-downward-since-2000-census-shows/>

<sup>29</sup> Kim PARKER et al, *Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement*, in *Pew Research Center 2020* (accessed 8/10/2020) <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>.

Spinoza wrote the *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)* to intervene in the politics of his time.<sup>30</sup> He recognized, at least at the end, that the passions of the people need to be understood not just for political peace, but also for individual flourishing. In a chaotic state, it's not easy to be a free individual—the individual path to freedom that Spinoza set out in the *Ethics* could not be completed without some degree of social peace.<sup>31</sup> Spinoza's intervention was not a huge success.<sup>32</sup> He revised his views on politics in his final and unfinished work, the *Political Treatise*, which is not on its face a particularly hopeful book. In it, Spinoza changes his appellation for democracy from most “natural” in the TTP to “most absolute”, which is somewhat chilling. The sections of the book on the Democracy are unfinished, and thus, it seems that the problem of democracy Spinoza was too hard for Spinoza to solve.

The *Political Treatise* isn't a hopeless book, however. In it, I find, the lessons that culminate in what I take to be the consolations of Spinoza. While democracy may be should be the most natural form of state, and while it would be the most absolute, it's also hard to create.<sup>33</sup> It requires understanding so much about human beings, individually and collectively, and finding genuine and convincing ways to get them to cooperate. Justice is hard. Cooperation among equals is hard. Combatting inequality is hard. Changing racism and racist imaginations is hard. The fear that is part of all hope, for Spinoza, is always ready to undermine collective goals and actions.<sup>34</sup> The lesson of Spinoza is to solve these hard problems, we need some hope — though not naive hope. We need the kind of hope that relies on understanding the causes of our collective problems and doesn't wish them away. Hope needs truth. Realistic and chastened hope requires that individual humans work together. Success in our goals is not likely, of course. Spinoza insists that we are small parts of an infinite universe, which does not seek what's best for us. However, Spinoza does not leave us in despair, nor does he counsel that we retreat from the world. While he doesn't give us a blueprint for collective action, he does argue it's necessary, and that a little bit of hope and an enormous amount of understanding and knowledge of ourselves, other humans and the world in which we live. Why study Spinoza? Because Spinoza was right about things we still get wrong. Because hating your neighbors is a bad way to get to know them,

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<sup>30</sup> SPINOZA, *Complete Works*, (*Theological-Political Treatise*, Preface), p. 387-394.

<sup>31</sup> Ericka TUCKER, *Spinoza's Social Sage: Emotion And The Power Of Reason In Spinoza's Social Theory*, in “Revista Conatus”, Vol. 9, No. 17 (July 2015): 23-41.

<sup>32</sup> Steven NADLER, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011; Susan JAMES, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

<sup>33</sup> SPINOZA, *Complete Works* (TTP, Ch 16), p. 531/ (TP 11.1) p. 752.

<sup>34</sup> SPINOZA, *Complete Works* (E3P50S), p. 303.

because human actions are caused. Because we can't change them if we don't understand them and even then, we might not be able to. Because Spinoza understood that hope was essential for political life, but essentially destructive, particularly if it is based on limited understanding. The more we understand, the more that we work with others, and the more others that we work with, the better our hopes can be.

Bearing our times philosophically, for Spinoza and Spinozists, means resisting those fears and anger and despair and hatred of the actions of those in political power and the ignorant masses that follow them. Fear, hatred, anger and despair diminish our power and make it harder to understand what causes the ignorance of other humans and the actions of those in power or what makes such actions possible. Hating injustice, while natural, is not enough to create justice. Hate only diminishes us — and we need all the power we can muster to understand and to stop the forces in our own time that seek to diminish the power of human beings and to keep them ignorant and fearful. Spinoza would have recognized our times.

As for the populace being devoid of truth and judgment, that is nothing to wonder at, since the chief business of the dominion is transacted behind its back, and it can but make conjectures from the little, which cannot be hidden. For it is an uncommon virtue to suspend one's judgment. So it is supreme folly to wish to transact everything behind the backs of the citizens, and to expect that they will not judge ill of the same, and will not give everything an unfavourable interpretation. For if the populace could moderate itself, and suspend its judgment about things with which it is imperfectly acquainted, or judge rightly of things by the little it knows already, it would surely be more fit to govern, than to be governed. But, as we said, all have the same nature. All grow haughty with rule, and cause fear if they do not feel it, and everywhere truth is generally transgressed by enemies or guilty people; especially where one or a few have mastery, and have respect in trials not to justice or truth, but to amount of wealth.<sup>35</sup>

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