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### [Review of: Y.Y. Melamed, H. Sharp (2018) Spinoza's : Political Treatise": a critical guide]

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*Spinoza's "Political Treatise": A Critical Guide.* Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Hasana Sharp, eds.

Cambridge Critical Guides. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xiv + 216 pp. \$105.

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“A commitment to method is one of Spinoza’s philosophical signatures” (27): yet the complex of scholiums, corollaries, exceptions, and analogies with which Spinoza

attempted to convey his thinking while evading censorship require not only analysis, but the work of imagination as well. This is particularly true for Spinoza's final and unfinished work. *Spinoza's "Political Treatise": A Critical Guide*, in the renowned series by Cambridge University Press, contains twelve contributions by authors who did not flinch from the task. The editors Yitzak Melamed and Hasana Sharp attribute the scarcity of scholarly attention the *Tractatus Politicus* (hereafter *TP*) has received to its "incomplete and imperfect" character (6), yet they stress its importance for a complete picture of Spinoza and "his insights into the dynamics of power and social life" (3). Spinoza employs here a different method, geared to the study of politics, that sheds new light on old ideas. Supposedly as a response to the political crisis of 1672, involving the brutal murder of two statesmen, Spinoza's approach to politics is more realist in the *TP*.

The introduction strives not to impose an interpretative vision on the *TP*, the editors being "unwilling to foreclose debate" about a work that has barely been studied (4). Nonetheless, the list of contributors and the four thematic sections—(1) relations to Spinoza's earlier work; (2) the role of affect; (3) the distinctive regimes of government; and (4) political power—show political theory and cultural criticism as the key approaches. Although the emphasis is justified, a philological chapter on the *TP*'s origins and historical context would strengthen this critical guide as a comprehensive starting point for research.

The remainder of this review demonstrates how three major topics recurring throughout the volume have inspired divergent interpretations. The first is the tension between political realism and idealism. While Spinoza aims to consider men as they actually are, and not as we wish them to be, to make politics as effective as possible, the *TP* contains multiple normative statements, resonant with the explicitly normative *Ethics* and *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Theo Verbeek prioritizes the *TP*'s realist tendency, suggesting that the events of 1672 led Spinoza to lose his faith in the self-correcting mechanisms of reason and that, consequently, Spinoza's preference for democracy is less a spirited defense of egalitarian principles than a resignation to the impossibility of sustaining the best government—namely, aristocracy. Melamed, on the contrary, focuses on a passage that hints at the limits of a realist attitude. The passage claims that states can have too much power, in the sense that it is not always rational for a state to act according to its might, although it would be realistic. The division among the authors provides a good reflection of *TP*'s openness on this point.

Another recurring topic is the role of conflict in the state. According to Julie Cooper, Spinoza's view of conflict resembles Hobbes's in his quest for modes of argument that are "powerful enough to forestall deliberation and dissent" (46). Filippo Del Lucchese, on the other hand, points out Spinoza's relation to Machiavelli, who considers social and political conflict crucial to the building of a community. Hasana Sharp takes a middle position, submitting that, for Spinoza, "domination is a greater threat to stability than is conflict" (100). Subsequently, she conceptualizes conflict after Spinoza's

*oikos-polis* analogy; however quarrelsome the members of a family or state are, they remain determined by one another.

Finally, several authors address Spinoza's remark that in a successful state, women are excluded from politics. Susan James uses the passage to support her claim that, for Spinoza, political inequalities may contribute to the sustainability of the state. The reasoning is that different social classes and groups will develop different affective dispositions, including dispositions that reconcile people to subordination. Moira Gatens is more resistant to Spinoza's misogynistic attitude, considering the passage a philosophical weakness. The fact that Spinoza only uses historical evidence and no philosophical arguments to substantiate his point leads Gatens to conclude that Spinoza's anxiety about the socially destructive forces of the passions superseded his desire to validate a genuinely democratic polity, dealing a severe blow to Spinoza.

With these brief examples I hope to have aroused the curiosity of some readers, not only for this critical guide, which offers a very diverse collection of excellent essays, but also for the *TP* itself and its capacity to inspire and divide the imagination of some fine thinkers in our time.