

**humility, *acquiescentia* and
subordination: a spinozist
response to jean hampton's
feminist kantianism**

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INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND FEMINIST ANALYSES

Humility is a sadness born of the fact a man considers his own lack of power, or weakness.

(*E III*, DA26)

We call him humble who quite often blushes, who confesses his own vices, and tells the virtues of others, who yields to all and finally who walks with his head bowed, and neglects to adorn himself.

(*E III*, DA29Exp)

For as pride is born of self-esteem so despondency is born of humility.

(*E III*, DA28Exp)

[Despondency is] a sadness born of a man's false opinion that he is below others.

(*E IV*, P57S)

In this paper, I explore a feminist understanding of humility, drawing upon the work of Benedict Spinoza in order to explain some of the ways in which subordi-

nation is perpetuated. My aim is to demonstrate that Spinoza's conceptual framework provides a better understanding of (and solution to) the problem of humility than that of the Kantianism employed by feminist philosopher Jean Hampton. Hampton's work provides an important background to this paper.¹ She sets up the problem to be examined by recognising that there *is* a problem with humility; that there are women (and men) who are raised to view themselves as "a different type of person," one for whom morality involves *always* putting others first at the expense of their own interests. This course of behaviour, of someone who "yields to all" (*E* III, DA29Exp) as Spinoza puts it, is problematic for Kant and Hampton if it arises from a lack of self-worth or diminished sense of entitlement rather than from generosity. Hampton's Kantianism provides her with a straightforward analysis. She characterises such humility as based upon a moral failure to view *oneself* as of equal moral worth to others. For her, as for Kant, such a failure is morally wrong for the same reason that a failure to respect others is wrong: the humble fail to recognise that all persons (including themselves) should be treated with respect as equal.²

As I will explain, Hampton's reliance upon Kant's idea of equal moral worth has *no equivalent* in Spinoza's immanent ethics. Instead, Spinoza describes how we move from a state in which we compare ourselves to others to one in which there is no comparison made, as we gain adequate knowledge about ourselves. I will compare Jean Hampton's feminist analysis of humility and self-worth with that of Spinoza on humility and his complex view of self-esteem /self-contentment (*acquiescentia*). What happens when Hampton's feminist inquiry is reworked within a Spinozist rather than Kantian framework? Hampton's analysis of humility informs her understanding of practical situations. As I will explain below, it provides her with a way of understanding unfairness in long-term relationships, paradigmatically heterosexual marriage, and has implications for gender bias regarding the credibility of witnesses in the criminal (and civil) justice system. Ultimately, what is at stake in my examination of humility is our understanding of subordination and its perpetuation. As a result, I argue that Hampton's feminist insights about humility are both provocative and useful when reframed within a Spinozist analysis.

I start with Hampton as a comparator to Spinoza because of her insight that "the problem of selflessness" is a feminist problem. This does not mean that men cannot be humble or that there is anything *necessarily* humble about women, who have often been stereotyped as vain regarding their appearance in societies that

objectify them. Hampton is concerned about particular cultures in which women are trained to always “yield to others” and to be less confident of their abilities, with lower expectations of being respected. In Hampton’s “Two Faces of Contractarian Thought” she compares Hobbes’ view of our worth unfavourably with the Kantian position that we should all be treated as having equal moral worth.³ Spinoza’s view of human value does not fit within the Kantian position of equal moral worth, on which Hampton relies, but neither does Spinoza merely fall back on Hobbes’ view that our worth is to be understood as our price. Instead, he holds a unique position in which a comparison with others only takes place when we have inadequate knowledge about ourselves. I explain this in the context of his understanding of humility and its opposite: *acquiescentia*, which is translated as self-esteem⁴ but also self-contentment.⁵

THE PROBLEM OF HUMILITY: SETTING THE SCENE

Before turning to Spinoza, it is worth setting the scene by answering in more detail the question: what is at stake in Hampton’s analysis? She uses the same arguments to address the criminal law as she does fairness in relationships—albeit that the criminal law provides an extreme example of unfairness. If someone is treated as a means to an end—paradigmatically in sexual offences—then, Hampton argues, the victim is right to feel she has been “put down” because she has not been treated with respect as a person. The criminal has treated her as if she were only an object, someone whose own goals do not matter. However, there is a worse reaction suffered by the victim of such a crime. This arises more often in a society in which the justice system does not discharge its duty to ensure that it makes a public statement that the criminal was wrong to hold himself above the victim; to continue to belittle her. It is possible, Hampton argues, for the victim (of heterosexual rape) to feel *diminished*. She started by feeling that she was of equal worth but then—as a result of the crime and courts’ unjust response—she *feels* and mistakenly starts to believe that she is an inferior sort of being compared to the criminal who has licence to treat her as an object.

Sometimes women (and men) are socialised from childhood to have a lower sense of self-worth and to expect little respect from others, just as some are taught to have a greater sense of entitlement. This lack of self-belief is not randomly distributed in the population—a point that I examine in my Spinozist analysis below. The spread of humility in a population correlates with groups for whom respect has been historically denied, based on race, class, disability and sexuality as well

gender. Even in a supposedly egalitarian society, which is no longer based upon differences in legal status, it is possible to compare some students—who expect that if their work is not viewed as that of a genius then they have grounds to appeal—with others whose experience of the education system leaves them diminished. Today in the West, this may well be associated more with class than gender in some universities. However, irrespective of the identity or identities that are belittled, such mechanisms undermine equality and the possibility of participative democracy. Focusing upon gender, Hampton cites an extreme example of a woman who viewed rape as something that women just had to suffer because that experience is “natural,” viewed as inevitably how society works.⁶ Hampton argues that this woman’s assumption is morally (and epistemologically) incorrect. To make this claim, Hampton relies upon the Kantian premise that the victim is objectively equal to others.

Hampton applies the same framework to consider long-term heterosexual relationships.⁷ She considers the fate of Jake and Amy, two children in Carol Gilligan’s famous study of children’s reaction to moral problems. When asked: “When responsibility to oneself and others conflict, how should one choose?” Jake replies: “You go about one fourth to others and three-fourths to yourself.”

In response, Amy is much less clear about her own claim even when she considers something that could hurt her,

Well it really depends upon the situation. If you have responsibility with someone else (sic) then you should keep it to a certain extent, but to the extent that it really is going to hurt you or stop you from doing something you really, really want then I think *maybe* you should put yourself first. But if it is your responsibility to someone really close to you, you’ve just got to decide in that situation which is more important yourself or that person, and like I said, it really depends upon what kind of person you are and how you feel about the other person or persons involved.⁸

Amy’s use of the term “maybe” could be viewed as leaving open the possibility that she would put herself first, for example if there were a risk of harming herself if she failed to do so. However, as Hampton points out, Amy is not even clear that she actually would act in her own interests, even in this extreme example and it is clear whose goals would dominate if Jake and Amy married.⁹

While this lack of assertiveness on Amy's part may well disempower her, and certainly reflects a lack of any sense of entitlement, it may be that she is proud of being selfless. She talks of taking responsibility for others and her position makes sense if she is thinking of those who cannot easily reciprocate because they are children or sick. However, she does not limit herself to these situations. Such an attitude could be based on a view that those with bodies similar to hers (women) are subject to a different sort of morality to Jake—a view popular with many male philosophers, including Kant.¹⁰ Drawing upon Spinoza for a moment, it may be that she may not compare herself to Jake any more than with “trees or lions” (*E* III, P55SCS) because she does not see herself as sufficiently similar to warrant comparison. It is necessary to be careful about what humility entails. It may be possible to attribute a willingness to help others to what Spinoza refers to as “nobility” (*generositas*) *E* III, 59S. I am concerned only with situations in which someone always “yields to others” because of a sense that she is below them. This is Hampton's characterisation of Amy.¹¹

To summarise, for Hampton—arguing against proponents of the ethics of care who view Amy's sense of responsibility as commendable—her selflessness reflects an objectively faulty morality because it is based upon a low expectation of how others should treat her. Hampton views Amy's answer to the question of what to do if your interests conflict with that of others as the counter-part of Jake's selfishness. She argues that it reflects the socialisation of one who is being trained to be subordinate, just as Jake is being raised to dominate. Hampton therefore has a straightforward answer to the problem she highlights regarding humility: the humble should use reason to view themselves as equal persons. This answer is based upon her Kantian position that persons have equal moral worth (despite Kant's actual views on women expressed in the *Anthropology* that they only mimic morality by behaving beautifully rather than employing reason).¹²

Part of my interest in reframing Hampton's work on humility is to think about the perpetuation of subordination. Spinoza's argument that both my mind and my body are expressions of the same mode of substance is useful in thinking of both: (i) encounters with other minds (ideas) that reinforce subordination; and (ii) encounters with other bodies, including bodily habits that perpetuate subordination. Neither mind nor body has priority, each being an expression of the same thing:

[T]he mind and the body are one and the same thing, which is conceived

now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension.
(*E* III, P2S)

Thomas Carson Mark provides a useful analogy to illustrate the relationship between mind and body in Spinoza's thought.¹³ He compares this relationship with the way in which the content of a noun or statement can be expressed in two different languages. For example, and leaving aside difficult problems of translation, "my aunt's pen" and "la plume de ma tante" both express the same thing but in different ways. By analogy, both my mind and my body express *me* but through different attributes. I will discuss encounters with others, which are always encounters between minds or between bodies, to explain how we come to a greater understanding of our interactions when I turn to Spinoza below.

Before turning to Spinoza's own analysis of humility, I want to illustrate Hampton's concern further by turning briefly to another feminist theorist to draw out one particular aspect of Hampton's work. Miranda Fricker discusses the result of "epistemological injustice," which occurs when what someone says, whether truth statements or opinions, is consistently disregarded by her listeners.¹⁴ It may be that someone's comments are not accorded respect in a one-off case, for example if her expertise is simply not realised by her audience. However, Fricker highlights the problems that arise when some sections of the population are consistently undermined when they communicate (or try to communicate, given that others may fail to listen at all). Women have been stereotyped as both ignorant and sometimes deliberately deceptive, with clichés employed such as "old wives tales" and "women's intuition." Fricker gives examples regarding attacks on women's credibility in both the formal role of witnesses in court, dismissive attitudes to their suggestions at work meetings and in social situations. In her empirical work, some women have described the problem of having their suggestions for workplace improvement adopted only when a man, who is then credited for the insight, later expresses these proposals.

Spinoza's ontology is particularly useful for considering the harm that arises in these situations, both to the individual women whose credibility is systematically attacked and to others who are denied the knowledge that she could otherwise provide. Both of these effects undermine the ability of a society to communicate adequate knowledge. While this seems to serve them right, the lost contribution of the subordinate to those who dominate them matters because everyone in a society is undermined if communication that leads to adequate knowledge

is blocked. The pride of those who dominate is based upon ignorance and anything that perpetuates ignorance is a problem for society as a whole. This is because, from a Spinozist perspective, human communication is central to the way in which we increase our understanding of the world and ultimately to “who we are” (ontologically) and the richness of the lives open to us:

To man, then, 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.

(*E IV, P18S*)

In support of the view that “man” also includes women in this quotation, Spinoza (*E IV, P68S*) describes Eve as completely agreeing with Adam’s nature.¹⁵ Human bodies are similar enough that one person’s insights may well be valid for others, in many though not all situations. My cure for cancer is likely to be your cure for cancer. Spinoza’s argument does not rest upon a claim that we are identical. We are particularly useful to each other as a source of adequate knowledge (or information that can lead to adequate knowledge). Adequate knowledge—an ability to understand the reasons why an encounter (with something or someone) has affected us in a particular way—allows us to increase our powers to act and to think, which increases the quality of our lives. Adequate knowledge changes *us* such that we can thrive and live more virtuous and free lives, given that for Spinoza thriving, freedom and virtue are synonymous. When we gain such knowledge, we can “boot strap” ourselves into a richer life by opening up richer experiences and new ways of living. As Balibar puts it:

[T]he whole of Spinoza’s philosophy, insofar as it makes metaphysics inseparable from politics (this unity or reciprocal presupposition being precisely what is meant here by an “ethic”), can be understood as a highly original philosophy of communication.¹⁶

In contrast to such a virtuous circle of improving our understanding of the world that comes from associating with “the wise,” I am interested in Fricker’s argument that failure to be treated as a credible source of knowledge may create a vicious circle, thereby producing one of many mechanisms through which subor-

dination is perpetuated. Someone whose statements and opinions are not taken seriously may start to doubt herself. A woman's (or man's) lack of self-confidence regarding her opinions will be reflected in bodily social cues, such as hesitation, thereby undermining her credibility further.

Although Fricker and Hampton have not engaged with each other's work (and neither discusses Spinoza), both produce theories that trace particular operations of power that are potentially self-reinforcing in ways that contribute to the perpetuation of subordination. Fricker's analysis of the way in which someone's credibility can be undermined such that she starts to doubt herself is akin to Hampton's analysis of women who are "diminished" as a result of an experience of a crime or treatment as a subordinate in an on-going sexual relationship. Unlike Spinoza, who does not recognise that humility is encouraged *systematically* in certain parts of the population, Hampton and Fricker both recognise this as a feminist problem (as well as one that concerns racism, and subordination through class, disability etc.). As a result, they trace a mechanism or techniques of power whereby such humility is maintained.

Having made this point, Spinoza's *Ethics* is useful for thinking in detail about the ways in which some passions are reinforced or undermined. In Spinoza's terms, both Hampton and Fricker describe sad encounters between women's minds and other minds, which diminish women's powers of thinking. (Bodily encounters with other bodies, in this context, diminish their powers of acting. As discussed above, this is an expression of the same thing, given that, for example, my mind and my body are simply the same thing: me, expressed in different ways.) While both Fricker and Hampton identify themselves as "analytic philosophers" their descriptions of specific mechanisms that reinforce subordination can inform the feminist/left work of continental philosophers who rework Spinoza's thought. Feminist engagement with Spinoza has thrived over recent years, as illustrated, for example, by the collection of *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*.¹⁷ The "transplant" of Hampton's work (that I aim to conduct) opens up a way of thinking of these mechanisms that is anti-humanist, i.e. that conceptualises the self as emerging because of such mechanisms, rather than (for example) envisaging a fully formed self that is then corrupted. This is a better image because it conveys the idea that our powers of acting and thinking may fluctuate; that even though there are mechanisms that perpetuate subordination, we can still improve our situation, not through an act of volition but by increasing our powers of acting.

Spinoza's analysis makes communication and understanding key to such improvement. The problem is that only affects can overcome other affects (*E II*, P7Pr). We are more likely to react to expressions of contempt by others with hate (defined as "sadness with an accompanying idea of an external cause," *E III*, P13S), seeking to destroy the object of hate, as discussed further below. Nevertheless, the point of analysing the passions in the *Ethics* is to understand them as part of nature so as to increase our powers through such understanding.¹⁸ This use of understanding rather than emotion allows us to become more active rather than passive. Spinoza is not asking us to "turn the other cheek" if belittled but provides resources so that we can try to understand how such lack of respect emerged in a society. For Hampton, we should only forgive if it is clear that the "guilty party" has changed and now recognises our equal personhood. For Spinoza, as I will illustrate, the relevant question only concerns our ability to be active and to increase our powers of acting.

Although she does not focus upon humility as such, I have referred to Fricker's work to illustrate a potential area of interactions in which someone's self-belief in her own opinions and judgement is undermined. Hampton's own problem of humility could include such diffidence regarding one's speech and so this aspect of Fricker's analysis can be used to illustrate one aspect of Hampton's concern. Having set up her feminist analysis of concern about humility, I will now turn to Spinoza on humility more generally to re-situate Hampton's response from a Kantian to a Spinozist framework. In common with Hampton, Spinoza—from a very different perspective—criticises the way humility has been characterised as a virtue.¹⁹

SPINOZA ON HUMILITY AND DESPONDENCY

In a definition, which I will apply to women as well as men, Spinoza defines humility as:

[A] sadness born of the fact that a man considers his own lack of power or weakness.

(*E III*, DA24)

His definition of despondency indicates that it is born of humility, just as pride arises from self-esteem *E III*, DA28Exp and involves:

[T]hinking less highly of oneself than is just.
(*E* III, DA29)

And:

[A] sadness born of a man's false opinion that he is below others.
(*E* IV, P57S)

In the next section, I will discuss the ways in which humility only ever arises because of our having inadequate knowledge about ourselves. I will then trace the way that Spinoza explains how, with adequate knowledge of ourselves, humility will turn into self-esteem, which is stable and does not involve a comparison with others. This self-knowledge differs at different “levels” of understanding, associated with the first, second and third type of knowledge, and is central to our ability to thrive. First, in this section, I will examine the description of humility and despondency in Spinoza's *Ethics*.

Turning to the definition of despondency, the idea of viewing oneself as “below others” provides a precise description of the problem that worries Hampton. She argues that philosophers have rarely recognised the problem of selflessness. This problem, described above, only becomes obvious when women and their traditional socialisation come into view as an area that requires philosophical analysis. From this perspective, Spinoza's claim appears traditional when he characterises humility and despondency as “very rare” (*E* III, DA29Exp). He claims that, while there may be many supposed displays of humility—of going out of one's way to always try to please others, for example—these are usually really motivated by ambition and not true humility. Spinoza gives a supporting argument as to why this should be the case:

These affects—humility and despondency—are very rare. For human nature, considered in itself, strains against them, as far as it can (see P13 and P54). So those who are believed to be most despondent and humble are usually most ambitious and envious.
(*E* III, DA29Exp)

Human nature strains against humility and despondency because both are sad passions.
(*E* IV, P56S)

Despondency is therefore more easily corrected than pride. Spinoza's explanation of why this is the case draws upon his analysis of the passions more generally and is envisaged in terms of forces. The "force" of the desires that arise from joy—as is the case with pride—is greater than the force of desires that arise from sadness, as is the case with humility (*E IV*, P18). In more detail, the force of a desire that arises from joy is:

[D]efined by both human power and the power of the external cause whereas the force of a desire which arises from sadness must be defined by human power alone.
(*E IV*, P18Pr)

This is a complex idea and an alternative translation of its demonstration by Shirley is useful to explain it:

Desire arising from pleasure is, by the fact of pleasure being felt, increased or helped; on the contrary desire arising from pain is, by the fact of pain being felt, diminished or hindered; hence the force of desire arising from pleasure must be defined by human power together with the power of the external cause, whereas desire arising from pain must be defined by human power alone.²⁰

First, it is important to recognise that the reference to "human power alone" in this quotation should not be confused with the situation in which someone is the adequate cause of her own actions and therefore is active rather than passive, acting in accordance "with her nature alone." The situation, envisaged in the above quotations from *E IV*, P18, is different because here Spinoza is discussing someone who has *inadequate* knowledge of the cause of her desire to act out of joy or sadness. This is clear because someone suffering from humility and despondency can only have inadequate knowledge of the situation. By attaining adequate knowledge of oneself, one overcomes these mistaken views. The reference to a desire arising from sadness (Curley's translation) or pain (Shirley's translation) is a reference to an interaction with another body or mind (ideas) that disagrees with our nature (such as a situation in which one's opinions are not respected and one is belittled). The external body/mind (ideas) then reduces our power to act/understand, i.e. it undermines our abilities (i.e. our powers of acting/understanding). Spinoza does not envisage us experiencing a *lack* of any ability when he describes a reduction in our powers. The reduction in our powers is described in

terms of our being blocked from our own powers of acting/understanding. When this impediment—such as the idea that our opinions are worthless—no longer exists then we are able to use these abilities as before.

To employ Hampton's examples, if a woman is raped then she could have different responses: anger or—worse—a sense that this is the sort of treatment that, as a woman, she has to put up with, thereby taking on the perspective of a misogynist society as inevitable. In the case of the second reaction, she is being "*diminished*" in Hampton's terms. In Spinoza's framework, this situation in which a woman becomes "diminished" accords with humility and despondency because it involves an assessment of oneself as ultimately "lower than others." This situation involves a diminution of one's powers of acting and thinking but these powers are never fixed while we are alive. As described in the above quotations, we strain against being positioned in this way because it gives us sadness and pain. This can be compared with joy/pleasure that derives from pride (i.e. assessing oneself as *above* others). Pride is accompanied by joy and therefore reinforced by external factors and so it is not as easily overcome as humility.

The humble are undermined in their striving to increase their powers of acting by a set of bodily practices that are also simultaneously expressions of ideas of this subordination expressed through a different attribute. The way in which Hampton and Fricker discuss such mechanisms, outlined above, provide examples. Spinoza captures one aspect of their analysis when he refers to passions that "cling to us":

The force of any passion, or affect, can surpass the other actions, or power of a man so that the affect stubbornly clings to the man.
(E IV, P6)

Seemingly selfless acts could be motivated by ambition, of course—as Spinoza also discusses—yet, as explained above, I am interested in "genuine" humility; thinking of your lack of power, associated with judging yourself as "below others." This investigation of humility involves clarifying the ways in which self-worth and self-esteem fit within these two very different frameworks: that of Kant/Hampton and of Spinoza. While Spinoza argues that humility and despondency are rare, he also recognises that parents bring up their children to have different views of what is moral, depending upon what is subject to praise or blame, such that "as each one had been educated, so he either repents of a deed or exults at being es-

teemed for it.” (*E III*, DA27). This opens a way to think about the fact that some people are raised to have (what Hampton, but not Spinoza, views as) “a false morality” that is based upon acting as subordinates to others. By acting in this way and because of their treatment by others, they view themselves as subordinate. I will argue that Spinoza provides a better framework than Kant through which to understand humility and its relationship to subordination. However, as recognised above, Spinoza does not consider the extent to which such socialisation does not occur randomly within the population. In many cultures it is women (along with some other groups, such as those based on race, class and disability) who are brought up to judge themselves as both weak and “below others,” with an accompanying lesser sense of entitlement.

To understand humility further, consider its opposite, self-esteem, along with the opposite of despondency, pride. Spinoza describes “self-esteem” or—in Shirley’s translation, “self-contentment” (*acquiescentia in se ipso*) as “the highest thing we can hope for” (*E IV*, P52S). It is clearly not peripheral to his thought nor does it simply refer to the “empty” aim of the ambitious who want to be highly regarded by others (*E IV*, App). I will look at how self-esteem is conceptualised differently in each stage of knowledge, starting with inadequate knowledge.

SPINOZA’S ANALYSIS OF HUMILITY AND SELF-ESTEEM: INADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE

Spinoza describes different stages of knowledge, the first stage being “inadequate knowledge.” This pertains to what we experience when we first encounter another body or idea. This encounter may increase or decrease our powers of acting / understanding or may be neutral. As a result, it is associated with either joy or sadness (or no passion) and we form an image of the other thing in our imagination. If it has harmed us, we tend to label it as “evil” rather than working out the ways that it failed to agree with our nature. This partial understanding makes us passive.

At this first stage of knowledge, we only have “mutilated and confused” (*E II*, 29C) ideas. Contra Descartes, Spinoza argues that we cannot introspect to gain a truthful or adequate understanding of our minds (*E II*, 28S). The only way we can know our own mind is through the ideas of our body’s interaction with other bodies (*E II*, P23). Additionally, we do not know what our bodies are capable of doing (*E III*, P2S). When it comes to self-esteem, our confused assessment of ourselves

is based upon a general impression of a number of experiences, including our own abilities as we perceive them; and our, often inaccurate, perceptions of how others rate us. If we are constantly belittled by others then we are more likely to be humble and despondent; and, as Spinoza (*E IV*, P49) stresses, if flattered we can easily become proud. As discussed above, Spinoza does not consider the impact of some parts of the population being treated systematically as subordinate. He comes closest to recognising this point in the *Ethics* when he notes that we may stereotype others based upon a particular sad encounter (i.e. one that diminishes our powers) with a representative of a particular class or nation, different from our own (*E III*, P46).

In Part III, definitions (*E III*, DA26Exp) Spinoza opposes self-esteem (“the joy born of the fact that a man considers himself and his power of acting,” *E III*, DA25) with humility (“sadness born of the fact that a man considers his own lack of power or weakness,” *E III*, DA26). Self-esteem and humility are opposites when we are considering our power of acting/thinking in general. (When we reflect upon a specific deed—when we feel good about having done something—then self-esteem is opposed to repentance of that deed.)

So, just as despondency arises as a result of humility, pride can result from self-esteem (*E III*, DA28Exp). As Spinoza points out, it is more usual to think of humility and pride as opposites. However, he argues that this is incorrect for an important reason. There is no opposite to pride (“thinking more highly of oneself than is just, *out of love of oneself*,” *E III*, DA27Exp, emphasis added), i.e. we cannot feel less highly of ourselves than is just, *out of hatred of ourselves*. This follows from a central point about Spinoza’s framework in the *Ethics*. No singular thing that exists can hate itself. “One who hates strives to remove and destroy the thing he hates” (*E III*, P13S) and nothing strives to destroy itself. On the contrary, the very *essence* of each singular thing is its *conatus*; its striving to preserve itself and to thrive. This is clearly illustrated by Spinoza’s treatment of suicide, which, he argues, only arises when someone is “defeated by causes external” (*E IV*, P20S).

A comparison between humility (and the despondency that can arise from humility) and suicide, illustrates how problematic such misunderstandings of oneself are for Spinoza. All things that exist have an essence that Spinoza defines in terms of their striving to persist and thrive. As humans we do this by increasing our understanding of what helps us (and undermines us) and *why*. By associating with the wise—people who try to increase their own understanding and hence

powers—we are able to make a collective effort to become more active in the world, seeking out things that are good for us and avoiding the bad. Spinoza envisages a society in which our greater understanding opens up culture, the arts and many different ways of life. We cannot do this alone but by working with others to achieve greater understanding of both ourselves and things that affect us, including the society in which we find ourselves. This striving to understand is undermined to the extent that fear and the passions can diminish us (and the society of which we are a part). If someone is humble or despondent, she is systematically diminished, i.e. at that point in time, she is unable to move beyond the passions to gain adequate knowledge of the world.

Given that Spinoza argues that humility is likely to be rare because “nature strains against it,” as discussed above, we need to find a reason for its existence at all in Spinoza’s *Ethics*. I think this can be understood by considering what Spinoza says about the socialisation of humility. He recognises that parents differ in the actions that they praise and blame (*E III*, P55S). He also argues that, if people cannot be reasonable, the prophets (i.e. those who tried to hold together early societies) were right to encourage humility and shame rather than pride in order to restrain the multitude:

The mob is terrifying, if unafraid. So it is no wonder that the prophets, who considered the common advantage, not that of the few, commended humility, repentance and reverence so greatly. Really, those who are subject to these affects can be guided far more easily than others, so that in the end they may live from the guidance of reason, that is, may be free, and enjoy the life of the blessed.

(*E IV*, P54S)

However, in this scholium, Spinoza does not fully recognise the problems with humility because he fails to see that both pride and humility are *systematically* encouraged by the socialisation of some groups as the “complementary opposites” of each other. For example, Jake feels good about being male in comparison to Amy and Amy sees herself as the sort of person who should put others’ needs before her own. This is reflected in their language and demeanour as well as the credibility with which their arguments are received, as discussed above. I suggest that humility is particularly problematic because it is not spread randomly in a population but, as I will now detail, this analysis is easily derived from (and analysed using) Spinoza’s conceptual framework.

In the quotation above, Spinoza argues that, ideally we would all be wise, but in the absence of wisdom, humility is better than pride because the humble are more easily led to wisdom. I have two responses: a) pride and humility, when they are gendered, are counter-parts and so reinforce each other. Hence, they are not as easily divided as he envisages; and further b) in a society in which there is systematic socialisation of some of the population to be humble and some proud, there are mechanisms, detailed by Hampton and Fricker discussed above, that reinforce both humility and pride.

To draw out the implications of these points involves recognising that those who are encouraged to dominate (men, for example) are likely to become proud in comparison to the humble (women) in ways that not only creates the “weakness of mind” associated with pride (*E IV, P56* and *E IV, P56C*), it also undermines social harmony (Spinoza’s concern). This is perpetuated when the problem concerns stereotypes of men and women in traditional roles for the following reasons: first, children learn subordination and domination in the home through the ways that their parents behave towards each other. Second, as Spinoza argues, socialised dominance behaviour produces fear and anger—sad passions—that are socially disruptive (*E III, P30S*).

In this regard, Spinoza shares with Hobbes his political concern about pride.²¹ In a Hobbesian state of nature, vainglory contributes to the war of all against all.²² For Hobbes, it is particularly strong in young men who have read classical tales of heroism.²³ When Spinoza describes self-esteem, which arises from inadequate knowledge of ourselves, his account bears another similarity with Hobbes’ position (for whom our worth is simply our price, based upon others’ estimation of us). In Hobbes’ view, our “worth” is something that can fluctuate. Similarly, for Spinoza, when we have inadequate knowledge of ourselves, our muddled self-assessment is unstable and depends upon our estimate of others’ fickle views of us. Like Hobbes, Spinoza (*E IV, P58S*) recognises that this causes conflict when individuals compete for glory.

Turning to Spinoza’s explanation of humility in Part IV, gives us insight into the way self-esteem (*acquiescentia*) is understood when we have adequate knowledge and why it is “the highest thing we can hope for” (*E IV, P52S*) rather than merely an “empty” (vain) concern with others’ opinions. It therefore leads into my next section on self-esteem that arises from reason. Spinoza explains why “humility is not a virtue, nor does it arise from reason” (*E IV, P53*). When we know ourselves

by “true reason” (as he puts it) we understand our own essence, which is our power to understand. His analysis depends upon the fact that he is describing a process that involves reflecting upon our own abilities, i.e. at a “meta level” understanding our ability to understand. As humans, our power to thrive actually *is* our ability to reason itself. It is through our ability to understand why some interactions aid or diminish our powers that we are able to increase our powers. If we know *ourselves* through reason then we also *understand that we understand* particular interactions and why they effect us. This adequate knowledge of our own power (to understand our encounters with others) gives us joy when we reflect upon it.

By contrast, in the case of humility, when “man is considering himself” he thinks about some lack of power. Importantly, this muddled thought about our lack of power does not mean that we understand ourselves. The opposite is true. The humble think of their lack of power because their power (i.e. their ability to reason; to understand an interaction) is, at that moment, *restrained* in some way by an external force. Importantly, as discussed above, there is nothing lacking as such, our power is merely blocked. When we understand ourselves, we clearly understand what we adequately know about the world.

Additionally, when someone appears humble, she may in fact be thinking of something more powerful than herself that really does act as a genuine constraint on her powers. We are finite and there are always things that are more powerful than we are. If this is what is happening, then she has a clear understanding of the situation in which case such insight actually *increases* her powers of acting. She knows when to run or fight (preferably helped by others similarly situated) and what to avoid or fight in future for a better life. In this example, she is not humble, as such, but demonstrates reasonable judgement and an understanding of the situation. This allows her to be active rather than passive. In contrast, to be humble involves sad passions and passivity. However, to be humble does not involve being permanently diminished or corrupted. Ideas and practices may diminish us (in Hampton’s sense such as a woman who, as a result of being treated as second class wrongly judges this as an inevitable reflection of society). However, there is nothing *corrupting* about inadequate knowledge in Spinoza’s thought. Inadequate knowledge is partial and tells us something—albeit in a muddled way—about the world. With greater knowledge, such as the details about the ways that mechanisms of power work and the best ways to oppose it in concert with others, it is possible to increase our powers.

Spinoza therefore concludes that,

humility or sadness which arises from the fact that a man reflects on his own lack of power, does not arise from true reflection, or reason, and is a passion not a virtue
(E IV, P53Pr)

The idea that to know ourselves involves reflecting on our essence, which is not fixed but is what we do to persist and thrive, i.e. our ability to understand, is considered in more detail in the next section.

SPINOZA'S ANALYSIS OF HUMILITY AND SELF-ESTEEM: ADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE

In E IV, P52 Spinoza states,

Self-esteem (*acquiescentia*) can arise from reason, and only that self-esteem which does arise from reason is the greatest there can be.
(E IV, P52)

Within the demonstration, he refers back to the Definitions of the Affects 25 to say that:

[S]elf-esteem is a joy born of the fact that man considers himself and his power of acting.

This section follows from the previous discussion of humility, which is a passion and is only experienced when we have inadequate knowledge of ourselves. As discussed above, when we have adequate knowledge of ourselves, we are able to reflect upon (and understand) our ability to understand. To recap and explain further, when we have adequate knowledge, we have understood the reason why an interaction with something or someone has increased or decreased our powers of acting. Once we have understood an encounter, further reflecting upon our ability to understand in itself gives us joy. This is not simply because the initial understanding of an interaction allows us to be active in seeking out things that agree with our nature and to avoid those things that diminish us. It is because we experience joy when we reflect upon our power of understanding itself. This fits as the corollary to Spinoza's definition of the love of others, which is "joy with the

accompanying idea of an external cause.” Here, we have self-esteem as self-love, joy with the accompanying idea of ourselves as a cause.

When we have such adequate understanding, by definition, we do not experience either pride, humility or the empty self-esteem that is associated with confused ideas, imagination and passions. We are not drawing on our confused sense of others’ evaluations of us; instead, we clearly understand what we are capable of doing/thinking by reflecting upon what we genuinely understand.

In summary, in *E IV*, P53S Spinoza makes it clear that self-esteem, when derived from reason, arises as a result of our understanding of our essence, which is our striving to thrive. This in turn involves reflecting upon our power of understanding because it is by employing this ability to understand that human beings thrive. So, it is our ability to understand the role of understanding for us that gives us insight into “who we are.” Such insight does not involve comparing oneself with others. We benefit and are not competitive over the spread of such self-knowledge. Spinoza therefore describes this self-esteem as “the most we can hope for” (*E IV*, P52S). He then sounds a jarring note in this scholium:

And because self-esteem is more and more encouraged and strengthened by praise ... and on the other hand, more and more upset by blame ..., we are guided most by love of esteem and can hardly bear a life in disgrace.
(*E IV*, P53S)

As I am interested in those, who are not accorded respect, this switch is disturbing. Self-esteem holds an important position in Spinoza’s thought, being “the best we can hope for” (*E IV*, P52S). However, towards the end of *E IV*, P53S there is this shift in register when he refers to others’ evaluation of ourselves. Without explanation, Spinoza suddenly reverts to the more Hobbesian position of the volatile self-esteem that can fluctuate, being based upon inadequate knowledge and imagination rather than reason. I think that Spinoza mentions praise and blame at this point in the *Ethics* because he is about to address the difference between self-esteem associated with both adequate and inadequate knowledge in more detail, turning to humility in *E IV*, P53 and going on to discuss pride. This jarring note is then clarified later in *E IV*, P58 in which he deals with the difference between self-esteem based upon imagination (and hence inadequate knowledge) compared to that based upon reason (and adequate knowledge) directly when he states that, “Love of esteem is not contrary to reason, but can arise from it” (*E IV*,

P58). In *E IV*, P58S, Spinoza makes clear that he was switching between two types of self-esteem in *E IV*, P53S. He distinguishes between: (1) the love of esteem linked to inadequate knowledge (the first kind of knowledge), that depends upon the view of the multitude, which is fickle, and the results of which are destructive to society; and (2) that self-esteem associated with adequate knowledge attained through understanding (the second type of knowledge), both of which have now been discussed.

I will briefly touch on Spinoza's third type of knowledge before returning to think about Amy. Clare Carlisle has argued that self-esteem (*acquiescentia*) can be understood—through not only imagination and reason—but also through the third kind of knowledge, that of intuitive knowledge of God, discussed in Part V of the *Ethics*: “[A]cquiescentia signifies the feeling-quality of participation in God's eternity, giving content to the apparently abstract idea of intellectual love of God.”²⁴ In support, she quotes *E V*, P32 and its demonstration, noting that what Curley translates as “satisfaction of the mind” in Latin is “*mentis acquiescentia*.” Carlisle thereby highlights a link with the earlier use of *acquiescentia*, discussed above, that is lost when it is translated as “self-esteem” in the Curley translation of the *Ethics*. Spinoza states:

Whatever we understand by the third kind of knowledge we take pleasure in [*eo delectamur*], and our pleasure is accompanied by the idea of God as cause. From this kind of knowledge there arises the greatest satisfaction of Mind [*Mentis acquiescentia*] there can be (by P27), i.e. (by DA25), Joy; this Joy is accompanied by the idea of oneself, and consequently (by P30) it is also accompanied by the idea of God, as its cause, q.e.d.

(*E V*, P32)

Here Spinoza is discussing the joy that arises as a result of, not only our understanding of our abilities (the second type of knowledge), but also the idea of ourselves and our abilities as part of God/Nature/all that exists (the third type of knowledge). In other words, intuitive knowledge of our abilities goes beyond our joyful reflection upon our power to understand adequately. We recognise that we are part of God/Nature/all that exists. A different way of stating this is to say that we become aware through intuitive knowledge that our adequate ideas are also adequate ideas in God/Nature/existence. Given that it is necessary to move beyond humility to attain adequate knowledge of oneself through reason (the second stage) before attaining this third type of knowledge, things are not looking

great for humble Amy.

CONCLUSION: RETURNING TO AMY

For Spinoza, like Hampton, genuine displays of humility are not demonstrations of virtue. On the contrary, they indicate that something is seriously wrong. For both, the use of reason is necessarily part of the solution to the humble person's problem. Both have different views of reason, however. Spinoza pre-dates Kant's distinction between understanding and reason. Spinoza stresses the human ability to understand our interactions with the world, that is, to employ reason in order to produce adequate knowledge as to why something is good or harmful to us. Importantly, for Spinoza, we are able to improve our understanding, to live richer lives, the more we are able to work together. A society that systematically produces pride and humility greatly undermines its members' ability to thrive. When we have only a confused passionate view of ourselves then our ability to understand the encounters we have of the world is blocked. In addition, the communication of adequate knowledge is undermined because of epistemological injustice.

For Hampton, as a Kantian, the way out of the problem of humility is to replace such false morality with true morality, i.e. the humble should recognise that they should treat *themselves* as well as others as having equal moral worth. For Spinoza, the answer is to move from such a confused imaginative state (which involves a comparison with others and which fluctuates) to one of genuine self-understanding and contentment, i.e. to have self-esteem (*acquiescentia*) that is derived from reason. For Spinoza, this necessarily involves working with others to understand and change anything that undermines us. This, I argue, includes increasing our understanding of economic and social subordination, along with an analysis of mechanisms by which subordination is perpetuated.

For Hampton, persons can demand respect as persons and not because of any other quality that involves a comparison with others. From a very different perspective, Spinoza also rejects such comparisons. He rejects the form of self-esteem that is derived by comparing ourselves with others, which we do experience but only when we have inadequate knowledge about ourselves. With the transition from inadequate to adequate knowledge, our self-esteem stops being imagined in relation to others' abilities and opinions. Instead, we feel joy as a result of a reflective understanding of our own ability to increase our powers through the use of reason. This is not the same position as Kant's (and Hampton's) claim

that we have equal worth because we simply do not compare ourselves with others at all, at this stage of knowledge. Instead, this self-esteem (better translated as self-contentment) arises from our reflection upon our powers; that we can be the cause of our own joy through understanding; gaining adequate knowledge that allows us to join with things that help us thrive. Drawing on this knowledge of the second kind, we may then be able to gain knowledge of the third kind, an understanding of our position within the whole of nature, with accompanying joy.

Rather than being a person—a special type of thing with free will and an ability to choose rationally to obey one’s own law—we come to see ourselves as modifications of part of the whole of existence. Spinoza’s recognition that there is no “free will” opens up the possibility of greater freedom. It allows us to gain a better understanding of why we act as we do. This attempt to understand would be unobtainable if we simply attributed our actions to free will without further analysis. Therefore, within Spinoza’s framework, Amy’s humility is not to be characterised as an individual failing of her will nor is the solution for her to struggle alone to understand and hence increase her powers of acting on her own. His answer is certainly not that Amy should treat herself as a neo-liberal enterprise who needs to work harder on her assertiveness training in case her submissive attitude affects her earning potential.

In Spinoza’s thought, the term for self-esteem, “*acquiescentia*,” carries with it a sense of stillness but also acquiescence. At first sight, this is not a term that feminists are likely to find useful in the context of Amy as it sounds as if she is being called upon to acquiesce in her subordination. However, in the case of Spinoza’s thought, the obedience that arises as a result of our understanding is “obedience to our nature,” which is to “seek [our] own advantage,” *E IV*, P18S. To advise that Amy seek her own advantage sounds initially as if she is being advised to behave more like selfish Jake. To avoid this conclusion, it is important to recognise that Spinoza’s view of the individual is not that of separate competing individuals. The fact that we thrive in communication with each other means that we all have an interest in others’ attainment of adequate knowledge. For all of us, self-esteem therefore involves recognising our powers of acting in ways that make us more active rather than passive, which also means being more virtuous and free. This radically alters what it means to be a virtuous woman.

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NOTES

1. Jean Hampton, "Contracts and Choices: Does Rawls Have a Social Contract Theory?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 77:6 (1980, 315-38); idem, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; idem, "A New Theory of Retribution." *Liability and Responsibility Essays in Law and Morals*. Eds Raymond Gillespie Frey and Christopher W. Morris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 377-414; idem, "Two Faces of Contractarian Thought." *Contractarianism and Rational Choice-Essays on David Gauthier's Morals by Agreement*. Ed. Peter Vallentyne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 31-55; idem, "Correcting Harms versus Righting Wrongs: The Goal of Retribution." *UCLA Law Review* 39 (1992, 1659-1702); idem, "Rethinking Reason." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29:3 (1992, 219-36); idem, "Selflessness and the Loss of Self." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10:1 (1993, 135-65); idem, "Feminist Contractarianism." *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*. Eds Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt. Westview Press, 2002, 227-56; idem, *The Intrinsic Worth of Persons: Contractarianism in Moral and Political Philosophy*. Ed. David Farnham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
2. Janice Richardson, "On Not Making Ourselves the Prey of Others: Jean Hampton's Feminist Contractarianism." *Feminist Legal Studies* 15:1 (2007, 33-55).
3. Hampton, "Two Faces of Contractarian Thought," 48-49.
4. Spinoza, *Ethics. The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Ed. and trans. Edwin M. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, vol. 1, 408-617.
5. Spinoza, *Ethics. Spinoza: Complete Works*. Ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley. Cambridge: Hackett, 2002, 213-382..
6. Hampton, "A New Theory of Retribution," 49; discussed in Janice Richardson, "Jean Hampton's Reworking of Rawls." *Feminist Interpretations of John Rawls*. Ed. Ruth Abbey. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013, 133-49.
7. Hampton, "Feminist Contractarianism."
8. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, 36; cited by Hampton, "Feminist Contractarianism," 338, emphasis added by Hampton.
9. Hampton, "Feminist Contractarianism."
10. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Ed. and trans. Robert Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, [306] 207.
11. My thanks to Justin Clements and other members of my audience at the Australian Continental Philosophy Conference who argued that Amy was a decent human being and not humble. If so, then she is a bad example of humility that leads to despondency, i.e. of acting and experiencing oneself as "below others," which is the focus of this paper. I use her to follow Hampton's analysis of Amy. My Spinozist analysis does not rely upon Hampton's interpretation of Amy's position per se, although I use her name as a signifier for it for ease of reference.
12. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, [306] 207.
13. Mark, Thomas Carson, "The Spinozistic Attributes." *Philosophia* 7:1 (1977, 55-82).
14. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
15. See also Beth Lord, "Spinoza, Equality, and Hierarchy." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31:1 (2014, 59-77).
16. Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*. Trans. Peter Snowdon. London: Verso, 1998, 99.
17. Moira Gatens (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza: Re-Reading the Canon*. Univer-

- sity Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.
18. Genevieve Lloyd, *Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994.
 19. Julie Cooper, "Humility: Spinoza on the Joy of Finitude." *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
 20. Spinoza, *Ethics*. Trans. Shirley. (2002, 330).
 21. Thomas Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*. Ed. Edwin Curley. Cambridge: Hackett, 1994, XV [19].
 22. "Besides, revenge without respect to the example, and profit to come, is a triumph, or glorying in the hurt of another, tending to no end; (for the end is always somewhat to come); and glorying to no end, is vain-glory, and contrary to reason; and to hurt without reason, tendeth to the introduction of war; which is against the law of nature; and is commonly styled by the name of cruelty." *Ibid*.
 23. "The vain-glory which consisteth in the feigning or supposing of abilities in ourselves, which we know are not, is most incident to young men, and nourished by the histories, or fictions of gallant persons; and is corrected oftentimes by age, and employment." Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. VI [41].
 24. Clare Louise Carlisle, "Spinoza's Acquiescentia." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (2016, 230).