

Spinoza's Unquiet *Acquiescentia*

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Abstract

For Spinoza, the highest thing we can hope for is *acquiescentia in se ipso* — acquiescence in oneself. As an ethical ideal, this might appear as a complacent quietism, a license to accept the way you are and give up hope of improving either yourself or the world. I argue that the opposite is the case. Self-acquiescence in Spinoza's sense is a very challenging goal: it requires a form of self-understanding that is extremely difficult to attain. It also involves occupying a daring and radical political position, one that obstructs the psychological mechanisms by which political power is typically maintained.

I. Introduction

In Part Four of the *Ethics*, Spinoza reveals 'the highest thing we can hope for'. This is to *acquiesce in oneself*; Spinoza calls it '*acquiescentia in se ipso*' (4p52s). Such *acquiescentia* is, in its highest form, what Spinoza calls beatitude (*beatitudo*) or salvation (*salus*) (Rutherford 1999; Carlisle 2017, §2.3). The purpose of his *Ethics* is to show the way to this beatitude. Even in his youthful *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* Spinoza described his philosophical project as a search for a 'true good', yielding 'continuous joy to eternity' (TIE, G 5.6).¹ *Acquiescentia* appears to be the result of his search.

But the goal of *acquiescentia in se ipso*, which some translate as 'self-satisfaction', seems disturbingly quietist. Self-satisfaction is hardly to be celebrated as the pinnacle of virtue. We can criticise it at both a personal and a social level. At a personal level, it seems too easy to be ultimate. If self-satisfaction were really an end in itself then we could achieve it by accepting ourselves however we are and giving up any ambition of improvement. This seems a very unworthy goal. And at a social level, it seems too individualistic. The world is full of cruelty and suffering. This is something to remain unsatisfied about, however satisfied you might be with yourself.

Spinoza's ethical ideal can be defended from these charges. To the first we can reply that *acquiescentia*, for Spinoza, does not mean accepting ourselves simply as we

¹ All translations of Spinoza are mine.

happen to be. Rather, it means discovering our true essence and then acting according to it. Our true essence exists objectively, but in an abstract realm that is very difficult to access. The ethical goal he sets is thus epistemologically challenging.

Relatedly, it is psychologically challenging. In trying to find out our own essence—seeking something we do not initially even know how to recognise—we are overwhelmingly tempted to look for confirmation from others whom we imagine to be similar to ourselves. When others strive after the same things we strive after, we feel that we must be on the right track. But this, Spinoza explains, leads us towards a blind craving for the approval of the crowd. Our self-satisfaction depends on the crowd's approval; in our desperation to retain it, we become enslaved to the crowd's whims and violently competitive with rivals to its attention. True *acquiescentia* requires that we resist these passions, but our psychological tendencies make this very difficult.

The answer to the second charge—that Spinoza's ideal is too individualistic—is related. An individual capable of resisting the allure of the crowd's approval can also act as a beacon drawing others away from it. This is because all affects are contagious for Spinoza—both the craving for the crowd's approval and the disdain for it. Thus the pursuit of Spinozist *acquiescentia* is a politically radical project, which cannot help but involve others. Pursuing *acquiescentia* independently of the crowd's magnetic power undermines any political power that depends on that magnetism. I shall use Spinoza's discussion of the example of Jesus to illustrate this point.

II. Ethics Made Too Easy

Let me begin with the first problem, that Spinoza's ethical goal seems too easy. Spinoza's *acquiescentia* appears in his system as the achievement of the fundamental striving of each individual, which, he tells us in Part Three of the *Ethics*, is 'to persevere in its being' (3p6). He refers directly to this striving in explaining how *acquiescentia* is our highest hope. When we are conscious of this striving, Spinoza says, it is *desire* (3p9s). From this fundamental desire, all our other affects and appetites derive (Douglas 2016). Thus to gain what this fundamental striving aims for is to have our desire totally satisfied. Perseverance *in our being* and acquiescence *in ourselves* relate as activity and end.

Daniel Garber, Martin Lin, and Valtteri Viljanen (among others) have provided good textual arguments against reading Spinoza's 'striving to persevere' as a sort of inertial principle, despite similar phrases being used to express a conservation law in Cartesian physics (Garber 1994; Lin 2004; Viljanen 2011, 112–25).² It is not that we already possess our being and strive simply to retain it. If that were so, our ultimate desire would be to remain in the same state and never to

² Matheron points out that Spinoza appears to have in fact evolved from a more static concept of the *conatus*, in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* towards a more dynamic one in the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise* (Matheron 1990, 267).

change. *Acquiescentia in se ipso* would then be cheaply bought. We would simply accept who we are right now and give up any aspiration to self-improvement.

But the phrase Spinoza uses is prone to mislead us. 'Striving to persevere in one's being' (*conatus ad perseverare in suo esse*) can be read as 'striving to remain in one's being'. This would suggest that our striving is simply to remain what we are—that we already possess our being and strive only to retain it. In that case *acquiescentia in se ipso* would be a matter of simply accepting what we already are. But we can, and should, read the passage another way. Neither '*suo esse*'—one's being—nor '*se ipso*'—oneself—refers to whatever one happens to be at the moment. It denotes, rather, something like a norm of action, determined by one's *essential* being.³ Many of us, perhaps most of us, fail to act in a way that expresses our essential being, according to Spinoza. But this is what we strive to do.

Let us look more closely at Spinoza's theory of desire, which I have elsewhere (Douglas 2018; 2016) called *metaphysical*. I borrow the term 'metaphysical desire' from René Girard, who uses it to express the thesis that 'all desire is a desire for being' (Girard 2014, 12). That is, desire for Spinoza begins as wanting to *be* something not as wanting to *have* something. But striving to be something, in this sense, cannot amount to mere inertia. For any complex creature, survival is a matter of change: one perseveres as a person by ceasing to remain a child, to use Spinoza's example (E 4p39s). Persevering in being under one description means ceasing to be under others. Which description matches our fundamental striving? As I see it, the only viable answer is: *our essential being* (Douglas 2016; 2018).

In Clauberg's *Logica Vetus et Nova*, a work Spinoza owned (Freudenthal 1899, 160–64), and by which I believe he was influenced, we find the following crucial passage:

What is called *Essence* or Nature is that by which a thing is, and is what it is. ... Of essence we ask the question: 'what is it?'

Existence is that by which an *actual being*, or a thing itself exists, as a rose in summer. But a rose in winter is called a *potential being*, or a power, because it can be. The question 'is it?' concerns existence, which is posterior to the question 'what is it?' (Clauberg 1658, 2.791, my translation)

If the question of existence, 'is it?', is posterior to the question of essence, 'what is it?', we cannot meaningfully say *that* something is without first saying *what* is. But to strive for being is to strive *that* something is, so that striving for this consciously

³ Valtterij Viljanen notes that this is also suggested by Spinoza's use of another phrase in the same proposition—'*quantum in se est*' (Viljanen 2011, 84–97; 2014, 261). Idiomatically it means 'insofar as it can'. Literally it means 'insofar as it is in itself'. But Viljanen notes how, while Descartes used it to express an inertial principle in physics, historically it has meant something like 'according to its essence'; Viljanen argues that this is how we should read it in Spinoza.

must require first knowing *what* being our striving is to bring about. In a different work, Clauberg proposes that an actual thorn in winter is a potential rose (Clauberg 1968, 1.299, my translation). Thus I think we should read Spinoza's claim, that our striving is our actual essence, somewhat elliptically, as suggesting that our striving is our attempt to actualise an essence: to be actually what we are potentially.

This is far from being an easy ethical task. 'Be yourself', we are often simplistically told. But if we were already in actual possession of our selves we would have nothing to strive after and would sink into indolence. 'Being yourself' must mean, in Pindar's paradoxical phrase (which so entranced Friedrich Nietzsche), *becoming what you are* (Pindar 1915, Pythian Ode 2, line 73, 178; Nietzsche 2001, §270). Carlisle notes that there is an 'element of paradox in this idea of becoming what (or who) we are, or realising our true nature' (Carlisle 2015, 26). I assume she means the implied contradiction in saying that something becomes what it already is. But this apparent contradiction is resolved, as Carlisle explains, by '[t]he Aristotelian distinction between potentiality (*dunamis*) and actuality (*energeia*)' (Carlisle 2015, 26n121).⁴ Something can become *actually* what it already is *potentially*. This is what we seek to do, but to do it consciously we must know what we are potentially.

The structure of Spinoza's ethical goal can be spelled out in fairly traditional, Scholastic terms. Persevering in being is the active side of the same state as acquiescing in being. The activity is what Aquinas calls an 'internal goal': 'the internal goal of anything being its characteristic activity (since things exist in order to act)' (Aquinas 1858, Distinction 49.1, Reply to Query 2; 2008, 320). But Aquinas goes on: 'Now we don't call every activity a goal but only that which first unites a thing to its external goal' (Aquinas 2008, 321). In Spinoza's case, the external goal is our essence, which we seek to adequately express in our actions. It might seem strange to say that our essence is *external* to us, but Spinoza suggests that essences and actual existents are distinct. For instance in E5p23s there is a strong suggestion that the mind's essence is eternal whereas the mind as an actual existent is not.

In this case, however, the ethical goal Spinoza sets is far from easy to attain. It is beset with two difficulties.

The first difficulty lies in knowing what we essentially are. With the thorn and the rose it is simple enough—under favourable conditions, a thorn flourishes into a rose. But what is it that *I* flourish into under favourable conditions? What type of potential being do my actions strive at achieving? We cannot easily take our past experience of ourselves as a guide. Kierkegaard expresses the problem here:

The self wants in its despair to savour to the full the satisfaction of making itself into itself.... And yet what it understands itself to be is in the final instance a riddle; just when it seems on the point of having the building

⁴ Aristotle's influence on Spinoza has been traced by Frédéric Manzini, among others (Manzini 2009).

finished, at a whim it can dissolve the whole thing into nothing (Kierkegaard 1989, 101).

To illustrate this: suppose I rise to the top of some human station. I become, for instance, a captain of industry. Should I retire in luxury? Should I continue amassing wealth? Should I start a charity? What was I playing at? Which move is most in keeping with the essential character I aim to exemplify? There is no clear answer, because I have taken there to be no better exemplar of my own characteristic being—my own essence—than what is revealed through my own actions. And yet it is my actions that I am trying to decide upon.

Nor is it any help to say that I should continue as I was going. A human life is not wallpaper holding a pattern. It is a story that starts somewhere and ends somewhere else. The end can give meaning to what comes before. But what comes before can't predict the end. Previous actions might suggest what sort of character we *essentially* are and to this extent predict our future actions. But if our future actions defy the prediction, this doesn't have to mean we have gone against our character. It might only suggest that we were wrong about that character—that we need to modify or add nuance to our view of it.

Thus we cannot directly derive an idea of our essential being from observing our actual being. What we wish for, as Spinoza puts it, is 'to form an idea of a human being, as an exemplar of human nature we can look towards [*quod intuemur*]' (E 4pref, G 3.378). Return to Clauberg's thorn and rose. We know that a thorn flourishes into a rose from experience, from observing some cases and hearing of others. Likewise, you might think, we can form an idea of a flourishing person from what Spinoza calls the first kind of knowledge (E 2p40s)—or knowledge from hearsay and sensory experience.⁵

If we proceed in this way we will find our exemplars among other people—those we observe or hear about in the world.⁶ As various philosophers have noted, it is part of the human condition to feel an absence of determinate being in oneself while imagining it in others.⁷ Since we cannot find out our desire—our essential

⁵ I suppose a modern version of this would be the account given in Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness* (Foot 2001). She writes, first: 'let us suppose, evaluating the roots of a particular oak tree, saying perhaps that it has good roots because they are as sturdy and deep as an oak's roots should be' (Foot 2001, 46), and then: 'Thus the structure of the derivation is the same whether we derive an evaluation of the roots of a particular tree or the action of a particular human being' (Foot 2001, 47). The upshot is that if we can identify good, healthy examples of trees by observation so we might also identify good examples of human beings.

⁶ Michael Rosenthal addresses the ways in which religion provides exemplars to the imagination according to Spinoza (Rosenthal 1997). Moira Gatens explores the crucial role of the exemplar in Spinoza's political philosophy (Gatens 2009).

⁷ Girard: 'man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess' (Girard 2013, 164). Comte-Sponville: 'The others give me the impression of existing, of being

striving—through introspection, we seek it in what we imagine *others* to strive after, hoping that their essential being is similar enough to ours to serve as a useful guide.

I have argued (Douglas 2016; 2018) that this is the source, in Spinoza, of *emulation*: ‘the desire for a thing which is generated in us from the fact that we imagine others like us to have the same desire’ (E 3p27s). This is a feature of what he calls ‘the imitation of the affects’. But it is also, indirectly, the source of *ambition*: the striving by each person ‘that everyone should love what he loves, and hate what he hates’ (E 3p31c). Even after we have made up our mind to pursue something, to love some things and hate others, we continue to require others as our models, to mark out in visible form the aim of our fundamental striving. Yves Citton explains Spinoza’s theory in these terms:

Spinoza signals with Proposition 31 that the imitation of the affects is not only the cause of the harmonisation of desires and their inter-individual compartments. It is also, equally, the cause of the intra-mental consolidation of the affects experienced by each individual... Put otherwise: I cannot affirm ‘my’ desire except to the extent that it is affirmed in me by the confirmation received from the desires I imagine in others (Citton 2010, 127, my translation).

When we take others as our exemplars, we find that we cannot sustain our affects without imagining others to experience the same affects. Thus, writes Spinoza, ‘we see how each of us, by nature, wants others to live according to our own character’ (E 3p31c).

Where we end up, in this case, is in what Spinoza calls ‘vainglory’ or ‘empty glory’ (*gloria vana*). This is a form of *acquiescentia* that entirely depends for its force on the approval of the crowd. Spinoza writes:

What is called *vainglory* is *acquiescentia in se ipso* that is nurtured only by the opinion of the crowd [*opinionem vulgi*]. When that ceases, *acquiescentia* itself—that is, (by p52) the highest good that each one loves—ceases. Whence it happens that whoever glories in the opinion of the crowd every day struggles, acts, and strives in anxious concern, in order to preserve a reputation. For the crowd is various and inconstant, and thus a reputation, unless protected, quickly fades away (E 4p58; G 2.254).

Carlisle points out the dire consequences of this, as recounted by Spinoza:

As well as making themselves anxious, people who pursue this *acquiescentia* become aggressively competitive with others. Indeed, those who succeed in

someone, something... And then solitude ... reveals to me my nothingness, teaches me my vanity, the emptiness of my presence within me’ (Comte-Sponville 2016, 18, my translation).

gaining it may be the worst of all. In this struggle for *acquiescentia*, 'the one who at last emerges as victor exults himself more in having harmed the other than in having benefited himself.' Spinoza emphasizes in this passage that it is precisely because *acquiescentia* is the 'highest thing we can hope for', 'the highest good that each one loves,' that the false *acquiescentia* arising from inadequate understanding has such destructive consequences: 'since this struggle is over a good thought to be the highest this gives rise to a monstrous lust of each to crush the other in any way possible' (Carlisle 2017, 220).

Not only, then, is experience a poor source of knowledge of our own essential being, seeking such knowledge there leads readily to consequences harmful to ourselves and to others.

As an alternative, we can, as Spinoza proposes in the Preface to Part Four of the *Ethics*, rationally *construct* an idea of an exemplary human rather than depending only on hearsay and direct experience (E 4Pref; G2.208). But, as Moira Gatens notes, the constructed idea of the exemplary human will always be partly 'fictitious' (Gatens 2009, 467). A wise person 'knows that the ideal is a fictional device, a mode of thought, that is put to work in the service of the human endeavour to persevere in existence' (Gatens 2009, 467–68). Yet Spinoza, as we have seen, believes our ultimate striving to lie, not just in persevering in being, but in persevering in *our* being. To *be*, in the manner of some rationally constructed model, is not to persevere in *your own* being unless the model you feign coincidentally corresponds perfectly to your own true essence. So constructing a rational idea is unlikely to lead to perfect *acquiescentia*. It will guide us to be in a way that conforms to a rational but ultimately fictional model. This can come with many advantages. But it isn't the same as being according to our own real essence.

Spinoza does hold that we can know our own essence perfectly, if we derive our idea of it from what he calls 'the third kind of knowledge'. This is the highest kind, and proceeds from knowledge of God's attributes to knowledge of the essences of things (E 5p25d). We have, according to Spinoza, an adequate idea of God's essence, and 'it follows that we can deduce many things from this' (E 2p47s). This might include knowledge of essences, including our own. But Spinoza offers little detailed guidance on how we can acquire this knowledge and use it to work out what our true essence is.

We must conclude at this stage that the object of our ultimate desire according to Spinoza—our metaphysical desire to *actualise our essence*—is something very difficult to locate. The point is illustrated in the Hassidic story that Martin Buber calls 'The Query of Queries': 'Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: "Why were you not Zusya?"' (Buber 1991, 251). We face the risk that throughout our lives we were not, on balance, the person we are *essentially*. Our actions might fail to express our essence. This can easily occur, for instance, when our knowledge of our essence is derived from a deficient source—especially from the observation of others,

who are themselves looking to others for exemplars. Thus the ultimate goal of *acquiescentia* is far from being easy to attain. It is as difficult and rare as all luminous things are, according to Spinoza (E 5p42s).

III. Ethical Egocentrism

I turn now to the second apparent problem with Spinoza's 'ultimate good' —that it appears to be complacent about the fates of others. Wittgenstein advised his friends not to improve the world —'just improve yourself' (Monk 1991, 17, 213). This might not be as egoistic as it sounds. One thing you might want to improve in yourself is your altruism or sense of civic-mindedness. But to *rest content* in yourself—to feel total *acquiescentia* so long as you are happy with how *you* behave in every situation—might still be taken to express an ethic of complacency. There is, it seems, plenty of room to remain dissatisfied with how *others* behave, or with natural tragedies. Spinoza's claim that our ultimate ethical aim is *acquiescentia in se ipso* seems to leave out this concern in a troubling way.

The source of the trouble here is Spinoza's theory that our ultimate desire, to which all our other desires are instrumental, is simply to persevere in *our own* being. This is a form of psychological egoism, giving rise to an egoistic ideal. Spinoza himself seems to have succumbed to a sort of political complacency as a result of his ethical beliefs. Elaborating what Lewis Feuer calls 'a philosophic defence mechanism' (Feuer 1987, 51), Spinoza wrote in October 1665 to his friend Henry Oldenburg, about the Second Anglo-Dutch War: 'I allow each one to live by his own temper and as he wishes. Indeed, they can die for *their* good while I can live for the true one' (Ep 30, G4.166). There is perhaps something admirable in this. But can it be the right ethics for an unjust world? How true is 'the true good' if living for it is consistent with complacently letting others die—and kill—for their own false goods?

Spinoza, however, gives reason to believe that properly and stably achieving *acquiescentia* can hardly fail to be disruptive to the existing social order—the order that drives others to die for false goods. To understand this, we should look again at the passage from Part Four of the *Ethics* quoted above:

What is called *vainglory* is *acquiescentia in se ipso*, which is nurtured only by public opinion. When that ceases, *acquiescentia* itself—that is, (by p52) the highest good that each one loves—ceases (E 4p58; G2.254).

Earlier Spinoza argues that, since *acquiescentia* is 'the highest good we can hope for', and since 'this *acquiescentia* is greatly fostered and supported by praise and greatly unsettled by dispraise, therefore we are led by glory most of all and can hardly endure a life of shame' (E 4p52; G 2.250). It is our need for *acquiescentia* that places us under the control of public opinion, the *opinio vulgi*. To draw *acquiescentia* from another source is to escape this control. And in escaping it, we set an example to others to similarly defy the tyranny of public opinion. In this sense it is a disruptive political act to find true *acquiescentia*.

As we have seen, it is the fundamental quest after *being* that leads us to look to others as models for ourselves, according to Spinoza. Emulation and ambition are nearly impossible to resist. Indeed, Spinoza tells us explicitly that a person who is bound by any desire is also bound by ambition, and quotes Cicero's *bon mot* to the effect that even treatises condemning public esteem are signed by their authors (E 3.Def.Aff.44). Ambition is also inevitably competitive. When Spinoza first defines it he writes:

This striving to bring it about that everyone should approve his love and hate is really ambition. And so we see that each of us, by his nature, wants the others to live according to his temperament; when all alike want this, they are alike an obstacle to one another, and when all wish to be praised, or loved, by all, they hate one another (E 3p31s).

Later he defines 'ambition' as 'excessive desire for glory' (E 3.Def.Aff.44). One definition entails the other, on Spinoza's theory, because the striving that others should share one's loves and hates can only lead to a desire for glory and can only be excessive. The explanation for this becomes clear in the discussion of vain glory at E4p58s:

Indeed because all desire to capture the applause of the crowd, one person readily puts down the reputation of another, from whence, seeing that the good contended for is judged to be supreme, an enormous lust arises to dominate the other in any possible way. And whoever turns out the victor glories more in having harmed the other than having profited herself. And therefore this glory or *acquiescentia* is really empty, for it is nothing (E 4p58s; G2.253).⁸

The 'applause of the crowd' is a rivalrous good, because the crowd's fickleness means that one person's gain must be another's loss. While the crowd is paying attention to you they are ignoring me.

But then there are the mysterious words: 'this glory or *acquiescentia* is really empty, for it is nothing'. What does Spinoza mean by this? It seems to refer back to the point that vain or empty glory — *vana gloria* — is 'nurtured only by the opinion of the crowd'. The person who is admired by the crowd glories in being admired and values this admiration because it is emulated. Each individual in the crowd dreams of being in the same position. But here the crowd is like the gods of the paradox in Plato's *Euthyphro*, who love an act because it is pious, where it is pious because they love it. Likewise the crowd admires the esteemed individual for being glorious, where glory is nothing more than the esteem of the crowd. The esteemed individual

⁸ Spinoza repeats the main points of this passage (and others we have quoted above) in the *Political Treatise* (TP 1.5, G3.275).

acquiesces in the self reflected in the admiration of the crowd. But this turns out to be nothing more than the crowd's own admiration reflected back at it. Thus the esteemed self is nothing at all. It is the mere *mise en abyme* of an empty hall of mirrors. The crucial point is that the admiration of the crowd is driven *only* by the imitation of the affects. Each member of the crowd only admires the esteemed individual because the other members do. And the admiration of the crowd is the sole cause of the esteemed individual's self-satisfaction.

This has a further, dangerous consequence. The crowd's attitude towards the esteemed individual cannot be purely loving. As Spinoza says: 'when all wish to be praised, or loved, by all, they hate one another'. The members of the crowd esteem the individual whom they long to emulate. But so long as that individual is in the privileged position, they cannot occupy it. Thus every member of the crowd really longs to bring down and dominate the admired subject. The throng of devoted admirers is really a pack of envious rivals, waiting for their moment to strike.

The situation of the esteemed individual is thus very fragile. In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza notes how the crowd 'now adore their Kings as gods, and then in turn execrate and detest them as the common enemies of humanity' (TTP; G3.6). The key to understanding this is the recognition of the two points above. On one hand, the opinion of the crowd is built on nothing more than emulation and the imitation of the affects. If one or a few members of the crowd feel their admiration turning to hatred, the contagion of this new affect can spread throughout the crowd. On the other hand, each member of the crowd feels an uneasy combination of love and hatred for the esteemed individual, who is what Girard would call a 'model-obstacle' to the members of the crowd: admired for occupying an enviable position, while envied and hated for blocking others from occupying it.

Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg expresses an indifference to the crowd and its violent fluctuations. He does not mind that the good they fight and die for is different from the one he lives for. Nor does he care what they think of him. In defiance of Cicero's *bon mot*, his *Theologico-Political Treatise* is published anonymously.⁹ And he declares in that book that he does not ask the crowd to read his book; he would prefer that they ignore it than risk misinterpreting it (TTP; G3.12). Whereas the vainglorious individual's *acquiescentia* is manufactured by the approval of the crowd, Spinoza's is found within himself and entirely independent of the crowd's opinion.

But the indifference cannot be mutual. It is for this reason that pursuing true *acquiescentia* is a politically radical act. Differing profoundly from vainglory, it is also threatening to it. The vainglorious person seeks to be admired by the crowd. If he is admired, his glory is empty, since he is admired for no other reason than that of being admired by the crowd. Resting upon no solid foundation, it is incredibly fragile. If another individual refuses to admire what the crowd admires then she fails

⁹ The implications of the anonymous publication, with respect to Spinoza's theory of ambition, have been noted by Pierre-François Moreau (Moreau 1992, 20).

to give the vainglorious person the *unanimous* admiration he craves. But, worse than this, she provides an alternative target for the crowd's admiration. The indifferent individual holds up to the crowd an alternative exemplar, whose indifference can be emulated instead of the frenzied admiration of the other members of the crowd. The indifferent individual is not simply another rival for the adulation of the crowd. She threatens to spoil the contest altogether, contaminating the crowd with an indifference that could stop it from adulating anyone.

The threat posed by such an individual is *political* since, as Eva Debray has argued, the desire for glory plays a crucial implicit role in Spinoza's account of the basis for political institutions (Debray 2019, 163, my translation). Desire for glory is a force that binds individuals to conform to a shared set of norms and practices, which 'nobody dares defy lest he should appear mindless [*ne mente carere videatur*]' (TTP; G3.191). The astonishing Spinozist thesis here is that *political institutions rest fundamentally upon the psychological insecurity of subjects*. We sense a fundamental absence of being in ourselves and seek the affirmation of the crowd to fill the void. This brings about the conformity and adherence to norms upon which political institutions depend. But the individual who does not sense such an absence in herself—who can access her own essential being—has no need of the crowd's affirmation. She is impervious to the affective force by which the crowd enforces conformity. And, most dangerously of all, she leads others to be so.

This, I propose, is how Spinoza reads the example of Jesus.

In December 1675, Oldenburg wrote to Spinoza: 'I would happily be taught what, according to you, should be said about [those] teachings, upon which the truth of the Gospel and the Christian Religion is established' (Ep 74; G4.310). Spinoza's reply is as follows:

the resurrection [*resurrectionem*] of Christ from death was really spiritual, and was only revealed to the faithful and accepted by them in this way: that Christ was given eternity and stood out [*surrexit*] among the dead (death I interpret in the sense in which Christ said 'let the dead bury their dead'), as soon as he gave, by his life and death, an example of singular sanctity. And he raises his disciples from death insofar as they follow this example of his life and death (Ep 75; G4.314).

Spinoza here plays on words, suggesting that Jesus's resurrection [*resurrectio*] from the dead was really a 'standing out' [*surrectio*] from a crowd—a crowd whose members cannot have been literally dead but were merely *spiritually* dead, like those Jesus said should be left to bury the (literally) dead (Matthew 8:22).

Although Spinoza to this extent naturalises the story of Jesus's death and resurrection, he does not follow his friend Adriaan Koerbagh in claiming that Jesus's

office of salvation does not spring from the fact that he died for the crimes of humanity (for we have shown that to be false), but from the circumstance that

he instructed the people as a teacher and sought to bring them to a knowledge of God (Koerbagh 2011, 3.24).

Rather, Spinoza finds the *death* of Jesus as important as his life. This is despite him having entirely rejected Oldenburg's traditional idea that Jesus 'with his passion and death paid the Ransom, the price of redemption, for us' (Ep 74; G4.310). Spinoza would almost certainly have agreed with Koerbagh that it is a barbaric superstition to believe 'that someone's death for someone else's crime can lead to the appeasement or satisfaction of God' (Koerbagh 2011, 3.16, note H). Why, then, doesn't he also follow Koerbagh in holding the death of Jesus to be an unfortunate event entirely external to his teaching? Why should the death be part of the example to be followed?

I propose that the answer has to do with Jesus's relation to the crowd. As we have seen, whoever remains indifferent to the crowd is a threat to the vainglorious. I believe that, as Spinoza reads the story of the Passion, this is what happened to Jesus. He 'stood out' —*surrexit*— from the crowd, remaining indifferent to its affects, refusing as Spinoza did to admire what it admired and condemn what it condemned. His life provided an example to others, that rather than competing violently for the admiration of the crowd, one could ignore it for the sake of something higher—a kingdom not of this world.

But since, as we have seen, acting indifferently to the crowd undermines the power of those the crowd admires, Jesus brought their wrath upon him. Moreover, those of the crowd who still followed his enemies became enemies also. The process is well-described by Matheron:

each time two individuals enter into a conflict, each of them will call to his aid all the others, and each of the others, answering the appeal and imitating the affects of those of the two adversaries who seem to be *most similar to them*, will become indignant and enter the fight against those who resemble them less: against the one whose values diverge the most from their own Whoever departs the most from the majority norm will thus be crushed and dissuaded from doing it again. Or, if she is not dissuaded right away, she will be by the end of the second conflict, for if she commits a new infraction, those who have defeated her a previous time will certainly swell in ranks (Matheron 1990, 265, my translation).

Jesus, however, was not dissuaded and paid for his non-conformity with his life.

The example we might draw from his death, however, is not that we should conform for fear of our life. For the threat to the vainglorious is not actually eliminated by the killing of the one who is indifferent to the crowd. Although Spinoza does not name Jesus in the following passage, his example seems to fit him very well:

What greater evil to the republic can be conceived of than that honest men, who hold dissenting opinions and do not know how to dissimulate, should be sent into exile like wrongdoers? What, I ask, is more pernicious than that men should be taken for enemies and led to their deaths, not because of any crime or misdeed, but because they are of a liberal disposition? And that the scaffold, the terror of the wicked, should be made into a most beautiful theatre of forbearance and virtue, to shame the great? For those who know that they are honest do not fear a criminal's death, nor do they reject punishment. Their minds indeed are not troubled by penitence. On the contrary, they consider it an honour and not a penalty to die for a good cause—for the cause of liberty, it is glorious. What example, then, do they set—they whose cause is unknown to lazy and impotent souls, they who condemn the seditious and love the honest? Nobody can take anything from their example except to imitate it, or at least to adulate it (TTP; G3.245).

Here is an irony deeply painful to the vainglorious. In attempting to persecute and crush a threat to their own popular adulation, they end up further concentrating that adulation upon the victim they crush.

Spinoza does not suggest that we 'do not fear a criminal's death', so long as we are honest. He argues that Jesus's injunction, 'do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul' (Matthew 10:28),¹⁰ applies only to his immediate disciples (TTP; G3.234). What he argues is rather that rulers should ensure that only deeds are punished, not opinions, so that nobody can be legally persecuted for standing apart from the crowd.¹¹ But what the example of Jesus shows is that destroying dissenters does not destroy their ability to undermine the command of the vainglorious over the adulation of the crowd. Rather, it often increases it, and can transfer the crowd's adulation from the vainglorious to the memory of the victims.

To find *acquiescentia* within oneself—*acquiescentia in se ipso*—is to have no interest in the empty glory that comes from the opinion and imitation of the crowd. This is an ethically arduous task, since it involves resisting the temptation towards vainglory that comes through emulation and ambition and is communicated by the imitation of the affects. And, as the example of Jesus highlights, it is a politically radical ethos for the same reason. Once one person has managed to break free of the affective power of the crowd, others will be tempted to follow, and the whole structure of vainglorious competition will be in danger of collapsing. *Acquiescentia* is not only ethically challenging, it is politically radical. It is far from individualistic,

¹⁰ David Bentley Hart's translation (Hart 2018).

¹¹ Matheron argues, however, that 'there has never been any State so perfect as to exist without some repression, nor any repression without at least an abstract collective indignation against non-conformists in general', and that this was 'a disagreeable reality, which Spinoza would no doubt have preferred not to think about too much' (Matheron 1990, 269–70).

insofar as its consequences spread throughout the whole of society. Inwardly, it may be a state of quiet, but it could not fairly be called quietist.

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E—*Ethics*

TIE—*Treatise on The Emendation of the Intellect*

Ep—*Letters*

TTP—*Theologico-Political Treatise*

TP—*Political Treatise*

In citing from Spinoza's Ethics I use the following abbreviations:

App—Appendix

A—Axiom

C—Corollary

D—Definition

Def. Aff.—Definitions of the Affects

Dem—Demonstration

Expl—Explanation

Gen. Def. Aff.—General Definition of the Affects

L—Lemma

P—Proposition

Pref—Preface

S—Scholium

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