

DRAFT

Indignation: Spinoza on the Desire to Revolt

Ted Stolze
Department of Philosophy
Cerritos College
11110 Alondra Blvd.
Norwalk, CA 90650
tstolze@cerritos.edu

“Active indignation is linked up with hope.”

—Leon Trotsky¹

In the Preface to his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) Spinoza famously raised an unsettling question. How was it possible, he wondered, that human beings could ever come “to fight for their servitude as if for salvation, and count it no shame, but the highest honor, to spend their blood and lives for the vanity of one man”? This was for Spinoza “the greatest secret of monarchical government and its main interest.” As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once remarked, in this passage Spinoza had posed “the fundamental problem of political philosophy.”² Yet this would seem to be only *half* of the problem. The other half, equally important for both Spinoza and political philosophers today, is to know how it becomes possible for human beings to fight for their freedom, to revolt against oppression, and to establish what Spinoza called a “free republic.” In what follows, then, I want to consider not an individual’s obligation to obey legitimate political authority but instead what can trigger his or her desire to resist illegitimate political authority. To do so requires that I examine a key concept in

Spinoza's political lexicon that has seldom received the careful treatment it deserves: "indignation" (*indignatio*).³

My point of departure is Spinoza's analysis in his last work, the unfinished *Tractatus Politicus* (TP), of the linkage between passions and institutions. In TP I, 5 Spinoza provides a dense summary of the theory of affects that he had previously defended in the second half of the third part of the *Ethics* (E), a theory whose point of departure was the compelling notion of "imitation of the affects" (*imitatio affectuum*). Spinoza claims to have demonstrated in the *Ethics*

that human beings are necessarily subject to affects (*homines necessario affectibus esse obnoxios*); and so constituted that they pity the unfortunate but envy the fortunate, and are prone more to vengeance than to compassion; and also that each individual wants to make others live according to his temperament, approve what he himself approves, and reject what he himself rejects. As a result, since all equally want to be first, they start to quarrel, and strive as much as they can to oppress one another; and the one who turns out to be the victor glories more in having harmed another than in having benefited himself (*magis gloriatur quod alteri obfuit quam quod sibi profuit*).

Spinoza's language here clearly evokes that of E IIIPP29-32. For example, in P32S Spinoza likewise observes that "for the most part human nature is so constituted that human beings pity the unfortunate and envy the fortunate." The

point of both passages seems to be that affective imitation underlies both “pity” (*commiseratio*) and “envy” (*invidia*).

Likewise, in both TP I, 5 and E IIIPP29-32 Spinoza discusses the nature of “ambition” (*ambitio*), an affect that is essentially a desire to dominate others by compelling them to adopt one’s own values. In short, ambition is a “striving to bring it about that everyone should approve his love and hate” (E IIP31S). If I want to get others to agree with my values, it is so that I might bring about their happiness and “glorify” (*glorior*) myself without having to sacrifice my desires to them. Thus, what I seek in this struggle for power is less my own “interest” (*utilitas*) than the joy of having earned others’ praise (see E IVP58S).

Finally, Spinoza’s allusion in TP I, 5 to the conflict between “compassion” (*miser cordia*) and “vengeance” (*vindicta*)—a conflict in which vengeance prevails—briefly evokes a perpetual alternation between cycles of positive and negative affective interaction among individuals (see E IIIPP33-34).

In TP I, 7 Spinoza concludes that the “natural causes and foundations of states” (*imperii causae et fundamenta naturalia*) cannot be deduced “from the precepts of reason” (*ex rationis documentis*) but only “from the common nature or condition of human beings” (*ex hominum communi natura seu conditione*), i.e., the nature or condition of human beings dominated by their passive affects or passions.

As Alexandre Matheron has exhaustively demonstrated, Spinoza's argument in these two sections of the *Political Treatise* (coupled with the relevant propositions from E III) seems to be that there exists an ineluctable cycle of interpersonal passions from pity to envy, from ambition for glory to ambition to oppress—and inversely.⁴ In other words, two pairs of these passions are inextricably linked: pity and ambition for glory underlie human “sociability,” whereas envy and ambition to oppress underlie human “unsociability.”⁵ Because of their contradictory fluctuation, these passions simultaneously make the “state of nature” (*status naturalis*) intolerable to human beings and enable them to escape it. If each individual were rationally to calculate that he should use others' natural sociability for his own interest in order to defend himself against their natural unsociability, a state would eventually emerge without mediation of a social contract.

Although such a cycle of interpersonal passions does indeed offer a possible non-contractarian explanation of how political authority arises, it has the serious drawback of committing Spinoza to a proto-utilitarianism according to which individuals establish states not so much as the result of a contract but as the result of their rational calculation of self-interest. With this drawback in mind, Matheron has recently sought to demonstrate through a meticulous reconstruction of two linked passages in the *Political Treatise* in which Spinoza seems to offer an intriguing alternative way to derive the necessity of some form of state.⁶ Let us turn, then, to VI, 1, in which we read that

since human beings . . . are led more by affect than reason (*magis affectu quam ratione ducuntur*), it follows that the multitude, led not by reason by some common affect, naturally agrees and wants to be led as if by one mind (*non ex rationis ductu, sed ex communi aliquo affectu naturaliter convenire et una veluti mente duci velle*), that is (as we said in III, 9), either by common hope, fear, or common desire to avenge (*ulciscendi*) some common harm. However, since fear of solitude belongs to all human beings, because no one in solitude has forces to defend himself and bring together those things which are necessary for life; it follows that human beings by nature desire the civil state (*statum civilem homines natura appetere*), nor can it happen that they ever entirely dissolve it.

Now this passage could again be interpreted along contractarian lines. For example, since all human beings fear natural solitude, they agree to submit to a common political authority or sovereign power. Such a reading requires that we stress the verb “agree,” which in Latin (*convenire*) can indeed have the legal sense of “to conclude a convention.” Closer examination reveals, though, that Spinoza qualifies this verb with the adverb “naturally” (*naturaliter*).

Matheron argues that we should see this adverbial qualification in a radically anti-Hobbesian light.⁷ If human beings “naturally” agree to live together in civil society, then Hobbes’s notion of sovereignty as an artifice or convention becomes superfluous. But we should also see in this passage Spinoza’s implicit rejection of the idea that human beings naturally accept political authority

because they are endowed with reason and hence calculate the relative advantage of living together as opposed to living separately. The whole thrust of the section's opening lines is that the causal factor is exclusively affective and not based on reason.

Yet what seems odd about this section is the “elliptical”⁸ reference to TP III, 9—odd because III, 9 concerns not the causes of the *emergence* of a state but, on the contrary, the causes for the *dissolution* of the state. To be more precise, in III, 9 Spinoza argues that

commands which arouse the indignation (*indignatio*) of many persons hardly belong to the right of the commonwealth. For it is certain that under the guidance of Nature human beings conspire together, either because of common fear, or desire to avenge (*ulciscendi*) some common injury; and since the right of a commonwealth is defined by the common power of the multitude (*jus civitatis communi multitudinis potentia definitur*), it is certain that the power of the commonwealth, and its right, are diminished insofar as it offers causes for more human beings to conspire together. Certainly, a commonwealth has dangers to fear, and what is true of each citizen, that is (*sive*), a human being in a natural state, is also true of a commonwealth; the greater the cause for fear a commonwealth has, the less it is possessed of its own right (*sic civitas eo minus sui juris est, quo majorem timendi causam habet*).

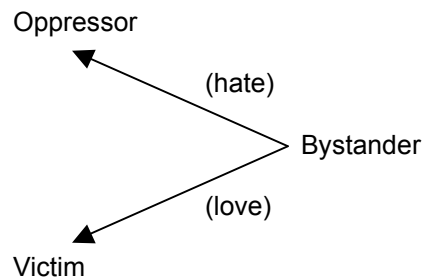
The first sentence of VI, 1 echoes these phrases the “guidance of Nature” (*ductu naturae*) and “conspire together” (*in unum conspirant*) that occur in III, 9.

Although in III, 9 citizens are rising up against an already existing regime and not seeking to establish a new one, Spinoza explains what “guidance of Nature” causes them to join together in resistance: “indignation” (*indignatio*).

The upshot of this passage is that since the right of a state is defined by the collective power of the multitude, every state’s power—and thus its right—decreases as the number of rebellious individuals increases. As a result, and in keeping with his thoroughgoing political realism, Spinoza concludes that it is strictly contrary to the right of a state to do anything that might incite general indignation. At the end of IV, 4 Spinoza provides further details of such a connection between excesses committed by a regime and the likelihood that the multitude will cease to be in awe, become indignant, and threaten to topple it. For example, if a ruler were to “run drunk or naked through the streets with prostitutes, act on stage, openly break laws or hold them in contempt . . . slaughter or plunder subjects, abduct young women, and so forth,” then the multitude’s fear would “turn into indignation,” and, as a result, the “civil state” (*status civilis*) would become a “state of war” (*status hostilitatis*).

At this point it is worth looking more closely at what Spinoza means by “indignation.” In E IIIDef. Aff. 20 he defines indignation as “a hate toward someone who has done evil to another” and refers the reader back to E IIIP27C1, by means of which it is clear that indignation is an imitation of the victim’s affects. The intensity with which I experience such affective imitation

depends on the degree to which the victim resembles me. From E IIP22, S it follows that my reaction will be even stronger if the victim is someone whom I have previously loved.⁹ Indignation in Spinoza’s account, then, is a three-part relation among oppressor, victim, and bystander, which I diagram as follows:



We are now in a position to appreciate how subjects’ fear of a tyrant can become indignation and tend to destabilize an oppressive regime. Tyrants—of which the Roman emperor Nero appears to be Spinoza’s favorite example—govern principally by means of instilling fear in their subjects. Because fear is a form of sadness (E IIP18S2), and hate is “sadness with the accompanying idea of an external cause” (E IIP13S); tyrants invariably incur their subjects’ wrath. But, of course, if these subjects were only to remain afraid as isolated individuals, lest their loyalty be detected and punished, the tyrant would remain secure in power. Also, such isolated individuals’ hate would be “episodic,”¹⁰ since no tyrant can simultaneously oppress every subject. As a result, as Spinoza remarks in VI, 4 regarding his paradigmatic case of “Turkish despotism,” subjects who live under tyranny exist in an artificially induced condition of “solitude” that is, contrary to the Hobbes’s position, itself the most glaring example of a “state of nature.” Such a society approaches a kind of civic death in which people have lost all hope and become utterly apathetic.¹¹

At some point, though, even the most cunning tyrant's excesses become too great to remain hidden. When his subjects become aware of these misdeeds and speak out against them, indignation necessarily arises and will result in a radical transformation of the situation as soon as each person knows that others are indignant too. We have a situation in which indignation "catalyzes" fear and generates a kind of affective "contagion."¹² Each subject's externally imposed solitude shatters and opens up the possibility of a collective revolt against oppressive rule. There are, of course, two possible outcomes to any revolt.¹³

The tyrant could well come to his senses, realize the danger, appease his irate subjects, and so retain power—at least until he again oversteps his authority, oppresses his subjects, who eventually revolt, and so forth. In Spinoza's view, such oscillations between state violence and resistance insure a kind of "self-regulation" of socio-political life.

However, a tyrant could just as easily remain obstinate and pave the way to insurrection. If an insurrection were to succeed in removing the tyrant but then devolve into civil war—Spinoza's favorite example here is the English multitude's overthrow of Charles I—and from civil war into a myriad of local conflicts, there would occur a hypothetical limit-case in which all social relations would dissolve. Such a fictional scenario is precisely what Spinoza, like Hobbes before him, intends by the term "state of nature."

Yet here is the remarkable insight that Spinoza implicitly affords us: by the argument of VI, 1 we can see that socio-political life must *necessarily reemerge*. The point of Spinoza's reference to III, 9 is that the way that political

authority reappears is analogous to the way that it has dissolved. In other words, indignation is responsible for both the fall *and* rise of states.

There remains an enigma, however. It is not clear why Spinoza simply refers from VI, 1 to III, 9 without explicitly telling the reader what he is up to. There are two possible explanations for Spinoza's discretion.¹⁴ First, there is what we could call a "negative" explanation.

Since Spinoza implicitly devotes the entire *Political Treatise* to elaborating the genesis of the state without appealing to a social contract, he does not really require an explicit account. In fact, in III, 9 he makes clear that even when subjects' indignation against a tyrant does not lead to the successful overthrow of an existing regime, it nonetheless plays a *regulative* role in socio-political life by forcing rulers to seek more securely to reestablish their power. Further, in VI, 1 he implies that indignation is ontologically *constitutive* of every state. These regulative and constitutive functions of indignation are distinct but inseparable, since there can be no independently existing, more-or-less stable state of nature from which a transition to political authority would arise. On the contrary, the state of nature is simply the obverse of socio-political life, indeed, its irreducible materialist presupposition.

More precisely, for Spinoza the state of nature is but one moment during the continuous process through which every state produces, reproduces, and strives to regulate itself—an effort that Matheron has designated as a kind of

collective *conatus*.¹⁵ It indicates an extreme situation when socio-political imbalance results from generalized indignation and leads to the possible dissolution of an existing regime. Yet such dissolution will immediately undergo an affective recomposition, and again through generalized indignation a more-or-less altered form of state will reemerge. As a result, a possible reason that in the *Tractatus Politicus* Spinoza never explicitly discusses the ontological genesis of the state is that he regards his oblique reference from VI, 1 to III, 9 as easy enough for his readers to follow.

However, another possible—what we could call a “positive”—explanation for Spinoza’s discretion is both “simple and disturbing.”¹⁶ To understand why, we need to know a bit more about the kind of affect that indignation is.

Spinoza argues in E IVP51S that indignation is a “necessarily bad” passion. Although, as Spinoza proposes in E IVP54S, some passions can be intrinsically bad but instrumentally good—e.g., “humility” (*humilitas*), “repentance” (*paenitentia*), and “reverence” (*reverentia*)—indignation is not one of them. Indignation is both intrinsically and instrumentally bad, because it is a form of interpersonal hate, and such forms of hate encourage us to “strive to destroy” the person we hate (E IVP45). Yet this destructive impulse is, as Spinoza writes in E IVP37, contrary to reason’s urging that we desire for others the good we desire for ourselves. As a result, we cannot distinguish good and bad forms of indignation. Even if indignation were collectively “good” for the society as a whole (e.g., resistance to an especially oppressive regime), it would still be bad for those individuals experiencing it, and in turn bad for the larger society

composed of those individuals. It would seem, then, that for Spinoza the state is a fundamentally flawed institution, since it invariably incites among the multitude the “necessarily bad” affect of indignation.¹⁷

A final implication of Spinoza’s analysis of indignation concerns not the repressive nature of the state but the political implications of the affects. Is every passive political affect sad? Not at all. Although monarchies—especially in their degenerate tyrannical forms—tend to rely on such sad passions as resentment and fear in order to keep their subjects in thrall, democracies instead strive to cultivate in their citizens such joyous passions as generosity and hope.

But a deeper question arises at this point: Must all sad passive political affects remain sad? No doubt the sad passion of indignation is a natural and unavoidable response by individuals and the multitude to state violence. But in part V of the *Ethics* Spinoza famously proposes a kind of “cognitive therapy” by means of which our passional servitude can in part be overcome by the power of reason to convert passive into active affects.¹⁸ How would this therapy work in the case of indignation? We would not so much try to purge ourselves of the affect of indignation as try to use reason to engage in an imaginative reconstruction of indignation’s underlying causes in as complete a manner as possible. Such a reconstruction would have the dual effect of (a) transforming indignation as a sad affect into a joyous affect and (b) increasing our power to

understand, act on, and perhaps even uproot the source of indignation. To recall my epigraph from Trotsky: the question is how to link indignation up with hope.

Beyond this therapeutic operation of reason, however, we can we even begin to speak of a “politics of the third kind”¹⁹ that would aim at a transition to a future society beyond the need for a repressive state apparatus, in other words, a community of freely associated members or, in Spinoza’s terminology, “sages” (*sapientes*). At the intellectual core of a political project to construct a community of sages would be a greater and greater desire to understand more and more of reality, what Spinoza regards as the fullest realization of reason in its effort to attain an “intuitive science” or “knowledge of the third kind.” As Pierre Macherey explains, such knowledge constitutes “the supreme good and supreme virtue” for human beings and is accompanied by an “indestructible certainty . . . through which the soul attains the summit of its power and of the exercise of its power, in complete tranquility, therefore, calm and serene.”²⁰

Beyond indignation and the accompanying desire to revolt against oppression, then, lies the prospect of a revolutionary “serenity” (*acquiescentia*). Let me hasten to add that such serenity implies neither passivity nor ascetic retreat from political engagement. As Macherey again puts it well, “the sage . . . is one who adopts an essentially active attitude regarding all of life’s problems. He doesn’t allow himself to be carried along by the flow of events, as if the latter constituted a blind fatality: but, from the fact that he manages to understand the necessity of these events, by considering them according to their actual causal genesis, he accepts them as they are produced—to the extent that they don’t

depend on his own good will—without allowing himself to be dominated by them.”²¹ Or as the sociologist Stanley Cohen has recently observed, in language that echoes Spinoza’s, the realization of others’ suffering can easily lead to despair, which takes on the other’s suffering to no purpose.” Indignation, by contrast, “demands action.”²² Consider once more the situation Spinoza describes in the Preface to the TTP. Instead of resigning themselves to the glorification of a single individual at the expense of everyone else, sages would deliberate over how to establish a social order in which a multitude of individuals might collectively *glorify themselves*.

Perhaps most important of all, sages would gradually extricate themselves from fear of failure and death; and they would come to understand that freedom is a constant struggle whose path is arduous: along the way victories will invariably be mixed with defeats. As a result, sages would not only persist in their desire for socio-political transformation over the long run, but in the very midst of social upheaval they would also strive to adopt what Spinoza memorably called the “perspective of eternity” (*species aeternitatis*).²³

¹Leon Trotsky, “Celine and Poincaré: Novelist and Politician,” in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, edited by Paul N. Siegel (NY: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 191

²Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 29.

³However, the importance of this concept is out of proportion to the frequency with which it appears in Spinoza's writings. The entry for "*indignatio*" in Emilia Giancotti-Boscherini's *Lexicon Spinozanum* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), lists only nine occurrences: E III P22S; E III Def. Aff. 20; E IV P51S; E IV App. 24; TP III, 9; TP IV, 4; TP IV, 6; TP VII, 2; TP X, 8. It is worth noting that Spinoza never uses this term in the TTP.

⁴Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, nouvelle édition (Paris: Minuit, 1988), pp. 287-354.

⁵Spinoza borrows the notion of human sociability either from such classical sources as Stoicism or from the Dutch jurist Grotius (e.g., in *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* Prol VI). Whatever the source, Spinoza is here clearly at odds with Hobbes's rejection of such a natural human inclination (e.g., see *Leviathan* XV, 17 and XVII, 6-12).

⁶See Matheron, "Le problème de l'évolution de Spinoza du Traité Theologico-Politique au Traité Politique," in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions. The Proceedings of the Chicago Spinoza Conference*, edited by Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (NY: E.J. Brill, 1990), pp. 258-70; "Passions et institutions selon Spinoza," in *La raison d'Etat: politique et rationalité*, edited by Christian Lazzeri and Dominique Reynié (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), pp. 141-70; "L'indignation et le conatus de l'état spinoziste," in *Spinoza: puissance et ontology*, edited by Myriam Revault d'Allonnes and Hadi Rizk (Paris: Kimé, 1994), pp. 153-65. Of course Matheron's recent articles have

only extended and deepened his earlier discussion in *Individu et communauté*, esp. pp. 415-20.

⁷Matheron, "L'indignation," p. 154.

⁸p. 155.

⁹pp. 156-57.

¹⁰p. 156.

¹¹Matheron, *Individu et communauté*, pp. 418-20.

¹²Hadi Rizk, "Les affects du pouvoir," *Rue Descartes* 12-3, 1995, pp. 117-18.

¹³Matheron, "L'indignation," p. 157.

¹⁴See pp. 160-64.

¹⁵p. 161. See also Matheron, "Passions," p. 157.

¹⁶p. 162.

¹⁷pp. 162-63.

¹⁸Here I am indebted to Pierre Macherey's masterful account in *Introduction à l'Ethique de Spinoza, La cinquième partie: les voies de la liberation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994).

¹⁹See André Tosel, "Histoire et éternité," in *Du Materialisme. De Spinoza* (Paris: Kimé, 1994), esp. pp. 72-75.

²⁰Macherey, *Introduction*, p. 140.

²¹pp. 197-98.

²²Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2001), p. 300.

²³Thanks to Warren Montag, Jacques Bidet, and Vittorio Morfino for their encouragement and critical comments.