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Spinoza's Social Sage: Emotion and the Power of Reason in Spinoza's Social Theory

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"Spinoza's Social Sage: Emotion and the Power of Reason in Spinoza's Social Theory"[1]

Traditional accounts of the 'sage', from the Stoic sage to the Christian conception of the 'monk', offer a picture of a lone figure distant from everyday society. In order to seek truth, reason, or salvation, the sage must avoid mixing with the passionate, superstitious multitude. The sage is often thought of as a human who must live apart from society, both for safety and to pursue knowledge so fully that a normal human life and engagement with human society is not possible. Spinoza's conception of the 'free man' has often been understood to be just such an individual.[2]

Although there has been more attention recently to Spinoza's theory of emotions, many Spinoza scholars see Spinoza primarily as a rationalist – one who wanted to find ways to fully overcome the bondage of the passions – all passions – and reach reason.[3]

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[1] I employ the standard abbreviated references to Spinoza's work: E3P11S is a reference to *Ethics*, Book 3, Proposition 11, Scholium. Abbreviations of Spinoza's writings: E (*Ethics*), KV (*Short Treatise*), CM (*Metaphysical Thoughts*), TdIE (*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*), TTP (*Theological-Political Treatise*), TP (*Political Treatise);* Ep (Letters). Other abbreviations: A (Axiom), P (Proposition), C (Corollary), Pref (Preface), App (Appendix), DefAff (Definition of the Affects), D (Definition), L (Lemma), S, (Scholium).

[2] *Contra* those scholars who understand Spinoza as having a 'Stoic' conception of both the sage and of emotions: e.g., Martha Nussbaum writes "The Stoics and Spinoza dislike the emotions intensely." in *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 73. She continues along this line in *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 514-521. Spinoza's relationship with Stoicism is complicated, but can begin to be understood by two studies, one by Firmin DeBrabander, *Spinoza and the Stoics: Power, Politics and the Passions*, (New York: Continuum, 2007) and another by Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride: Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Although the section on his on Spinoza is short, Brooke gives us a better understanding of what it means to be a 'Stoic' in the 17th and 18th centuries, and that Stoicism itself is richer than the often caricatured versions presented of it. However, if we take the strong line of Peter King on the irrationality of the emotions for the Stoics, then passions are always irrational failures of reason and can never be good. "Dispassionate Passions," in Shapiro and Pickave, *Emotions and Cognitive Life in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012) 14. The same cannot be said for Spinoza. Aurelia Armstrong has recently published a paper in which she argues that both Spinoza and Nietzsche defy this 'Stoic' conception of reason and the emotions, in which she supports my claim that this is a standard reading of Spinoza: "The Passions, Power and Practical Philosophy: Spinoza and Nietzsche Contra the Stoics." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (V.44, n. 1, 2013), 6.

[3] We can find such characterizations of Spinoza in a variety of sources, notably in the following: John Cottingham, *The Rationalists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, vol. 1*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Audi*, The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy,* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 759-763*,* Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*. (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1984), and Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*. (New York: Routledge, 2008). Recent guides to the history of philosophy,

Often this conception of Spinoza skews our view of the 'free man' as a man alone, seeking reason outside the boundaries of normal society. Indeed, some scholars have seen Spinoza as proposing just such a sage – a man removed from common life and seeking solace in a community of sages.[4]

This picture of Spinoza's anti-social 'free man' is hard to sustain once one reads past the first book of the *Ethics.* Venturing into Books 3 and 4 of the *Ethics* one encounters a sustained and complex discussion of the emotions, the relation between imagination and reason, and a detailed investigation of the way humans shape their emotions to conform to those around them in their societies. Following the road to reason and ultimately freedom, for Spinoza, requires understanding the emotions, and what power they have both over us and over those around us. In the Preface to Book IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza's emphatically rejects those who would blame humans for their emotions and those who would pretend that 'reason' alone could free us from the power of the emotions.[5] Spinoza neither thought life outside of human society good, nor did he think it possible or desirable to escape all of the passions.[6]

In this paper I will offer a reevaluation of Spinoza's 'free man' by taking account of Spinoza's body of writing on the 'social'. When we take Spinoza's commitments to social philosophy seriously, a new picture emerges of the free man as social. I argue that, for Spinoza, the social both conditions and is the condition of the possibility of individual flourishing. This is true even for the Spinozan free man, which I will refer to, as the

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such as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy have several entries which perpetuate this conception of Spinoza, including the following: Thomas M. Lennon and Shannon Dea, "Continental Rationalism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.); Peter Markie, "Rationalism vs. Empiricism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.); Yitzhak Melamed and Martin Lin, "Principle of Sufficient Reason", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.); Martin Lin, "Power of Reason in Spinoza," in O. Koistinen, *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[4]Antonio Negri*, The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics.* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991)

[5] Spinoza, *Short Treatise,* in Shirley (trans.), *Spinoza: Complete Works.* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 93, ST, Chapters 16-17

[6] E3 Preface; E3App32; TTP, Chapter 4, p.426; TP 1.5

Spinozan 'sage'.[7] In his two treatises on politics, the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise,* in the *Ethics* and in his earliest works, he developed a framework for understanding how social forces and social institutions are composed of individual humans. For Spinoza, society is composed of human beings in the following way: social life emerges from the interaction of individuals, who, by means of shared affects and imaginative views of the world come together and create social practices of evaluation and conduct, which we understand as social norms and customs.[8]

Although Spinoza's social theory has not been much explored in the literature -- with some notable exceptions[9] -- the idea of the social and in particular the power of the social and of social forces were of great importance to Spinoza. Spinoza argues that

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[7] There is precedent for such terminology, in Jon Wetlesen's *The Sage and the Way*. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1979), but this terminology also allows us to show that while Spinoza is taking up the tradition of the Stoic sage, his sage differs from many Stoic accounts of the relationship between the sage and society.

[8] E4P37S For Spinoza, this is the beginning of social life, but not social life in its highest form, the state or political community. Etienne Balibar, "Spinoza, politique et communication." *Cahiers philosophiques,* Paris, n°39 (1989), 17-42 ; I have argued elsewhere that for Spinoza, the social is nothing about and beyond these shared emotions communicated among individuals living together [Citation removed for blind review].

[9] Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, past and present*. (New York: Routledge, 1999); Genevieve Lloyd, *Part of Nature, Self-Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Moira Gatens, "Compelling Fictions. Spinoza and Eliot on Imagination and Belief," *European Journal of Philosophy*, (Volume 20, Issue 1, March 2012.), 74-90; Heidi Ravven, "Spinoza's Intermediate Ethics For Society And The Family," *Animus* (6: 2001), 80-85; Susan James, "Narrative as the Means to Freedom: Spinoza on the Uses of Imagination," in Yitzhak Y. Melamed & Michael A. Rosenthal (eds.), *Spinoza's 'Theological-Political Treatise': A Critical Guide*. (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Susan James, Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens "The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions." *Hypatia* (15 (2) 2000) 40-58; Moira Gatens, *Spinoza's Hard Path to Freedom.* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2011); Susan James, *Passion and Action the Emotions in Seventeenth-century Philosophy*. (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1997). Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd have, individually and collectively, done excellent work on the social nature of Spinoza's affect theory, and on its contemporary usefulness in diagnosing social ills and for understanding the force of norms. I take my project to be in the same spirit as theirs, as with philosophers like Heidi Ravven, Etienne Balibar, Hasana Sharp, Alexandre Matheron, Aurelia Armstrong and Susan James, who have argued that Spinoza's theory of affects is central rather than peripheral to his philosophy. Matheron's work has been particularly helpful in developing my own view. There are no direct disagreements between us on the subject of this paper, but a fuller discussion of Matheron's contributions to the study of Spinoza's social and political philosophy is forthcoming. What I provide here is evidence for the thesis that the question of the social is embedded in Spinoza's project from the beginning of his career and that it explains the moves that Spinoza makes in Book Three of the Ethics -- providing the foundation for an interpretation of the unity of Spinoza's philosophy. In service of this aim, I provide a step-by-step interpretation of Spinoza's affect theory as a theory of the social. Given the persistence of the misunderstanding of Spinoza as a rationalist, and thus as one who, by definition, could not have taken these thing seriously, I think this position merits further argument. Dan Garber, in a short piece "Dr. Fischelson's Dilemma" takes up the question of whether Spinoza's free man is supposed to avoid or engage with society. Although Garber agrees that it is the latter, his mode of arriving at this conclusion presumes a very different conception of reason than I propose here. Dan Garber, "Dr. Fischelson's Dilemma." *Ethica IV: Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man.* Ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel & Gideon Segal. (New York: Little Room Press, 2004)

societies are important for human individuals, who are otherwise weak.[10] By joining together, they increase their power to preserve themselves.[11] At the same time, Spinoza realizes that societies based on shared affects and imaginative conceptions of themselves and the world are vulnerable, given the changeability of human affects. Thus, in his political works, and beginning even earlier, he seeks to show how human society based on human affects and imagination can be made more secure through developing more reasonable institutions and customs.

Spinoza recognized the importance of social organization for human freedom and empowerment, although he was always sensitive to the drawbacks of social interaction, particularly in societies where humans are ruled by passions. The Spinozan sage, however, is always in society and shaped by society; moreover, Spinoza argues the sage needs society. So, Spinoza shows, since the sage cannot avoid society, he or she but must take it up as an object of investigation and ultimately as something to improve. For, who but the sage could shape and reform society to realize Spinoza's project to empower humans through the investigation of the natural world? Further, given the sage's need for society, how, but through improving society, could the sage reach the highest stages of human perfection?

1. The Young Sage and the Social

From his earliest work, the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding* (TdIE), to his final work, the *Political Treatise* (TP), Spinoza took the problem of the social *extremely* seriously. Indeed, in the middle of his life, Spinoza broke off from writing the *Ethics* to write the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP), citing unrest in his own city and country,[12] and finding the norms and customs of his society harmful to the pursuit of his own research into the natural world.[13] The citizens of his society, Spinoza despaired,

[10] E4P37S2, TP, 2.15
[11] TP 2.13, TP 2.15; TTP Chapter 4, 426
[12] Letter 30 to Henry Oldenburg, in Shirley (trans.), 843-844
[13] Piet Steenbakkers, "The Textual History of Spinoza's Ethics," in Olli Koistinen (Ed) *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-political Treatise.* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

seemed to passionately seek the conditions of their own enslavement, and to denounce the conditions of their freedom.[14] Yet, for Spinoza, the freedom of individuals seeking reason depends in part on the conditions of one's society, since, according to Spinoza, the free individual needs society.

Spinoza starts the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* by recounting the beginning of his own philosophical enquiries. The young philosopher finds himself seeking answers to the question of whether there really is a true good, given that the things of this world, the practices and norms of human communities contain many things that have no worth:

> After experience had taught me the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realized that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good or evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to inquire whether there existed a true good.[15]
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> "All those objectives which are commonly pursued not only contribute nothing to the preservation of our being but even hinder it.[16]

The common pursuits of the life of his society, "riches, honors, sensual pleasure," characterize the "old ways" of life which the young philosopher will need to set aside, and leave behind in order to embark on his "new way of life." The pursuit of this new way of life, he recognizes, will involve leaving behind a known but uncertain good, for an event more unknown and uncertain path.[17] Social life seems hollow to the young philosopher. The futile pursuits of the masses are mere distractions from the 'true good'. Particularly "those things men regard as the highest good: riches, money, sensual pleasure"[18] lead to "confusion and enervation",[19] diminishing one's ability to think and act. These pursuits can be dangerous: "All those objectives that are commonly pursued not only contribute nothing

[14] TTP, Preface
[15] Spinoza, *Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect*, in Shirley (trans.), *Spinoza: Complete Works*. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), TdIE §1
[16] TdIE §7
[17] TdIE §4-7
[18] TdIE, §3
[19] TdIE §4

to the preservation of our being but even hinder it, being frequently the cause of the destruction of those who gain possession of them, and invariably the cause of the destruction of those who are possessed by them.[20] Thus, the young Spinoza rejects these goods that the common run of humans seek.[21]

From this seemingly 'anti-social' beginning, we might expect the Spinozan sage, in this case the young Spinoza, to retreat from society and pursue a life of contemplation. Spinoza is cautious, and recognized the danger in what he was proposing to do, in trying to find what was really good for humans, and not just what their communities valued. Seeking for a higher happiness, while it may offer immense reward and power, also leaves one in a perilous position to the good of one's community. [22] Fortunately, young Spinoza finds what he seeks – a true good; however, once he finds this true good (loving God and recognizing the true aim of life to be properly understanding oneself as part of Nature) he runs not *away* from the crowd, but *toward* them. Spinoza explains that once the sage has found the true good, he or she will immediately try to reform society to allow the masses to seek true happiness.

> This then is the end for which I strive, to acquire the nature I have described and to endeavor that many should acquire it along with me. That is, my own happiness involves my making an effort to persuade many others to think as I do, so that their understanding and desire should entirely accord with my understanding and desire. To bring this about, it is necessary: 1) to understand as much about Nature as suffices for acquiring such a nature [model of the best for man], and 2) to establish such a social order as will enable as many as possible to reach this goal with the greatest possible ease and assurance. 3) Furthermore, attention must be paid to

[20] TdIE §7-8

[21] A quite natural reading of this is that Spinoza's sage ought to avoid society and the common pursuits of life, in order to seek reason and knowledge. Requiring the support of humans, particularly accepting favors from others in society is indeed explicitly prohibited by Spinoza in E4P70. Here, Spinoza proposes that the "free man who lives among ignorant people [should try] as far as he can to avoid receiving favors from them." While this would appear to mean that the free man should avoid interacting with the masses, Spinoza explains this immediately in the Demonstration and Scholium to Proposition 70. Spinoza writes, it is advisable to avoid favors so that one can avoid giving offense, since the free man's friendship is not based on giving and receiving favors, such as it might be among the ignorant. Rather, the free man ought to seek friendship. Spinoza explains: "[M]en, however ignorant, are still men, who in time of need can bring human help, than which nothing is more valuable." Accepting favors from other can be tricky, that is, one enters into a possibly irrational system of favors and favoring, which may yield behavior which is not rational, or best for us. However, even at their worst, humans are still useful and important, and it is always rational to join with them, although one should be careful in what manner one obtains and maintains friendships.

[22] TdIE §2, 3

> moral philosophy, an likewise the theory of the education of children, and since health is of no little importance in attaining this end, 4) the whole science of medicine must be elaborated...[23]

As soon as Spinoza, seeker of truth, finds what is 'best' for one to pursue, he immediately argues that it is not enough to seek this for oneself. One must strive to achieve happiness for those around one.

> The good which every man who pursues virtue aims at for himself he will also desire for the rest of mankind, and all the more as he acquires greater knowledge of God.[24]

Practically, on Spinoza's view, ensuring happiness for those around one requires the following: investigating what is actually good and bad for humans (moral philosophy), creating educational institutions for children, and elaborating the 'whole science of medicine'. It would appear that the individual's search for truth almost immediately becomes a project of social, political and scientific outreach. This requires more than just friendship with a few likeminded individuals.[25] Social reform, indeed, seems to be part of the sage's project.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza reaffirms this sentiment and goes on to write, not only that one should wish for others to seek the true good, but also that the individual who wishes to seek reason is better off in a community than alone.

> The man who is guided by reason is more free [*sic*] in a state where he lives under a system of law than in solitude where he obeys only himself. [26]

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[23] TdIE §14-15; There is also a similar idea in the *Short Treatise*, Chapter 6, where Spinoza writes, "…Whatsoever exists in Nature, if we entertain any wish about it, then we must always improve it, either for our own sake or for the sake of the thing itself. And since a perfect man is the best thing for us that we know of all that we have around us or before our eyes, it is by far best both for us and for all people individually that we should at all times seek to educate them to this perfected state." ST, Chapter 6, p. 71. This last quotation provides evidence that this improvement of the multitude is not merely instrumental.

[24] Spinoza, *Ethics* in in Shirley (trans.), *Spinoza: Complete Works.* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002) *Ethics,* Book 4, Proposition 37 (E4P37)

[25] Spinoza's proposal that friendship is essential for the free individual is well known. (E4P18S; E4App. 12) However, I take this passage and those following it, to show that the sage's concern for others goes beyond this circle of friends, as Spinoza makes clear in E4App14 and in the Scholium to E4P70 (as argued in note 21)

[26] E4P73D

Despite his earlier worries that the actual pursuits of human societies are often vain and futile, Spinoza believes society to be good for humans, even those pursuing truth. Indeed, Spinoza argues that the sage needs society to develop fully his or her reason:

> We can never bring it about that we should need nothing outside ourselves to preserve our own being and that we should live a life quite unrelated to those things outside ourselves. Besides, if we consider the mind, surely our intellect would be less perfect if the mind were in solitude and understood nothing beyond itself. Therefore there are many things outside ourselves that are advantageous to us and ought to be sought. Of these none more excellent can be discovered than those that are in complete harmony with our nature. For example, if two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly.[27]

Spinoza seems to suggest here that the sage needs society – and not just for the purposes of mere survival. In the above quotation, Spinoza proposes that the intellect of the sage is less perfect in solitude. Thus, in addition to the sage's aforementioned duties of bringing those around them to understand the world as it really is, it would appear that these others help the sage improve his or her own knowledge. It would appear then, that I might rest my case here. Spinoza clearly proposes that the sage needs society, and that society is the condition of the existence and flourishing of the sage. However, we have not found out why, for Spinoza, this is the case. We have not yet seen the development of his arguments for this view, and of the larger theory of why it is that the sage needs society. We may still ask why the individual seeker of truth, who recognizes man's true good, needs anyone at all? It would appear from what Spinoza has said of the normal pursuits of society that keeping company with those following their passions would derail the free man from his path. Why does the sage need society at all? In the next section of the paper, I will delve further into Spinoza's arguments for this view. I will show that Spinoza's affect theory provides the explanation for how the sage is both conditioned by his or her society and how the sage might transform his or her society to create conditions for individual and collective emancipation.

[27] E4P18S

2. Affect and Empowerment in Spinoza's Social Theory

The *Ethics* is, with a brief exception in Book IV, focused on the project of individual empowerment, freedom and the path toward achieving *scientia intuitiva.* However, the problem of our own affects and the way the affects of those around us shape our affects does not go away for Spinoza when he considers individual enlightenment. Present at the beginning of his work, it becomes later a pressing concern, as the politics of his own time increasingly imperil his project.[28] He comes to recognize that for the individual seeking reason to flourish the emotions of the people around them matter. They are, in important ways, the conditions of individual empowerment.

For Spinoza, individuals who follow reason and who understand the forces that affect them are nearly as 'powerful' as humans are able to become. For Spinoza, the more one follows reason, as one understands oneself and the world more adequately, the more one increases one's power to think and to act in the world. However, even an individual human who is maximally reasonable is still just a small part of the whole of Nature.

> Nature's right is coextensive with her power. […] But since the universal power of Nature as a whole is nothing but the power of all individual things taken together, it follows that each individual thing has the sovereign right to do all that it can do, i.e. the right of the individual is coextensive with its determinate power.[29]

Humans are mere particles when considered as part of the whole of Nature.[30] Alone, an individual's power is too small to be able to achieve his or her goals, even the basic goal of self-preservation. In order to preserve themselves and to increase their power of acting in the world, Spinoza argues that individuals must join together.

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[28] Hans Blom, *Causality and morality in politics: the rise of naturalism in Dutch seventeenth-century political thought*. Den Hague: CIP Gegevens Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 1995; Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life.* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1999)

[29] Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chapter 16, in Shirley (trans.), *Spinoza: Complete Works.* Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002, 527.

[30] *Ethics,* Book 4, Appendix 32

The 'free individual' recognizes this need for other humans.[31] He or she understands that although they are parts of the power of Nature, they are very small parts.[32] Only by joining with others can they realize and increase their power in Nature. The sage comes to understand that: "The more that combine together, the more right [power] they collectively possess."[33] When a multitude of human individuals joins together in a political community, Spinoza suggests, they can potentially join their individual powers together.[34] This collective power enables the community to itself seek reason – to identify the ends that are best for it to pursue. However, the power of the collective, the community, and the organization of the passions of those in the community can be problematic for the free individual.

The problems that the passions of others in the community may pose for the individual seeking knowledge of the world will be the subject of the second half of this paper. In the next section, we will turn to Spinoza's theory of human power, which we will use to understand how the community can both empower and disempower an individual, according to Spinoza's view.

3. Affects and Individual Power

Each individual has a certain power of acting and thinking, which Spinoza calls the individual's 'conatus.' The power of an individual can increase or decrease. At its minimal level, the conatus is the amount of power an individual needs to survive. At this minimal level, the individual is very weak, and has only a very confused understanding of its body the forces in the world that affect it. Affects of pleasure or joy are signals that the power of the body and the power of thinking have been increased. [35] Affects of pain or sadness are signals that an individual's power of acting and thinking has been decreased.[36]

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[31] TP, 2.15; James, 2011, 185
[32] *Ethics,* Book 1, Appendix
[33] TP 2.15.
[34] William Sacksteder, "Communal Orders in Spinoza" in Genevieve Lloyd's *Critical Assessments.* (London: Routledge, 2001) 24; Robert McShea, "Spinoza on Power" *Inquiry* (Vol. 12, Spring 1969) 136-137
[35] There are some who claim, e.g. Juhani Pietarinen (in correspondence) that we never experience active affects, since to do so would require that we have adequate ideas, which, such philosophers argue, we never do. Citing E2P24, P25, and P27, Pietarinen argues that all the ideas we gain from our bodies are inadequate. Pietarinen goes on to argue that since Spinoza specifically argues that we can have adequate ideas (E2p40),

The passive affects, sadness and its derivatives (e.g. fear, hatred), express a decrease in our power, making us less likely to be in a position to investigate the causes of our being so affected and thus removing ourselves from situations and forces that make us sad. Spinoza explains this:

> Sadness diminishes or restrains man's power of acting, that is, diminishes or restrains the striving by which a man strives to persevere in his being; so, it is contrary to this striving, and all a man affected by sadness strives for is to remove sadness. But (by definition of sadness) the greater the sadness, the greater is the part of the man's power to which it is necessarily opposed. Therefore, the greater the sadness, the greater the power of acting with which the man will strive to remove the sadness, that is, the greater the desire or appetite with which he will strive to remove the sadness.[37]

The active affects, on the other hand, increase an individual's power of striving (or, more precisely, express the increase in power).[38]

If an individual is affected by passive affects, e.g. fear and sadness, its power decreases.[39] If the individual is affected by active affects, its power increases.[40] More adequate ideas increase the power of acting of an individual,[41] just as more inadequate ideas diminish the individual's power.[42] One's ideas of oneself and the world produce one's understanding of the world and oneself, and shapes what one seeks – depending on

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there must be a sense or power of reason beyond the mind-body union. This is a conception of disembodied 'reason' which, I would strongly argue, is interesting, but ultimately not Spinoza's conception of 'reason', since he clearly states that all of our ideas come from the body and bodily experience of the world (E2P23; E2P26). Since Spinoza argues that common notions are adequate ideas (E2P38-39), that we have adequate ideas (E2P40S2; E2P47), that our minds are sometimes active (E3P1) and thus that we can sometimes have adequate ideas, then we should conclude that for Spinoza, we can have adequate ideas. Insofar as we can have adequate ideas of our affects, we can have active affects. For more on the argument for the existence of active affects and their place in Spinoza's understanding of the process of achieving reason, knowledge and power, see: U. Goldenbaum "The Affects as a Condition of Human Freedom" in Y. Yovel and G. Segal, eds. *Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man*. (New York: Little Room Press, 2004).

[36] Spinoza characterizes some of those emotions that signal an increase in the body's power the active emotions, and those that signal a decrease in power the body's passive emotions. *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 11 Scholium; E3P58-9.

[37] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 11 Scholium

[38] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 11 Scholium

[39] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 11 Scholium

[40] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 11 Scholium

[41] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 1, *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 9

[42] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 1, *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 9

one's ideas, affects and desires, one's power is increased or decreased.[43] The more adequate one's ideas of oneself and the world, the more likely one is to follow 'reason', that is, to do things in the 'best way', and to seek those things which are genuinely good for one.[44] The more adequate one's ideas, the more one follows reason, the more one's power is increased.[45]

To increase their knowledge and power, individuals must join with others. However, joining with others can be dangerous, particularly for the individual seeking reason, or the 'best' way to live, since human communities are generally organized through collective passions, rather than reason.[46] Few, if any, communities are organized through reason alone. Affects and the imagination are the primary modes through which humans interact and join their power.[47] Human emotions and human imaginations create the foundation of social life, but because emotion and imagination are based on inadequate understandings of the world, this foundation is weak. Further, as I will show below, individuals are not immune to the emotions of others. There is a real fear, then, that the individual seeking reason may be infected by the baser emotions of others.

For Spinoza, the social emotions shape the way individuals and collectives conceive of their identity and affect the degree of individual and collective power. Depending on the accuracy of these self-conceptions and the degree of activity of the affects by which the group is coordinated, the individuals within the community will have a better or worse chance of following reason. Even so, Spinoza insists that free individuals are better off in society. If the sage wishes to seek reason they must, he argues, bring others along with them.[48]

4. The Imitation of the Affects and the Foundation of Sociality

[43] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 6-Proposition 58
[44] *Ethics,* Book 4, Preface, Proposition 37, Scholium, and Proposition 22 Corollary. For a nice discussion of this see: Gerald Mara, "Liberal Politics and Moral Excellence in Spinoza's Political Philosophy." *Journal of the History of Philosophy,* (V. 20, no. 22) 132
[45] E5 Preface; E4Def8;
[46] *Ethics,* Book 4, Proposition 37, Scholium
[47] *Ethics,* Book 4, Proposition 37S, TTP, chapter 18
[48] TdIE § 14-15

We are bound to and divided from those around us through our affects – love, hate, contempt, joy, fear, etc. To understand our social attachments and conflicts we must understand these affects. Affects are the building blocks, or better, the *motions* of social life. To understand the social, Spinoza will investigate the affects, their variety, their power, and their power over us.

He proposes that there are as many types of affects as there are objects in the world.[49] Our love, hate, admiration and contempt vary depending on whether or not it is a water bottle, a puppy, or the whole of Nature that we love or hate. Not all of the objects we experience are alike. One group of objects, namely other humans, influences us in very special ways. We imagine that they, like us, desire things and strive to realize their desires. To the extent that we think that these others are like us, we take up their desires, their likes and dislikes as our own.[50] Spinoza calls this 'imitation' and defines it as, "the desire of something which has been engendered in us from the belief that others similar to ourselves have this same desire."[51] That is, through 'imitation', we endeavor to bring about whatever it is we imagine is conducive to pleasure or which we imagine others like us to desire.[52] This is a process that begins in childhood and is a result of both physiological and psychological facts about humans:

> For we find from experience that children, because their bodies are continually, as it were, in a state of equilibrium, laugh or cry simply because they see others laugh or cry. Moreover, whatever they see others do, they immediately desire to imitate it. And finally, they desire for themselves all those things by which they imagine others are pleased.[53]

[49] E3P56
[50] Crucially, this likeness or apparent likeness may be *mistaken*. That is, we may think *x* is like us or like *y* and yet be wrong about both the likeness or the respect in which x is like y. I discuss this at length below, in the section on 'Error and Bad Norms.'
[51] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 27
[52] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 29
[53] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 32, Scholium

This imitation is bolstered by the desire for esteem. Individuals, from their earliest years, seek love and approval.[54] Children learn from their parents what is acceptable and what is not acceptable by what they praise and blame.[55]

> If anyone has done something which he imagines affects others with pleasure, he will be affected with pleasure accompanied by the idea of himself as cause.[56]

Children's desire for esteem and acceptance causes them to internalize these values and make them their own principles for living. Spinoza cautions, however, that we ought not to understand 'that which is praised' and 'that which is blamed' as 'good' and 'evil'. He argues that in Nature, there is no right and wrong, no good and evil *simpliciter*. Spinoza insists that what a particular group values and calls 'good' might not mean 'what is best for us' or what empowers individuals, which is how Spinoza redefines 'good' and 'bad'. He writes:

> Parents, by blaming former acts and often scolding their children on account of them, and on the other hand, by recommending and praising the latter acts,-- have brought it about that the emotions of sadness were joined to one kind of act, and those of joy to the other… Hence, according as each has been educated, so he either repents of a deed or exults at being esteemed for it.[57]

In general, this process works as follows: we strive to increase our pleasure by bringing about what we desire and what we imagine others desire.[58] When we do what we believe will bring pleasure to others and are praised, we feel good about ourselves. This 'esteem' we receive from others increases our power.[59] The more praise we receive, the

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[54] *Ethics,* Book 3, Propositions 33-34
[55] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 29
[56] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 30
[57] *Ethics,* Book 3, Definition of the Affects, XXVII
[58] We may, of course, be wrong about what others desire. More below.
[59] There is an important difference, for Spinoza, between esteem and what we might think of excess of esteem, e.g. pride, and deficits of esteem, e.g. humility and what Spinoza calls 'self-abasement'. Although Spinoza prizes self-esteem because it enhances individual power (E3P53) he argues that pride, humility and self-abasement are bad for us, since they are miscalculations of self-esteem. Being prideful, we err by esteeming ourselves too much (E3DefAff 6 and 28; E4P48-49); being humble, we err (E3DefAff 26; E4P53) by focusing on our weakness, and thus diminishing our power; in self-abasement, we err by esteeming

more our esteem increases. The more our self-esteem increases, the more our power increases. Esteem is a built-in motivator for social conformity, for seeking to please others. Spinoza spends much of Book III of the *Ethics* investigating this motivational force.

Spinoza explains that the desires of the *self* move outward toward others if they are like us; we take up what we imagine to be their desires as desirable. Even if we do not know the individuals in question, we seek, in general, to conform to what we believe are the expectations and values of others. Spinoza is clear about this: "We endeavor to do whatever we imagine men [men for whom we have felt no emotion] to regard with pleasure, and on the other hand we shun doing whatever we imagine men to regard with aversion."[60] Even for those individuals whom we don't know or care about, we still aim to act in a way that they would approve and seek to avoid their disapproval. We do not just seek to act in a way that others approve we also seek to align our preferences, values and desires with theirs. Spinoza explains:

> If we imagine that someone loves, desires, or hates something that we love, desire or hate, this very fact will cause us to love, desire or hate the thing more steadfastly. But if we imagine he dislikes what we love, or vice versa, then our feelings will fluctuate.[61]

Spinoza explains this process as: 'the imitation of the affects.'[62] He explains how this works in great detail in Book III of the *Ethics*.[63]

This 'imitation' of the affects of those around us, for Spinoza, is the foundation of all social life.[64] Through this imitation, we become trained as members of the community. We take up the values of others, we come to value what they value and to shape ourselves into the kinds of beings who will merit esteem from those around us, while avoiding blame

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ourselves too little (E3DefAf29). Ultimately, for Spinoza, error in estimation of anything, ourselves included, can decrease our power.

[60] *Ethics*, Book 3, Proposition 29

[61] *Ethics*, Book 3, Proposition 31

[62] *Ethics*, Book 3, Proposition 27, Scholium

[63] He sets the stage for this discussion by explaining the ways in which the human mind and body can be affected by external objects.(E3P2-E3P17) From E3P27 to E3P57, he explains how, depending on our orientation towards a particular individual can affect us. If we love something, than we will love whatever we imagine to be pleasing to that individual (E3P19), whereas, if we hate something, we will hate whatever gives it pleasure (E3P23) and love whatever gives it pain (E3P20—what we might call the *schadenfreude* proposition).

[64] Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza.* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1969) 150-167.

and negative judgment. Becoming a member of a social group means valuing those things the group values. This 'common valuing' starts at a stage too early to resist consciously. How we act in the world, how we do things and how we understand the world are influenced by common customs and practices first of a family, then of a social group. We imitate others, and learn from those we wish to please how to act in the world, what is right and wrong, respectable and shameful. We learn how to obtain praise that feeds our self-esteem.[65] These affective-imaginative connections can be very powerful. These shared affective-imaginative connections can form the basis of stable communities and can increase the power of those who join them.

However, because this is an automatic process, a process that involves the affects almost exclusively, the values we take up may not actually be 'good' for us, in Spinoza's sense. Not all of the things our community values may actually be 'rational', leading us to genuine increases in power and knowledge. In the next section, I will take up Spinoza's answer to the question of irrational, 'bad' or 'disempowering' values, norms and community practices.

5. Error and Bad Norms

Just because the community values something doesn't mean that it is necessarily good for us as individuals or for the group as a whole. Error creeps in at the point where we identify the causes of our pleasure and pain. Spinoza explains that anything can indirectly be the cause of pleasure, pain desire.[66] If we experience pain, then we will dislike whatever it is we believe to have caused the pain; however, we might misidentify what actually caused our pain, and thus hate something that may not be bad for us.

For example, if someone encounters a dog for the first time, and it bites, the idea of a dog may be associated with the feeling of fear or pain for that individual.[67] When we experience objects that resemble those that have caused us pain in some relevant respect, we will avoid it, and we will experience pain. When we encounter objects that resemble

[65] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 17, Scholium; *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 29, *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 31 Corollary, *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 32 Scholium, *Ethics,* Book 3, Propositions 33-34
[66] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 15
[67] E3P21Proof, E2P18, E3P14; E3P15, and E2P22 (see footnote 41 above)

those that have caused us pleasure in the past we will approve that thing, and seek it. The individual bitten by the dog may come to fear all dogs, not just that original dog. Or perhaps the person bitten by the dog was actually mistaken, and what bit him or her was actually a wolverine. In that case, what the person imagines to be a dog is associated with pain. When that individual encounters other dogs, they may be afraid, thinking that this is just another scary 'dog'. By misidentifying the cause of their initial fear, the individual's error ramifies, blaming all dogs and dog-like entities for the sins of one wolverine.

We may accidentally love something that only accidentally appears good, like something we've loved in the past, or we may hate something or someone for no good reason. For Spinoza, this is a normal fact of human psychology, and yet it can be completely maladaptive. When we do not understand the causes of our desires, likes and dislikes, we are bound to have a few things that we like or hate for no good reason.

This error can easily ramify, since those things that resemble in some respect (not necessarily even the right or relevant respect) things that we love (which we believe to cause our pleasure), we will also love. Spinoza writes,

> From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have something similar to an object that is wont to affect the mind with pleasure or pain, we shall love it or hate it, although the point of similarity is not the efficient cause of the emotions.[68]

Thus, we may have an entire set of false beliefs, and a set of 'bad desires' that rest on these false beliefs. We may misidentify those things we believe to have caused us pleasure and that we therefore love, but which are actually bad for us. Those things that are 'bad for us' are those that decrease our power overall, although we associate them with pleasure. Without understanding causes, we are liable to massive error about what is good and bad for us, that is about what actually increases our power. We may actively pursue, in the course of attempting to preserve ourselves, things that actually decrease our power. The source of our error can be two-fold: we can be wrong about identifying causes, and we can also be wrong about identifying likeness, or associating ideas. Let's consider an example.

[68] *Ethics,* Book 3, Proposition 16

(1) We love ***a*** and ***b.***

(2) We love ***a*** and ***b*** for reasons (beliefs) F and G.

F: ***a*** causes us pleasure.

G: ***b*** is like ***a.***

(3) We could be wrong about F, G or both.

We might be wrong to love ***a,*** because F may be false. It might not be ***a*** which causes us pleasure at all, but rather something constantly conjoined to our experience of ***a.*** If F is false, it may still be harmless to love ***a,*** but it may still be irrational. However, if F is false, and something else is causing out pleasure, then ***a*** may be bad for us, that is, it may actually decrease our power, and rather than causing us pleasure it may cause us pain, which we may blame on something else.

Furthermore, we may be wrong on the matter of likeness, that is G may be false. G, however, can be wrong in more than one way. ***a*** might not be like ***b*** at all, and we may just have mixed them up somehow, e.g. someone may have falsely told us that ***a*** is like ***b***. ***a*** might be like ***b,*** but not in the relevant respect. That is, ***a*** and ***b*** may have some property in common, but not the property in virtue of which ***a*** caused us pleasure. That is, ***a***, for example, might be a chocolate covered bunny, which caused us pleasure because it was chocolate. ***b***, then, might be an actual bunny, that is, one made of young rabbit-meat, etc. and not made of chocolate. So, while it would be correct to say that ***a*** and ***b*** are similar in some respect, they are not similar in the relevant respect of 'being made of chocolate'. We may discover we have a chocolate allergy, and thus discover that ***a*** is bad for us after all. This may lead us to fear ***a***, but also to fear ***b***. Fear of ***b,*** given the fact that ***b*** is not made of chocolate, is unfounded in this case. Actual bunnies may indeed be delicious, although not a great source of nutrition.[69]

[69] Rabbits, in this case, are not as silly an example as we might have originally thought. The likeness of rabbits to other fleshy forest beasts (and the scarcity of larger mammals) has fooled many into thinking they might be just as good a source of nutrition as, for example, deer. Such individuals have been stricken with what is sometimes called 'rabbit starvation', Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *My Life With the Eskimo.* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

For Spinoza, when we investigate and finally understand the real causes of our affects, desires, likes and dislikes, we can reappraise, at least to a certain extent, the objects of our likes and dislikes, and thereby change what we seek.[70] Reason, then, is understood as seeking what is actually good for us, and avoiding what is actually bad for us.[71] There is an important caveat to mention here: even though without reason, we may not be able to identify these errors, with reason we might not be able to do much more.[72]

Understanding how individuals make such evaluative errors is important for diagnosing individual error and irrationality, but it also tells us something about what we might call 'collective error.' Just as individuals seek things which they believe to be good, but are really bad for them, so collectives, or groups can seek or value those things which either seem good, or once seemed good, but are actually 'bad' for them, in the sense of diminishing the power of the group as a whole or diminishing the power of individuals in the group. The norms and practices of our community are shaped by the history of the community, that is, by those things that have been the sources of praise, blame, love and hate by those in the group (or by powerful members in the group).[73] At a certain point in its history, our community may have formed the following rule, R, in order to ensure the peace and stability of the community:

R: Those who question community elders are to be summarily beaten and jailed.

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[70] Spinoza is clear that we do not have complete power over our affects and that even when we see the better option we are sometimes compelled to do the worse. He also notes that we do not have complete control over what we like and dislike, as he explains in ST chapter on 'reason,' (Chapter 21, 92-93) where he shows that there is a subset of our passion which no adequate ideas or reason can overcome. He calls these, the passions we have through experience. However, should we gain this capacity to see the better and actually do the better, this would be because of an increase in our reason (E4P66)

[71] E4P24; E4P59Proof; E4P65-66; He also sees 'reason' as a stage in the progression of knowledge. It is not the top of the ladder. See: H. De Dijn, "Ethics IV: The Ladder Not the Top," in Y. Yirmiyahu and G. Segal, *Ethica IV: Spinoza on Reason and the Free Man.* (New York: Little Room Press, 2004) 37-56. Rather, understanding Nature in itself, and not from the point of view of our human needs and interests, is in fact beyond reason. E2P40SII) *Scientia intuitiva*, understanding how the parts of Nature fit together is the highest form of knowledge, above reason.

[72] Reason may allow us, Spinoza argues, to see the better, but we may still find ourselves powerless to choose this better option. Spinoza writes, "Reason has no power to lead us to the attainment of our wellbeing." (ST, Chapter 21-22; *Ethics*, Propositions 15, and 16) Reason, it would appear, cannot fight our most disabling passions. Rather, we need another strategy, one that Spinoza provides in Book 4, E4P7: "An affect can only be controlled or destroyed by another affect contrary thereto, and with more power for controlling affect."

[73] TTP, Chapter 17, 548-9; TTP, Chapter 3, 418

At a certain point in our community's past prohibiting dissent in this way may have seemed useful, for example, when in the midst of war, disease or struggle for survival. For Spinoza, it should be said, there is no requirement that it was ever *actually* useful. This practice may just have *seemed* useful at a certain time to a certain group of individuals.

The member of the group's beliefs in Rs utility, their preference for it over other ways of solving the problem of communal peace and stability creates a set of values that shapes the communities norms and practices, which are then taken up by new members of the community. Over time, this rule may have softened into something like an informal norm. Dissent is no longer punished, perhaps, by beating or imprisonment, but through informal means of social exclusion or disparagement. Meanwhile, those who are least critical gain favor, and those who cause trouble or ask too many questions are relegated to poorly remunerated positions. We may come to feel that it is a mark of our society that we are fully unified and do not ask questions, and thus come to be proud of this manner of behavior. These norms and ways of valuing people and behaviors may come to seem quite natural to us; we come to see them as necessary, and indeed identify them as the cause of our community's peace, unity and strength. However, we could be, and Spinoza argues that in this particular case, we are, wrong. Norms and rules that prohibit dissent may, and Spinoza argues do, diminish the power and stability of the community.[74]

Just because these norms are actually be harmful doesn't change the fact that we still value them, we still follow them. I take this to be the upshot of Spinoza's arguments that what those things we value because we believe that they give us pleasure need not be the cause of our pleasure. We will love and value these norms because of our (false) belief that they are the cause of our pleasure, or in this case, peace and community strength. Thus, for the community, what is believed to be the cause of peace, in this case, prohibiting dissent, will be valued even if prohibiting dissent does not make the community peaceful, but rather, on Spinoza's view, is a bad way to run a state.[75] I have used the example of a society banning dissent, because it is one that Spinoza explicitly

[74] TPP, Chapter 20
[75] TTP, Chapter 1, Chapter 20

addresses. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza argues that it is always better to allow dissent in some forms than to prohibit it entirely.[76] States that prohibit dissent are less powerful and less free than those that allow citizens to speak their minds. Prohibiting dissent, on Spinoza's view, weakens a state.[77] Thus, such a norm, however useful in the past, is a 'bad norm', diminishing the power of the society as a whole and diminishing the power of the individuals in the society who are affected by it. Once we recognize that our community has a 'bad norm', one based on an error, and one which diminishes the power of those in the society, what can one do?

What is the condition of the individual, for example, in a community that has banned critical discourse, or free investigation into the natural world? How does the community constrain the power of this individual?[78] What are his or her resources for changing the community norm? Or, would it be better to leave the community? We know that it is better to be in society, on Spinoza's view, than alone, so we cannot abandon the society to live according to our own rule. If we are in a community that restricts that which is actually best for us, what is rational, then, surely, we must do something to mitigate this enervating power?

6. The Sage and Society

Let's consider again the quotations from sections §1 to §15 of the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect*. Spinoza finds himself at odds with what those in the community think is important. He seeks a different kind of life from the 'vain and futile pursuits' of his neighbors, §1-§3. He writes of the difficulty of removing oneself from society, and the need to appear to follow the norms of the community while one searches

[76] TTP, Chapters 19-20
[77] TTP, Chapters 19-20; Michael Rosenthal, "Spinoza's Republican Argument for Toleration." *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2003, pp. 320-337; Robert Misrahi. "Spinoza, tolerance et liberte d'expression." *Magazine litteraire,* No. 363, 1998, pp. 26-27; Steven Nadler, *A book forged in hell: Spinoza's scandalous treatise and the birth of the secular age.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 201); Steven Smith, *Spinoza, liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997)
[78] Moira Gatens has shown the power of Spinoza's answer to this question in her interpretations of the work of George Eliot, in Gatens, Lecture Two, *Spinoza's Hard Path to Freedom.* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2011).

for truth.[79] As soon as he finds what is 'best' and 'reasonable', what is the best way to live, he recognizes the need to reform the community in such a way that others may seek this 'best' along with him. Thus, he argues, we need to improve the sciences of morality, medicine and expand education in order to improve the community, so that it might be supportive of the path to reason. These are the words of a young and optimistic man, one who will come to see that uprooting community norms and practices and reforming one's society is not as easy as it may appear, and it is certainly not as easy as recommending that one follow what one has discovered as the 'true' good as opposed to the community's 'futile' pursuits.

For Spinoza, dissent is a natural result for someone seeking to follow the rocky path to reason. When one submits one's actions and the practices one follows to the test of reasons, to see if these actions are actually what is best for one, one can easily find oneself at odds with the norms of the community. This is a process Spinoza describes of his own development in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and we can find this tension between the rational individual and the imaginative community in Spinoza's own life.[80]

Excommunicated from the Amsterdam Jewish Community at age of 24 for his 'beliefs and actions', vilified for his critique of the power of religion in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza knew well the difficulty of being at odds with one's community, and his eventual exile showed him the power of the community both to protect and to harm.[81] He lost the protection of the community and found himself finally harassed out of Amsterdam.[82] We can find further echoes of his own biographical struggles with communal norms in the *Theological-Political Treatise.* There, he argues, that every state should allow for the freedom to philosophize, for if it did not, it would exclude its 'best' citizens, thus ultimately disempowering the state. He further argued against the idea that

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[79] "To speak to the understanding of the multitude and to engage in all those activities which do not hinder us from our aim For we can gain no little advantage from the multitude, provided that we accommodate ourselves as far as possible to their level of understanding. Furthermore, in this way they will give a more favorable hearing to the truth." TIE [§17]

[80] This has been noted by Colin Marshall, in "Spinoza on Destroying Passions with Reason," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (vol. LXXXV, No. 1, July, 2012), 158

[81] Y. Yovel, "Why Spinoza Was Excommunicated", *Commentary* (64:5 (1977: Nov)), 46; S. Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy.* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA 2001)

[82] S. Nadler, *Spinoza: a Life*. (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

one could not critique religious dogma, particularly where it overlapped with natural science. Prohibitions on philosophizing, Spinoza argued, limit the power of humanity, undermine religion, and misunderstand the nature and scope of religious authority, which is ultimately limited to morality and faith, not to philosophy, or the investigation of the natural world.[83]

Spinoza's social theory in part emerged in part from his own struggles following community norms that he knew were not optimal, and by being alienated from his own community for rejecting their beliefs. In his own life, Spinoza learned that following reason can leave one without the support of one's community. The road to reason, then, is rocky not just because it is difficult and requires mental attention, but it is hard because there are hardships, and it is dangerous, since one risks alienating those upon whose power one relies, and those among whom one's identity is shaped.[84]

7. Spinoza's Fear of the Multitude

In *Spinoza et la politique,* Etienne Balibar argues that there is a tension that emerges in Spinoza between the individual seeking reason and the multitude – the society in which the individual finds him or herself. Balibar argues that this tension betrays Spinoza's distrust and fear of the common people and the passions.[85] Balibar is not wrong about this tension. Indeed, Spinoza offers evidence in Proposition LXX of the *Ethics* Book IV: "The free man, who lives among the ignorant, strives, as far as he can, to avoid receiving favors from

[83] Spinoza*, Theological-Political Treatise,* in Shirley (trans.), *Spinoza: Complete Works.* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), TTP, Chapters 14-15

[84] This explains Spinoza's preoccupation with norms and customs, which some commentators have interpreted as a sign of Spinoza's conservatism, e.g. R. Prokhovnik, "From Democracy to Aristocracy: Spinoza, Reason and Politics." *History of European Ideas,* (Vol. 23, issue 2-4, 1997) 107. Others have attributed to Spinoza a 'basic sociability', Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings.* 14. While I think the notion of 'sociability', at least in its 18th Century context is misapplied to Spinoza. [Citation removed for blind review], Gatens and Lloyd propose that Spinoza outlines a theory in which a social imaginary is created in order to bolster political community. Heidi M. Ravven in "Spinoza's Intermediate Ethics For Society And The Family" (*Animus* 6 (2001): 80–95) offers a similar suggestion. I take the present argument to support these readings of Spinoza's political theory, and I am here to spell out the details of Spinoza's social theory of the affects, which he sets out in the *Ethics,* Books Three and Four.

[85] Etienne Balibar, *La crainte des masses: politique et philosophie avant et après Marx.* (Paris: Galilee, 1997); We can find stronger versions of this thesis in Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Crititque of Religion.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and Steven Smith, *Spinoza, liberalism, and the question of Jewish Identity.*

them." From this quotation we might think that Spinoza is counseling the sage to live apart from society, even while within it. Does Spinoza think the free individual should keep away from the common and ignorant multitude altogether? In the definition and proof of this proposition, Spinoza explains that accepting favors, in particular, means that one is obligated to do things for reasons that may be other than according to reason. What becomes clear in Spinoza's code for the free man in Book IV, is that the sage, by following reason, will be according an alternative set of values, and will thus act differently and for different reasons than those around them. This tension between the sage and the common people is indeed one that Spinoza recognizes.

What is important about this tension is that it is not just a tension in Spinoza's thought -- it is a real tension that we find in the world. Individuals seeking reason really do come into conflict with those in their society. That Spinoza's theory identifies and indeed accurately predicts that there will be such a real tension is a credit to the theory. The solution Spinoza devises for this tension is what we ought to examine in order to discern his true view of the common people. This solution is twofold: on the one hand, we need to educate and improve the conditions of the common people.[86] On the other hand, he argues we must include them in politics,[87] and indeed change our form of government to be as democratic as possible.[88] More democracy, and more education are necessary, Spinoza argues, to eliminate the tension between the sage and society.

Beyond Balibar, there is another group of philosophers who worry that Spinoza is in fact, offering just another version of the Stoic sage – one who eschews society and blames humans for their emotions. Finding Spinoza's attention to the emotions initially promising, these thinkers find his periodically negative talk of the passions and his despair at the behavior of the common people to support a kind of anti-humanism that amounts to a rejection of those things, which in their view, give human life meaning and value. These readers find Spinoza's dismissal of the passions disappointing, and come to see in him the

[86] TdIE §14-15
[87] TP 7.27
[88] TP 11.1; TP 7.2; TTP, Chapter 5; TTP, Chapter 16

return of a Stoic rejection of the passions and rejection of common people and common life.[89]

There is evidence for their worries, and indeed, there are several places where Spinoza clearly seems frustrated with the fickleness, ignorance and fear-driven actions of the common people.[90] He also speaks of the 'passions' as things to which we are in bondage.[91] This alone might be enough to suggest that Spinoza is offering yet another rejection of the passions. Indeed, Spinoza does reject the 'passions' -- what he calls 'passive affects', fear, pain, sadness, and their related affects. Moreover, he does think the common people in can be terrifying, and that they are probably too ignorance and superstitious to do philosophy.[92] However, he doesn't blame them for their ignorance, nor does he blame them for their passions. The passions are unavoidable. Spinoza neither blames individuals for their passions, nor does he blame them for their ignorance. Rather, he blames the culture, religion and government that keep the people ignorant, and not the people themselves. Spinoza writes:

> As for the populace being devoid of truth and judgment, that is nothing to wonder at, since the chief business of the state is transacted behind its back, and it can but make conjectures from the little which cannot be hidden...So, it is a supreme folly to wish to transact everything behind the backs of the citizens. [93]

Spinoza explicitly argues that, unlike those moral philosophers who create a model of human nature that is impossible to achieve, and then blame people for their passions, he

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[89] Two such philosophers, Lilli Alanen, and John Cottingham have been generous enough to discuss these issues with me. Their conceptions of Spinoza are not wrong, but the passages they cite in which Spinoza appears to be rejecting the passions and the common people can be understood within a larger project, a larger framework in which Spinoza at first despairs at the ignorance and violence of the common people, and then finally comes to see this as the mission of the sage to find ways to intervene, to improve life not just for those seeking reason and *scientia intuitiva,* but for all. We also find some evidence for this in Matheron's proposal for the change in Spinoza's views of the multitude after 1677. Alexandre Matheron "Le probleme de l'evolution de Spinoza du Traite theologico-politique au Traite politique," in Edwin Curley and Pierre-Francois Moreau (Eds), *Spinoza : Issues and Directions* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).
[90] TTP, Preface
[91] EIV Pref. [Citation removed for blind review]
[92] TTP, Preface
[93] TTP, Chapter 4, p.426; TP 1.1; E3App32; TP 1.5; E4App32; TP7.27

will do no such thing.[94] Instead, he will try to understand the affects, just as one investigates any other aspect of the natural world. He will treat the passions as if they are "points, lines or planes."[95] One does not judge a triangle for being obtuse. In the same way, Spinoza will seek to understand the nature of human properties, of which passions are basic.

We must place these passages within the larger context of Spinoza's project, which is fundamentally, and as I have argued, from its beginning, a project in which individual empowerment is seen as only possible in the context of collective emancipation. The individual, Spinoza realizes in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect,* cannot seek enlightenment alone. Thus, the 'road to reason' for the sage, leads through the social and requires collective cooperation and empowerment.

Spinoza's disappointment and despair at the behavior of the common people must be taken in the spirit of this collective project. Anyone who attends to the wellbeing of humans cannot help but despair at the occasionally destructive power of humans in large groups. While this despair may be natural, it is not, for Spinoza, ultimately helpful. If we despair at the condition of the common people, and at the effect of their ignorance on the lives of others, we do nothing to ameliorate the situation, and merely diminish our own power. Instead, we need to understand the behavior of other humans, individually and collectively, in order to understand what, if anything, we can do about general ignorance or viciousness. Spinoza, as a theorist of human *potentia*, must have been just as frustrated to see humans fearful, weak, violent and in pain as we are at these same phenomena today.[96]

8. Conclusion

[94] "I shall consider human actions and appetites just as if it were an investigation into lines, planes or bodies." E3Pref; TP1.7

[95] E3Pref; TP1.7

[96] Scholars also worry that, for Spinoza, improving the lives of others is of merely instrumental value. The sage seeks to improve the lives of others because it will better his or her own chances for successfully investigating the natural world. Spinoza discusses this, however, as an obligation, as a requirement. Further, as humans are part of the world, it is intrinsically valuable to understand them. Spinoza's entire system of ethics is shaped around the needs of human beings. Although it might not satisfy the worry about instrumentalism, and indeed we may worry about this view on its own, but given this background, it is not a mark against his view that seeking the wellbeing of others should be sought because it improves human life, including, both directly and indirectly, the life of the sage.

On Spinoza's view, humans seek society because we are weak and passionate creatures.[97] Moreover, we are born into societies that shape the very forces that can increase or decrease our power – our ideas of the world and our affects. These ideas of the world and what is best for us are shaped socially, through the mechanism of our affects and our conatus, or our power of striving. These ideas may be, and often are, very confused. They are often based on imaginative views of the world, and although they unite the community, they may not be best for us, individually or collectively. As we seek reason, we may come into conflict with these communal ideas or norms, since, as our ideas become more adequate, we may come to reject the inadequate ideas of our community. Reasoning and increasingly adequate ideas can lead us into conflict with our community, leading us to diminish our power no matter which path we seek. If we seek to increase our power and critique the norms of the community, we may be thrust out of the comfort of the community. We seem to have two non-optimal choices: 1) We can reject the ideas of our society, thereby losing their protection and likely decreasing our overall power; or, 2) we can follow the norms of the community, through which we diminish our own power by following irrational norms, practices and beliefs of the community.

Spinoza chose a third way. He proposed that we could follow the norms of our community while attempting to change them.[98] Ultimately, what Spinoza recognizes and identifies, is the hard problem of individual and social change, when what we seek to change are practices and beliefs which are tied up with our affects. The affective force of the norms and values of our community can be barriers to both individual and collective empowerment, reason and freedom, in Spinoza's view. Reason, so powerful and so important for directing humans to live the best life possible, is, in such situations, much weaker than the affective forces that bind individuals to even the most irrational disempowering norms.[99]

On our own, we humans are less able to understand the variety of causes by which we are affected, and so, for Spinoza, the best way to increase our power is by joining with

[97] TP 2.15
[98] TdIE, §17
[99] ST, Chapters 21-22

others. Through joining with others, we are able to coordinate our efforts in identifying what's best for us. Communities unified through aligning the emotions and imaginations of individuals may be based on error. That is, they may praise things that actually are harmful and they may blame things that are actually helpful. Ultimately, being part of a society based on imaginative conceptions of the world is empowering, in Spinoza's view. Our communities can develop and change based on the quality of the imaginative views that shape individuals within them. As both Lewis Feuer and Susan James point out, for Spinoza, collective human interaction, in the form of states, communities and societies is the medium through which individual power and knowledge is increased.[100] Spinoza was no hater of the community. Rather saw its empowering and disempowering potential for individuals seeking knowledge.

To increase our power, to increase our knowledge of the world, we must join together. By doing so, we coordinate our emotions with others in the community. However, since most communities are organized imaginatively, we may take up bad values, maladaptive practices. Yet, because our emotions are formed in these communities, we may not be able to see their harm. Even if we can understand that such customs are harmful, they can be difficult to uproot, since they are based on emotions that have shaped our behavior, our values, and our identity from childhood. Questioning the norms of the community is not only difficult for the individual as a crisis of identity. The community, if its norms and values are questioned, may turn against the individual. If it does so, the whole weight of the community, its members and their collective power can be brought to bear against the dissenter.

Spinoza worried about the power of social customs, especially religious prohibitions on research into the natural world, and the ways in which the masses could be used for the purposes of unscrupulous religious and political leaders who kept them weak and ignorant. An ignorant and passionate multitude, made weak by social and political exclusion, kept from the truth by unscrupulous ideologues was a terrible force for chaos which could weaken any state and thus weaken any individual's chances for empowerment

[100] Susan James, "Creating Rational Understanding," 185; Lewis Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987).

within it.[101] This is as true in Spinoza's time as it is our own. To counter the power of passion and superstition we need more than reason alone. We need to find ways to fight communal affects with affects to reshape the norms and practices of our communities. For Spinoza, effective social and individual change requires taking into account the affective force of such norms, practices and beliefs.

[101] TP 7.27