

## FRIENDSHIP, SYMPATHY AND INDIGNATION IN SPINOZA

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1. There are not many occurrences of the notion of friendship in Spinoza's *Ethics* [1675]. The notion does, however, appear in some decisive passages. To start, it is worth mentioning three of these instances. The first occurrence of friendship has a negative connotation: in Proposition 35, Part III, in which Spinoza speaks of jealousy mixed with envy. This section is dedicated to imagination, that is, knowledge of the first kind, and in this stage, we fear that the object of our love may join itself to another with bonds of friendship that are equal or closer than ours. We are jealous: the object of love is also, at the same time, the object of hate. Our soul vacillates, and the envy of another is strong. Friendship here is nothing other than mutual love and it seems to be of the same kind as sexual desire. The second instance to be considered is, on the other hand, entirely positive. We are speaking of the Scholium to the Proposition 37 of Part IV; in this section we have moved from imagination to a life according to reason. Friendship, in this case, is the effect of honour (*honestas*): the more our desire is guided by reason, the more honourable we are, that is, we associate others with ourselves in friendship. A true qualitative leap for the connective drive of the *cupiditas*. And finally: the *Demonstratio* of Proposition 71 of Part IV, where freedom and gratitude are fully equated: men can be grateful only if they are free, and vice versa. Men who desire according to reason are thoroughly free, and so are useful to other men. Always capable of gratitude, they never cease to form bonds of friendship with free men.

2. From the occurrences of the term to the constellation of propositions and of affects, which form the background and give shape to the notion we are focusing on. Going in order, we will first look at the relation between friendship, jealousy and envy. Before doing this, however, we must provide some brief indications of Spinoza's ontology, necessary to delve into Part III and IV of the *Ethics*. Spinoza's ontology is founded on the notion of *conatus*: a striving, tendency,

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or drive to persevere in one's own existence (EIII, P6). It is a 'given determinate manner' of expressing the power (*potentia*) of existence and of activity of *Deus sive Natura*. In this sense, *conatus* is the 'actual essence' – mode or manner always being modified – of things (EIII, P7). The tendency of things to exist is also, and especially, connective power: with Spinoza we can say that a relation precedes the terms of a relation. We have always been immersed in a pattern, a fabric, and the *conatus* varies on the basis of encounters, compositions, hindrances, conflicts, etc. Affects are the continuous modification of power: the primary affective vacillation, from joy to pain: we feel joy when our power to exist is increased by encounters; vice versa, we experience pain if our *conatus* is hindered, diminished (EIII, P11). Each encounter, it must be noted, leaves a physical (and psychic) trace, an image. The affective variation is thus a modification of the power of the activity of the body but also of the power of thinking, in the first place of the imaginative power of the mind. Love is thus pleasure accompanied by the idea or image of its external cause, while hate is the pain accompanied by the idea or image of its external cause (EIII, P13S). The affective dynamics presented *more geometrico* by Spinoza, which stem from the primary oscillation, constitute the *pre-individual field* inside which individuals are born, inside which they develop and break up relationships, communities, and institutions.

3. Let us go back to friendship and its opposite. It is exactly that which creates most bonds, love, that can turn into hate for the loved object, into envy of the other, who takes this object from us. In Proposition 32, just shortly before the Proposition (35) we have already examined, Spinoza introduces a crucial issue: the scarcity of the object of our desire – indeed *cupiditas* is the truly human *conatus*, because it is self-aware. Imagine a man who takes pleasure from an object that can be possessed by one man only: we would do everything in our power to stop him from possessing it. From scarcity to quarrel, to conflict. Putting the two propositions together, it is evident that friendship forms such strong bonds with the other that it transforms it into such a rare object, that it must be defended by hanging on to it. But what is envy, that which opposes us to the third person threatening us? In the Scholium of Proposition 24, Spinoza clarifies this point: envy is that same hatred that disposes a man to rejoice in another's hurt, and to grieve at another's advantage. So, not only hatred, but a new disposition, a new manner of our affective existence. We cannot tolerate the joy of the person we envy, we wish to destroy the object that gives him pleasure, separate him from the objective of love that he possesses. It is worth stressing, however, the hallucinatory traps of our imagination: the envious person's hate would not be the same if the other's happiness were not diminishing our happiness, if the quarrel were not about an object we desire that is scarce, unavailable –

according to our imagination – and impossible to share. The power of another is, therefore, my impotence.

4. The affective contagion that constantly modifies us does not lead only to envy. The constellation that anticipates Proposition 35, Proposition 27 – with its *Demonstrationes*, *Corollarii*, and its *Scholii* – plays a fundamental role in the *Ethics*. Spinoza writes: ‘By the very fact that we conceive a thing, which is like ourselves, and which we have not regarded with any affect, to be affected with any affect, we are ourselves affected with a like affect (*affectus*)’. The image, we have said, is that of a physical trace, something affecting our body, of which we form an idea containing the representation of an external object experienced as present. If the external body we encounter, by which we are affected, seems to be similar, its affective modification is also ours, a sort of co-feeling or affective co-identity. In the first Scholium Spinoza introduces the notion of *affetuum imitatio* and explains that: we feel compassion when the pain of another is our pain; we feel emulation when our *cupiditas* of anything is perceived as being the same in another person. These extraordinary affirmations by Spinoza easily bring to mind the recent findings in neuroscience: mirror neurons and ‘embodied simulation’, the shared ‘we-centric space’ that precedes the formation of subjectivity (Gallese 2003). This notion points to the connective drive of the *cupiditas*, to its dimension that is both singular and pre-individual: the singular essence of each person, that which makes us become what we are, expresses itself existing and combines, identifies and clashes with all other singular things that we unavoidably encounter. It is inside this fabric defined by the imitation of emotions that, according to Spinoza, we seek to free from misery, as far as we can, a thing which we pity (EIII, P27, C3), to destroy those who hurt someone we are close to, because his pain is ours. This is not, in any way, an altruistic morality, which postulates the existence of sovereign and accountable individuals. Rather, it is an ethics in which affective compositions precede and accompany individuation. If someone else’s pain is our pain, the same happens with joy. And this is why we endeavour to do whatsoever we conceive other men to regard with pleasure and avoid doing that which we conceive men to avoid (EIII, P29). Again, another inversion: the same affective dynamic that makes us human fuels the greatest ambition; we endeavour or restrain from endeavour solely in order to please, regardless of the hurt we cause by doing this (EIII, P29, S). Spinoza’s anthropology is no doubt an anthropology of ambivalence. An ambivalence that can be very clearly seen in children: ‘We find that children, whose body is continually, as it were, in equilibrium, laugh or cry simply because they see others laughing or crying; moreover, they desire forthwith to imitate whatever they see others doing, and to possess themselves whatever they conceive as delighting others’ (EIII, P32, S).

5. Let us now focus our attention on the relationship between pity, honour and friendship, as it is outlined in the Scholium of Proposition 37, Part IV. Shortly above, in the Scholium of Proposition 18, Spinoza presents the precepts of reason and identifies which emotions are in harmony with the rules of human reason. It must be stressed that when we speak of reason, we are not referring to consciousness or to a moral imperative. We are, instead, becoming active, the adequate cause of our actions and thoughts. Also, it is joyous passions, which increase our power of existing, that allow the transition toward a greater perfection. If we pay attention, it becomes clear that it is the combination of the emotions related to love and friendship that enhance this power, allowing us to reach the plane of reason. What is the precept of human reason? Nothing other than the *conatus*, the endeavour to persist in one's being, self-love, and the desire to seek what is useful for us. However, and this is what counts, on a new ground, that is common. Also, from a physical and biochemical point of view we are in a relationship of continuous exchange with the outside world: we progress by means of compositions, nourishment, intoxications and decompositions, ceaselessly. The same can be said from the point of view of our affects. When we compose with another person who is similar to us we create a more powerful individual. In this sense nothing is more useful for man than man himself. Reason is the achievement of this practical truth: common life, the convenience of many, defeats solitude. Until we are immersed in the realm of imagination, where we are prey to passions, we are not naturally in harmony (EIV, P32), we are contrary one to another (EIV, P34), we live in a state of permanent conflict. In the *Demonstratio* of Proposition 32, Spinoza clarifies: we are in harmony naturally only if we agree in power, not in want of power or negation. We are in harmony naturally and agree in power only when we are active, when our desire is guided by reason, when we dramatically increase the positive (and joyous) compositions. Once again, it is about asserting sociality against a solitary life. With Propositions 36 and 37 we grasp the leap we have just taken: the highest good of those who follow virtue, of those who are guided by reason, is common to all, and therefore all can equally rejoice therein (EIV, P36). Understanding God (in other words Nature), having knowledge of the causes, the relationships that build compositions. Also, if we are active, the good which every man desires for himself he will also desire for other men (EIV, P37). From the scarcity of the desired object (EIII, P32) to the reversal of the principle of scarcity: a shift that allows us to feel pity for those suffering. Now, however, it is no longer a passion, but an affect, expression of our power to act and think. *Cupiditas* according to reason, which aims to unite many others in friendship, is honour, and together with *pietas* it is a decisive affective resource in building solid public institutions.

6. In Proposition 71 of Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza says that only free men are thoroughly grateful one to another. Gratitude, when it is not associated with freedom, an active life, is often insidious ‘bargaining’, while ingratitude is base, and shows that a man is affected by excessive hatred or avarice (EIV, P71, S). A free man, on the other hand, knows that nothing is more useful than another man, and for this reason he forms friendships and endeavours to do good. Friendship thus, if it is so, predisposes to gratitude, and to benevolence: this is a new and positive definition of friendship. Going back to the Scholium of Proposition 59 of Part III, we find yet another definition. Spinoza is here anticipating themes that will be exposed in Part IV: when we desire according to reason, our actions are accompanied by affects indicating strength of character (*fortitudo*), which is divided into courage (*animositas*) and generosity (*generositas*). The latter, in particular, is the rational *cupiditas* by which a man endeavours to aid other men and to unite them to himself in friendship. If passional friendship, still immersed in affective fluctuations, was cause of jealousy and envy, now we have achieved a totally different type of friendship, which is an effect of freedom. Just as there are no already formed individuals, but only individuations, freedom in Spinoza is not a premise but an outcome of a process of liberation, collective and individual at the same time. To accumulate joyous encounters, which are technical and practical as much as they relate to love, makes us active, that is, rational; desire according to reason makes us capable of generosity and honour, that is, of friendship. It must be noted that we do not pass from solitude to sociality, rather, we transform the sociality in which we have always been immersed: from the most bitter conflict, from the negativity of impotence, to convenience, to an increase of one’s own power of existence.

7. Free friendship is also, and especially, political friendship. To transform social relations means to politicise them: and it is only within solid political institutions that friendship connections can multiply. Let us go back and ask: what are the passional grounds of political friendship? In Proposition 22, Part III, precisely in the Scholium, Spinoza introduces the notion of pity, defined as ‘pain arising from another’s hurt’. Shortly after, in Proposition 27, analysed above, Spinoza clarifies that we feel pity for someone suffering who is like ourselves, and not only for the loved object that is painfully affected. Pity, despite being a passion that is painful, ‘bad and useless’ for a man who lives under the guidance of reason (EIV, P50), displays the connective power that makes us properly human. He who, on the contrary, is moved to help others neither by reason nor by compassion, is defined as inhuman, and ‘seems unlike a man’ (EIV, P50, S). The same connective power displayed by pity makes us hate the person

afflicting the other who is like ourselves. This hatred is termed by Spinoza *indignatio*. In fact, pity leads to a desire to destroy the persecutor. If we move from Spinoza's *Ethics* to his *Political Treatise* [1677], we understand that *indignatio* plays a major role in the permanent political construction of society. There are two moments in particular that deserve our attention. In the first paragraph of Chapter VI, Spinoza clarifies that men naturally desire to live in a civil condition, to overcome fear of solitude. Furthermore, the natural agreement of the *multitudo*, is not generated by the guidance of reason, but by common affects. What are these common affects that build a political society? 'A common desire or fear', 'the desire to avenge some common hurt'. The latter is precisely *indignatio*, and, as we have seen, this emotion is closely linked to pity. Without there ever being a leap from a state of nature to a civil state, as is the case with Hobbes and the tradition of contractualism, the passional pair pity-*indignatio* is the generative source of all institutions. What is more, and here we insist on paragraph 9 of Chapter III, just as this pair constitutes political society, it also keeps despotic and tyrannical drifts in check, fuelling, in answer to rules that are hostile to the majority of citizens, seditions and conflicts. In this sense, we can say that society is always political, that it is always marked by a process of politicisation, and that, at the same time, it is inevitably also always divided, polemical, torn by conflict. Also, because it is divided, articulated by pity and *indignatio* for the common hurt, then it is always political.

8. There is a variation on pity, or better, a development of pity, which posits us on the grounds of a transition from imagination to reason. Spinoza speaks of it, quite briefly, in the Definition of the Affects at the end of Part III of the *Ethics*: it is sympathy (*miser cordia*). This emotion might appear to be similar to pity, and in part it is; however, it differs inasmuch as it displays one decisive trait: sympathy is not a singular instance of sympathy, but a habit. In Proposition 18 of Part II, and in particular in the Scholium, Spinoza explains that habit has to do with memory and with the concatenation between images of external things, between modification. To repeat the same imaginative- affective combination creates a habit. The sympathiser has become used to suffer because of the pain inflicted to others, and cannot do otherwise. Sympathy, however, is also the emotion that opposes envy. This emotion is a form of hatred so perverse it modifies us to the point we take pleasure from another person's hurt, or feel pain if the other is pleurably affected; sympathy is, on the other hand, love, and it transforms us so that we take pleasure when the other is pleurably affected and feel pain if the other is painfully affected (EIII, D23). The habit of sympathy, it must be noted, is not a transition toward a lesser power, but a common feeling of pain, a permanent disempowerment. Sympathy, which never occurs separately from *indignatio*, despite still being an emotion of a

passional and impotent kind, is the passional condition of reason, of affective life, of political friendship. Also, the political praxis of liberation is always an unstable balance between sympathy and violence, and with violence we intend the destructive drive of the *indignatio*, that is, resistance to wrongdoing and injustice, the defence of the poor and the suffering.

9. In a very firm letter of reply to Blyenberg, Spinoza claims that the duty of friendship is, in essence, to express one's thoughts (Ep. XXI). It is an exercise of honesty, honour, but also of truth. To quote Foucault, a friend is, in Spinoza's opinion, a *parrhesiastes*: it is he who speaks the truth, who does not conceal, who does not fear exposing himself, who by speaking accepts the challenge and the test. However, language is always also an affective relationship with the world, a *mnesic* combination, a habit (EII, P18, S). Language is always also an ethical stance, a way of existing. For this reason it is worth quoting Foucault, concentrating on the analysis that he developed of cynical life. A cynical, according to Foucault, not only tells the truth, but shows the truth of what he is saying through a form of life (Foucault 2009). To embody truth as a mode of existence means to progress by means of examples, to achieve a life that is exemplary and experimental at the same time. Going back to Spinoza, friendship is always also the consolidation of habits of sympathy, an invention of institutions, construction – always polemical and never irenic – of community, and the defence, at times violent, of joyous combinations. A friend is he who takes on the challenge, at my side, so that common life may be a happy one.

### Abbreviations

- E. Spinoza, B. [1675]. *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza* Volume 2 (trans) R.H.M. Elwes, 1883.
- Ep. Epistula [1665] in Spinoza, B. [1677], *Epistolario*, pag. 165 (a cura di) A. Droetto. Turin: Einaudi, 1974.
- TP. Spinoza, B. [1675, 1677]. *Tractatus politicus Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza* Volume 1 (trans) R.H.M. Elwes. London: George Brill and Sons, 1883.

### Other abbreviations

- C. Corollarium
- D. Demonstratio
- Def. Definitio
- P. Proposition
- S. Scholium

## References

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