Ambition

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AMBITION

Spinoza writes that "human nature is so constituted that each of us wants the others to live according to his temperament" (E5p4s). This "striving to bring it about that everyone should approve his love or hate" (E3p31s) is central to our psychological makeup, yet manifests itself in different ways: "in a man who is not led by reason this appetite is the passion

called ambition [*ambitio*], which does not differ much from pride. On the other hand, in a man who lives according to the dictate of reason it is the action, or virtue, called Morality" (E5p4s). The Spinozistic sage who seeks virtue and strives to have others love the same thing, presents himself as a desirable image of love to others (E4app25). The ambitious man, however, desires "admiration" (E4app25), and this, as Spinoza's definition of pride suggests, out of "self-love" (E3DA28). Spinoza thus treats the desire for recognition as a pervasive feature of human psychology (see also TTP6[22] & TP6[3]), yet distinguishes between a constructive and immoderate manifestation of this striving.

Ambition, understood as an "excessive desire for esteem" (E3DA44) is the trademark of the political agitator: "this striving to do something (and also omit doing something) solely to please men is called ambition, especially when we strive so eagerly to please the people [*vulgo*] that we do or omit certain things to our own injury, or another's" (E3p29s; see also E4app25). Building on ideas found in Hobbes's *Leviathan* (chaps. 29, 36), Spinoza defines ambition as (i) essentially destructive and (ii) connected to pleasing the crowd. Thus, Spinoza treats the demagogue as the exemplar of ambition.

Indeed, ambition is envy directed at people enjoying non-shareable goods, that is, status and prestige (E3p39s). The demagogue is driven by the desire for applause from the crowd, to simultaneously gain attention and status and, thereby, prevent others from having it (E3p32s). The effect of demagoguery is polarization or mutual hatred (E3p29s; TTP17[15]). The demagogue instantiates immoderation and duplicity in all respects, and is especially dangerous in the company of fellow bandits (E3DA48). Furthermore, the demagogue encourages law-breaking (E4app25; TTP7[4]). In the demagogue renown thus becomes an all-consuming end without any utility except self-aggrandizement; the "affect is stubbornly fixed" (E4p44s) and often leads to fury (E5p10s). Spinoza calls the excessive desire for esteem "a species of madness" (E4p44s), one with little hope of being cured: only nobility and tenacity can mitigate its effect (E3DA48). Strikingly, the clergy are the first example of ambition in the TTP (TTPpref14–15).

The demagogue is also a symptom of a wider social malaise. Significantly, Spinoza defines the corrupt state in terms of its susceptibility to demagoguery: a corrupted Republic, one "where superstitious and ambitious persons ... achieve such a great reputation that ordinary people value their authority more than that of the supreme powers" (TTP20[21]). As such, the ambitious demagogue signifies the twin evils of moral disorder and political subversion.

As our pattern of citations implies, the dangers of political ambition and demagoguery are also discussed in the heart of the *Ethics*. This suggests that republican fears over the dangers of corruption and ambition are not incidental to his philosophy, merely driven by contemporary events, but central to his aims.

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KEY PASSAGES

E3p29s; E3DA44; E4p44s; E5p4s; TTPpref14–15.

RECOMMENDED READING

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RELATED TERMS

Esteem, Love of; Fortitude; Hobbes; Love; Multitude; State; Striving; Temperament