

**“I do not utter a
word”: Speech and
Political Violence
in Spinoza**

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between violence and the domination of speech in Spinoza’s political thought. Spinoza describes the cost of such violence to the State, to the collective epistemic resources, and to the members of the polity that domination aims to script and silence. Spinoza shows how obedience to a dominating power requires pretense and deception. The pressure to pretend is the linchpin of an account of how oppression severely degrades the conditions for meaningful communication, and thus the possibilities for thinking and acting in common. Because it belongs to human nature to desire to share our thoughts with others, Spinoza believes that most people experience efforts to control our communication to be acutely intolerable. As a result, such unbearable violence threatens the political order that deploys it. I conclude with some speculative remarks about why, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza consistently deploys the superlative form of the adjective *violentus* in reference to the domination of thought and speech rather than to other modes of political violence.

Keywords: Spinoza; Speech; Freedom; Violence; Epistemic Violence

Spinoza knew all too well that membership in a particular community is conditional upon respecting certain discursive norms. There are some things that one cannot say. There are other things that one must say. At the age of 23, several of his peers reported to the authorities of Amsterdam’s Portuguese Jewish congregation that Spinoza expressed “evil opinions” and committed “monstrous deeds.” We do not know whether those prohibited acts were anything other than sharing his heterodox ideas with other members of the “Talmud Torah” community. However, we can be confident that he communicated in ways that were believed to threaten the recently established immigrant community in some significant way.¹ After refusing to “mend his wicked ways,” Spinoza was expelled from the people of Israel. Jews were forbidden from communicating with him, reading anything that he wrote, or offering him material support of any kind.² Those who were banned from the Talmud Torah were given a few hours to say goodbye to their family members and the tight-knit community into which they were born. The refusal to comply with the terms of membership resulted in a symbolic exorcism from the group, a kind of social death. As Malcolm X observes

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1 On Spinoza’s excommunication, see Nadler 1999, Ch. 6 and 2001. Nadler argues that Spinoza’s views may have been, first and foremost, a political threat to the community, which needed to remain in the good graces of local authorities. The excommunication was a disciplinary tool that safeguarded the (conditional) toleration the 17th century Amsterdam Jews enjoyed.

2 On the interpretation of the significance of Spinoza’s excommunication for the people of Israel today, see Cooper 2020.

in his autobiography, “The Jews read their burial services for Spinoza, meaning that he was dead as far as they were concerned.”³ The social and economic costs of excommunication were sufficiently grave to secure the compliance of most people. But Spinoza, for reasons about which we can only speculate, could not obey.

Someone whose words and writings were cast out and cursed would, as we know, proceed to write a treatise that defends the virtues of a political and social order in which “everyone is permitted to think what he wishes and say what he thinks.”⁴ He would not only defend the value of free expression, however. Spinoza declares that the harsh suppression of human communication represents the apex of political violence. As Mogens Laerke points out in his recent study, “Spinoza repeats it again and again: ‘rule over minds is considered violent;’⁵ ‘that government which makes it a crime to hold opinions... is the most violent of all;’⁶ ‘a government which denies everyone the freedom to say and teach what he thinks will be most violent;’⁷ ‘the less we grant men this freedom of judgment, the more we depart from the natural condition, and the more violent the government.’^{8,9}

It is not as though Spinoza fails to acknowledge the more obvious brutality that rulers may visit upon their people. He notes that a ruler may flagrantly disregard his own laws, “slaughter and rob his subjects,” and “rape their women.”¹⁰ Why aren’t these examples of political violence in the superlative? Is the claim that repression of free thought and speech is the most acute form of state violence an uncharacteristic example of rhetorical extravagance on Spinoza’s part? Certainly, harsh censorship can land subjects on the scaffold.¹¹ But, given that human history is drenched in blood, the claim that the greatest violence a state can exercise consists in the effort to dominate minds and control tongues is a strong one.

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3 Malcolm X 1973, p. 275.

4 Spinoza 2016, p. 344. *Theological-Political Treatise* (hereafter *TTP*), Ch. XX. This is an allusion to Tacitus’ *Histories*: “rare are the happy times when we may think what we wish and say what we think.” I will proceed to cite Spinoza’s writings from *The Collected Works* vol. 1 (1985) and vol. 2 (2016). I will indicate from which work the passage is cited. For the two political treatises, I will indicate the chapter; and, for the *Ethics*, I will use the standard notation to indicate the part, proposition, demonstration, scholium, etc.

5 Spinoza 2016, p. 344. *TTP*, XX.

6 Spinoza 2016, p. 327. *TTP*, XVIII.

7 Spinoza 2016, p. 346. *TTP*, XX.

8 Spinoza 2016, p. 351. *TTP*, XX.

9 Laerke 2021, p. 90.

10 Spinoza 2016, p. 526. *TP*, IV.

11 Spinoza 2016, p. 350; *TTP*, XX.

In what follows, I will define violence according to Spinoza. With a particular understanding of violence in mind, I will outline the manifold and profound harms that follow from the domination of speech through the threat of deprivation, punishment, and death. Spinoza describes the cost of such violence to the State, to the collective epistemic resources, and to the members of the polity that domination aims to script and silence. Spinoza shows how obedience to a dominating power requires pretense and deception. The pressure to pretend is the linchpin of an account of how oppression severely degrades the conditions for meaningful communication, and thus the possibilities for thinking and acting in common. Because it belongs to human nature to desire to share our thoughts with others, Spinoza believes that most people experience efforts to control our speech as acutely intolerable. As a result, such unbearable violence threatens the political order that deploys it. I will conclude with some speculative remarks about why, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza consistently deploys the superlative form of the adjective *violentus* in reference to the domination of thought and speech rather than with respect to other possible examples of political violence.

Violent Forces

Before looking closely at Spinoza's political writings, let us briefly take note what "violence" means in the period and how Spinoza uses it. Similar to English, the word *violentia* in Latin implies a kind of transgression, a harmful breach of limits. Although it is often used to refer to an injustice in the early modern period,¹² Spinoza uses the adjective *violentus* in a broad sense to refer to potent, disruptive forces. If what makes a force violent and not simply powerful is its destructive and contrary character, it is helpful to identify, in any given deployment of the term, what it is that such a force transgresses, violates, or opposes.

We will see that, for Spinoza, a violent force is one that opposes a being's "nature." The nature of any being whatsoever, according to Spinoza, is its *conatus*, its striving to persevere in being as the kind of thing that it is.¹³ Being tiny parts of nature, we are often subject to violence. We are inevitably and universally moved by external forces, for better and for worse. Often ambient forces act upon us in ways that sustain and amplify our power, such as when a person inhales clean

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12 For a helpful discussion of the Roman vocabulary of violence, see Winter 2018, pp. 26-29.

13 Spinoza notes that he derives his political principles from "the supreme law of nature [which] is that each thing strives to persevere in its state, as far as it can by its own power" in the *TTP*, XVI (Spinoza 2016, p. 282). Similarly, in the *Political Treatise* (hereafter *TP*), he affirms that he has "demonstrated all these conclusions from the necessity of human nature...the universal striving all men have to preserve themselves" (III/18) (Spinoza 2016, p. 524). It is clear in the *Ethics* that this principle of the *conatus*, far from being exclusive to human beings, defines the nature of anything whatsoever (EIIIp6) (Spinoza 1985, pp. 498-499). For an analysis of how the *conatus* grounds Spinoza's thought, see Bove 1996.

air or enjoys an excellent comedy. Nevertheless, it is far from rare that we undergo encounters with external agencies that contradict our striving to develop and exercise our characteristic powers. For example, someone might inhale some debris that interferes with her breathing or he might encounter a police officer who interprets his benign gestures as threatening. Encounters that interfere with one's striving to persevere in being can be described as violent, but they may be more or less distressing. Someone is unlikely to be especially angry about the particle that threatened his breathing, but he may be indignant about being treated as a threat by an agent of the state, especially if this were to occur repeatedly. The affects produced by such experiences, then, will vary in intensity depending on social patterns and the meaning we attribute to them. What is important for our purposes is just that a force can be called violent when we experience it to oppose – palpably and strongly – our particular natures. The more something is experienced as an obstacle to our fundamental striving to persevere and to exercise our characteristic powers, the more violent it will seem, and the more violently we will be inclined to oppose it.

Any affect that opposes our striving opposes, at the same time, our physical and our mental power.¹⁴ The *conatus* that animates each of our minds, according to Spinoza, aims at nothing but understanding.¹⁵ Our minds do not exist for the sake of our physical survival. Considered in themselves, our minds aim to amplify their thinking force, to become as capable and powerful as their natures allow. This may be why Spinoza describes even the distress provoked by the lack of a clear method as violent. He refers in the dedicatory letter to *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* to the pain of a mind “tossed about on a violent sea of opinions.”¹⁶ In the *Ethics*, he observes that “Desires which arise from affects by which we are torn are also greater as these affects are more violent.”¹⁷ Violent affects torment us when they provoke strong ambivalence or confusion. We are moved this way and that, such that we feel out of control and unable to determine ourselves. Violent affects can also be unambivalent: they can be very powerful forces that push in a direction that tears us away from the ability to pursue what is genuinely to our advantage. For example, Spinoza considers a delirious experience of lust violent if the object of our desire consumes us to the point that we are unable to think of anything else.¹⁸

14 Spinoza, as is well-known, maintains that the mind and the body are “one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways” (EIIp7s; see also EIIp13). Spinoza 1985, p. 451 and p. 457.

15 Spinoza 1985, p. 559; EIIIp26.

16 Spinoza 1985, p. 225.

17 Spinoza 1985, p. 554; EIVp15s.

18 Spinoza 1985, p. 571; EIVp44s.

Love is often an enabling passion that attaches us to those things that contribute to our perseverance and thriving, as when we love our caregivers, teachers, and friends. But obsessive love, Spinoza observes, can lead to profound distortions of reality: “For we sometimes see that men are so affected by one object that, although it is not present, they still believe they have it with them.”¹⁹ The same principle animates Spinoza’s description of manic passions that sustain intense attachments to superstitious doctrines. Very intense passions provoke distortions in perception, such that reading can alter one’s consciousness in a detrimental way. In Spinoza’s words:

They dream that the most profound mysteries lie hidden in the Sacred Texts, wear themselves out searching for these absurdities, neglecting the rest, which are useful. Whatever they invent in their madness they attribute to the Holy Spirit, and strive to defend with the utmost force and violent affects.²⁰

Note that the fugue state brought about by violent affects prevents the theologians or clergy, in this example, from discovering the useful, advantageous features of the text immediately before them. Importantly, the problem with violent affects violent is not that they are passions and thereby external to our natures. Many passions are what Spinoza would call “God’s external aid.”²¹ They come from outside but guide us toward what benefits us. A passion is only violent if it prevents us from apprehending the various forces and ideas in our milieu that contribute to our striving and the development of our powers.²²

Because, according to Spinoza, it belongs to our essence to desire our own perseverance, passions that press us away from what is good for us will be volatile and unstable. Insofar as our passions do not give rise to mental and physical vitality, we will feel torn from ourselves and from each other. As Spinoza declares in the *Ethics*, “Men can disagree in nature insofar as they are torn by affects which are passions; and to that extent the same man is changeable and inconstant.”²³ When we are changeable and inconstant, two things become especially difficult. First, our confusion prevents us from acting in a wholehearted way, which makes us less effective and more vulnerable to fortune. Second, our changeability and volatility interfere with our ability to unite with

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¹⁹ Spinoza 1985, p. 571; EIVp44s.

²⁰ Spinoza 2016, p. 170; *TTP*, VII.

²¹ Spinoza 2016, p. 113; *TTP*, III.

²² Spinoza claims that an “affect is only evil, or harmful insofar as it prevents the Mind from being able to think” (EVp9d); Spinoza 1985, p. 601.

²³ Spinoza 1985, pp. 561-562; EIVp33.

others and to coordinate our powers. If a passion divides us from others or makes us feel torn, tossed about, and unable to determine ourselves, it moves us away from being able to intelligently, joyfully, and collaboratively persevere in being. Such a passion may merely be sad and debilitating, but if it's intense, vigorous, and palpably harmful, we will experience it as "violent."

We see, thus, that affects, for Spinoza, are violent insofar as they "carry us away" or "tear us apart." It should be clear by now that what we are carried away from are the means to realize our power, our given striving to act guided by fortitude, which is intelligent action that preserves us and unites us to others.²⁴ Spinoza explains that if human beings were free and guided by reason, we would require neither moral nor civil laws. We would spontaneously and wholeheartedly do what is best for ourselves and for others. But, Spinoza maintains, human beings are not typically like that. We pursue our desires often in confused, misguided, and immoderate ways, "carried away by affects of mind which take no account of the future and of other things."²⁵ Violent passions distort reality and obscure the true sources of our own power all around us. In our madness, we might not know what is present or absent; we might mistake friends for enemies, and enemies for friends; we may see harmful doctrines as beneficial, and neglect teachings that are useful.

On an epistemic level, we can observe that violent affects distort perception such that we are easily deceived about what benefits and what harms us. Violence, therefore, harms our bodies and minds at once. It diverts us from the means to preserve and enhance our power. The most important means to preserving and enhancing our being are our relationships with other people. As Spinoza remarks, "To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man."²⁶ From reason, we want nothing more than to "join forces," mental and corporeal, with others.²⁷ Spinoza notes in the *Political Treatise* that political life follows from our universal fear of solitude, and thus we all necessarily desire sociality over isolation.²⁸ A fundamental way that beings such as ourselves join forces and assuage our basic fear of solitude is to communicate to one another through speech and other means. Thus, speech, writing, and communication form the fabric (and the barriers) of political life.

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24 On the importance of fortitude for Spinoza and political life, see Stolze 2014.

25 Spinoza 2016, p. 144; *TTP*, V.

26 Spinoza 1985, p. 556; *EIVp18s*.

27 Spinoza 1985, p. 564; *EIVp35s*.

28 Spinoza 2016, p. 532; *TP*, VI. I examine this claim in depth in Sharp 2022.

Political Violence and Human Nature

Spinoza's well-known conclusion to the *Theological-Political Treatise* exhorts his readers to appreciate the virtues of granting everyone the freedom "to think what he wishes and to say what he thinks."²⁹ Whereas Hobbes endorsed restrictions on speech to prevent civil conflict, Spinoza defends much greater latitude for the same reasons. Both thinkers were deeply concerned about the violence that religious institutions and popular mobs might incite against members of the commonwealth who communicate unorthodox or heretical views.³⁰ Hobbes advocated empowering the State with not only a monopoly on violence but a monopoly on meaning, in order to protect individuals from the chaotic violence that could erupt from any direction by virtue of intense disagreement.³¹ Spinoza surely also worried about the civil strife and popular violence that might be aroused by superstitious enthusiasm and inflamed by zealous and power-hungry clergy. Hence, Spinoza asserts that when a government seeks to hold subjects accountable for thought crimes, "what rules most is the anger of the mob."³² Yet, he rejected the solution of strictly proscribing thought and speech. The solution to popular violence prompted by doctrinal deviance, in other words, is not State violence targeting thought and speech. He promises that the effort "to make men say nothing but what [the supreme powers] prescribe" will be universally regarded as an intolerable violence and yield "the most unfortunate result."³³

There are three principal ways in which the strict control of speech constitutes violence, which I will proceed to discuss in order. First, because, according to Spinoza, "men have nothing less in their power than their tongues,"³⁴ it commands humans to act contrary to how their nature compels them to be. Requiring humans to exercise control over what they say so as to say only what is prescribed is tantamount to obligating a table to eat grass.³⁵

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29 Spinoza 2016, p. 344; *TTP*, XX.

30 As Hobbes writes in *Leviathan*, "[I]t is to be annexed to the Sovereignty, to be Judge of what Opinions and Doctrines are averse, and what conducing to Peace; and consequently, on what occasions, how farre, and what, men are to be trusted withall, in speaking to Multitudes of people; and who shall examine the Doctrines of all bookes before they be published" (L XVIII, 9); Hobbes 1996, p. 124.

31 See Abizadeh 2011. Of course the phrase "monopoly on violence" is an allusion to Max Weber's famous discussion of the State in "Politics as Vocation." Although I cannot discuss this here, Balibar rightly implies that Spinoza does not belong in this tradition, which regards violence as "asocial, illegal, and extrapolitical" (2015, p. 2).

32 Spinoza 2016, p. 327. *TTP*, XVIII.

33 Spinoza 2016, p. 345. *TTP*, XX.

34 Spinoza 1985, p. 497; EIIIp2s.

35 Spinoza 2016, p. 526; *TP*, IV.

Second, as I will discuss in the following section, insofar as subjects manage to obey and thereby succeed at appearing to think and say only what is prescribed, they participate in a culture of pretense, deception, and falsity. When obedience and conformity are rewarded and dissent and honesty are punished, social mistrust is inevitable. A society of mistrust not only lacks the kinds of institutions that allow people to communicate freely. Mistrust is also an inevitable outcome for any collective life structured by domination. Such domination produces patterns of epistemic violence, such that those without social standing will typically be and will be targeted for repeated interrogation and, concomitantly, their testimony will also be disregarded.

Finally, I will conclude with a brief account of how the domination of thought and speech by the State also constitutes violence against itself. State action contrary to the striving of one's subjects necessarily provokes indignation. Indignation is, according to Spinoza, an inevitable collective response to violent rule, and is expressed in the desire that the rulers suffer "all sorts of bad things."³⁶ When a commonwealth is afflicted by such violence, according to Spinoza, this contradicts its own striving to persevere in being, since "it does, or allows to happen, what can be the cause of its own ruin."³⁷

That it is contrary to human nature to expect us to exercise control over what we say, and that, therefore, the suppression of thought and speech is violent, has been widely discussed in the literature.³⁸ Nonetheless, it is important to lay out the steps of Spinoza's argument. The basis lies in Spinoza's anti-voluntarism about beliefs. He maintains that humans do not have voluntary control over their beliefs and that, therefore, it is impossible to "prescribe to everyone what they must embrace as true and reject as false."³⁹ What each of us maintains as true and false – as well as our feelings of love and hate, our attachments and our aversions – follow necessarily from our particular histories of experience. Our judgments are simply the ideas that are most vivid and compelling in our minds.⁴⁰ Since each of us has a unique experiential history, it follows, according to Spinoza, that "men's minds differ as much as their palates do."⁴¹ Human mentality and judgment is inevitably diverse and simply cannot be forced into a single mold.

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36 Spinoza 2016, p. 144; *TTP*, V.

37 Spinoza 2016, p. 527; *TP*, IV.

38 See, for example, Cooper 2006; Pitts 1986; Rosenthal 2008; Steinberg 2010. Laerke (2020) provides the most comprehensive discussion to date of the philosophical issues surrounding the freedom to philosophize.

39 Spinoza 2016, p. 344; *TTP*, XX.

40 For a rich discussion of political judgment in Spinoza, see Skeaff 2018.

41 Spinoza 2016, p. 345; *TTP*, XX.

Importantly, since we cannot but feel love toward whatever benefits us and hate toward what we perceive as a source of harm,⁴² we cannot obey laws that command us otherwise. It belongs to the nature of finite experience to think this or that by virtue of the psychological laws of association and memory, laws that Spinoza analogizes to laws of motion. Like a physical law, our patterns of association cannot be superseded by human decision, or legislation.⁴³ In Spinoza's words:

Even though we say that men are not their own masters but are subject to the Commonwealth, we don't mean that they lose their human nature and take on another nature. Nor do we mean that the Commonwealth has the right to make men fly, or (what is equally impossible) to make men honor those things which move them to laughter or disgust.⁴⁴

Institutions might aim to encourage positive associations with beneficial social practices, doctrines, or civil offices, but ruling powers cannot effectively command what is not subject to voluntary control. Efforts to strictly prescribe opinions, judgements, and affects will necessarily be experienced as opposed to our particular strivings, and thus as violent.

The notion of human nature in Spinoza is necessarily controversial. His arguments from human nature may make the reader conscious of nothing so much as the remoteness of Spinoza's thought from our own. But whatever human nature is, for Spinoza, it certainly does not entail that we all honor, admire, or detest the same things; it entails precisely the contrary. Spinoza's claim about how humans retain their nature serves to endorse a context-sensitive understanding of political rule, à la Machiavelli, according to which one must recognize the habits, customs, values, and collective modes of thinking proper to a particular group in order to avoid arousing their acute resentment.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, humans do have characteristic powers, which include the power of the mind to exercise reason, to understand things as they really are. Because it belongs to our minds to strive for reason, to aim to see things in terms of their relationships and their common properties, we will also resist doctrines that contradict our understanding.⁴⁶ So, even if it is rare to act primarily from reason, and even if our understanding is necessarily partial, we cannot but strive to improve it as much as

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42 Spinoza 1985, p. 507; EIIIp22s.

43 Spinoza 2016, p. 126; *TTP*, IV.

44 Spinoza 2016, pp. 526-527; *TP*, IV.

45 On Spinoza and Machiavelli, see Del Lucchese 2011 and Morfino 2018.

46 On reason, see Spinoza 1985; EIIp29 and EIIp38-40. Sangiacomo provides an interesting recent discussion of reason 2020.

our powers and circumstances allow. Thus, commands to adopt certain doctrines will necessarily produce intense conflict in our minds, if those doctrines do not cohere with what we think we understand about the nature of reality and human life. If there are forces that seem systematically to interfere with our ability to understand and to strive toward what we consider to be in our vital interest, we will experience this, too, as violent. The more vehemently norms, rules, and laws block our efforts to understand, to join our minds to those of others, and to desire in a wholehearted and constant way, the more violent we will find them.

More unusual and perhaps contentious than his anti-voluntarism about beliefs and affects is Spinoza's anti-voluntarism about speech. Spinoza argues that, if it is very difficult to command beliefs, it is even more difficult to control speech. Humans are just not the kind of beings that are skilled at secrecy.

Not even the wisest know how to keep quiet, not to mention ordinary people. It's a common vice of men to confide their judgments even when secrecy is needed. So a government which denies everyone the freedom to say and teach what he thinks will be most violent. But when a government grants everyone this freedom it will be moderate.⁴⁷

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza associates the inability to keep quiet with drunks and gossips, but we see in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that neither are the wise able to avoid communicating their judgments. Indeed, the wise and honest, according to Spinoza, find it *most intolerable* to conceal or misrepresent their judgements. Underlying our inability to keep our thoughts, judgments, and feelings to ourselves is, I think, not only our incontinence but the potency of our desire to teach others. It belongs to human thinking to strive to share our thoughts, to join the thinking of others, and to make our point of view shared rather than isolated or anomalous. Both the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise* point to how we desire from reason "to compose, as it were, one Mind"⁴⁸ and "wishes to be led, as if by one mind,"⁴⁹ so that together we can pursue the common advantage.

Political efforts to dictate our thoughts and words are predicated on a faulty understanding of human self-control. Our feelings and opinions escape us. Even when we live under an acute threat of State or popular violence, we inevitably expose our points of view and encourage others

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47 Spinoza 2016, p. 346; *TTP*, XX.

48 Spinoza 1985, p. 556; *EIV*p18s.

49 Spinoza 2016, p. 532; *TP*, VI/1. Variation on this phrase appear several times in the *Political Treatise*. For an excellent discussion of the "one mind" in Spinoza, see Balibar 2005.

to share them with us. Of course, the Jewish community into which Spinoza was born spent generations practicing their faith in secret in full awareness that this could result in family separation, exile, torture, or death. Spinoza exposed his views and refused to recant them, even though it cost him his relationships to his surviving siblings and most everyone he had ever known.⁵⁰ Spinoza and his circle wrote and circulated texts at significant risk to themselves. Famously, Adrian Koerbagh paid for his inability to keep his judgments private with his life.⁵¹ Perhaps especially when we are animated by a desire to communicate the means to salvation and happiness, humans will teach what we believe no matter what the cost.

The desire to persuade is part of what makes us experience the regulation of thought and speech as oppressive and violent. Spinoza makes clear that the pain of being forced to conceal one's thoughts is a violence that no one should have to endure. Yet we can also see how the desire to persuade and encourage ideological conformity is both an inevitable feature of social life and a source of political violence. In other words, the violent contradiction of our natural striving itself follows from a tendency of human nature. Oppressive and violent rule expresses the ambitious and, according to Spinoza, universal desire to have others think like us, to approve and disapprove as we do.⁵² But since our minds are inevitably diverse and our desire to share them is universal, a conflict resides at the heart of human nature. As Laerke emphasizes in his recent study, our diverse complexions and our universal desire to join others to us entails that we require institutional means to manage, at the same time, our expressive/ persuasive needs and our inevitable disagreement.⁵³ But if a State – or another common institution, such as the church or the family⁵⁴ – does not allow dissent and complaint, it leaves them only two choices: pretense or punishment. Spinoza tries to persuade his reader that either option is disastrous.

Domination and Deception

At a crucial moment in the famous concluding chapter to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza alludes to a line from Terence's comedy *Andria*. Spinoza invites his reader to imagine that the freedom to think and speak

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50 Nadler 1999 suggests that Spinoza likely welcomed being liberated from the family business, but it is difficult to imagine that being severed from all of his remaining family and everyone else he had known until that point was not a tremendous cost to pay for being able to speak his mind.

51 See Nadler 1999 (Ch. 7) and Montag 2002.

52 See the various remarks on ambition in the *Ethics*. For an analysis of how ambition is a source of both conflict and collective power, see Cooper 2013, Ch. 3.

53 Laerke 2021.

54 I discuss Spinoza's praise of family quarrel at length, in Sharp 2018.

would be subject to command so effective that no one would “dare mutter anything except what the supreme powers prescribe.”⁵⁵ Spinoza, here, alludes to an exchange between a *paterfamilias* and a slave charged with serving his young adult son.⁵⁶ Simo, the paternal authority, suspects that his slave is engaged in some kind of plot on behalf of his son, and threatens the slave with punishment and death if he discovers the scheme. A sincere explanation of the son’s desire to evade the marriage plans his father has arranged, however, could yield punishment or death for his young master to whom the servant is devoted. Davus, the slave, has no good options and must navigate a complex terrain of dangers. Davus, as Terence draws the character, aims to serve faithfully the family with whose reproduction and care he is charged, but the relations of domination do not allow him to enlist others openly in bringing about desirable ends. Thus, in response to Simo’s efforts to extort a confession that he is lying, a confession that would be his doom, Davus speaks the line to which Spinoza alludes: “I dare not utter a word.”

Terence is presumed to have been a slave himself, and part of the comedy of the *Andria* follows from how the master cannot know what to believe as a consequence of how the enslaved person’s speech is constrained.⁵⁷ Terence, in this exchange, represents the futility of demanding the truth with threats to the other’s freedom or life. The slave’s speech is always, by virtue of his station, heavily burdened by the strategic context, which is easily recognizable by everyone involved. Words become instruments for satisfying or diverting the master. Under threat, speech is not communicative; it cannot be the means by which two minds are joined to one another.

In the comedies of Plautus, an especially successful Roman playwright, the trickster slave is a stock character. A classic example is the play *Pseudolus*, meaning liar, named after the deceptive enslaved protagonist. In Plautus’s comedies, the trickster slave allows the audience to laugh at the temporary and carnivalesque subversion of power relations. The audience can enjoy the foolish master and even root for the subordinate, especially since the comedy form promises a happy ending that preserves rather than threatens the Roman family. The trickster is a kind of *deus ex machina* whose masterful art of deception makes anything possible.⁵⁸ Terence modifies the conventions of domestic comedy, however, to represent the slave more naturalistically, and to

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55 Spinoza 2016, 349; *TTP*, XX.

56 As Curley points out in his editorial notes, it is a reference to line 505 of *Andria*: “*itaque hercle nil iam muttire audio.*”

57 Terence 1992. Like many Roman plays, *Andria* is a translation, with some adaptation, of a Greek original. Interestingly, Machiavelli also translated this play into the vulgate Italian.

58 On Plautus, see Hunt 2017, Ch. 11.

convey some of the difficulties that belong to a life in servitude to the Roman family. In contrast to Plautus, Terence's slaves are not effective deceivers. The happy outcomes are credited not to the supernatural powers of the trickster slave, but instead to the invisible forces of fortune. The domestic slave is portrayed as inhabiting an ambiguous and nearly impossible position. On the one hand, the slave is entrusted with a family's secrets and charged with its care. On the other hand, the shadow cast by the master's arbitrary power makes trust impossible to establish. Someone enslaved may need to conceal anything that displeases a master, in order to preserve her or himself.⁵⁹

Spinoza's allusion to Terence appears at precisely the point in his argument where he is explaining how speech burdened by domination leads to widespread deception. Spinoza points to how practices of political domination and efforts to severely restrict speech yield pervasive mistrust and force the dominated to conceal their judgments, motives, and aims. Speech constrained by threats of deprivation, punishment, or death yield a corrupt social world, replete with treachery: "the necessary consequence would be that every day men would think one thing and say something else."⁶⁰

Spinoza, like other republicans, points out repeatedly that arbitrary and oppressive rule contribute to treachery, deception, and sycophancy.⁶¹ Like the master of a slave, a ruler cannot trust his advisors when they operate under the weight of severe threat. Beneath the thumb of capricious rule, the safest route is to flatter, reassure, and endorse whatever the ruler already thinks. There is an epistemic cost to a ruler, since they will not benefit from the knowledge of their advisors or servants. Spinoza underlines in both of his political treatises how rule is solitary and precarious when others fear sharing what they really think with those in power.⁶²

Spinoza seeks to persuade his readers that sovereign power is less secure when it is hostile to frank speech. There is no truth in a commonwealth of pretenders, which can only be a theater of pretense, flattery, and deception. The conditions for the collective production of adequate ideas are weak. At the same time, Spinoza acknowledges that the cost is not only to those in power. Part of what is violent and ruinous about burdening speech with the threat of deprivation, punishment, and death is that, under such oppression, subjects' livelihood and lives depend upon knowing "how to pretend to be what they're not." Under such circumstances, communication is arguably not performing

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59 These brief remarks on the *Andria* draw upon the analysis of McCarthy 2004.

60 Spinoza 2016, p. 349; *TTP*, XX. See also Laerke 2021, Ch. 6.

61 Skinner 1998, pp. 88-93.

62 For more on this, see Sharp 2022.

an epistemic function at all. Strict censorship is a demand for verbal expressions of obedience. If speech directed at political or other authorities is constrained by a short menu of possibilities, the speaking subject occupies a tactical situation that renders her literally incredible. The experience of being confronted and required to comply in words is especially common among groups that are marginalized or dominated. In 17th century Amsterdam, if you belong to a minority religious group, a recent immigrant community, or you associate with free thinkers, you will find yourself more often under suspicion from the State and other authorities. The ability to navigate the social context to avoid punishment, Spinoza laments, demands that you know how to pretend. Clearly, Spinoza thinks this is repugnant to a virtuous and honest person whose beliefs are constant and firm. Spinoza also claims that the more we enjoy the power to reason, the more we desire to participate in a community of thought with others.⁶³ Thus, the demand to keep quiet will be particularly unbearable to those whose thoughts are clear and powerful, by virtue of which they cannot but desire to join their minds to those of others.

Many thinkers reflecting upon oppression have emphasized how profoundly diminishing it is to be constantly suspected of dishonesty, to be addressed as someone whose thoughts and testimony are suspicious or invalid. The relation between a master and a slave or between a despotic ruler and a subject is one of domination; it involves an acute power differential that explicitly and radically constrains the possibilities of communication. Gayatri Spivak famously names systematic barriers to being heard and believed, which can be severe for the least powerful, “epistemic violence.”⁶⁴ Histories of domination, Spinoza helps us to see, produce the epistemic violence that leads to phenomena such as what Kristi Dotson calls “testimonial smothering.” Extending Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence, Dotson focuses on how frustrating and dangerous communicative contexts produce patterns of silencing and self-silencing among disadvantaged groups. On the one hand, if you are a member of a group that has been stereotyped as ignorant or unreliable, your expertise and experience are less likely to be sought and more likely to be dismissed. On the other hand, as a member of a marginalized group, you may withhold your own knowledge due to the perceived dangers burdening your speaking context. Dotson describes how women of color, aware of how racism and sexism structure their credibility as speaking subjects, will sometimes smother their own testimony in anticipation of the costs of frank speech.⁶⁵

Importantly, these situations of epistemic violence reflect social

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63 Spinoza 1985, pp. 529-530; EIIIp59s.

64 Spivak 1988.

65 Dotson 2011.

and political conditions, past and present practices of domination. Epistemic violence does not follow from mere prejudice or ignorance; it is a property of domination. Dominating social conditions – understood as conditions in which groups or individuals are subject to the arbitrary, uncontrolled power of others – practically and logically require distrust.⁶⁶ Spinoza refers to the enslaved person who dare not utter a word to a suspicious master, and to the political dissident whose honest advice may land him on the rack. But there are numerous examples in social and political life, past and present, in which the acute vulnerability of the speaker to violence or deprivation radically undermines the possibility of genuine communication. Imagine being questioned at the end of a soldier’s rifle, or on the other end of a police officer’s gun. Think of the many employees who can be fired at will for criticizing their employer or for communicating their genuine opinions or feelings to a customer. Consider an early modern bourgeois woman who must marry or join a convent for the material means to survive. In marriage, Mary Astell observes bitterly, it is considered “a Wife’s Duty to suffer everything without Complaint.”⁶⁷ In the convent, of course, one’s words and deeds are carefully proscribed. There are many social circumstances in which one risks a great deal by complaining, objecting, or even reacting in a sincere way to something unpleasant or terrifying. But it is not a coincidence that those with lower social status or less social power will more often find themselves in a context where they are asked to use their words or gestures to communicate their compliance rather than their thoughts. And it is precisely their lack of status and power that defines the risks entailed by their honesty. They are asked to affirm those in power, to “bow and scrape,”⁶⁸ or else to suffer the consequences. It is thus not everyone equally but especially the less powerful who will be regarded as sneaky, wily, deceptive, or frivolous.⁶⁹

When Spinoza describes liars and sycophants, he most obviously points to ambitious men “contemplating money in their coffers and having bloated bellies.” He suggests that those in power will not be served by their own laws, because their courts will be populated by those without integrity, who treat words as mere instruments to secure

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66 I am drawing upon the understanding of domination current upon neo-Republicans, such as Petit 1997. There are features of this discourse that are not compatible with Spinoza but discussing them is beyond the scope of this paper.

67 Astell 1996, p. 18.

68 This a common allusion to Wollstonecraft 1796.

69 Bettcher 2007 offers a compelling analysis of how transphobia often takes the form of regarding transgender people as dishonest, “evil deceivers.” In this case, it is not only one’s words but one’s social appearance that is understood by some to violate accepted terms of signification. Transphobic demands to dress to signify sex in a particular way is likewise an intolerable form of epistemic violence that contributes to other expressions of violence. Of course, transphobic laws and norms are also an oppressive demand to pretend, to appear in a way that contradicts one’s self-understanding.

comfort and influence. He warns that “flattery and treachery would be encouraged,” since the vicious will simply say whatever will bring them the most profit.⁷⁰ But it is the powerless who have the most to lose if they “don’t know how to pretend what they are not.” And when one is a member of what we might anachronistically call an “over-policed” community,⁷¹ one is more often confronted and required to engage in such pretense. In particular, members of less powerful groups are forced to make respectful gestures to the powers that dominate them. And they are admonished not to complain even as they are beaten or threatened with exile, death, or imprisonment.

Spinoza warns those in power that demanding such intolerable servility will be a danger to the State, because the people cannot help but admire those who refuse to engage in such debasing rituals. Spinoza argues that someone who enjoys strength of mind will find pretense especially painful and will also be less likely to fear punishment, including death. This claim coheres with his claim in the *Ethics* that “a free man” does not act deceptively insofar as he is free. If a free person were to save himself from present danger through deceit, he would agree with others only in word but not in fact.⁷² Steven Nadler interprets this passage to explain why Spinoza would endorse such a counter-intuitive claim. If it belongs to our essence to strive to persevere in being, why wouldn’t it be rational to lie to escape a dangerous situation? He argues that freedom, for Spinoza, does not only follow from the striving to preserve our being. Freedom entails striving to preserve a particular kind of nature, one which is defined by our desire for intellectual perfection. Importantly, developing this power depends upon being able to forge commonalities with others, which Spinoza describes as “agreements in nature.” Therefore, since deception involves agreeing “only in words” while opposing one another in fact, it contradicts the possibility of agreeing in nature. The free person, according to Nadler, will not deceive, since the free person strives not just for duration but for perfection. And perfection depends upon being able to join together with others.⁷³

Nadler is right that, according to Spinoza, humans strive not only to live but to perfect their natures, the powers characteristic of their being. Likewise, he rightly observes that deception is a form of separation, which is antagonistic to the project of joining together that reason recommends. But notice that, if one is confronted with the “the present danger of death” that could be avoided only by a lie, one is likely in a

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70 Spinoza 2016, p. 349; *TTP*, XX.

71 Nadler 2001 suggests that it is precisely the Talmud Torah’s worries about scrutiny and sanctions from Dutch authorities that motivated their excommunication of Spinoza.

72 Spinoza 2016, p. 586; *EIVp*72.

73 Nadler 2016.

situation in which someone is threatening your life with the exercise of arbitrary power. This describes domination rather than freedom. There is little to no possibility of using words to join the mind of the person threatening you. You are opposed in fact, and words cannot align you. Situations in which it is very difficult, if not impossible, to come together with words due to pervasive dangers are not uncommon in social and political life. And no amount of virtue can reliably rescue us from them as long as domination is unchecked. Spinoza's only assurance is that unchecked domination will turn the scaffold into a stage, where the exceptionally honest will perform their virtue by accepting death rather than dishonesty. He claims that such a display of sovereign power can only be regarded as antagonistic to the common welfare and thus as violent. And he promises, "no one has sustained a violent rule for long."

Uncontrolled Power

Finally, let us reflect briefly on Spinoza's suggestion that the State exercise of intolerable violence is self-defeating, and thereby a kind of violence against itself. Spinoza seems to accept the need for institutions that are upheld by force and to acknowledge that the establishment of civil order often occurs through bloody violence. He does not treat violence as some kind of unnatural eruption that might be overcome by reason, or which might be monopolized and controlled exclusively by a State's repressive apparatus. Nevertheless, when he acknowledges that the State necessarily relies upon force, he also reminds his reader that "human nature does not allow itself to be compelled in everything." He proceeds to issue the warning mentioned above, citing Seneca's tragedy, *Troades* (*The Trojan Women*): "no one has sustained a violent rule for long; moderate ones last." Even if a State must have recourse to force, those who rule by terrorizing their subjects, motivating obedience with threats of deprivation, punishment, or death, will themselves live in fear. Their subjects "can't help wanting bad things to happen to [them]; when they can, they help to bring [them] about."⁷⁴ When he alludes to Seneca another time in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, he maps this same line directly onto his declaration that the suppression of speech is the greatest possible expression of violent rule. "[A] government which denies everyone the freedom to say and teach what he thinks will be most violent. But when a government grants everyone this freedom, its rule will be moderate."⁷⁵

In Seneca's play, the line is spoken by Agamemnon. His men have decisively conquered Troy, and yet there are further demands for Trojan blood. The Trojan men have died in battle or fled, but the women and

74 Spinoza 2016, p. 144; *TTP*, V.

75 Spinoza 2016, p. 346; *TTP*, XX.

children have been distributed among the Greek victors for destinies that will be chosen for them.⁷⁶ Achilles, from the grave, demands the sacrifice of a young Trojan woman who was promised to him when he was alive. Calchas, a Greek prophet, advises the death of the young heir to the Trojan throne so that he does not grow up and seek revenge. The play features the grief of the surviving Trojan women, and their pleas for mercy as they are about to be absorbed forcibly into Greek society. Agamemnon agrees with the Trojan women and warns his countrymen against abusing their advantage through further, unnecessary killing: “*violenta imperia continuit diu, moderata durant.*”⁷⁷ He tries, thus, to persuade his fellows that drenching an already blood-soaked sword is madness.⁷⁸ They are not persuaded. Instead of moderation, the tragedy unfolds with the crushing triumph of violent, uncontrolled power.

Spinoza thus compares the restriction of thought, speech, and teaching to the brutal overreach of a conquering power. Like a people at war, a State must exert force to establish the necessary conditions to avoid being destroyed by opposing powers. But if a commonwealth is to establish a form of rule that lasts, Spinoza warns that it must avoid excessive oppression. It is must not strike at what matters most to its constituents. Seneca’s play suggests that the most agonizing form of political violence is not necessarily the loss of life or the physical suffering involved in war. Rather, it is the attack on kinship and on hope for the future. In *The Trojan Women*, this perspective is voiced by Andromache who, in effort to draw attention away from the child she is hiding from the conquerors, proudly declares that she is willing to suffer any form of torture the Greeks wish to visit upon her: “Bring on thy flames, wounds, devilish arts of cruel pain, and starvation and raging thirst, plagues of all sorts from every source, and the sword thrust within these vitals, the dungeon’s pestilential gloom.” Because the anguish of seeing her child killed would be greater than her own physical torment, she declares that her “dauntless mother-love knows no fears.”⁷⁹ She implicitly accepts torture and death as part of political conflict but she will say anything to avoid seeing her child killed. Once her child is under threat, nothing could make her obey. She has neither respect nor fear for her conquerors.

Andromache’s child is not only the being she has nursed and

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76The women seem to treat marriage and slavery as interchangeable. Either possibility would be arbitrarily determined by their new lords.

77The Loeb edition translates this as “ungoverned power no one can long retain; controlled, it lasts.” Seneca 2002, 143.

78 Seneca 2002, pp. 143-145. Because Spinoza’s teacher, Franciscus Van den Enden, had his students perform this play, Spinoza likely knew the tragic poem well.

79 Seneca 2002, p. 173.

raised, but he is also someone in whom the Trojan people had invested their hopes. The entire play is a protracted negotiation over whether the maiden and the child must die. They are symbolic sacrifices designed to undermine any hope for self-determination or independence among the survivors. Further violence establishes not the defeat of the Trojans, for that is already secure. It serves to convey to the Trojan women and their children that they should expect enduring subordination to the whims of their new rulers.

It is hard to see how subjecting women and children to slavery, sacking a city, and destroying a generation of men is not the apex of political violence. Yet, States are typically established through such violence, rather than through mutual agreement of subjects. Perhaps founding violence is simply not under consideration in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Perhaps Spinoza is appealing to those States, like his own, that do not imagine their own government as an effort “to dominate, restraining men by fear, and making them subject to another’s control.”⁸⁰ Spinoza aims to outline how an established commonwealth ought to be constituted so that its practices and laws do not “turn the civil order into a state of hostility.”⁸¹

Spinoza’s experience and his study of history support the idea that, even if thought can be dominated in subtle and sometimes impressive ways, people will reject constraints upon their speech. Many will say what they are moved to say, even if it costs them their lives, their security, or their livelihood and possessions. Even when confronted with the gravest punishments, they will speak clandestinely and find others with whom they hope to join thoughts.⁸² The impulse to speak, teach, and communicate is such a strongly felt desire that efforts to repress it will erode the fear and respect among subjects that are necessary for any commonwealth to persist. Without fear or respect, subjects will speak overtly and critically, winning the admiration of others. If resistance comes to be admired, the State risks becoming a shared object of indignation and vulnerable to conspiracies.⁸³ Like the Greeks who could not moderate their violence, those powers that strive to dominate minds and tongues will become their own enemies. Political power, Spinoza implies, neglects at its own peril the “law of nature” that drives us inevitably to seek mental community. He warns that efforts to isolate subjects from one another through political and epistemic violence cannot but yield “the most unfortunate result.”

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80 Spinoza 2016, 346; *TTP*, XX.

81 Spinoza 2016, 527; *TP*, IV.

82 They will form a kind of fugitive, maroon community, as Ford 2018 suggests.

83 On indignation, see Del Lucchese 2011 and Matheron 2020, Ch. 9.

Spinoza's invocation of Seneca – “no one continues violent rule for long” – may seem overly optimistic. Spinoza himself remarks that “[n]o state has stood so long without notable change as the Turks,” whereas democracies are especially susceptible to rebellion. Nevertheless, he observes, “if slavery, barbarism, and desolation [*solitudo*] are to be called peace, nothing is more wretched for men than peace.” Peace consists, he proceeds, not in the absence of war but in “a union or harmony of minds.”⁸⁴ Certainly, there are enduring oppressive and violent regimes. Political and epistemic violence target our ability to communicate, to bring together our minds, and to mitigate the solitude or desolation that we cannot but resist. In every society, laws and social norms impose more or less severe costs upon unfettered communication of our judgments, feelings, complaints, and thoughts. These costs are distributed unevenly and some experience much more acutely the violence of being scripted or silenced. Yet, Spinoza observes, for most people, being asked to pretend, to keep our mouths shut, or to say only what is prescribed is intolerable. It contradicts our natures, our desires to share mental and corporeal power. It is an excessive exercise of violent power, a violence that we cannot but wish to see destroyed.⁸⁵

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84 Spinoza 2016, p. 533; *TP*, VI.

85 Research for this paper was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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