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SPINOZA, LIBERALISM AND ‘THE CLASS OF 1632’

Abstract. Spinoza, Pufendorf and Locke all championed freedom of thought (including freedom of religion) and of speech; all three thinkers deserve credit for having forged the fundamental principles of the liberal tradition. Spinoza, in particular, was the first writer in modern times to articulate a systematic defence of democracy. He believed that the state should promote the welfare of its citizens, while maximising their freedom. Although he equated right with power, he also advocated respect for the moral law, stressing the importance of being good to other people.

Keywords: Spinoza, Pufendorf, Locke, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, liberalism

Introduction

The philosophers Benedict de Spinoza, John Locke, and Samuel von Pufendorf were all born in 1632, each confronted new questions arising at that time concerning freedom of religion, and each developed a moral philosophy. These three, whom I call ‘the class of 1632’, effectively launched the Enlightenment. All three philosophers underlined the importance of freedoms of thought and religion; all three espoused a notion of religious toleration; all three subscribed to the doctrine of Natural Law; all three wrote about “the state of nature”, albeit Pufendorf declared that this existed only in relations between states in the international system; and all three believed in the existence of a supreme deity, although Spinoza rejected any anthropomorphic concept of God and argued that God did not have a mind and hence could not think, decide, prescribe, or want anything.

A century of religious warfare

Unleashed by Martin Luther (1484–1546) and Jean Calvin (1509–1564), the Protestant Reformation led to over a century of religious-inspired warfare across much of Central and Western Europe. The two most important

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conflicts were the French Wars of Religion (1562–1598), in which between 2 and 4 million people lost their lives due to armed conflict, famine or disease; and the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), in which at least 8 million people lost their lives (Wilson, 2008: 554). The French Wars of Religion were brought to an end when King Henry IV, a Protestant, converted to Catholicism, but then immediately issued his Edict of Nantes (1598), extending extensive religious liberty to Huguenots (Calvinist Protestants), also granting them full civil rights (Mark, 2022: 1). King Louis XIV (1638–1715; reigned 1643–1715) revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685, spurring the emigration of more than 400,000 Huguenots shortly thereafter, with several migrating to England, Prussia, the Netherlands, or North America.

Given the tensions between Lutherans and Catholics following Luther's refusal to recant his beliefs and his excommunication in January 1521, the German states were divided into, on one side, those that accepted Luther's arguments that indulgences could not be sold, that the clergy could not legitimately claim to have a closer spiritual relationship with God than ordinary people (McGrath, 1999: 223), and that five of the seven sacraments, all except baptism and communion, were "artifices", and, on the other side, those that remained loyal to the Pope. In order to calm the waters of religious strife, a Diet was convened in Augsburg in 1555. It deliberated from 5 February until 25 September of that year, closing its sessions by ultimately promulgating the Peace of Augsburg, granting each prince the right to declare either Catholicism or Lutheran Protestantism the official Church in his realm. Unfortunately, this agreement did not prevent a fresh outbreak of religious warfare in 1618. This warfare was brought to an end by the Treaty of Westphalia, which established the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose region, his religion), authorising each king or prince to determine which branch of Christianity should be practised in his realm (alongside Catholicism and Lutheranism, Calvinism was recognised). The three philosophers were all aged 16 years when the Treaty of Westphalia was signed and, given the enormity of the war which had preceded it, would have been aware of the contentions underlying the war and, one must assume, of the basic principle enshrined in the treaty. They thus became mature at a time when a war had just been fought over whether Catholicism or Protestantism should predominate in Central Europe. Since different religious beliefs had sparked the conflict, it was quite natural that these three philosophers reflected on the best way to bring an end to religious strife.

Spinoza's championing of freedom of thought

Spinoza (1632–1677) devoted much of his adult life to championing freedom of thought and speech, including freedom of religion. Because of that,

along with his advocacy of secular democracy as potentially being the best political system, Beiner credits Spinoza with having been the first liberal thinker (Beiner, 2011: 146). His (direct or indirect) influence on subsequent generations of philosophers has been huge; among these, Montesquieu, Kant, Madison and Hegel were all influenced by their reading of Spinoza. Born Bento (Nadler, 2011: 4–5) Spinoza on 24 November 1632 – scarcely 3 months after John Locke came into this world, he began life as a member of the Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam, where he was called Baruch. His father, like his grandfather, was a leader of the Jewish community in Amsterdam (Allison, 1975: 17). Aside from Dutch and Portuguese, Spinoza also learned Hebrew, Spanish and Latin, the language in which he wrote his philosophical tracts. Under the tutelage of Franciscus Van Den Ende, he took up the study of the sciences and also read the works of René Descartes. Although well schooled in Judaism, Spinoza remained a free thinker and shared his views – which were seen by some as heretical – with friends and associates. Asked by the Jewish community to retract certain views to which the community had taken exception, Spinoza refused. This led him to being expelled from the Jewish community on 27 July 1656, when he was barely 23, standing accused of “abominable heresies” (as quoted in Nadler, 1999: 129). The things that bothered the Jewish community about Spinoza included his scepticism concerning the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, as reflected in his conviction that there were no such phenomena as ghosts or spirits of the departed. In his Theological-Political Treatise (TTP¹), he would later argue that the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture and of the Old Testament alike) was not “of divine origin” and he would also later deny that the Jews were, in any meaningful sense, the “chosen people” (Nadler, 1999: 131, 132). He was also reliably reported to have asserted, in 1658, that one should not believe in the existence of an anthropomorphic God (Nadler, 1999: 135–136). If he had been voicing beliefs of this nature during the first half of the 1650s, this would certainly have added to the decision to expel him from the Jewish community. Spinoza, in response, abandoned his use of the name “Baruch” and adopted the Latin form of his name – *Benedictus*, or, as it is written in English, Benedict – for all future uses.

Still, it was not simply his harsh experience within the Jewish community and its pressures to conform in thought and speech that drove Spinoza to champion freedom of thought. There was also pressure to conform in these ways from the Reformed (Calvinist) Church. Calvinism had become the official religion of the United Provinces (alongside a tolerated, substantial Catholic minority). However, the Calvinists were divided into two camps: *Remonstrants*, who supported freedom of conscience and pleaded

¹ From the Latin, Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.

for religious tolerance, and *Gomarists*² or orthodox Calvinists, who were not prepared to see religious authorities placed in subordination to secular authorities and argued that a secular ruler could *only* claim the loyalty and obedience of his subjects if he were a Christian prince, lending his authority and other resources to the promulgation and defence of the true faith, by which the Reformed Church was meant. This, in turn, translated into demands on the part of Reformed pastors for the civil magistrates to enforce strict doctrinal orthodoxy and punish those who taught doctrines or interpretations which Gomarists considered to be heretical (Balibar, 2008: 28).

Spinoza rejected orthodox Calvinists' claim to a right (and duty) to impose their doctrines on people, as well as their accompanying belief that only (Reformed) Christians could be considered morally worthy. On the contrary, in 1671 Spinoza wrote:

As regards Turks and other non-Christian nations; if they worship God by the practice of justice and charity towards their neighbour, I believe that they have the spirit of Christ and are in a state of salvation, what[ever] they may ignorantly hold with regard to Mahomet and oracles. (Spinoza, 1955: 368)

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As for the broader question of religious coercion, Spinoza was so agitated by the demands for religious conformity that in 1665 he set aside his work on *Ethics* to write his *Theological-Political Treatise*, which he completed during 1668. In this work, he argued that any "government which attempts to control [people's] minds" should be considered "tyrannical, and it is considered an abuse of sovereignty and a usurpation of the rights of subjects, to seek to prescribe what shall be accepted as true, or rejected as false, or what opinions should actuate men in their worship of God" (Spinoza, 2011a: 257). Moreover, in Spinoza's view, the effort to impose religious doctrines on people is bound to fail because "[n]o one would consider himself bound to obey laws framed against his faith or superstition" (Spinoza, 2011a: 212), and the effort would thus risk provoking rebellion. Commenting directly on the disputes in his native land, he warned that

...when the religious controversy between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants began to be taken up by politicians and the States, it grew into a schism, and abundantly showed that laws dealing with religion and seeking to settle its controversies are much more calculated to irritate than to reform...: further, it was seen that schisms do not originate in a love of truth, which is a source of courtesy and gentleness, but rather in an inordinate desire for supremacy. (Spinoza, 1955: 264)

² Named after Francis Gomar, an influential figure in this dispute, residing in Leiden.

Historically, in Europe a widespread notion was that it was precisely the duty of the state to protect and advance Christian religion, and even that the state bore some responsibility for the salvation of souls. Against this traditional view, Spinoza offered the radical notion (polemically expressed) that “the object of government is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or puppets, but to enable them to develop [sic] their minds and bodies unshackled” (Spinoza, 1955: 259). Accordingly, Spinoza concluded, it was right that “every man should think what he likes and say what he thinks” (Spinoza, 1955, 259) – a radical idea at the time.

The rival camps in the religious sector were, in turn, associated with two contending political groupings; specifically, the Remonstrants were associated with Johan De Witt, described as “arguably the greatest statesman of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century” (Nadler, 1999: 255) and himself an advocate of religious toleration (within limits) and freedom of philosophy, while the Counter-Remonstrants or Gomarists were associated with the House of Orange, which was seeking to bring the republic down (Nadler, 2001: 18).

Johannes (Jan) Koerbagh, a Reformed preacher, agreed with Spinoza on denying the divine authorship of Scripture; he also denied the divinity of Jesus – as did Spinoza (Feuer, 1964: 149–150 – ruled miracles out as being impossible (as did Spinoza), and reduced “true religion” (again, as did Spinoza) to obeying the moral law and being good to other people. Nonetheless, Koerbagh was not as cautious as Spinoza and published his book under his own name and in the Dutch vernacular, thereby making it readily accessible to the general public. Koerbagh was subsequently arrested and sat in jail for over 6 weeks, finally being released with a warning. Meanwhile, Koerbagh’s brother Adriaan was taken into custody on 18 July 1668, for having forwarded some of his own writings to a local publisher; sentenced to 10 years in prison, Adriaan Koerbagh became ill while incarcerated and died on 15 October 1669. Around this time, Spinoza was finishing writing the TTP and, bearing in mind what the Koerbagh brothers had suffered, resolved to take precautions. He hence used a pseudonym – Henricus Künraht, invoking the name of a 16th-century German alchemist (Nadler, 2011: 219) – on the title page, while his Amsterdam publisher, Jan Rieuwertsz, upon bringing out the book in late 1669 or early 1670, endeavoured to conceal his own involvement by representing that the book had been printed in Hamburg. In later editions, Rieuwertsz would variously list the publishing house as Jacobus Paulli, Isaacus Herculis or Carolus Gratiani (Nadler, 1999: 266–268; Nadler, 2011: 38–43, 48, 219).

Although written in Latin, a language which ordinary people could not read or understand, the book immediately caused controversy and provoked a number of rebuttals by persons of various orientations. On top of

that, despite his use of a pseudonym, Spinoza's authorship was soon discovered. The book was referred to the ecclesiastical court of the Reformed Church in Amsterdam which on 30 June 1670 referred the question to the General Synod. The Synod of South Holland later condemned the work, declaring it "as vile and blasphemous a book as the world has ever seen" (Nadler, 1999: 296). The Synod also demanded that any further printing and circulation of the book be halted. Then, in April 1671, the High Court of Holland ruled that Spinoza's TTP, Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and Lodewijk Meyer's *Philosophy, the Interpreter of Scripture* all contained "scandalous opinions" and "Godless thoughts" (as quoted in Nadler, 1999: 296). In spite of this and the unrelenting pressure applied by the Reformed Church on secular authorities to ban these works, Spinoza's TTP remained available in book shops in the major towns of the country during the early 1670s.

Meanwhile, Johan De Witt was forced to resign as the Grand Pensionary on 4 August 1672, 1 month after William III (1650–1702) of the House of Orange, later to reign as King of England and Ireland beginning in 1689, made a successful bid for power. Later that month, Johan De Witt and his brother Cornelis were murdered by a hostile mob. After this, the tolerance of unorthodox opinions and ideas came to an end.

Spinoza's relationship to Hobbes

Passages in Spinoza's posthumously published *Ethics* may remind readers of Thomas Hobbes. Like Hobbes, Spinoza considered that there was

... nothing in the state of nature which, by the agreement of all, is good or evil; for everyone who is in the state of nature considers only his own advantage, and decides what is good and what is evil from his own temperament, and only insofar as he takes account of his own advantage...

But in the civil state, of course, it is decided by common agreement what is good or what is evil. And everyone is bound to submit to the state. (Spinoza, 1996: 136)

It then followed, for Spinoza – again striking a Hobbesian note – that

[i]n order, therefore, that people may be able to live harmoniously and be of assistance to one another, it is necessary for them to give up their natural right and to make one another confident that they will do nothing which could harm others. (Spinoza, 1996: 136)³

³ I have changed Curley's translation of homines as "men" into "people" because homines is gender-neutral and means human beings or people. If Spinoza had meant men, he would have written viri. The

Spinoza added, drawing out the implications of his argument, that “Sin, therefore, is nothing but disobedience, which for that reason can be punished only by the law of the state” (Spinoza, 1996: 136). If one recalls Hobbes’ claim that it is the prerogative of the sovereign to interpret the moral law, it should be apparent that here Spinoza agreed completely with Hobbes. Spinoza wrote much the same thing in the TTP, urging that

... no private citizen can know what is good for the state, except from the decrees from the sovereign, to whom alone it belongs to transact public business: therefore no one can rightly practise piety aright nor obey God unless he obeys the decrees of the sovereign in all things. (translation by Nadler, 2010)

Spinoza further concurred with Hobbes in promoting social harmony and stability as values, and discord as an evil to be avoided (Spinoza, 1996: 138). Again, like Hobbes, Spinoza viewed the state of nature – the condition of people living without an effective government – to be a dangerous condition in which people cannot trust each other and must, therefore, relate to each other as (at least potential) enemies (Spinoza, 2011b: 306), although, perhaps inconsistently, he also claimed that all people “whether they are Savages or civilized, form associations” (Spinoza, as quoted in Kwek, 2015: 164). Again agreeing with Hobbes, Spinoza held that people are driven by considerations of self-interest, anchored the legitimacy of government in human convention, and argued that “all are bound to obey a tyrant, unless they have received from God through undoubted revelation a promise of aid against him (Spinoza, 2011a: 251). Noting Spinoza’s contempt for anthropomorphic concepts of God and, indeed, for any notion that God wills or chooses anything, it seems doubtful that Spinoza truly intended this appeal to a promise of divine aid to be taken seriously. The evidence suggests not, leaving us with his bare exhortation that everyone is obliged to obey the commands of a tyrant (so long as he holds power, which Spinoza interpreted as right).

It is known that Spinoza had read Hobbes’ *Leviathan* prior to finishing his TTP and before returning to work on *Ethics* (Nadler, 1999: 306). He was also influenced by Hobbes’ *De cive*, a copy of which he kept in his private library (Nadler, 2011: 188). Still, Spinoza disagreed with Hobbes on a number of points. Most obviously, where Hobbes preferred monarchy to democracy

complete passage is as follows: “Ut igitur homines concorditer vivere et sibi auxilio esse possint, necesse est ut jure suo naturali cedent et se invicem secures reddant se nihil acturos quod posit in alterius damnum cedere.” – See Spinozae Ethica, Ordine geometrico demonstrata et in quinque partes distincta, Pars Quarta, Propositio XXXVII – Scholium II. Accessible at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.ethica4.html>, 11. 3. 2012.

and conjured up a vision of a social contract in which people appointed an absolute monarch to whom they transferred most of their rights, Spinoza rejected Hobbes' notion that people had ever agreed anywhere to appoint an absolute monarch, let alone to alienate their fundamental rights to any sovereign (Feuer, 1964: 185). As already noted, he also considered democracy, grounded in laws protecting people's rights and promoting their welfare, to be the best and most natural form of government. Consistently, Hobbes defended the notion that one is always under an obligation to honour contracts or agreements – thus including the social contract to obey the sovereign – even when they turn out to be detrimental to one's interests. This excluded rebellion against any sovereign able to maintain order. Spinoza nonetheless came to see stability not as an end in itself or even as merely serving the purpose of keeping people from killing each other, but as enabling people to seek happiness (Feuer, 1964: 184–185) – which presumed freedom and which he associated with expanding one's knowledge and understanding of the world (alternatively, of Nature or, as he sometimes put it, of God). As Spinoza wrote in *Ethics*, “things are good only insofar as they aid [a] man to enjoy the life of the mind, which is defined by understanding” (Spinoza, 1996: 155–156). Given this higher purpose, Spinoza rejected Hobbes' claim that agreements and contracts were unconditionally binding. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for his assertion – despite his previous admonition that even a tyrant's commands should be obeyed – that a citizen might ignore laws and commands when, in his or her judgment, it was appropriate to do so. The corollary of this was, of course, that rebellion could be justified against a sovereign judged to be tyrannical. That there is some inconsistency on Spinoza's part may be attributed to the fact that his TTP was written under the pressure of time to address the burning issues of his day, while his premature death at the age of 44 prevented him from finishing his *Political Treatise* and editing either that work or his *Ethics*.

However, where Hobbes stressed that sovereignty could not and should not be divided, Spinoza contended that political power – namely, sovereignty – should not be concentrated in the hands of a single person (Donagan, 1989: 183). Reviewing the history of the ancient Hebrews, he argued that, “during all the period, during which the people held the reins of power, there was only one civil war”, while, after a monarchical government was introduced, “civil war raged almost continuously; and battles were so fierce as to exceed all the others recorded” (Spinoza, 2011a: 240). Accordingly, where Hobbes saw absolute sovereignty as the remedy for civil strife, Spinoza considered it a source of discord and strife. Moreover, “...to entrust [the] affairs of state absolutely to any man is quite incompatible with the maintenance of liberty” (Spinoza, 2011b: 342). The remedy for megalomaniac tendencies in a monarchy, Spinoza concluded, was to require

a monarch to have numerous counsellors, aged 50 or above, that he would be required to consult before taking any decisions on matters of public policy (Spinoza, 2011b: 320–321).

Even with respect to the concept of God, Spinoza registered his disagreement with the English thinker, declaring in *Ethics*, that “...everyone who has to any extent contemplated the divine nature denies that God is corporeal” (Spinoza, 1996: 10). Since Hobbes had declared that only bodies exist and had concluded from this axiom that God must be, in some sense, corporeal, Spinoza’s withering remark represented the Englishman as not having thought about the subject “to any extent”.

Asked by an associate to explain how his views differed from those of Hobbes, Spinoza described it this way:

As regards political theories, the [chief] difference...between Hobbes and myself, consists in this, that I always preserve natural right intact, and only allot to the chief magistrates in every state a right over their subjects commensurate with the excess of their power over the power of their subjects. This is what always takes place in the state of nature. (Spinoza, 1955: 369)

Spinoza, Pufendorf and Locke

Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694) was born in a village in Lutheran Saxony, studied in Leipzig and Jena and, by 1670, had been appointed professor of Natural and International Law at the University of Lund. It was here that he published his most important works on Natural Law. His most influential work on Natural Law was *De jure naturae et gentium* (1672), translated into several European languages. Pufendorf, like Locke and Spinoza, advocated the natural equality of human beings, founding this principle on an assertion of human *worth* (always, but I would say misleadingly, presented as a doctrine of human “dignity”, as if even war criminals are “dignified”). What Pufendorf meant by asserting human worth was that human life is worth more than the lives of other mammals, let alone birds, fish, reptiles or amphibians (Saastamoinen, 2010: 40, 41).

Like John Locke (1632–1704), yet unlike Spinoza, Pufendorf accepted the legitimacy of slavery. However, where Locke connected this to victory in war by a just defender over an unjust aggressor, in which the just conqueror spares the lives of the aggressors by consigning them to permanent servitude (Farr, 2008: 496), Pufendorf argued that some people “are too dull-witted to be able to govern themselves, except badly, or they do nothing at all unless they are directed or impelled by others, even though nature has often endowed them

with a strong body by means of which they can shower many advantage upon the rest” (Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium*, as quoted in Saastamoinen, 2010: 43). For such people, Pufendorf held, slavery offers the advantage, at least in theory, of “the perpetual certainty of maintenance, which is often not the lot of those who work by the day” (Pufendorf, *De jure...*, as quoted in Saastamoinen, 2010: 43). Pufendorf and Locke, like Spinoza, understood that it was impossible to attain certainty about theological and religious matters, let alone to bring about universal assent to one specific creed. Like Spinoza, both Pufendorf (Zurbruchen, n.d.: 3) and Locke (Owen, 2007: 157) rejected coercion as an illegitimate tool to promote religious conversion. Further, like Spinoza, both Pufendorf and Locke underlined the importance of people’s freedom to think for themselves. Thus, Pufendorf, for instance, held that people enjoyed an “innate right to govern [themselves] ... independent of others”, adding that “the Wife is not obliged to follow her Husband’s Religion, nor the Servant [that of] the Master” (Pufendorf, *De jure...* and *De habitu religionis Christianiae at vitam civilem*, both as quoted in Saastamoinen, 2010: 47, 53). Marriage, in other words, did not constrain the wife’s freedom of thought or her freedom of religion. Locke, in his *Essay on Toleration*, completed in 1667, argued “that speculative opinions and worship which did not affect politics or detract from the public good should *not* be regulated by the magistrate” (Spellman, 1997: 16).

All three philosophers agreed that there was a God and all three agreed that it was impossible to have any definite ideas about the Supreme Being. However, Pufendorf and Locke both circumscribed the freedom of religion which they proclaimed. For Pufendorf, “belief in God’s existence and in His providence was a basic requirement of man as a moral agent ... [Accordingly,] atheists and blasphemers were deemed incapable of a moral life and excluded from toleration” (Zurbruchen, n.d.: 6). Locke excluded Catholics from toleration in England because they owed their allegiance to a “foreign prince”; like Pufendorf, he too excluded atheists from toleration, arguing that one could not rely on atheists to be moral (Locke, 1990; Ashcraft, 1986: 100). Spinoza, by contrast, was more radical in his views about religion than either Pufendorf or Locke, recognising the utility of religious belief for motivating moral behaviour but not associating Christian religion with any objective truth, while dismissing descriptions of God as merely “a concession to popular understanding” (Spinoza, 2011a: 64). Indeed, Spinoza’s equation of God with Nature in *Ethics* has led some scholars to view him as a pantheist, while others dismiss that characterisation as misleading, if not absurd.

On Spinoza’s view of God, it followed that divine rewards, after death, for the just and punishment for the sinful made no sense whatsoever. Nor did Spinoza accept the conventional (in his time) notion that a deity had

created the world at some point in time; this construal limited God's causal activity in time and space, which Spinoza believed involved self-contradiction (Hampshire, 2014: 44). Indeed, he was "the first major modern philosopher to believe that nature exists in its own right, and needs no supernatural being to create or to sustain it" (Donagan, 1989: xi).

Spinoza was guarded in his TTP, as well as in his *Ethics*, which he originally intended to publish in his lifetime. Indeed, for a while, Spinoza feared that he might be murdered for his views (Smith, 1997: 38). Still, he wrote more freely in his private correspondence, offering his opinion in a letter to Henry Oldenburg in 1675 that

Christians are distinguished from the rest of the world, not by faith, nor by charity, nor by the other fruits of the Holy Spirit, but solely by their opinions, inasmuch as they defend their cause, like everyone else, by [stories about] miracles, that is by ignorance, which is the source of all malice. (Spinoza, 1955: 298)

Even though he considered it functional for the stability of society that people believe in God, Spinoza had nothing but contempt for the anthropomorphic concept of God which, in any event, held the danger of exciting groundless hope and fears (Nadler, 2001: 33) and, as he added, provoking antagonism against members of other faiths (Nadler, 2011: 153).

Finally, all three philosophers contended that human beings enjoyed certain inalienable – or, as represented in Chapter 17 of the English translation of Spinoza's TTP, "nontransferable" – rights, from which it followed that there were nature-given standards by which to determine the limits to legitimate authority.

Morality and free will

The notion of a moral law, and hence of morality in a broader sense, presumes free will. Anyone familiar with the exculpatory uses made of insanity pleas in American criminal cases is already familiar with a clear example of this. In turning to Spinoza's written work, however, we find that while he considered freedom to be a vital value which needed to be safeguarded in any state, he expressed serious reservations about the extent to which ordinary people (i.e., not intellectuals) could ever be free except in the most limited sense. People, he wrote in *Ethics*, "...think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]" (Spinoza, 1996: 26). The key to understanding Spinoza's notion about free will lies in his discussion

of reason and passions. For Spinoza, to the extent that people are guided by their passions, they may be said to be unfree – “in bondage” (in servitude), as Spinoza put it (Spinoza, 1996: 113). To be in bondage is, of course, to lack real power over one’s own life. To gain such power, understanding of one’s passions is critical and, with such understanding, a person can choose to be governed by reason. It is only by choosing to make decisions rationally, Spinoza believed, that people could seek their own advantage; and people thinking rationally would also want other people to live well (Spinoza, 1996: 125, 126).⁴ This, in turn, set the stage for Spinoza’s definition of morality as “[t]he desire to do good, generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason” (Spinoza, 1996: 134; comma added).⁵ Here, Spinoza was closer to Locke, who rejected the notion that people had any innate moral sense, than to Pufendorf, who argued the opposite.

This then pointed to Natural Law, known to individuals through their inborn rational faculty. In Spinoza’s words, “acting from virtue is nothing but acting from the guidance of reason” (Spinoza, 1996: 144). With this, Spinoza associated rationality simultaneously with both freedom and morality such that, in his view, a rational person should be seen as free in some fundamental sense and should be expected, further, to strive to live a moral life. “A free person always acts honestly, not deceptively”, Spinoza stated (Spinoza, 1996: 153).⁶ Finally, since freedom is best assured in conditions of security, Spinoza argued that any rational person would value a decent state and want to observe and respect the laws of that state (Spinoza, 1996: 154).

However, the freedom in which Spinoza was most interested was the freedom to think and speak about big questions – that is, the freedom to philosophise. Much like the case of John Stuart Mill later – who championed free speech but could entertain certain forms of censorship, Spinoza was concerned that there be freedom of serious speech about matters of social and political importance, but combined this with a readiness, at least some of the time, to endorse the suppression of “subversive” speech which could endanger the civil order (Feuer, 1964: 114). It may be, as Stanley Rosen has written, that, for Spinoza, “*in the fullest sense*, only the philosopher is free” (Rosen, 1987: 468, my emphasis). Yet, any citizens who take the trouble to

⁴ “... the good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men” (Spinoza, 1996: 134).

⁵ Regarding the relationship between freedom and virtue, see also Kisner, 2011: especially chapters 4–6.

⁶ I have changed “man” to “person” because Spinoza consistently writes homo (Latin for human being or person) rather than vir (Latin for a male) in Ethics. See Spinozae Ethica, Ordine geometrico demonstrata et in quinque partes distincta. Accessible at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.ethica1.html>, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.ethica2.html>, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.ethica3.html>, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.ethica4.html>, and <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/spinoza.ethica5.html>, 11. 3. 2012.

inform themselves and to deliberate about matters of consequence in a rational and honest way may approach the ideal of freedom to the extent that they are “led by reason alone” (Spinoza, 1996: 151). Nevertheless, he saw that most people were driven, much of the time, by passions, fears and irrational hopes, rather than by reason. Most people, he felt, could scarcely provide clear accounts of the reasons for their behaviour or for their choices (Mason, 2004: 294). This meant that for them, “with their childish systems of rewards and penalties”, religions were useful for providing supernatural incentives for good behaviour (Hampshire, 2014: 150). Philosophy, the preserve of philosophers, had, for Spinoza, “no end in view save truth”, while faith, accessible to the wide public, “looks for nothing but obedience and piety” (Spinoza, 2011a: 189).

The state and religion

Spinoza devoted the first 15 of the 20 chapters of his *Theological-Political Treatise* to discussing the Scripture, the ancient Hebrew state, the claims of theology, and religion in general, returning to the subject of religion in later chapters as well. In Chapter 18, for instance, Spinoza urged that it was harmful to both the state and religion when ministers of any religious establishment could exercise the prerogatives of government (Spinoza, 2011a: 241). On the contrary, having before his eyes the example of ecclesiastical (ab)uses of political instruments to repress free thinking in the United Provinces, Spinoza endorsed the proposition that the sovereign should regulate public displays of religiosity, but defended individuals’ right to make their own decisions regarding what to believe (Spinoza, 2011a: chap. XIX). At the same time, Spinoza recognised that the “right” religion could be useful to the state, to the extent that it conduced citizens to obey the secular authorities; by the same virtue, a religion which undermined the foundations of the state would be dysfunctional and dangerous. Hence, in Chapter 17 he wrote that a subject’s “obedience does not consist so much in the outward act as in the mental state of the person obeying ...; and consequently the firmest dominion belongs to the sovereign who has [the] most influence over the minds of his subjects” (Spinoza, 2011a: 215). Moreover, for Spinoza, “either dominion [sovereignty] does not exist, and has no rights over its subjects, or else it extends over every instance in which it can prevail on [people – homines] to obey it” (Spinoza, 2011a: 215). Spinoza thereby opened the door for the state also to regulate religious *belief*, at least where ordinary citizens are concerned, with the result that the oft-touted distinction between citizens’ freedom of thought and the state’s right to regulate external forms of worship breaks down (Halper, 2004: 167–168), leaving only perhaps the philosophers still free.

Spinoza even spelled out what he considered the seven essential postulates of a true or “universal” religion, including that God exists, that only those who obey God can be saved, while “the rest of mankind, who live under the sway of their pleasures, are lost”, that “the worship of this Being consists in the practice of justice and love towards one’s neighbour”, and that “[n]o one is free from sin” (Spinoza, 2011a: 186–187). He was convinced that Church–state separation would serve only to encourage religious rivalries, conflicts and fanaticism, and stimulate rival religious organisations to compete for influence in the government and in legislation. Hence, state control and regulation of the religious sphere was the best solution. It was, accordingly, the duty and charge of secular authorities to propagate such religion as was functional for the state (Spinoza, 2011b: 306; Levene, 2004: 155).

If it seems that Spinoza wished to have it both ways – full religious freedom and state supervision of the religious sphere – it was because he feared that, in conditions of unregulated religious freedom, ecclesiastical authorities would exploit and abuse that freedom in order to infringe upon, curtail and ultimately abolish the religious freedom of the country’s citizens (as per Beiner, 2011: 146). Thus, although Spinoza held that the state’s purpose was to safeguard people’s freedom, his ideal was a state in which the laws were “founded on sound reason, so that every member of it may, if he will, be free; *that is, live with full consent under the entire guidance of reason*” (Spinoza, 2011a: 206, my emphasis).

His Biblical criticism (in TTP, Chapters 7–10) was thus aimed at distinguishing those precepts peculiar to the ancient Hebrews and which, hence, had no validity beyond the lifespan of the ancient Hebrew kingdom, from those of lasting value, which reflect the dictates of reason and, as already mentioned, promote the precept of treating other people with justice and love (Della Rocca, 2008: 249).

Spinoza’s political theory

The High Court which banned Spinoza’s TTP, Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, and Meyer’s *Philosophy, the Interpreter of Scripture* did so in the belief that the open challenging of certain principles could threaten the socio-political order and that repression was the best assurance of stability. Although he had a mixed mind about this, Spinoza’s general tendency was to challenge this assumption. Already in his banned treatise, he had offered a rival view arguing that the state can never prevent people from thinking for themselves and that the state should concern itself with people’s actions, not their thoughts and beliefs (Spinoza, 2011a: 252, 261). Since the state cannot, in fact, control people’s thoughts, it followed that a government which “seeks to regulate everything by law, is more likely to arouse vices than to reform them”. Moreover,

when the state endeavours to suppress opinions which people hold to be true, they may rise up in rebellion against the authorities (Spinoza, 2011a: 262).

By contrast, the freer a people, the more legitimate the rule under which they live and, in consequence, the more power which can be built up in the state. To put it somewhat differently, since democracies allow their citizens to live freely, to investigate and write and develop new ideas (including scientific and technological innovations), democracies are intrinsically stronger than authoritarian states of comparable size and resources (see Della Rocca, 2008: 214; Balibar, 2008: *passim*). In this connection, he praised the city of Amsterdam – meaning, of course, as it existed when Johan De Witt held sway as Grand Pensionary – for its religious tolerance and allowance for freedom of speech. The result, Spinoza wrote, was that “in this most flourishing state, and most splendid city, [people] of every nation and religion live together in the greatest harmony” (Spinoza, 2011a: 264). Note that Spinoza championed the building up of the capacity of a democratic state. Negri (1991) is thus mistaken in thinking that Spinoza spun a radical democratic dream, according to which equality would be advanced against the obstruction and resistance of state institutions; on the contrary, for Spinoza, people promote and safeguard their equality through and by virtue of political institutions (Field, 2012: 221). Spinoza even wrote, in his *Political Treatise*, that “those who believe that ordinary people...can be persuaded to live solely at reason’s behest are dreaming of the poets’ golden age or of a fairytale” (as quoted in Field, 2012: 31).

Like Hobbes, Spinoza was worried about the consequences of state decay since, “if government be taken away, no good thing can last, all falls into dispute, anger and anarchy reign unchecked amid universal fear” (Spinoza, 2011a: 249). This is the reason for the aforementioned advice that people should submit to a tyrant rather than risk the “universal fear” associated with complete uncertainty. Even though freedom was the ideal, there is no such thing as freedom without survival.

Among those factors which can result in political decay, Spinoza mentioned not only repression but also wanton disregard for the law since, in his view, a state in which laws are routinely ignored or broken and where strife or war is ever a risk is not much different from the state of nature, or – expressed in another way – it is almost as if the state did not exist at all (Spinoza, 2011b: 314). One other factor he hinted at was the lowering of taxes to the level where the government is unable to fulfil its function of providing for the welfare of the people because, as he described it, “the people’s welfare is the highest law” (Spinoza, 2011b: 330).⁷

⁷ In suggesting that he hinted at dangers associated with low taxation, I have in mind the following passage from *Political Treatise*: “What nation ever had to pay so many and so heavy taxes as the Dutch? Yet

Final revisions

On 6 December 1674, Franciscus Van den Enden, Spinoza's Latin teacher from whom he had also assimilated some views about religion and who had moved to Paris in 1670, was arrested and hanged for his political activities. French authorities burned his writings the following day (Klever, 2021: 45–46). Spinoza was deeply shaken by this and, according to Jarig Jelles, who edited the philosopher's posthumously published works, withdrew into virtual seclusion (as cited in Rice, 1984: 193). In the meantime, having returned to work on *Ethics* after the publication of the TTP, Spinoza finalised that manuscript in 1675. As already noted, he originally planned to publish it in his lifetime but, in the face of hostility from certain Reformed theologians, he changed his mind, withholding it for posthumous release.

He was also engaged in the writing of a purely political work, the *Political Treatise* (TP, from the Latin, *Tractatus Politicus*), left unfinished upon his death. In this work, he discussed the three traditional forms of government: monarchy (*monarchia*), aristocracy (*aristocratia*) and democracy (*democratia*). Although he declared once more that democracy was the most natural form of government, he outlined which factors contributed to the optimal functioning of each form of government, recommending that both monarchies and aristocracies establish large governing councils, drawn from all classes and groups in society (Kwek, 2015: 170–171). Even so he stressed that democracy was best suited to tapping the collective rationality of a society and, likewise, to assuring the freedom and security of its citizens (Allison, 1975: 180, 187; Levene, 2004: 142, 170, 183),⁸ provided that the government in question allowed freedom of conscience and, in general, respected the laws. Spinoza's commitment to democracy is consistent with his stress that the purpose of the state is precisely to assure and safeguard human freedom. As he wrote in his TP, "rights are the soul of a government. Where they are maintained the state is necessarily maintained" (Spinoza, 2011b, as quoted in Saar, 2015: 124).

There are some continuities between this late work and his TTP, such as his definition of natural right in terms of power, his insistence that the state has no right (or power) to interfere with freedom of thought, and his reassertion of his principle that, in the state of nature, there is no right or wrong, with these things being established by law (Balibar, 2008: 50; Spinoza, 2011b: 297). There are also some disjunctions between the two works. To begin with, the TP no longer presented the social covenant as "a

it not only has not been exhausted, but, on the contrary, has been [made] so mighty by its wealth, that all [have] envied its good fortune"; Ibid., chap. VIII, para. 31, p. 360.

⁸ For a different point of view, see Prokhovnik (1997: 108).

constitutive moment in the construction of civil society” (Balibar, 2008: 50). Second, instead of restating his earlier thesis that the purpose of the state was to establish and safeguard freedom, he now contented himself with the ostensibly more modest (and more Hobbesian) claim that “the purpose of political order ... is simply peace and security of life” (as quoted in Balibar, 2008: 51), though Balibar is correct in observing that peace and security are prerequisites for the enjoyment of any meaningful freedom (Balibar, 2008: 116). Third, the notion of “true” (or “universal”) religion was omitted, being replaced by allusions to the religion of the homeland.

There were also some refinements. For example, in seeking to justify obedience to the state in contravention of one’s conscience (or the demands of one’s religious community), he argued that, if a person

who is led by reason, has sometimes to do by the commonwealth’s order what he knows to be repugnant to reason, that harm is far compensated by the good, which he derives from the existence of a civil state. For it is reason’s own law, to choose the less of two evils; and accordingly we may conclude that no one is acting against the dictate of his own reason, so far as he does what by the law of the commonwealth is to be done. (Spinoza, 2011b: 303)

He also placed more emphasis than before on the state’s responsibility to educate people in citizenship. Seditions and wars, he warned in the *Political Treatise*, should in the first place be seen as the result of the poor state of a commonwealth, rather than of human “wickedness” (Spinoza, 2011b: 313).

Finally, he sketched, albeit only in a very preliminary way, a theory of political change, identifying a natural and intrinsic tendency for democracies to evolve (or decay) into oligarchies (“aristocracies” in his terminology) – or perhaps, if I do not distort his meaning, plutocracies – and for oligarchies to evolve (or decay) into monarchies, which is to say systems of one-man rule (Spinoza, 2011b: 351).

Conclusion

This article has stressed that Spinoza, Pufendorf and Locke – exact contemporaries – all felt that people should enjoy freedom of thought and of religion, and further that the status of religious freedom had not yet been resolved in their respective societies. They set aside religious claims that God was in some sense knowable, and called for religious toleration – albeit somewhat constrained in the views of Pufendorf and Locke. Spinoza, Pufendorf and Locke should, accordingly, be considered equal founders of the Enlightenment, even if their range of influence has varied, with Locke

retaining the greatest resonance today, at least in the English-speaking world, and Pufendorf largely being forgotten outside Germany and Sweden. Finally, insofar as the Enlightenment saw a flowering of principles dear to liberals and fundamental to any conception of democracy, they may also be credited with being the grandfathers (or perhaps great-grandfathers) of liberal democracy.

Spinoza has exerted an enormous influence on subsequent philosophers. He was perhaps the first serious thinker to realise that, at least in the conditions emerging in the 17th century, democracy could provide a better foundation than either monarchy or aristocracy for the construction of a strong state. His conviction that the state should provide for the welfare of its citizens and his accompanying endorsement of high taxes mark him out as an early advocate of the notion that the state should be useful for its citizens in this life above all (thereby breaking decisively with the medieval notion that the state's primary responsibility was to collaborate with the Church in promoting the salvation of souls). He was among the first to argue for a radical concept of freedom of speech and, together with Jean Bodin in France and John Locke in England, among the first to argue for freedom of religion and religious tolerance. His tenet that it was the responsibility of the state to socialise its citizens, since "men are not born fit for citizenship, but must be made so" (Spinoza, 2011b: 313), foreshadowed Immanuel Kant's arguments to the same effect in *Perpetual Peace*. G. W. F. Hegel would later read Spinoza (Parkinson, 2001: 229-239) and it is hard not to think of Hegel's equation of the real and the rational when one reads Spinoza's assertion that "[w]henever ... anything in nature seems to us ridiculous, absurd, or evil, it is because we have but a partial knowledge of things, and are in the main ignorant of the order and coherence of nature as a whole" (Spinoza, 2011b: 295). Again, Spinoza's assertion that "[i]f everyone were broadly rational then there would be no reason to establish and maintain a coercive authority" (Spinoza, 2011a: chap. XVI, as paraphrased in Rosenthal, 1998: 405) would find an echo later in James Madison's reflection that, if men were angels, then no government would be necessary. Montesquieu and Rousseau both read Spinoza's work and sought to distance themselves from him. Malebranche, Hume and Schopenhauer, among others, also read his works. Bearing in mind Spinoza's groundbreaking analysis and arguments in the TTP, Steven Nadler has called that work "one of the most important books of Western thought ever written" and has credited Spinoza with having "laid the foundation for much of what we now regard as 'modern'" (Nadler, 2011: xi, xv).

Spinoza is sometimes baffling, because he was an original thinker. Yet, for all that, he bears comparison to Hobbes. Like Hobbes, Spinoza was troubled by the efforts made by ecclesiastical establishments to dominate the

state apparatus and to impose doctrinal unity on the population. However, whereas Hobbes was concerned in this regard primarily with the fact that interreligious competition had contributed to fuelling civil war in England, Spinoza's focus was on freedom of thought and hence on freedom of religion, which ecclesiastical monopolies threatened. Therein, and in his systematic defence of democracy, lie Spinoza's chief claims to our attention.

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