



Spinoza and the Radical Enlightenment

Week 11. 27th November 2017

Democracy and Freedom



Domenico Garguilo, *Piazza del Mercato during the Revolt of Masaniello* (Naples 1647)



'It may indeed be the highest secret of monarchical government and utterly essential to it, to keep men deceived, and to disguise the fear that sways them with the specious name of religion, so that they will fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for their own deliverance, and will not think it humiliating but supremely glorious to spill their blood and sacrifice their lives for the glorification of a single man. (TTP Preface)



'it signifies nothing other than a phenomenon whose natural cause cannot be explained on the pattern of some other familiar thing or at least cannot be so explained by the narrator or reporter of the miracle' (6.5)



'For the sacred books were not written by one man alone, nor for the common people of a single period, but by a large number of men, of different temperaments and at different times, and if we calculate the period from the earliest to the latest, it will be found to be around two thousand years and possibly much longer.' (14.1)

Religion under Reason

- Over Chapters 1-15, Spinoza subjects biblical scripture to critical analysis
- He presents and uses contradictions and inconsistencies in the texts to develop a broader argument:
- Prophets and religious structures aim, at their best, at instilling cooperative and peaceful behaviours
- Religion itself is neither bad nor good, but it can be refined to serve a universally good end – the flourishing of one and all

The Universal Faith (Ch14)

- The seven dogmas:
- there is a supreme being who is just and merciful; it is
- a singular being;
- Omnipresent; omniscient; and omnipotent;
- obedience consists solely in justice, charity, loving one's neighbour;
- by believing this one is saved; and this being forgives sins (TTP 14.10).
- *Why would Spinoza present such an account?*

Natural right

- Turn now to Chapter 16 of the TTP, and sections 2-8
- Here Spinoza presents his account of 'natural right'
- Please think about, read through, and discuss these questions:
- *What is our natural right?*
- *How might it relate to Spinoza's ideas in the Ethics?*
- *What kind of consequences might ensue from a state of nature in which everyone pursues their natural right?*

The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?



- [10] Nature is not constrained by the laws of human reason, which aim only at man's true advantage and preservation. It is governed by infinite other laws, which look to the eternal order of the whole of nature, of which man is only a small part. It is only by the necessity of this order that all individuals are determined to exist and have effects in a definite way.
[11] So when anything in nature seems to us ridiculous, absurd, or evil, that's because we know things only in part, and for the most part are ignorant of the order and coherence of the whole of nature, and because we want everything to be directed according to the usage of our reason—even though what reason says is evil is not evil in relation to the order and laws of nature as a whole, but only in relation to the laws of our nature.

Natural right

- Spinoza's account of natural right is similar to the conatus
- All beings, be they animals, wise men or fools, share naturally a fundamental striving to do everything they can do
- Each person lives in thrall to their appetites, which inevitably leads them into contact and conflict with others
- Everyone ultimately desires to live in security and peace...
- And for this reason, Spinoza argues, people live together in societies, where they give up part of their freedom to pursue their own unbridled appetites...
- And in return, they enjoy some mutual security and peace

Natural right

- [12] Also, if we consider that without mutual aid men must live most wretchedly and without any cultivation of reason, we shall see very clearly that to live, not only securely, but very well, men had to agree in having one purpose. So they brought it about that they would have collectively the natural right each one had to all things. It would no longer be determined according to the force and appetite of each one, but according to the power and will of everyone together.



The Robber

- Like Hobbes, Spinoza thinks that human beings share a natural state defined by self-interest and inevitable conflict, which we inevitably leave for the sake of security
- Communities form out of agreements to give up one's natural right for the common good and protect each other
- But whereas Hobbes insists on the importance of outwardly obeying the social covenant with the sovereign, Spinoza argues it's a bit more complex than that...
- Take a look at sections 15-20 now
- *Why does Spinoza justify lying to the robber?*
- *Why does the social contract remain valid only for as long as there is use in obeying it?*

Three laws of human societies

Chapter 16 presents three ‘universal’ or ‘supreme’ laws of nature

1. The conatus

‘each thing strives to persevere in its state, as far as it can by its own power’ [3]

2. That hope or fear decide our judgements

‘no one neglects to pursue what he judges to be good, unless he hopes for a greater good, or fears a greater harm’ [15]

3. The common good is the most secure basis of the state

‘But in a Republic, and a state where the supreme law is the well-being of the whole people, not that of the ruler, someone who obeys the supreme power in everything should not be called a slave, useless to himself, but a subject’ [34]

Democracy

- While we can agree not to pursue our own natural right without restriction in society, we *cannot* give up our own right to think, speak and judge
- If it no longer serves our needs to follow the laws of a society, and there is little authority in place to keep us in check, then we will begin to break the laws, Spinoza argues
- A stable society isn't one then that enforces the obedience of its subjects by sheer command
- Rather, there must be sufficient motivations in place to obey and become part of a society
- The best way to realise this is through democracy, where all people agree to protect each other, and decisions are made for the benefit of all, by all

Democracy

- Take a look at sections 30-35 now
- Think about these questions, and once you've read through the material, discuss in pairs:
- *What argument does Spinoza present for the superiority of democracy in section 30?*
- *Why is living under a democracy is akin to being a child under a kind parent, than a slave under a master?*
- *What is the significance of Spinoza's political paternalism?*

‘the democratic republic ... seems to be the most natural and to be that which approaches most closely to the freedom nature bestows on every person. In a democracy no one transfers their natural right to another in such a way that they are not thereafter consulted but rather to the majority of the whole society of which they are a part. In this way all remain equal as they had been previously, in a state of nature.’

‘How pernicious it is for both religion and state to allow ministers of things sacred to acquire the right to make decrees or handle the business of government. ... Government is bound to become extremely oppressive where [dissident] opinions which are within the domain of each individual, a right of which no one can give up, are treated as a crime. Where this happens, the anger of the common people tends to prevail.’ (18.6)

‘Were it as easy to control people's minds as to restrain their tongues, every sovereign would rule securely and there would be no oppressive governments. ... This is why a government which seeks to control people's minds is considered oppressive, and any sovereign power appears to harm its subjects and usurp their rights when it tries to tell them what they must accept as true and reject as false ... For these things are within each person's own right, which he cannot give up even were he to wish to do so.’
(20.2)

‘the purpose of the state is not to turn people from rational beings into beasts or automata, but rather to allow their minds and bodies to develop in their own ways in security and enjoy the free use of reason, and not to participate in conflicts based on hatred, anger or deceit or in malicious disputes with each other. Therefore, the true purpose of the state is in fact freedom.’ (20.6)

Democracy

- Democracy is said to be the most 'natural state', because it reflects how human beings naturally associate and assist each other, through a desire to remain alive, a fear of dying or isolation, and hopes of current and future rewards
- By providing peace and stability (by acting according to the three laws, earlier), democracies will be more stable and secure than any other society
- Philosophy, the sciences and the arts will be able to flourish
- Freedom of speech ensures that everyone is able to express their views, and the best ideas inevitably triumph...

Moses

- This in turn requires that religion be restricted...
- Separated and made subordinate to the decision-making powers of the state
- Curiously, Spinoza uses the figure of Moses to present this argument
- The power of Moses, as a prophet-leader, was his ability to persuade the stateless Hebrew people in exile to obey laws that would engender their survival and flourishing
- Moses presents his 'interactions' with God, and the Ten Commandments, as a very effective (and good) means of building a stable society



Ferdinand Bol, *Moses descends from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments* (1664)



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Moses Trampling on Pharaoh's Crown* (1660s – exact date unknown)

The Hebrew Republic (Ch 17)

- A state's durability relies 'chiefly upon the loyalty of its subjects, their virtue and constancy in executing commands'
- Where the regimes of Alexander or the Roman emperors failed by turning their subjects into 'slaves useless to themselves', Moses' state succeeded in encouraging the Hebrews to surrender their natural right freely, and expressly in an oath, in which 'all remained perfectly equal'
- While the Dutch imagined themselves as the Hebrew Republic
- Spinoza draws attention to the communal ownership of property, its semi-democratic federalism, the regular redistribution of debts...
- And the warning, that a powerful priestly class and ambitious would-be kings would destroy their state



Next week...

- We'll turn to the final chapter of the TTP, and the first chapter of Spinoza's *Political Treatise* (1677)
- We'll explore what Spinoza's lasting political ideas and contributions were
- Is he the founder of a Radical Enlightenment?
- Can his democratic and collectivist ideas make sense of complex 21st century politics?