

Chapter 1

Spinoza and the Origins of Liberalism

The political philosophy of Spinoza is the first statement in history of the standpoint of democratic liberalism.”

—Feuer (1987), *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, p. 65.

Whether Feuer’s claim is strictly true or not need not concern us, but it may very well be. Liberalism in the modern world probably did begin with Spinoza a generation before John Locke, who is usually the thinker most associated with its origin. Born Baruch Spinoza, but sometimes identified as Benedict de Spinoza, he lived from 1632 to 1677 in the Netherlands. We shall have a bit more to say about Spinoza’s biography later, but it is important to know from the outset that the Netherlands at that time was the freest country in Europe. There is no doubt that its environment affected Spinoza’s reflections on political and social matters.

Spinoza’s parents fled the Inquisition in Portugal in the 1590s and arrived in Amsterdam. We think of the Inquisition as requiring conformity among Christians to a certain dogmatic understanding of Christianity. We may not realize that the Inquisition was equally oppressive, if not more so, towards the Jewish community. To save their lives, Jews often outwardly confessed to Christianity but secretly practiced their faith. They were known as *marranos*, and they represent Spinoza’s family background. The lucky ones, such as Spinoza’s family, managed to emigrate. The preferred destination for these escapees was the Netherlands, specifically Amsterdam. Amsterdam not only allowed Jews entrance, but allowed them to practice their religion

as they saw fit. It is not that the Jews thus became free of discrimination as we would understand it today. They were, after all, ghettoized into separate neighbourhoods. But relative to other countries at the time, they were openly tolerated and thus breathed an air of freedom denied in most other places. Indeed, tolerance was largely the hallmark of the Netherlands—a place one could go to avoid persecution. That benefit of having a place to go to escape persecution was sought by others from a number of other countries, including John Locke himself.

The Netherlands at this time had a flourishing commercial economy, and Spinoza's family was among the many merchants in Amsterdam. The "Dutch Republic" was a federated system of seven provinces that were themselves divided into "states." The largest of these was Holland, which contained the city of Amsterdam. The various provinces had considerable political autonomy compared to a typical monarchy and were themselves federated. There was thus a good deal of local autonomy. While not exactly democratic, the Dutch Republic did have a popular dimension to its politics, if for no other reason than the federated system was open to citizens having an influence on political affairs, especially citizens from the merchant class. However, despite this general culture of freedom, there were times when that same ability of citizens to have an influence enabled the toleration of those who held views contrary to a liberal spirit. Religious conservatives, usually connected to Calvinism, were not particularly open to liberal attitudes on thought and speech. And these conservatives were not an insignificant portion of the population. Thus they too sometimes prevailed in securing non-liberal policies and attitudes. This illiberalism was something Spinoza also witnessed during his lifetime. Nonetheless, the general tenor of freedom in the Netherlands during this period provided the basic environment in which Spinoza's thinking emerged.

What might we therefore say constitutes the general features of a liberal political and social order? One central characteristic of a liberal order certainly would seem to be a grounding in popular government. By popular government, we mean a government whose legitimacy and authority is strongly rooted in the consent and well-being of the governed. Today we would probably apply the term "democracy" to this form of government. As we shall see momentarily, Spinoza was perhaps the first modern defender of democracy, and his reasons for that defence have a lot to do with the advocacy

of a liberal social and political order. Another factor in the idea of liberalism is the rule of law. This means that the sovereign itself is subject to law and not above it. As we shall note later, there was some ambiguity about this aspect of liberalism in Spinoza, but this was not due to any belief on his part that some—because of their station in life—are exempt from legal authority. An idea closely related to the rule of law is Spinoza’s argument that obedience to law and authority should be willing obedience and not obedience out of fear and mere coercion. Another important feature of a liberal order is tolerance, and we shall have much to say about that in the next chapter. The idea of individual rights is also normally connected to liberalism. We believe everyone has a right to something akin to the well-known American expression “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The doctrine of rights we are familiar with is Lockean in origin. Spinoza has a rather different understanding of rights, one that looks illiberal at first. Later we shall see how his notion of rights has a strong connection with some other core concepts of liberalism, namely, peace and power. Finally, liberal orders tend to be commercial. Perhaps because of his background, Spinoza seems quite open to an appreciation of the nature and value of a commercial order. All of these views are motivated by the love and importance of liberty which is the essence of both liberalism and Spinoza’s political philosophy.



It is now important to say a few words about the philosophical framework from which Spinoza’s social and political theory emerged. As important as political theory was to Spinoza, he was first and foremost a philosopher dealing with metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, and ethics. Aspects of this part of Spinoza’s thought as it relates to our concerns here are best left to our third chapter. Here we should stick with the framework most directly related to political and social theory. Spinoza forcefully states that framework as follows:

In fact, [philosophers] conceive men, not as they are, but as they would like them to be. The result is that they have generally written satire instead of ethics, and have never conceived a political system which can be applied in practice; but have produced either

obvious fantasies, or schemes that could only have been put into effect in Utopia, or the poets' golden age where, of course, there is no need of them at all. Thus... no men are regarded as less fit to govern a state than theorists or philosophers. (*Tractatus Politicus* (henceforth TP): 1.1)

And again,

There is no doubt that statesmen have written much more successfully about politics than philosophers; for since experience has been their guide, they have taught nothing which could not be put into practice. (TP: 1.2)

Additionally,

I have therefore regarded human passions like love, hate, anger, envy, pride, pity, and the other feelings that agitate the mind, not as vices of human nature, but as properties which belong to it in the same way as heat, cold, storm, thunder and the like belong to the nature of the atmosphere. (TP: 1.4)

We see from the foregoing that Spinoza is working within what can be called a realist framework. In such a framework, we don't imagine some ideal persons or states of being and then judge our current situation from there. Instead we look to people "as they are" and draw our inferences about what should be done on that basis. In this way theory answers to practice, rather than the reverse. At the same time we say this, it is important to note that realism is not pessimism. Spinoza holds out the possibility—indeed the belief—that we can improve ourselves and make our condition better. We can only do so, however, if we have a realistic understanding of human nature. Success emanates from understanding, not dreaming.

Part of understanding human nature is to realize that people are moved more by their desires and passions than by reason. This realization means that passions that are particularly worrisome for politics—such as envy, lust for power, revenge, glory, and the like—need to be recognized and countered or redirected. Reason, however, will not be the main tool: "those who believe

that a people, or men divided over public business, can be induced to live by reason's dictate alone, are dreaming of the poets golden age or of a fairy-tale" (TP: I.5). Hence, "the causes and natural foundations of the state are not to be sought in the precepts of reason, but must be deduced from the common nature or constitution of men" (TP: I, 7). In traditional liberal thought, the recognition that state power can be abused in diverse ways through the influence of the various passions has led to the idea that the activities of the state should be controlled. In the case of the American Founding, for example, the idea was to limit the state to defined activities and to use checks and balances to counter attempted abuses of power. Spinoza's way of expressing the need to manage the passions likely to result in abuses of power is to call for political stability and security. Here stability and security mean that the state should not be subject to the passions of its rulers, but rather designed in such a way that those rulers are induced to do the right thing no matter what their motives.

Thus when the safety of a state depends on any man's good faith... it will be very unstable; if a state is to be capable of lasting, its administration must be so organized that it does not matter whether its rulers are led by reason or passion—they cannot be induced to break faith or act badly. In fact it makes no difference to the stability of a state what motive leads men to conduct its affairs properly, provided that they are conducted properly. For freedom or strength of mind is a private virtue; the virtue of the state is stability. (TP: I, 6)

Controlling passions within oneself is what Spinoza means here by freedom or strength of mind. We shall have something more to say about that later. What, then, is the key to and meaning of stability in this context?



In trying to answer this last question, there are two components to consider, namely, what is the purpose of the state and what form of political organization best adheres to that purpose. Spinoza is very clear about the purpose of the state.

It is not, I say, the purpose of the state to change men from rational beings into brutes or puppets; but rather to enable them to exercise their mental and physical powers in safety and use their reason freely, and to prevent them from fighting and quarrelling through hatred, anger, bad faith, and mutual malice. Thus the purpose of the state is really freedom. (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth TTP): XX)

One of the first things one notices about this statement of the purpose of the state is how limited the ends of the state are. Basically, the role of the state is to keep us from fighting or hurting one another so that we might exercise our powers in safety and freedom (TP: V, 2). Once safety and stability are achieved, one has freedom because there is little else for the state to do beyond maintaining that condition. Hence freedom is the purpose of the state. With freedom we are insured against being “brutes or puppets” where our capacities are not allowed to be exercised as we see fit. The two main obstructions to such freedom are continual conflict on the one hand and unwillingly having to do someone else’s bidding on the other. It is not the role of the state to make us better persons, or wealthy, or happy, or virtuous. The state is limited, and limited state activity and transparency of its rules are the hallmarks of a liberal order. As we shall see in chapter 3, freedom is also the means, and the only means, by which individuals and societies can become maximally empowered.

One of the characteristics of a liberal social and political order, as we have suggested, is it refrains from trying to control the behaviour of individuals even when undesirable consequences might result from that behaviour. Spinoza tells us that, “he who seeks to regulate everything by law will aggravate vices rather than correct them. What cannot be prohibited must necessarily be allowed, even if harm often ensues” (TTP: XX). As creatures of our passions, our passions will be what most of us will follow most of the time. Spinoza’s realism tells us this is just human nature. The state must thereby accord with that nature, meaning that it cannot be in the business of correcting our “vices” or fail to take them into account in making public policy. Rather, public policy can only competently seek to prevent those passions from threatening the safety and security of others. Quite consistently, and uncharacteristically for

his time, Spinoza was opposed to sumptuary laws—laws that restricted the consumption of “luxury” goods.

I therefore conclude that those vices that are prevalent in time of peace... should never be directly prevented but only by indirect means, that is, by laying such a foundation to the state that most men—I won't say will be eager to live wisely, for that is impossible—will be guided by such feelings as will conduce to the greater good of the commonwealth. (TP: X, 6)

And as we have seen, the foundation conducive to “the greater good” is one of maintaining safety and security. Establishing security and safety for all means that “the fool and the wise man have about an equal chance of happiness or unhappiness.” Both are governed by the same protections and the same rules. “To this end, reason and experience have taught us no surer means than to organize society according to fixed laws” (TTP: III)—that is, to organize society under well-defined rules applicable to all equally.

One aspect of the freedom from harm being described here includes another perhaps more positive freedom—the freedom to live as one wills. To do so requires not just security but also an atmosphere devoid of fear. Of course, one kind of fear is expressed in insecurity and instability. But Spinoza means more than this.

Men should be governed in such a way that they do not think of themselves as being governed but as living as they please and by their own free will, so that their only restraint is love of freedom, desire to increase their property, and hope of attaining offices of the state. (TP: X, 8)

Notice first that fear of one's government or rulers, even though it may create some order, is not the sort of government Spinoza wants. Not thinking of oneself as being governed is perhaps best insured by giving the citizens a say in their government—that is, by democracy—of which we shall speak momentarily. But notice also what Spinoza is saying here: the sorts of things people will be doing in a free state are things ordinary people do regularly—operate a business and get involved in their communities. And while it

may seem strange to think of the love of freedom as a “restraint,” if one loves their freedom, they are less likely to put up with those who want to control or restrict it in some way.



Spinoza’s push for a free state raises the question of who or what should be sovereign in such a state. Spinoza is the first thinker in the modern era to answer this question with “the people”—or in political terms, democracy. Spinoza lived in an era where the typical state was a political monarchy. And the chief political theorist prior to Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, advocated monarchy. Hence Spinoza’s defense of democracy was all the more distinctive for its time.

Spinoza tells us that democracy is “the most natural form of state, and to come nearest to preserving the freedom which nature allows the individual” (TTP: XVI). In addition, democracy is less prone to folly and more prone to peace and harmony than other forms of government.

There is less danger of foolish decrees in a democracy: first because it is practically impossible for the majority in an assembly, especially in a large assembly, to agree upon a piece of folly; and secondly because of the basis and aim of democracy, which... is precisely to avoid the follies of appetite, and to restrain men as far as possible within the bounds set by reason, that they may live in harmony and peace. Destroy this basis and the whole fabric will collapse at a touch. (TTP: XVI)

The foregoing passage links reason, freedom, and democracy together. Democracy may not always be perfect, but its links to freedom and reason are inexorable. “A state whose laws are based on sound reason enjoys the greatest freedom; for in it everyone can be free whenever he wishes, i.e., can live with a sound mind under the guidance of reason” (TTP: XVI). Since democracy requires that most of us both create the rules and agree to live under the rules we create, we are, in a democracy, doing what we will which, under these conditions, is also being guided by reason. For it is harmony and peace that we seek, so the political order that achieves that is stable, free, and in

accordance with what reason would dictate. It is important in this connection not to confuse stability with longevity.

Experience seems to teach that it makes for peace and harmony if all power is vested in one man. For no state has stood as long without any notable change as that of the Turks, and, conversely, none have proved so short-lived and so liable to constant civil strife as popular or democratic states. But if slavery, barbarism, and desolation are to be called peace, peace is the greatest misfortune that men can suffer... So it is slavery, not peace, that is furthered by the transfer of all power to one man; for peace, as I have said already, is not mere absence of war, but a union or harmony of minds. (TP: VI, 4)

Notice most especially that it is really freedom that Spinoza seeks, and as the passage indicates, political freedom comes through what we would today call cooperation—Spinoza’s “union or harmony of minds.” Cooperation insures the security and safety we spoke of above, as well as the positive sense of doing what one wills. Clearly order for the mere sake of order, or mere survival, are not the objects of a political regime. Whatever problems may beset democracy, its basic sense of cooperation among diverse individuals gives it superior status in Spinoza’s political theory.

However, “this union of minds is quite inconceivable unless the commonwealth does its best to achieve those conditions which sound reason declares to be for the good of all men” (TP: III, 7). Consequently, democracy at its best is the condition where virtually all members of the society *willingly* obey the same rules. Individuals are not, on the one hand, doing whatever they feel like doing, nor are they, on the other, slaves. But when they agree to the same rules, they are doing what they themselves will and are simultaneously creating political and social stability. For “the political order is naturally established to remove general fear and to dispel general suffering; and thus its chief aim is one which every rational man would try to promote” (TP: III, 6). Hence, living in the right political order is both rational and free.

As it turns out, “the commonwealth which is based on and directed by reason will be the most powerful” state (TP: III, 7). Democracy well-constructed is, then, for Spinoza, the most powerful state. We will have more to

say about power in the third chapter. For now, we can conclude that later in Spinoza's life he became more aware of the problems that might emerge from a democracy and that there might be different forms of democracy (TP: XI, 3). We see from the passage above mentioning the Turks that Spinoza saw that there can be instability under a democracy. But he never gave up the idea that power is both actually and best rooted in the people, and that democracy properly constructed is the most completely absolute form of government. He also never gave up his commitment to freedom, as we shall see in the next chapter.