Spinoza – A Man for Our Troubled Times

In these interesting times, we all need someone to admire. I have found such a one in Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), the 17th-century rationalist liberal philosopher who advocated freedom of thought and expression, toleration, and simple kindness.

Spinoza lived in what at the time was the most liberal place on earth, the Dutch Republic, his Jewish Portuguese family having moved there after Portugal expelled its Jewish population in 1497. He seems to have been a free thinker at an early age, and it apparently got him into trouble with the Jewish community of Amsterdam. In 1656, at the tender age 23, his synagogue banned him for life from the community for "abominable heresies … and … monstrous deeds." The excommunication decree — the *charem* — left no doubt about how the Jews of Amsterdam were to regard the young man:

> *By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.*

It ordered "that no one should communicate with him neither in writing nor accord him any favor nor stay with him under the same roof nor within four cubits [six feet] in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him."

Spinoza was not upset with this development; he apparently thought his excommunication merely saved him the trouble of leaving the community on his own initiative. So he changed his name from the Hebrew word for *blessed*, Baruch, to the Latin equivalent, Benedictus. However, he lived in a time and place in which being unaffiliated with any community had its disadvantages.

What had he done to deserve this treatment? No one is really sure because he had not yet written a word, and he would not publish a book for several years. But he must have been talking to friends about the philosophy he was formulating. If so, we should have no problem understanding why Spinoza would have outraged the Jewish authorities, who feared anything that might jeopardize the community's relatively free status in the Protestant republic. His writings, published between those of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, would reject the immortality of the soul and the divine origin of the Bible, while arguing that God was nothing more than nature, or existence, itself, without a consciousness or will with which to command, reward, punish, or listen to human beings. His famous phrase was *Deus sive Natura*, God or/as Nature. For Spinoza, nothing could be beyond nature and logic; thus, no supernatural being or realm existed.

When I (along with others) nominate Spinoza for hero status, I am thinking specifically of his political philosophy, which he expressed in his anonymously published *A Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), which was condemned as "a book forged in hell." The authorship of the book soon became an open secret, and all but his book on Descartes were banned in the Dutch Republic and elsewhere. Spinoza also lived in interesting times, which were no doubt on his mind as he formulated his outlook: the Thirty Years' War ended in 1648 and the English Civil War raged from 1642 to 1651.

As the libertarian philosopher Douglas Den Uyl notes in *God, Man, and Well-Being: Spinoza's Modern Humanism*, Spinoza was very much in the tradition of Greek philosophy, but he went the Greek thinkers one better by rejecting the state as a shaper of souls and promoter of virtue. What Spinoza called "blessedness" cannot be achieved through external forces but only through an internal process that individuals undertake. (Den Uyl's earlier book on Spinoza, a doctoral dissertation, is *Power, State, and Freedom: An Interpretation of Spinoza's Political Philosophy*.)

For Spinoza (alas, no anarchist, but see Daniel Garber's lecture at 44:00), the socially contracted democratic-republican state had one task: to produce security — full stop. Security enables individuals to 1) live in safety, 2) pursue understanding, which is the key to activeness, power in the sense of efficacy, virtue, and excellence, and 3) enjoy the benefits of cooperation with others through the division of labor. But, properly, number two is neither the state's direct nor indirect goal. Against the claim that Spinoza looked to the state to promote virtue if only indirectly, Den Uyl refers to Spinoza's unfinished *Political Treatise*, where he writes, "The best way to organize a state is easily discovered by

considering the purpose of civil order, which is nothing other than peace and security of life." Virtue is not even an indirect goal? No, because, Den Uyl points out, the failure of people to become more virtuous would not indicate a deficiency in the state. Virtue is a private internal matter.

As an aside, I note that for Spinoza, living actively according to reason (understanding), rather than passively according to appetites and (other) "external" forces, enables one to accomplish more than one's own flourishing directly; it also encourages others to live according to reason, which in turn further promotes one's own flourishing.

Another Spinoza scholar who finds this political philosophy especially worth studying today is Steven Nadler. In his 2016 *Aeon* article "Why Spinoza Still Matters" (from which many of the Spinoza quotes below are taken), Nadler writes:

> *At a time when Americans seem willing to bargain away their freedoms for security, when politicians talk of banning people of a certain faith from our shores, and when religious zealotry exercises greater influence on matters of law and public policy, Spinoza's philosophy – especially his defence of democracy, liberty, secularity and toleration – has never been more timely. In his distress over the deteriorating political situation in the Dutch Republic, and despite the personal danger he faced, Spinoza did not hesitate to boldly defend the radical Enlightenment values that he, along with many of his compatriots, held dear. In Spinoza we can find inspiration for resistance to oppressive authority and a role model for intellectual opposition to those who, through the encouragement of irrational beliefs and the maintenance of ignorance, try to get citizens to act contrary to their own best interests.…*
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> *The political ideal that Spinoza promotes in the Theological-Political Treatise is a secular, democratic commonwealth, one that is free from meddling by ecclesiastics. Spinoza is one of history's most eloquent advocates for freedom and toleration.*

In his treatise, Spinoza was quite clear: "The state can pursue no safer course than to regard piety and religion as consisting solely in the exercise of charity and just dealing, and

that the right of the sovereign, both in religious and secular spheres, should be restricted to men's actions, with everyone being allowed to think what he will and to say what he thinks."

And: "Freedom to philosophise [on *all* things –SR] may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic, but that it cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself."

Further: "A government that attempts to control men's minds is regarded as tyrannical, and a sovereign is thought to wrong his subjects and infringe their right when he seeks to prescribe for every man what he should accept as true and reject as false, and what are the beliefs that will inspire him with devotion to God. All these are matters belonging to individual right, which no man can surrender even if he should so wish."

Nadler elaborates: "No matter what laws are enacted against speech and other means of expression, citizens will continue to say what they believe, only now they will do so in secret. Any attempt to suppress freedom of expression will, once again, only weaken the bonds of loyalty that unite subjects to sovereign. In Spinoza's view, intolerant laws lead ultimately to anger, revenge and sedition."

For Spinoza, it was not enough to have only the freedom to *think* any thoughts. "The more difficult case," Nadler writes, "concerns the liberty of citizens to express those beliefs, either in speech or in writing. And here Spinoza goes further than anyone else in the 17th century:

> *'Utter failure will attend any attempt in a commonwealth to force men to speak only as prescribed by the sovereign despite their different and opposing opinions.... The most tyrannical government will be one where the individual is denied the freedom to express and to communicate to others what he thinks, and a moderate government is one where this freedom is granted to every man.'"*

Alas, Spinoza was no modern libertarian, although (as Nadler emphasizes) he was a far better liberal than John Locke, whose Letter Concerning Toleration did not extend the courtesy to the *beliefs*, not to mention the public displays, of atheists and Catholics.

Nevertheless, Spinoza thought one can be free "in any kind of state." How so? The free person is guided by reason, he wrote, and reason favors peace; therefore, the reasonable person obeys the state's laws because "peace … cannot be attained unless the general laws of the state be respected. Therefore the more he is free, the more constantly will he

respect the laws of his country, and obey the commands of the sovereign power to which he is subject." Now Spinoza might have been thinking of a commonwealth in which the laws are perfectly appropriate to rational persons — except that he says we can be free in *any kind of state*. Does it follow that ignoring unjust statutes really risks general civil strife? I think Spinoza would reply, in a Hobbesian way, that "justice is dependent on the laws of the authorities." Yes, civil strife is not conducive to the good life, but neither are unjust statutes.

Spinoza drew a more-or-less bright line between the expression of thoughts and action. As Nadler points out (in this video), Spinoza thought the secular authority had a right to dictate how religion was *publicly* practiced in order to safeguard the peace. Practitioners of alternative religions should be fully free to think and say what they please, but their public rites were to be permitted only within prescribed limits. As one can see, Spinoza is in some respects a Hobbesian though he was more liberal because Hobbes, unlike Spinoza, had the sovereign serving as the arbiter of right opinion in religious and other matters — for the sake of civil peace, of course. The one time that Spinoza mentions Hobbes is in a note in his treatise: "Now reason (though Hobbes thinks otherwise) is always on the side of peace, which cannot be attained unless the general laws of the state be respected."

Spinoza wrote:

> *The rites of religion and the outward observances of piety should be in accordance with the public peace and well-being, and should therefore be determined by the sovereign power alone. I speak here only of the outward observances of piety and the external rites of religion, not of piety, itself, nor of the inward worship of God, nor the means by which the mind is inwardly led to do homage to God in singleness of heart.*

Moreover, Nadler says, "Spinoza does not support the absolute freedom of speech. He explicitly states that the expression of seditious ideas is not to be tolerated by the sovereign. There's to be no protection for speech that advocates the overthrow of the government, disobedience to its laws, or harm to fellow citizens." Citizens should be free to argue for repeal of laws, but that's about it; they may not rebel or even express ideas that *implicitly* call for rebellion because it would undermine the social contract and peace. Nadler acknowledges that, despite Spinoza's definition of *seditious beliefs*, the vagueness of that phrase and his notion of implicitly inciting rebellion properly trouble civil libertarians.

Nevertheless, Spinoza ends his treatise on a high note: “The safest way for a state is to lay down the rule that religion is comprised solely in the exercise of charity and justice, and that the rights of rulers in sacred, no less than in secular matters, should merely have to do with actions, but that every man should think what he likes and say what he thinks.” Not bad for 1677.

Spinoza knew he was entirely free in the world’s freest state. (Friends had been persecuted by the state for their ideas.) Besides not putting his name on the book, which was written in Latin rather than the vernacular, he wrote in his final paragraph:

> *It remains only to call attention to the fact that I have written nothing which I do not most willingly submit to the examination and approval of my country’s rulers; and that I am willing to retract anything which they shall decide to be repugnant to the laws, or prejudicial to the public good. I know that I am a man, and as a man liable to error, but against error I have taken scrupulous care, and have striven to keep in entire accordance with the laws of my country, with loyalty, and with morality.*

Whatever his limits, we have much to learn from and admire about Spinoza, especially these days.