

Chapter 2

Spinoza on Toleration

In 1656, at the age of 23, Baruch Spinoza was literally excommunicated from the Jewish community in Amsterdam for his views on God, the law, and the soul. Members of that community were forbidden to associate or communicate with him. This happened even though Spinoza's main discussion of religion, in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), did not appear until 1670. Across Europe, religion was perhaps the predominant cultural force. Controversies abounded and intolerance was common, even, at times, in relatively tolerant countries such as the Netherlands. Within a given religious sect, conformity was often strictly enforced. In addition, during the early years of Spinoza's life, the "30 Years War" was raging. That war began as a religious war, though by the end it became more of a war over religious affiliations than over religion itself. Religious affiliation was perhaps the most common basis for group identification in that era. In Spinoza's case, during his lifetime he circulated among some of the more liberal and radical religious sects. He had, for example, a number of Mennonite friends, and that sect was an offshoot of the Anabaptist movement, which advocated a strong separation of church and state. No doubt their "radical" doctrines both attracted and subsequently influenced Spinoza—and also put him at odds with the establishment of both the Jewish and Christian communities in Amsterdam.

But it was not only Spinoza's personal affiliations that made him an outsider. His own beliefs and doctrines were themselves quite outside the norm. Although it is not our intention to discuss these doctrines here, knowing something about them is useful for understanding his call for toleration. Perhaps most striking is Spinoza's identification of God with nature. God, for Spinoza, was not an entity distinct from the natural world who was responsible for, at some point, creating nature. He believed that God is simply whatever is and whatever is is simply an expression of God—no separation. Some have

called this pantheism, others atheism. Still others, such as the German poet Novalis, described Spinoza as the “God intoxicated man.” However one labels this view, it is clearly unorthodox! In addition, Spinoza had other controversial views. He held, contrary to his upbringing, that the Jews were not the chosen people (TTP: III) and that sacred rites contributed nothing to blessedness (TTP: V). Moreover, he held that the Hebrew prophets were endowed with vivid imaginations whereas only Jesus saw things adequately, that is, in accord with reason (TTP: IV). Because of such doctrines, in many places Spinoza’s books were burned or banned. For a long time, even citing Spinoza positively could be dangerous.

One can see why, then, Spinoza would have an interest in toleration. And given the importance of religion in his era, one of the first concepts that comes to mind when thinking of liberalizing religion is toleration. Toleration allows for diversity while at the same time minimizing violence and persecution. It is nonetheless difficult to come by in a religious environment where there is a tendency to seek conformity to doctrine and to hold firm to the certainty of the truth of one’s beliefs. Perhaps the most famous defense of toleration in the Western tradition is John Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, first published in 1689. This was the same year that Spinoza’s TTP was published in English.

There may actually be more than a temporal connection between Spinoza and Locke. Locke took refuge in Amsterdam in 1683 from a political scandal known as the Rye House Plot, an alleged Whig conspiracy to assassinate Charles II of England because of his pro-Roman Catholic policies. Although Spinoza had died in 1677, Locke frequented the same groups of religious pluralists as did Spinoza, and Spinoza’s ideas would have been well incorporated into these groups by that time. Moreover, there is evidence the Locke was familiar with Spinoza long before his exile in Amsterdam (see Klever, 2012). Indeed, the evidence runs contrary to Locke’s own public statement that he did not know much about Spinoza—a claim more likely made out of prudence than truth. As noted above, Spinoza’s writings were often so controversial that there was peril in admitting any sort of connection to them. Nonetheless, Locke possessed all of Spinoza’s works, as well as the works of many of Spinoza’s critics, and from marginal notes it is clear he was familiar with them. Moreover, Locke’s views on revelation, prophecy, and the relationship between faith and reason are remarkably similar to Spinoza’s,

even though Spinoza was not a Christian. In short, Locke's *Letter* may be better known, and for that reason more influential than the relevant parts of Spinoza's TTP, but that only highlights Spinoza's historical importance in giving toleration a central role in the cannon of liberalism.

What, then, is the foundation of Spinoza's view of tolerance? The following two passages lay out that foundation for us:

How dangerous it is to apply religious law to matters purely speculative, and to legislate concerning beliefs about which it is common or possible for men to dispute; for tyranny is at its worst where the opinions to which everyone has an inalienable right are regarded as criminal. (TTP: XVIII, 2)

and

The safest way to protect a state from these evils is to make piety and worship consist simply in works, i.e., simply in the practice of charity and justice, and otherwise to leave the individual his freedom of judgment. (TTP: XVIII, 2)

These two passages bring out two fundamental points in Spinoza's defense of toleration and freedom of thought. The first is that trying to control or censor thought, and even speech, is likely to end in tyranny because these are not easily controllable. They are not controllable because we all have opinions and they often differ. To make them conform requires force, which, Spinoza believed, apart from its inherent inconveniences is destructive of human progress. We'll have more to say about progress in the next chapter, but it's easy enough to see that force tends to freeze activity rather than promote it. The second point to keep in mind is expressed in the second passage cited above. If we stick to the common denominator for all faiths, namely, that we behave justly and charitably towards our neighbours, then we both achieve peace and avoid tyranny. For if the state limits itself simply to the task of enforcing justice and encouraging civility, then we have both freedom of opinion and a stable, prosperous public order. In this way, faith and reason can converge, at least socially, since they encourage the very same necessary public benefit.

We should note, however, that toleration is not the same as acceptance. To tolerate something is to allow for something that one disagrees with, believes is mistaken, or is a practice one would not adopt for oneself. Today toleration and acceptance are often confused or regarded to be the same. Yet in some ways tolerance is harder to achieve than acceptance, because it implies that one can allow for ideas or practices that one may not agree with or condone. In this way toleration implies freedom of thought, whereas acceptance implies conformity of belief. In Spinoza's time, and in his arguments, the issue was to defend toleration—particularly with respect to religion.

Second, we should also note that our subject here is the role of the state in controlling or regulating speech and belief, and not necessarily how private individuals should have to regard each other. If the state allows a diversity of religious practices and beliefs, then of course one must also do so as a matter of social practice. But not only does that not imply an acceptance of those beliefs or practices by any given individual, it does not even imply that any given individual must possess an attitude of tolerance towards others. Spinoza's point is that the purview of the state is external behaviour, not internal thoughts. The "wrong" attitude is none of the state's business; the wrong action is. As Spinoza notes, the civil order can, at best, only control some forms of behaviour, though even there its scope is limited. So in the end for Spinoza, "he who seeks to determine everything by law will aggravate vices rather than correct them" (TTP: XX).

The strong defense of toleration and freedom of thought and expression are to be found throughout Spinoza's works, but especially in chapter XX of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. There he is most explicit about the purpose of the state as we described it in the previous chapter.

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. (TTP: XX)

Notice how this passage combines the two passages quoted just above. Keeping people from harming one another is the concern of the state. Within

that framework, thinking and acting as one pleases should be allowed. The further suggestion here is that this liberal approach accords with our nature, which is to be rational beings. And to be a rational being means to be able to act on one's judgment within the constraint of not harming others. That is our nature, and there's a sense in Spinoza's writing that living according to that nature is best. For this reason, Spinoza notes that, "given... that human nature is such, it follows that laws which proscribe beliefs do not affect the wicked but the liberal-minded" (TTP: XX). Proscribing beliefs is a way of coercing conformity, whereas rational beings open-mindedly consider different alternatives and may form different judgments about those alternatives. Our nature is to consider and express, and whatever impedes that impedes both the self and society generally.

As it turns out, and as evidenced in the following passage, democracy is the most natural form of government and the one most likely to respect freedom of thought and expression.

[I]t is necessary to allow freedom of judgement, and so to govern men that they can express different and conflicting opinions without ceasing to live in harmony. This government is undoubtedly best, and least subject to inconveniences; for it is best suited to human nature. I have shown that in a democracy (which comes nearest to the natural condition) all make a covenant to act, but not to judge and think, in accordance with the common decision... Thus the less freedom of judgement men are allowed, the greater is the departure from the most natural condition, and, in consequence, the more oppressive is the government. (TTP: XX)

Because it is rational for us to consider alternatives and to have diverse plans of life—and being rational in this way is natural to us—the political condition that allows our nature to express itself would be the best one. What Spinoza means by "common decision" is that in a democracy we adopt rules and procedures common to all that are put there by general assent. And because of the general assent and commonality of the rules, people are governing themselves rather than being governed. Aristocracy and monarchy are thus less natural in this respect, as they suggest people being governed by others. As a result, democracies are more likely to be liberal about free speech

and expression than are other forms of government, though Spinoza admits that no form is perfect in this regard.

Spinoza conveniently sums up for us the conclusions of his arguments. Here is what he says:

I have thus shown—

- I. That it is impossible to deprive men of the freedom to say what they think.
- II. That this freedom can be granted to everyone without infringing the right and authority of the sovereign...
- III. That it is no danger to the peace of the state; and that all troubles arising from it can be easily checked
- IV. That it is no danger to piety either.
- V. That laws passed about speculative matters are utterly useless; and finally,
- VI. That this freedom not only can be granted without danger to public peace, piety, and the right of the sovereign, but actually must be granted if they are all to be preserved. (TTP: XX)

In short, Spinoza's doctrine on toleration and free speech is much like the views of many classical liberals who came later: the state limits itself to actions alone, and to those actions that involve or incline towards harm to others. Freedom of thought and expression are thus not only allowed, but also believed to be good for both the individual and the well-being of the state and society. And although Spinoza may have been largely motivated by a consideration of religious intolerance prevalent in his day, he clearly intends these conclusions to apply across the board to virtually any topic.

We must conclude this chapter, however, with a brief introduction to our discussion to follow in the next. Given what we have said above, it might be rather surprising to read the following from the same account in which Spinoza defends freedom and toleration.

What I am discussing now is not [a ruler's] right, but the good of the state. Admittedly, he has the right to rule with the utmost violence, and to hale citizens off to execution on the most trivial

pretexts; but everyone will deny that he can do so with the approval of sound reason. (TTP: XX)

It may look to us like Spinoza is contradicting himself. After all, he was defending a limited state and virtually complete freedom of expression. Now it looks like the sovereign—and here he means every sort of sovereignty from democracy to monarchy—has every right to do as it pleases! One would think he'd be saying the sovereign has no such right.

While it may seem foreign to us because we are used to using terms like “right” and “rights” in ways that carry an idea of goodness and duty with them, Spinoza has a different doctrine. Basically, the doctrine is something like “might makes right.” To speak of someone’s right as strictly a function of their power is anathema to us. We think this way, however, because we have been following a different tradition of talking about rights—one that might be regarded as centered around John Locke and the notion that rights reflect moral claims and duties of some sort. But Locke came after Spinoza, and ways of thinking about rights did not yet have such a defined and universal tradition of discourse. So Spinoza was, in a way, on his own. Our task then is to make some sense of how Spinoza’s doctrine of right can be reconciled with the liberal positions he also adopts. To that task we now turn.