

Chapter 3

Spinoza on Freedom and Power

In political philosophy there is an approach called “social contract” theory. Basically, this view began, at least in the modern era, with Thomas Hobbes and holds that the sovereign power—and sometimes also the legitimacy of that power—is established by people “contracting” with one another to set up a government. The time prior to when people get together to set up their government is known as the “state of nature.” The state of nature is thus that period of time, before any general agreement, when there is no government. There are different theories about what such a time would be like, or even whether it is truly possible to have a state of nature. Also, there are different theories about how the move out of the state of nature would go. Although it is debatable whether Spinoza is actually a social contract theorist, he does comment about our natural state and our natural rights, as well as the setting up of a government. Let’s begin with what Spinoza takes to be our natural rights and then move to the state of nature and the rights of government.

Thus the natural right of nature as a whole, and consequently the natural right of each individual, extends as far as its power. Hence everything a man does out of the law of his nature, he does by the sovereign right of nature, and he has as much right against other things in nature as he has power and strength. (TP: II, 4)

It follows that the right and law of nature under which all men are born and for the most part live, forbids nothing but what nobody desires and nobody can do; it forbids neither strife, nor hatred, nor anger, nor deceit; in short, it is opposed to nothing that appetite can suggest. (TP: II, 8)

And moreover,

It also follows that one individual is subject to the right of another, or dependent upon him, for as long as he is subject to the other's power; and possessed of his own right, or free, in so far as he can repel all force, take what vengeance he pleases for harm done him, and, to speak generally, live as his own nature and judgment dictate. (TP: II, 9)

Clearly Spinoza identifies “right” with “power.” One has the right to do whatever one has the power to accomplish. Thus if I lie to you, I have the right to do so; or if I murder you, I have the right to do so. This all sounds crazy! Normally we would say exactly the opposite—that I don't have the right to murder you any more than you have the right to murder me. Just because one *can* do something doesn't mean they *should* or that they have the right to do so. Right?

We will come back to that question in a moment. First let's notice the second passage quoted where all the negative emotions are mentioned. Apart from reiterating the rights-as-power thesis, these are mentioned to emphasize Spinoza's desire to have a realistic political theory, as we noted in the first chapter. In other words, people in the real world do have such emotions and a political theory that ignores them or supposes people will not act on them is one that is not realistic. Moreover, to suppose that such emotions are not common, even at times prevalent, would be naïve as well. Spinoza notes in many places that people are often not guided by reason but rather by emotion, and often those emotions can be the ones listed here. In many respects, the main job of a government is to control the effects that can arise from such emotions—effects that cause harm or injury to others, or incite such consequences. The other point to notice comes from the first quotation and is the phrase “right against other things.” That phraseology will become important to us shortly below.

The third paragraph quoted above suggests again that right and power are the same. However, it further links power relations among people to a conception of freedom. Both of these factors point to Spinoza's different way of looking at the state of nature. Typically, say in the writings of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, people contract themselves out of the state of nature.

The language usually used is that they give up their right to do whatever they want to a sovereign power that restricts certain actions and allows others. In Locke's case, people in the state of nature are fairly independent and only give up a few of the rights they had as individuals to the state, such as defense and punishment. In Hobbes' case, one transfers all one's rights and then the state decides what people will and will not be allowed to do. In all such situations, the existence of the state amounts to a fundamental transformation away from life in the state of nature. Not so, as Spinoza tells it.

First of all, the state of nature is a virtual impossibility for Spinoza because people would have little or no power. That is, as atomized individuals with no connection to others, we would be essentially powerless. "Hence human natural right or freedom is a nonentity as long as it is an individual possession determined by individual power" (TP: II, 15). Essentially, in the state of nature where we are completely on our own we would be too weak to survive. We need the help of others in some way to link their own limited power with our own to create enough power to defend ourselves and produce things for survival. As Spinoza puts it, an individual's power in such a situation "exists in imagination rather than fact" (TP: II, 15). So although it seems at first like you can do anything you want in the state of nature, you actually can do little or nothing at all. You certainly are not going to waste your strength killing someone else if you need that strength to keep them from killing you! You do have as much right as you have power; but that turns out to be very little in the state of nature.

Ironically and perhaps seemingly contradictorily, Spinoza says we never leave the state of nature: "the individual's right of nature does not cease in the political order" (TP: III, 3). How can he both say there really is no state of nature and that we never leave it? To answer this question, we need to distinguish between the principle involved and the actual actions allowed by that principle. The principle involved is that all actions, and thus all relations among actors, are power relations. Whether you organize as a marauding gang, a village, a monarchy, or a democracy—or any other set of connections for that matter—you have established a certain set of power relations. Hence it does not matter whether a complete state of nature is ever possible. No matter what set of relations one has, they will still be in keeping with the basic principle that all is power. The reason the term "state of nature" is used in this context is because the traditional theory begins with the idea that power starts

in the hands of individuals who then may join together to create a sovereign power. No matter what the arrangement, individuals still remain the origin of power, as in the state of nature, even if some arrangements may minimize their ability to exercise it.

But the logic of Spinoza's point has another very interesting dimension—it allows for change, indeed his view *implies* process. Power is something that often varies. It increases or decreases, but generally seeks to extend itself. We noted about the first quotation that Spinoza speaks of a “right against other things.” Power does not exist in a vacuum. It exerts itself in the midst of others exerting themselves. In essence, then, we have a complex group of powers exerting themselves against other powers also exerting themselves. There are similar and contrary directions of these exertions of power, and this process never ends. Just as in the state of nature when the “first powers” of individuals combine to form a sovereign power, that new sovereign power then finds itself in a space of other, perhaps contrary, similar powers. And not only does that power find itself among similar alternative powers, but the very alliances that made the original “contract” may themselves be shifting, causing changes in the power exertions of the sovereign power they created.

We might say about all this more normally that politics has both international and domestic power relations to consider. Both dimensions are in constant flux due to changing power alignments and directions. In that very flux there are “good” and “bad” motives, intentions, and actions among the individuals involved. The “bad” are as much a part of the power plays as the “good”—maybe more so! Hence social and political life is always, in this regard, in the same state of newly realigning power entanglements and disentanglements—that is, we are always in the state of nature in the sense of always forming new alliances.

To appreciate the point more fully, we need to spend a moment on Spinoza's more general philosophy, which is primarily found in his work entitled *Ethics* (hereafter cited as “E”). The work itself is organized “mathematically” with axioms, definitions, propositions, proofs, and the like. The Latin term for the organization is *more geometrico*, or we would say “geometrically,” as in a geometry text. It is a very interesting but complicated work with many different dimensions, including axioms, definitions, propositions, proofs, corollaries, and scholiums. It begins with a philosophy of God and ends with a discussion of human freedom. Besides God and human freedom

the work covers such subjects as free will, emotions, reason, happiness, mind and matter, and related themes. We cannot pursue these themes here, however interesting they may be. Instead let's look for a moment at Spinoza's core idea as it applies to our topic of political liberalism.

First, when talking about the concept of power in Spinoza, we are not just talking about human beings. Everything that exists exhibits power. All existing things, animate and inanimate, can be said to have a disposition to remain in existence and to be exerting themselves into their environment. As Spinoza puts it, "each thing, insofar as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being" (E3P6). This endeavor is what Spinoza calls "conatus." Hence, "the conatus with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself" (E3P7). Spinoza further elaborates by saying that, "the power of anything, or the conatus with which it acts or endeavors to act, alone or in conjunction with other things, that is... the power or conatus by which it endeavors to persist in its own being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing" (*Ethics* 3: P7, Proof). That dispositional power is what is essential to them, so power is what is essential to everything.

To put the point in more ordinary terms, imagine a table and a person in front of you. Both exist in certain ways, representing the power they are currently exercising within their environment. If you or the other person bang the table as hard as you can with your hand, the table is likely to be able to resist that blow, but the hand is likely to be hurt. However, the table is not likely to be able to exert itself successfully against a sledgehammer. Similarly, the person across from you has a package of powers much more complicated than the table's. The powers here can be psychological and situational as well as physical. If the person is your boss the powers are of one type; if the person is your subordinate, another. Your "conatus" may be exerting itself to become the boss, or to simply obey. Whatever configuration exists, for Spinoza there is both a set of limitations as well as a set of dispositions to maintain and increase one's power. Every finite thing can be destroyed by something more powerful, so something is always pressing against us as we press against others. The only unlimited powerful being is God.

Your desires represent ways of pushing against your environment. If you want to be the boss, that motivates you to "extend your being" in that direction. You may or may not be successful depending upon the countervailing forces you face. If you don't want to be the boss, you have other desires,

and you want to extend your being in those directions. Others, of course, are doing the same with their desires. The world is a never-ending process of an interplay of powers. The question now becomes what can one do to extend and maximize one's power? Spinoza's answer is to be active rather than passive, so let's take a moment to explore that idea.

Here is what Spinoza says about being active and passive:

I say we are active when something takes place, in us or externally to us of which we are the adequate cause; that is... when from our nature there follows in us or externally to us something which can be clearly and distinctly understood through our nature alone. On the other hand, I say that we are passive when something takes place in us, or follows from our nature, of which we are the partial cause. (Ethics 3: Def. 2)

This description sounds very complicated, but for our purposes the point is rather simple. One is active when one “clearly and distinctly” understands what one is doing in the environment in which one is engaged. One is “passive” when one is being controlled by forces that are unclear and seem to be outside oneself. Though there are exceptions, emotions are typically passive states of being. They happen to us or come upon us. So the more understanding and reason we have, the more active we are in any given situation. To put it even more simply, when one knows what's going on, one is more likely to be able to handle the situation than when one does not understand. One can, so to speak, exert oneself more competently in one's environment when guided by understanding.

As we noted earlier, perhaps most of us most of the time are moved by our passions, appetites, and emotions. Hence, by Spinoza's account, most of us are passive most of the time. The consequences of following any given emotion or passion may or may not help us increase our power, but clearer understanding will surely do so. Furthermore, the mind has a propensity to want to push in that direction of increasing our power through clarity of understanding (E3P12ff). Spinoza calls this clarity of understanding “reason.” The more we reason the more likely it is that we will be successful in our environment. There are even, in such cases, emotions attending to the process of reasoning which Spinoza calls “active emotions.” They no doubt help motivate

us to seek more clarity and understanding. But the point here is the same: acting through reason gives us more power to maneuver in our environment (see e.g., E 4: Appendix).

Now what is interesting is that Spinoza tells us that “by virtue and power I mean the same thing” (E 4: Def. 8). So to be powerful is to be virtuous, and the degree of one’s virtue is measured by the degree of one’s power. Spinoza elaborates that point in the following way: “true virtue is nothing other than to live by the guidance of reason, and so weakness consists solely in this, that a man suffers himself to be led by things external to himself” (E 4: P37, Scholium 1). At the same time he tells us again what we noted earlier, namely, that “every individual’s right is defined by his virtue or power.” What are we to make of all this? Is Spinoza saying that a Mafia boss is more virtuous than, say, a college professor? In actuality it is likely that from Spinoza’s perspective the reverse holds: The Mafia boss has less power than the college professor.

We can begin to unpack this paradox by paying attention to the words quoted above—what is “external to himself.” The Mafia boss is likely to be driven by many forces external to himself, such as fear, suspicion, lust, hatred, pride, arrogance, and many other such passions and emotions. These make the Mafia boss “passive” in Spinoza’s understanding of passivity. Being passive is less powerful than being active, as we noted above. The college professor, by contrast, is likely to have a clear understanding of her interests and how to conduct the life she has chosen for herself. Perhaps that involves a willingness to give up income she could otherwise have because a more modest lifestyle supports her studies. Perhaps it is clarity about her research goals. Perhaps her heightened ability to reflect and think puts her more in control of her life. Whatever the case may be, if she is more guided by reason than the Mafia boss, she has more power over her life than he does. However that may be, the obvious objection is that the Mafia boss has more power over *other* people than the professor. Ignoring the fact that the Mafia boss probably spends most of his time being suspicious and mistrusting those around him, thus living constantly in a kind of fear, is power over someone the sort of power that makes one powerful? In pursuing this question we shall finally be returning to the social political context that is the focus of our inquiries here.

The simplest way to answer the last question is with another one: is the way to accomplish more things to do so through cooperation or through

command and control? Perhaps some might choose the latter, but Spinoza would not. Let's go back to the state of nature again. By ourselves we are basically too weak to survive for long (TP: VI, 1). By joining forces and cooperating with others we gain the power to survive and expand. People can "much more easily meet their needs by mutual help and can ward off ever-threatening perils only by joining forces" (E 4: P35, Schol.). This cooperative endeavor accords with sound reason (TP: 3, 6). First of all, "the whole teaching of reason is that men should seek peace" (TP: 3, 6), so banding together to leave the state of nature, where the absence of law makes conflict inevitable, is rational. In addition, "the commonwealth which is based on and directed by reason will be most powerful and most fully possessed of its own right" (TP: 3, 7). Command and conflict imply passivity; cooperation and coordination imply activity.

Just as the power of an individual is diminished when she is led more by fear than reason, "commands which arouse the indignation of a great number of subjects hardly fall within the right of the commonwealth" (TP: 3, 9). So while we must take the fact that individuals often act more out of emotion than reason when we are designing a commonwealth (or political community), the commonwealth itself should not be encouraging divisive emotions. That would only diminish the power of the commonwealth. Peace is the path to power. The upshot of this politically is,

Since the right of the commonwealth is determined by the collective power of the people, the greater the number of subjects who are given cause by a commonwealth to join in conspiracy against it, the more must its power and right be diminished... what is true of each citizen, or of each man in the state of nature, is true of the commonwealth also; the greater the cause for fear it has, the less it is possessed of its own right. (TP: 3, 9)

No doubt early solutions to the state of nature problem involved gang-like arrangements of marauding bands commanded by a dictatorial leader. Yet by rearranging the forms and modes of cooperation societies can become more complex and powerful. Think of the difference between the power manifested by our society today at both the individual and social levels and the power individuals would have in, for example, a medieval society of serfs and lords and ladies. True, some few individuals back then might have more power

than some individuals in our society today, but overall, especially in commercial societies, all social ranks have significantly increased power due to the forms of cooperation that have developed in modern societies. In other words, both the society as a whole today, as well as the vast majority of individuals that compose it, have more power than their counterparts back then in terms of having the resources to follow their desires and achieve their goals. One is reminded in this regard of Adam Smith and the cooperation that defines the division of labour: “it is the great multiplication of the productions of all the different arts, in consequence of the division of labour, which occasions, in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people” (Smith, 1789/1981: Bk I, ch 1, para 10).

If certain forms of cooperation are more efficient and thus more power enhancing than others, what might be the key to such enhancements? The division of labour as a pattern of cooperation as Smith uses it is a version of the following answer Spinoza himself gives to this question:

It is when every man is most devoted to seeking his own advantage that men are of most advantage to one another. For the more every man seeks his own advantage and endeavors to preserve himself, the more he is endowed with virtue. (E 4: P35, Corollary 2)

If we concentrate our attentions on what we can control and understand about our own interests, desires, abilities, and circumstances, we can better match ourselves with the interests and talents of others. Keeping in mind that this can be done only when individuals have the freedom to follow their interests—and that in turn requires that interactions among people be voluntary—one realizes why peace and freedom are so complimentary. The voluntary alignment of powers is in its nature peaceful as well as efficient. It is also rational in that it focuses our attention upon what we are most likely be able to understand and want to preserve, namely, the success of our own endeavours.

We can now see that despite what may seem to us some rather different terminology when it comes to talking about rights and power, Spinoza’s point is simply that if you want a prosperous and successful society, what we would call a liberal order is the means to that. In other words, individual freedom, peace, and order promote cooperation and thus social and personal

advancement. So although equating rights and power looks like a recipe for oppression, exactly the opposite is what Spinoza is arguing. Oppression stifles power and thus success; freedom liberates it.

Conclusion

We end our reflections on Spinoza and the rise of liberalism with the idea that liberal orders are successful ones. Such has proven to be the case historically. The most prosperous and powerful societies have adopted liberal values, at least partially. We have also seen that liberal values are in accord with human nature in that we are disposed to develop ourselves into the world that surrounds us. More politically, we have seen that democracy coupled with tolerance, both of which are hallmark characteristics of liberalism, is Spinoza's preferred political arrangement. In essence, democracy comes down to a willing conformity to the laws of the land which are themselves only concerned with regulating actions that may harm others. The freedom of individual choice and action is thus paramount. Spinoza was no dreamer. He advocated realism in politics. But a good part of that realism involved the recognition that only a limited state can be a powerful and successful one. The direction towards liberalism to which Spinoza first pointed has been followed up by numerous later thinkers. Their frameworks may have been different, but what they recognized were the basic liberal values Spinoza was one of the first to recognize: individual freedom, popular sovereignty, toleration, and prosperity.