



“Stop Being So Judgmental!”: A Spinozist Model of Personal Tolerance

Justin Steinberg

Contents

Introduction	2
Tolerance as a Personal Virtue	3
Spinoza on Intolerance	5
Being Judgmental	5
Intolerance and Disagreement	6
Spinoza on Becoming Less Judgmental	7
Suspension: The Official Account	7
Suspension as Ambivalence or Persistent Vacillation	8
Restricting the Scope of One’s Judgments	10
Spinoza on Tolerating Disagreement	11
Non-contemptuous Engagement and Suspending Reactive Attitudes	11
Sincere Engagement	13
Toleration, Trust, and the State	14
Conclusion	15
References	16

Abstract

This chapter considers the challenges to, and the resources for, cultivating a personal capacity for tolerance, according to the writings of Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677). After articulating two main components of personal tolerance, I examine the features of Spinoza’s theory of cognition that make the cultivation of tolerance so difficult. This is followed by an analysis of Spinoza’s account of overcoming intolerant tendencies. Ultimately, I argue that the capacity of individuals to be tolerant depends crucially on the establishment of conditions of trust, conditions that are conspicuously lacking in many modern democracies.

J. Steinberg (✉)
Brooklyn College and CUNY Graduate Center, New York, NY, USA
e-mail: jsteinberg@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Keywords

 Disagreement · Judgment · Skepticism · Toleration · Trust

Introduction

In contemporary American culture, being judgmental is commonly regarded as a social vice. On the one hand, this seems to make good sense: the trait of being judgmental resembles other social vices like close-mindedness and arrogance. Still, there is something odd about the label, since, taken literally, being judgmental does not seem bad *per se*. We want to be fair, accurate, discriminating judges, not to refrain from judging altogether. And even if we accept that “being judgmental” is simply the vice of being *unduly* or *inappropriately* critical, one might still worry that admonitions against being judgmental are inapt since judgments do not fall under our direct voluntary control (see discussion in Elgin 2010). In response to this, one might maintain that while it is not under one’s immediate voluntary control to refrain from being unduly critical, it is under one’s distal control such that one can over time develop a habit or state of character of avoiding unduly critical judgment. This leaves one to answer how.

One philosopher who recognized the challenge, as well as the benefits, of becoming less judgmental was Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677). He denied the existence of a free will and advanced a fully deterministic account of judgment formation as an alternative to Descartes’s voluntaristic model. While his account seems less equipped to explain how one can suspend one’s judgment (2p49s), he declares that the power to suspend judgment is a “rare virtue” (TP 7/27). (References to English translations are to Benedict de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Vol. 1–2, translated and edited by Edwin Curley (1985, 2015). I adopt the following abbreviations for the *Ethics*: Numerals refer to parts; “p” denotes proposition; “c” denotes corollary; “d” denotes demonstration; “D” denotes definition; “DA” denotes Definition of the Affects; “s” denotes scholium (e.g. 3p59s refers to *Ethics*, part 3, proposition 59, scholium). References to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* open with an abbreviated reference to the work – TTP – followed by the chapter and section in the Curley translation For instance, TTP 3.28; G III, 50 refers to chapter 3, section 28. References to the *Tractatus Politicus* open with an abbreviated reference to the work – TP – followed by the chapter and section. For instance, TP 4/1 refers to chapter 4, section 1. All references to the Latin are to *Spinoza Opera*, edited by Carl Gebhardt.) This is of a piece with his general promotion of toleration. While much attention has been paid to Spinoza’s defense of political toleration (e.g., Laursen 1996; Rosenthal 2001, 2003; Steinberg 2010), one can also find in Spinoza the basis of an intriguing, if overlooked, defense of tolerance as a personal virtue.

The structure of this paper is as follows. I open with an explication of two main components of personal tolerance. This is followed by an examination of the features of Spinoza’s theory of cognition that make the cultivation of tolerance so difficult. From there, I consider Spinoza’s account of overcoming intolerant tendencies.

Ultimately, the capacity of individuals to be tolerant depends crucially on the establishment of social conditions or civic relations. Regrettably, the conditions that foster tolerance are conspicuously lacking in many modern democracies today.

Before commencing, a quick note about method. While this chapter is largely about Spinoza, it is not a work of scholarship. I do not enter into interpretative disputes, but rather present Spinoza's views as directly as possible so as to show how they illuminate the challenges for, and prospects of, personal tolerance. I refer to the resulting model as "Spinozist" to flag that it is something of a reconstruction.

Tolerance as a Personal Virtue

There are at least two components to being personally tolerant: (1) responding to perceived disagreement in a non-dismissive way. We may refer to this as *being tolerant of disagreement* (see section "[Spinoza on Tolerating Disagreement](#)" for a further explication); (2) not proliferating disputes or treating every variation of opinion as a disagreement. For convenience, we may refer to this component as *not being judgmental*. To see why being tolerant requires both of these components, let us take them up in turn.

Typically, personal tolerance is theorized as a way of responding to disagreement. Where there is no disagreement, either because interlocutors agree or because variance of opinion is recognized as a matter of mere preference, the question of toleration seems not to arise. Two people may enjoy different genres of music, admire different character traits, and adopt different modes of life, but if both regard these as matters of taste or arbitrary preferences, the issue of toleration is not an issue. For example, if I, as a beer lover, ask you whether you would prefer beer or wine with dinner, and you express your preference for wine, I can hardly be said to be exhibiting tolerance when I pour you a glass of wine. Tolerating another's preference implies that one regards it with disapproval (see e.g., Mendus 1988). (To be sure, one can be *intolerant* of another's views when these are matters of mere taste or arbitrary allegiance. One team's fans may despise another team and their fans, even while acknowledging that the conditions that led her to be a fan of that particular team were the result of accidents of birthplace or upbringing.) Toleration is, at least in part, an attitude that one adopts in relation to beliefs or activities of which one disapproves.

But being tolerant requires more than just adopting a certain attitude in relation to those beliefs and activities of which one disapproves. To see this, imagine someone who thinks that it is morally repugnant to eat eggplant on Wednesdays, but who is willing to tolerate – however this is spelled out – those who violate this principle. There is good reason to question whether this person is really tolerant. Being tolerant seems to require that one subjects one's own judgments of disapproval to scrutiny, so as not to form judgments with undue haste and misplaced intensity and so as not to proliferate disputes or regard every variance of opinion as a form of contestation. Somewhat more demandingly, we might say that one who is tolerant does not judge others' beliefs or activities disapprovingly without warrant. She is not dogmatic or

arrogant. Put more positively, it is the mark of the tolerant person that she tends to recognize when her prereflective evaluations are ungrounded or rooted in contingent features of her personal history. In light of this, we may say that toleration includes the tendency to be self-critical in forming evaluative judgments and modest about the scope of these judgments. I will call this aspect of personal toleration *being non-judgmental*, as I think that it captures much of the value that lies behind the admonition against being judgmental.

What follows is an examination of Spinoza's resources for cultivating the trait of tolerance. As we will see in the next section, the challenge for Spinoza is considerable, since his views about judgment-formation – which are at least somewhat plausible in their own right – imply that we are judgmental by nature, and judgmental in ways that conduce to intolerance of disagreement. Moreover, some have thought that being committed to a certain set of values entails disapproving of competing value systems, even when one, at some level, recognizes the legitimacy of these other views. This is expressed forcefully by Joseph Raz, who writes:

Skills and character traits cherished by my way of life are a handicap for those pursuing one or another of its alternatives. I value long contemplation and patient examination: these are the qualities I require in my chosen course. Their life, by contrast, requires impetuosity, swift responses, and decisive action, and they despise the slow contemplative types as indecisive. They almost have to. To succeed in their chosen way, they have to be committed to it and to believe that the virtues it requires should be cultivated at the expense of those which are incompatible with them. They therefore cannot regard those others as virtues for them. . . Conflict is endemic. Of course, pluralists can step back from their personal commitments and appreciate in the abstract the value of other ways of life. But this acknowledgment coexists with, and cannot replace, the feelings of rejection and dismissiveness. Tension is an inevitable concomitant of value pluralism. And it is a tension without stability, without a definite resting-point of reconciliation of the two perspectives. (1995, 180)

On Raz's analysis, though one can adopt a disengaged and tolerant perspective, one cannot fully reconcile this perspective with one's engaged perspective (for a rich discussion of possible responses, see Wong 2006, Ch. 9). We may refer to this as Raz's challenge. While Spinoza admits that evaluative commitment tends to promote dismissiveness toward competing perspectives and that the more fundamental the evaluation is to one's belief-system, the less open one will be to tolerating it. But he would deny that toleration is merely a function of the shallowness of the dispute; being tolerant is a disposition that can be developed. Before we develop the Spinozistic account of personal tolerance, we must explore the psychological *problem* of tolerance.

Spinoza on Intolerance

Being Judgmental

On Spinoza's account of cognition, we are doubly judgmental by nature. The first sense in which we are judgmental is that our ideas are intrinsically belief-like. Spinoza's view of belief-formation is advanced as an alternative to the Cartesian view, according to which beliefs or judgment arise through the concurrence of two distinct faculties: the intellect and the will. On the Cartesian account, the intellect supplies the content, and the will assents to, rejects, or suspends judgment about this content. Spinoza denies that we have a free faculty of will that enables us to adopt a stance in relation to an idea. Rather, he thinks that ideas have an intrinsic force, such that the volitional attitude is baked into the idea, as it were: "In the mind there is no volition, or affirmation and negation, except that which the ideas involves insofar as it is an idea" (2p49). Affirmation in particular has a kind of pride of place: to have an idea is, in the first instance, to affirm its content, from which it follows that: "if the mind perceived nothing else except [a] winged horse, it would regard it as present to itself, and would not have any cause of doubting its existence" (2p49s). This renders us credulous by nature, tending to accept straightaway what we read and hear and to retain traces of past beliefs even after they have been debunked. Put somewhat differently, we are judgmental by nature, forming beliefs first and asking questions later. In recent decades, this so-called belief-default or "Spinozan" view has been defended by psychologists and philosophers of cognition (see Gilbert 1991; Gilbert et al. 1993; Mandelbaum 2014; Egan 2008).

There is a second, and perhaps more germane, sense in which we are judgmental by nature on Spinoza's account, which concerns *evaluative* judgments. To see why we are judgmental in this sense, we must examine Spinoza's account of the character of evaluative judgments. He grounds evaluative judgments in desire, claiming that "each one, from his own affect, judges, or evaluates, what is good and what is bad, what is better and what is worse, and finally, what is best and what is worst" (3p39s) and that "because each one judges from his own affect what is good and what is bad, what is better and what worse (see P39S) it follows that men can vary as much in judgment as in affect" (3p51s). Evaluative judgments covary with affects, and affects are in some sense prior to judgments.

The nature of the priority relationship is clarified in *Ethics* 4, where Spinoza asserts that: "The cognition of good and evil is *nothing but* an affect of joy or sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it" (4p8). In claiming that the cognition – or representation – of good and evil is "nothing but" an affect, insofar as we are conscious of it, Spinoza is signaling an explanatory reduction of evaluative judgments to the consciousness of an affect, which Spinoza claims is "not really distinguished from the affect itself" (4p8d). The crucial point here is that, according to Spinoza, evaluative judgments are constituted by affects themselves.

Affects are at once representations of changes in one's "power of acting" (3 GDA) and of some object or putative cause (2a3; 3p56). And while it is possible to represent objects non-affectively (2a3; 3 Post 1), given the manifold ways in

which past experiences and associations inform our affective responses to things, our ideas of things will almost always include an affective component.

Joining together the preceding threads, we may say that we typically perceive the world affectively and consequently evaluatively. Since we naturally and automatically respond to what we perceive in affective ways, and since these affects themselves constitute judgments, we are naturally and automatically evaluatively engaged with the world (see Shapiro 2012). Even when we would prefer not to be moved by our affects – as for instance when they arise out of implicit associations and stereotypes – and even when we consciously disavow them, affects reveal our valuations, our judgments. Consequently, we are by nature judgmental in ways, and to degrees, that exceed our direct control.

In light of this, one might wonder whether the exhortation not to be judgmental can be voluntarily observed, since we simply cannot suspend our evaluative judgments or restrain our emotions through fiat. As we will see in section “[Spinoza on Becoming Less Judgmental](#),” Spinoza is keen to show that we can exercise distal and partial control over our wayward emotional responses, so that can become less judgmental in the pejorative sense.

Intolerance and Disagreement

According to Spinoza, in addition to being judgmental by nature, we are also prone to be intolerant of those with whom we disagree. To see this, we need to fill out a bit more of Spinoza’s social psychology, one foundational principle of which is the so-called imitation of affects: “If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect” (3p27). From the principle it follows that we tend to emulate the desires of others (3 DA xxxiii), emulation being the conative side of imitation. And since affects (including desires) constitute evaluate judgments, it follows that, other things being equal, we love what others love, desire what others desire, and regard as good what others regard as good.

One might think that imitation and emulation would tend to convergence of judgments. The desire for esteem plays an enormous role in one’s motivational economy, encouraging one to regulate one’s behavior to comport with social norms. However, Spinoza also claims that “from the same property of human nature from which it follows that men are compassionate [i.e., from the imitation of affects], it also follows that the same men are envious and ambitious” (3p32s). Envy arises when the imitation of affects contributes to a sense of deprivation, as when imitating another’s joy at some accomplishment, say admission into a prestigious program, intensifies one’s own sense of failure (e.g., being denied admission into the same program). More important for this account is Spinoza’s analysis of ambition, which he construes as the striving that “everyone should love what he loves, and hate what he hates” (3p31c). Ambition, or the striving for others to defer to one’s judgment, arises from imitation of affects for the following reason. When we disagree with others, *ceteris paribus*, we undergo a “vacillation of mind” (3p17, 3p31d), leaving us

torn between contrary affects, and, in turn, judgments. Spinoza regards such dissonance as unstable (5a1). And while dissonance could be reduced by modifying one’s own antecedent attitude and deferring to others, we are generally disinclined to defer because we are ideologically protective, or averse to modifying our own judgments (see Steinberg 2018a). The more deeply entrenched one’s affect or evaluative attitude is, the more resistant one will be to adapt, since modifying such judgments will require extensive revision to one’s belief system.

The upshot is that we are naturally ambitious, seeking to have others defer to us rather than vice versa. Since one’s interlocutors are equally prone to ambition, all disputing parties are likely to resist revising their beliefs, leading to protracted disputation and deep internal dissonance, tending ultimately toward contemptuous dismissal. Contempt or hatred overcomes the dissonance problem since it overrides the imitative process that begets dissonance in the first place (3p27d; 3p23). Hating those with whom one disagrees – or delegitimizing their perspective – enables one to retain one’s viewpoint without internal conflict. There is thus a strong tendency to be intolerant of disagreement, especially with respect to matters of significance. While this account, as sketched, remains overly simplistic, the basic psychodynamics are not particularly implausible.

Tying this together with the conclusion of the previous section, we see that we are judgmental by nature and prone to hatred when disagreements persist. The dreary conclusion is that we are naturally prone toward intolerance. Still, we are not condemned to this condition. To see this, we will turn now to his account of how we come to be less judgmental.

Spinoza on Becoming Less Judgmental

Suspension: The Official Account

Since, on Spinoza’s account, being judgmental makes us prone to agonistic disagreements, we can appreciate why he would declare that the capacity to suspend judgment is a “rare virtue” (TP 7/27). Still, one might wonder how suspension of judgment is possible on his account, since all ideas are belief-like in structure. Spinoza’s account of suspension of judgment is advanced in the very passages in which he articulates his account of belief-formation: “when we say that someone suspends judgment, we are saying nothing but that he sees that he does not perceive the thing adequately. Suspension of judgment, therefore, is really a perception, not [an act of] free will” (2p49s). Here I think that Spinoza is being a bit imprecise, since the second-order perception of the inadequacy of the first-order perception is not really *itself* the suspension – a claim that would conflict with his view that ideas are belief-like. Rather, his point seems to be that the second-order idea offsets the force of the first-order idea, resulting in suspension (see Steinberg 2018b). This is suggested in the continuation of the “winged horse” passage noted above in which he claims that while we initially affirm the existence of a thing that we perceive, we doubt its existence when we form a further idea that holds the initial idea in check.

While belief is the default cognitive stance, doubt arises when one has some further idea that functions as a kind of counterweight to the initial idea. And the paradigm case is that of forming a higher-order, or reflective, idea that challenges the credentials of the initial idea. The main features of this model of doubt as suspension between two opposing ideas have deep historical roots, resembling the Pyrrhonian account of skeptical suspension as equipollence, or balanced tension between appearances.

In light of this official suspension-through-reflection model, we can better appreciate the importance of Spinoza's sustained critique of ordinary unreflective moral judgments, which arise on the basis of confused, anthropocentric thinking. As he puts it, in the first instance, people judge things to be "good or evil, sound or rotten and corrupt, as they are affected by it" (1 App). Evaluative predicates, "indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves" (4 Preface; cf. 1app). And while Spinoza attempts to offer a well-grounded, nonarbitrary version of evaluative concepts, he clearly thinks that we ought not to give credence to our passions, which are unreliable guides to happiness and virtue.

Spinoza wishes to cultivate in his reader a healthy mistrust of our prereflective intuitions or automatic affective responses to things. If we can imprint on our mind the principle or maxim that passions are unreliable guides to the good, we may be able to neutralize their force before they are deeply embedded within our belief-system (see Huebner 2009). But, as Spinoza concedes, the ability to suspend judgment in this way is a *rare* virtue, since it is not easy to adopt a habit of checking one's intuitions or affects. It requires that one develop self-critical habits of thought, which is cognitively demanding and which is at odds with our natural ideological protectiveness.

Suspension as Ambivalence or Persistent Vacillation

Elsewhere in Spinoza's writings we find the basis for a somewhat different conception of suspension, one that perhaps better captures the interpersonal dimensions of "not being judgmental." The crucial concept here is one that we have already introduced: vacillation. When Spinoza introduces the notion of doubt, he presents it as a vacillation between opposing ideas (2p44s). This conception of doubt applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to evaluative attitudes, as when one oscillates between opposing affects (3p17s). On this account, suspension of judgment is just a state of non-commitment resulting from two counterbalanced ideas, where counterbalancing is understood diachronically, with the mind lurching back and forth, but never so decisively to express a proper judgment (see Steinberg 2018b). This is a somewhat different version of equipollence.

This account captures a form of suspension that can arise as a result of peer disagreement. The question of how to respond to peer disagreement has been the basis of a lively debate in epistemology. Some hold that the proper response to acknowledged peer disagreement is to accord the peer's position equal weight, resulting in an erosion in one's confidence, perhaps to the point of suspending

one's judgment in the absence of further evidence (Christensen 2009; Elga 2007; Elgin 2010; Vavova 2014). This is often referred to as the conciliatory view. Others think that one should, at least to considerable degree, retain in one's judgment. This is often referred to as the steadfast view (see Kelly 2005). Rather than attempting to adjudicate this dispute here, I will simply situate Spinoza's position in relationship to it.

Spinoza's analysis of disagreement is fundamentally psychological rather than normative. As indicated above, he is interested in our tendency to imitate and internalize the evaluative judgments of our interlocutors. Here we should qualify his account in a couple of respects. First, a qualification about scope. Spinoza claims that we imitate those whom we imagine to be *like oneself*. This vague construal allows for different ranges of empathy. One important respect in which another may be like oneself – which Spinoza admittedly does not take up explicitly – is in terms of epistemic capacities and level of expertise. If part of how we modulate representations of likeness is in terms of epistemic capacities, we can make sense of why disagreement often yields disruptive forms of ambivalence. When an evaluative disputant is perceived as an equal, one is prone undergo destabilizing vacillation. In this sense, Spinoza is a kind of descriptive conciliationist, articulating a form of what David Wong has called "moral ambivalence," defined as "the phenomenon of coming to understand and appreciate the other side's viewpoint to the extent that our sense of the unique rightness of our own judgments gets destabilized" (Wong 2006, 102). Indeed, on an idealized version of this account, we might say that vacillation, or doubt, is a necessary consequence of regarding a disputant's view as just as authoritative as one's own, so that remaining steadfast in one's judgment in the face of disagreement is evidence that one does not fully acknowledge the other as one's peer.

Because we are ideologically protective, we tend to seek to reduce the discomfort of dissonance by impugning the perspective of the other. As Catherine Elgin puts it, in order for disputants to retain their judgments, they "must construe each other as irrational" (2010, 66). But while we tend to be ideologically protective, we are not destined to be. By coming to appreciate the incapacitating effects of ideological protection, we may be able to resist the impulse to discredit. To make this effective, one must imprint upon one's mind this further idea that the impulse to discredit incapacitates, so that this is ready at hand when discrediting ideas arise, rendering us ambivalent rather than intolerant (for a version of this method, see 5p10s). It is not easy to resist the impulse to dismiss, especially when successful resistance yields only an unsatisfying ambivalence. But perhaps this is the most important upshot of this analysis: if we are to curtail our tendency toward being judgmental and dismissive toward others, we must also be prepared to endure affronts to our pride and disruptions to our confidence and cognitive consonance.

Restricting the Scope of One's Judgments

The aforementioned ways of becoming less judgmental involve eroding the power of one's reflexive and ill-begotten judgments. One might wonder, though, if there are ways to avoid being unduly judgmental without sacrificing one's evaluative commitments. Can one remain affectively engaged (i.e., committed to one's own valuations) *and* personally tolerant, or does toleration require the suspension of judgment? This brings us back to Raz's challenge.

One rather straightforward way in which one can judge without being judgmental in the pejorative sense is by restricting the scope of one's judgment. For Spinoza, even well-founded deployments of evaluative predicates like "good" and "evil" are always indexed to a striving agent. And while he thinks that the most important goods – namely, on his highly intellectualist conception of morality, forms of knowledge – are common to all human beings (4p36; 4p26), he allows for variation among individuals with respect to other goods (e.g., material and social goods) which are often the source of dispute. The utility of various objects, courses of acting, ways of relating to others, and modes of living in general vary according to one's temperament or disposition such that "one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf" (*Ethics* 4 Preface). Since we are often not sufficiently well acquainted with others' temperaments to make very informed determinations about particular goods for them, we have reason in these instances to restrict the scope of our evaluative judgments.

This comports with a strand of Spinoza's analysis of religious toleration. On his account, faith should be understood in functional terms, as that set of beliefs that encourage obedience to God through loving one's neighbor (TTP 14.13–23). By defining faith functionally, Spinoza allows that the beliefs that constitute one person's faith may differ from the beliefs that constitute another's. And while he advances seven "doctrines of the universal faith," or basic religious precepts on which everyone can agree (TTP 14.24ff), even here he allows that these doctrines are so general as to admit a wide range of understanding, and that each person ought to "interpret them for himself, as it seems to him easier for him to accept them without hesitation, with complete agreement of the heart, so that he may obey God wholeheartedly" (TTP 14.32). Because human temperaments vary, the beliefs that are conducive to piety may differ between individuals, and it is the individual herself that is best positioned to make these determinations.

These arguments dovetail nicely with the suspension-through-reflection account, according to which we should rigorously scrutinize our evaluative judgments so as not to put credence in arbitrary and unreliable passions. Here the point is that even when we are confident about what is good for us, we should acknowledge the variability among human temperaments and not be overly confident that what is good for us is good for others. By acknowledging that not every variance of opinion is the grounds of a disagreement we avoid proliferating disputes and so resist the tendency toward being judgmental.

Spinoza on Tolerating Disagreement

In the preceding section, we considered three ways in which Spinoza thinks that we can resist the tendency to be judgmental: by reflecting on the inadequacy of many of our automatic evaluative responses, by embracing the ambivalence that arises through peer disagreement, and by restricting the scope of our judgments. In this section, we will examine how, on Spinoza's account, toleration is possible when one is evaluatively committed *and* there is persistent disagreement.

Non-contemptuous Engagement and Suspending Reactive Attitudes

While Spinoza regards many of our ordinary evaluative judgments as inadequate and unreliable, some of our evaluative judgments will remain credible even after careful scrutiny. Though we cannot trust the issuances of our passions, rational moral judgments are self-certifying, lying beyond all doubt (2p43s). And a great many of our particular ethical judgments fall in between the extremes of wholly unreliable passions and absolutely certain rational judgments, as somewhat credible, but disputable positions (see Kisner 2011; Steinberg 2014). How does Spinoza think that one should relate to others when one's ethical judgments persist in the face of scrutiny and disagreement?

To answer this, I propose that we consider some underappreciated remarks from Spinoza's discussion of impermissible speech in TTP 20, where he examines not only the content of the speech, but also the motives that prompt and animate it. Here, as elsewhere, he singles out speech motivated by "deception [*dolo*], anger [*ira*], [and] hatred [*odio*]" (TTP 20.14) for exemption from the scope of permissible expression on the grounds that these affects are distinctly anathema to civic agreement (see TTP 16.9; TTP 16.12–13; TTP 20.12). Since the way that deception undermines agreement is somewhat distinct from how hatred and anger do, we will treat them separately, beginning with hateful, angry – that is, contemptuous – speech.

According to Spinoza, hate is a uniquely destructive affect (4p45). It is itself a form of suffering or sadness (3 DA vii), and its expression breeds more hate and more suffering, keeping individuals locked in a negative feedback cycle (3p40; 3p43). While some of us might think that contemptuous disagreement can play a constructive role in firming up the convictions of the righteous and galvanizing social change, Spinoza evidently does not. Engaging others contemptuously does nothing to dislodge the offending views; it only inflames them.

At the social level, widespread hateful disagreement fractures society and undermines the very bedrock of the state, security, as "[t]here is no one who lives among hostilities, hatreds, anger and deceptions, who does not live anxiously" (TTP 16.13). Spinoza particularly has in mind the rancorous diatribes of preachers and clerics who target freethinkers. Since, on Spinoza's account, faith and piety are expressed through loving one's neighbor, it is in fact hateful religious zealots who are the true heretics: "faith condemns as heretics and schismatics only those who teach opinions which encourage obstinacy, hatred, quarrels and anger" (TTP 14.39).

We see from this that Spinoza's notion of personal toleration is rather more demanding than the conception of "mere civility" that Teresa Bejan has recently explored in connection with the work of Roger Williams. Williams was a firebrand protestant who went on to settle and found Providence Plantations and Rhode Island after being banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for his strident advocacy of puritanical ideals. Having experienced persecution himself, Williams advocated broad freedom of religious expression, including expressions of antipathy for other religions as a tool of evangelizing. The notion of mere civility, on Bejan's analysis, was that of being able to live together and converse even with those with whom one rather vehemently disagrees. Williams's minimal sense of civility as willingness to continue to engage with others does not require respectful or polite disagreement. Indeed, as Bejan puts it, it allows for "peremptory contradiction, dogmatic and unwanted counsels, expressions of disgust, or sharp rebukes" (2017, 65).

Spinoza certainly allowed for a degree of contentious dispute. In his critique of despotic rule in which dissent is thoroughly quelled, he writes that if one calls such a condition "peace," then "nothing is more wretched for me than peace. No doubt there are more, and more bitter, quarrels between parents and children than between masters and slaves" (TP 6/4). But whereas Williams regarded denunciations and insults as compatible with his conception of civility, Spinoza believed that hostile, hate-fueled disputes are destructive to civil life, which is why he includes "venting one's anger" among seditious forms of speech (TTP 20.21).

To overcome the contemptuous affects that deep disagreement engenders one must seek to make others intelligible. When others express themselves in ways that strike one as utterly indefensible, one must try to comprehend them, rather than critique, condemn, or deride them. This is a theme that runs throughout Spinoza's writing. Necessitarian metaphysics encourages us "to hate no one, to disesteem no one, to mock no one, to be angry at no one, to envy no one" (2p49s), recognizing instead that human passions "follow with the same necessity and force of Nature as the other singular things" (3 Preface). Unfortunately, even philosophers typically treat human affects "as vices, which men fall into by their own fault. That's why they usually laugh at them, weep over them, censure them, or (if they want to seem particularly holy) curse them" (TP 1/1). On Spinoza's view, those who ridicule or condemn others are themselves in the grips of passions that are rooted in confused beliefs about free will and moral responsibility.

In contrast to those who ridicule or scorn, Spinoza advocates simply trying to understand people as they are, dispassionately (TP 1/1). In P.F. Strawson's terms, Spinoza advocates adopting something like a dispassionate, objective attitude in the face of strong disagreement, rather than yielding to participant reactive attitudes like blame and indignation, which are themselves confused, irrational affects (4p51s; 4p45). While P.F. Strawson famously doubts that one could consistently adopt a dispassionate perspective on the basis of some general metaphysical principle like necessitarianism (1993b, 55), Spinoza would counter that while it is certainly not easy to take up this objective attitude, it can be achieved over time through a meditative, cognitive therapy (cf. G Strawson 1993a, 99–100). And he sought to practice what he preached, declaring in response to the needless bloodshed of the

Second Anglo-Dutch war that: "these turmoils move me, neither to laughter nor even to tears, but to philosophizing and to observing human nature better. For I do not think it right for me to mock nature, much less to lament it, when I reflect that men, like all other things, are only a part of nature" (Ep. 30 to Oldenburg). Through meditating on the necessity of things and striving to make one's interlocutors intelligible, one can shed the feelings of contempt and dismissiveness without sacrificing one's evaluative commitments.

Sincere Engagement

On Spinoza's account, working to suspend reactive attitudes vis-à-vis those whom we regard as confused or misguided need not imply interpersonal disengagement. Ultimately, what we seek is intelligibility. When the opinions of others are not at all rationally intelligible to us, we are forced to take up a kind of third-person scientific approach to understanding them. In other instances of disagreement, though, the views of others will be to some degree rationally intelligible to us, or at least there will be reason to believe that they could be made so through deliberative engagement. The more intelligible another's view is, the less contempt – and the more dissonance – one will feel. Still, disagreement breeds discontent, which is why, according to Bejan, Hobbes calls for silence or nonengagement in the case of fundamental disputes (see Bejan 2017).

Spinoza rejects this approach, advocating instead for sincere engagement with others, partially on the grounds that it is extremely difficult to consistently suppress one's views (3p2s; TTP 20.8), but more importantly because suppressing one's true opinions undermines the trust or good faith [*fides*] on which civic harmony depends. He writes that if the state sought to restrict expression, "the necessary consequence would be that every day men would think one thing and say something else. The result? The good faith especially necessary in a Republic would be corrupted. Abominable flattery and treachery would be encouraged, as would deceptions and the corruption of all liberal studies" (TTP 20.27; Cf. TTP 20.45). While Spinoza is here discussing state censorship, the same considerations apply to self-censorship: suppressing one's views out of fear or aversion to conflict impedes intellectual progress and erodes the conditions of trust on which the health of the republic depends.

To engage others sincerely is to avoid tactical or temperamental peacekeeping. One who is deeply conflict averse might not denounce a view that she finds enraging, but it would be misleading to claim that her silence constitutes tolerance. And one who, in the midst of a political disagreement over dinner proposes that disputants drop the subject, might well be acting tactfully, but in calling for silence (say, in the form of "agreeing to disagree") she is not displaying tolerance. To be sure, there are cases where it makes good prudential sense to avoid disputes; but avoidance tendencies are not a mark of tolerance. On the contrary, toleration requires the willingness to express one's own sincere views and to listen charitably to the reasons behind opposing view.

Spinoza's defense of the freedom to philosophize is ultimately a defense of a certain kind of deliberative practice, that of engaging others in good faith and without contempt. In a well-governed state, people can "openly hold different and contrary opinions, and still live in harmony" (TTP 20.37). Deception and disengagement undermine genuine harmony; sincere, non-contemptuous disagreement need not. Provided then that one has checked one's hate and anger, the appropriate response to disagreement – the *tolerant* response – is to engage the other sincerely, in good faith.

Toleration, Trust, and the State

Still, in order to engage in sincere, non-contemptuous disagreement, a certain baseline of trust must be established. Put somewhat differently, expressions of disagreement not only contribute to trust, they require it. If I doubt the sincerity of your motives, suspecting that you are not at all amenable to persuasion, I will tend to withhold my views and to withdraw from the exchange, preempting any sort of productive dispute. And to the extent that one continues to debate in conditions of distrust, one is likely to react defensively and dismissively. Consequently, so long as general conditions of distrust or suspicion obtain, even well-intended actors are not likely to satisfy the conditions of Spinozist tolerance, since their motivation to engage with the other sincerely and non-contemptuously will be disabled. Tolerance requires trust. But how is trust between disputants established?

A certain degree of trust may be secured between disputants when the discussion is bound by salient, narrowly specified, common aims. (Note: much depends on the level of specificity with which we understand commonality. Two educators may share a concern with the development of their students, but if they have vastly different understandings of how development is to be understood and measured, they may well struggle to remain sincerely, non-contemptuously engaged.) Where the dispute is framed from within common project, disputants have at least some reason to assume that the exchange is founded in good faith. David Wong expresses something like this point in his response to Raz's challenge, maintaining that disagreement need not engender feelings of dismissiveness, provided that they are expressed against a background of commonality or cooperation. Consequently, he emphasizes the value of civic rituals that bind society even while allowing for disagreement, seeing contemporary democratic practices like voting and citizen juries as according with Mencius's aim of reconciling harmony and fragmentation (Wong 2006, 266–272).

We have seen that Spinoza himself seems to think that disagreement is compatible with harmony (though, to be sure, pure agreement is preferable (see Lord 2017; James 1996; contrast with Del Lucchese 2009)). Like Wong, he seems to think that this typically requires the establishment of a social bond that enables one to countenance disagreement non-dismissively. We see this informing Spinoza's analysis of cooperation and agreement and his defense of republicanism more broadly. The state aims to promote cooperation, or a sense of partaking in a common project,

which underwrites civic trust (Steinberg 2019; Steinberg 2018a). And widespread trust will not be achieved unless the state actively roots out sources of discord and hate and establishes participatory institutions and conditions of relative equality (Steinberg 2018a, Chs. 6–7).

Ultimately, since toleration of disagreement is expressed through sincere, non-contemptuous engagement, which requires trust, and since trust itself depends on the establishment of cooperative civil conditions, we are led to the conclusion that personal toleration is inexorably a political problem. To be sure, even in the absence of pervasive conditions of trust, one might be able to tolerate disputes with a small circle of friends (see Spinoza's exchange with his friend Hugo Boxel, Ep. 53–54). But to be tolerant toward a few does not make one tolerant, any more than being generous toward a few makes one generous. The conclusion that the state plays a crucial role in establishing the conditions that enable individuals to be tolerant is of a piece with Spinoza's more general observation that virtues and vices are fundamentally dependent on the institutions and laws of a state (TP 5/2–5/3).

Conclusion

We have now seen that, on Spinoza's view, while people tend to be judgmental and to be intolerant toward those with whom we disagree, these tendencies can be checked in a variety of ways that involve acquiring habits of thinking and reacting that are at odds with our inclinations to give credence to our automatic evaluative responses, to resist revision, and to dismiss or disengage from those with whom we disagree. Instead, if we are to be tolerant, we must critically scrutinize our judgments, welcome destabilizing challenges, work toward making opposing views intelligible, and seek to engage others sincerely. It should be apparent from all of this that it is quite difficult to become tolerant. And, I have argued, it is not something that lies entirely under one's control, since it depends on the establishment widespread social trust, which seems to be in short supply today.

Let me conclude with a reflection on how the preceding bears on a recent stir among intellectuals, especially on the American left. On July 7, 2020, over a hundred and fifty prominent writers, academics, and artists – most of whom are broadly left-leaning – signed an open letter to *Harper's Magazine* decrying what they perceive as leftist intolerance that seeks to silence and punish dissent. Predictably, the signatories were subsequently accused of seeking to protect the status quo under the false mantle of freedom of speech. Spinoza would likely regard the intractability of this dispute – which is, ostensibly, a kind of meta-dispute, a dispute about how we dispute – as a reflection of civic dysfunction rooted in distrust. The signatories distrust their opponents, taking them to be censorious and dismissive interlocutors who seek to silence what they find disagreeable, a suspicion that they took to be validated by the critical responses to the letter. And the letter's critics distrust the motives of signatories, assuming that the appeal to free speech is really just a cover for preserving their own privileged social positions. Critics suspect that what the signatories really want is not really free speech, but deference.

Leaving aside the merits of the competing claims, I think that it is fair to say that this debate is characterized by distrust. And if such distrust pervades internecine debates on the American left, the prospect of sincere and non-contemptuous disagreement across the political spectrum is vanishingly small. What, then, are we to do? We can push for structural political change, the kind of change that diminishes power disparities that contributes to distrust and obstructs political cooperation. We can also work to be less judgmental and to engage in tolerant disagreement within circles of good faith, even if we are likely to find these circles to be quite confined. And where conditions of suspicion seem to forestall sincere, non-contemptuous engagement, we can at least try to make others intelligible so as not to participate in noxious and unproductive disagreement that deepens civic distrust.

References

- Bejan T (2017) *Mere civility: disagreement and the limits of toleration*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA
- Christensen D (2009) Disagreement as evidence. *Philos Compass* 4(5):756–767
- Del Lucchese F (2009) Conflict, power, and multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: tumult and indignation. Continuum, London/New York
- Egan A (2008) Seeing and believing: perception, belief formation, and the divided mind. *Philos Stud* 140(1):47–63
- Elga A (2007) Reflection and disagreement. *Nous* 41(3):478–502
- Elgin C (2010) Persistent disagreement. In: Feldman R, Warfield T (eds) *Disagreement*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Gilbert D (1991) How mental systems believe. *Am Psychol* 46(2):107–119
- Gilbert D, Tafarodi R, Malone P (1993) You can't not believe everything you read. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 65(2):221–233
- Huebner B (2009) Troubles with stereotypes for Spinozan minds. *Philos Soc Sci* 39(1):63–92
- James S (1996) Power and difference: Spinoza's conception of freedom. *J Polit Philos* 4(3):207–228
- Kelly T (2005) The epistemic significance of disagreement. In: Szabo Gendler T, Hawthorne J (eds) *Oxford studies in epistemology*, vol 1. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 167–196
- Kisner M (2011) *Spinoza on human freedom*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA
- Laursen J (1996) Spinoza on toleration. In: Nederman C, Laursen J (eds) *Difference and dissent: theories of toleration in medieval and early modern Europe*. Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, pp 185–204
- Lord B (2017) Disagreement in the political philosophy of Spinoza and Rancière. *Proc Aristot Soc* 117(1):61–80
- Mandelbaum E (2014) Thinking is believing. *Inquiry* 57(1):55–96
- Mendus S (1988) Introduction. In: Mendus S (ed) *Justifying toleration*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp 1–19
- Raz J (1995) *Ethics in the public domain: essays in the morality of law and politics*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Rosenthal M (2001) Tolerance as a virtue in Spinoza's Ethics. *J Hist Philos* 39(4):535–557
- Rosenthal M (2003) Spinoza's republican argument for toleration. *J Polit Philos* 11(3):320–337
- Shapiro L (2012) How we experience the world: passionate perception in Descartes and Spinoza. In: Pickavé M, Shapiro L (eds) *Emotion and reason in early modern philosophy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 193–216
- Spinoza B (1985, 2015) *The collected works of Spinoza*, vols I–II (ed and trans: Curley E). Princeton University Press, Princeton

- Steinberg J (2010) Spinoza's curious defense of toleration. In: Melamed Y, Rosenthal M (eds) *Spinoza's theological-political treatise: a critical guide*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp 210–230
- Steinberg J (2014) Following a *recta ratio vivendi*: the practical utility of Spinoza's dictates of reason. In: Kisner M, Youpa A (eds) *The ethics of Spinoza's ethics*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 178–196
- Steinberg J (2018a) Spinoza's political psychology: the taming of fortune and fear. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA
- Steinberg J (2018b) Two puzzles concerning Spinoza's conception of belief. *Eur J Philos* 26(1): 261–282
- Steinberg J (2019) Spinoza on bodies politic and civic agreement. In: Armstrong A, Green K, and Sangiacomo A (eds) *Spinoza and relational autonomy: being with others*. Edinburgh University Press, pp 132–148
- Strawson G (1993a) On 'freedom and resentment'. In: Martin Fischer J, Ravizza M (eds) *Perspectives on moral responsibility*. Cornell, Ithaca, pp 67–100
- Strawson P (1993b) Freedom and resentment. In: Martin Fischer J, Ravizza M (eds) *Perspectives on moral responsibility*. Cornell, Ithaca, pp 45–66
- Vavova K (2014) Moral disagreement and moral skepticism. *Philos Perspect* 28(1):302–333
- Wong D (2006) *Natural moralities: a defense of pluralistic relativism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford