

Baruch Spinoza

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We sometimes imagine that diversity of religion, culture and ethnicity is a problem of the present, one that sets our time apart. However in the 17th century at the end of the Reformation and the wars of religion that divided Europe, overthrowing medieval institutions, social, political and religious hierarchies that had dominated for centuries, the question of how to govern a diverse multitude of individuals was a pressing practical and theoretical question. By taking human diversity as primary, Baruch Spinoza proposed a theory of the state that does not require pre-existing unity among individuals and so provides a theory of justice, which can be scaled to the global. Further, Spinoza's theory of political and individual power offers positive reasons why we may want to build global

democratic institutions to solve the problems of global justice.

In 1632 Spinoza was born in Amsterdam, the largest and most powerful city of what were then known as the United Provinces. These provinces were united by their resistance to the Spanish Empire, from which they had recently won independence, against the Catholic states to the south, and the English incursions from the West. Amsterdam was a great center of commerce and trade, and the United Provinces themselves were known for their relatively high levels of political and religious toleration. Thus, the United Provinces were ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse; home to refugees from the wars of religion in France and Germany, and home to a thriving Jewish community which had earlier fled the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal. Their governmental structure was that of a loose confederation, historically headed by a member of the Orange family. However, due to the early death of one Orange and the minority of another, for most of Spinoza's lifetime, the United Provinces were headless. During the

time known as the 'Golden Age of the Dutch Republic', roughly 1648-1672, the de facto heads of state were the De Witt brothers, the administrators of Holland, the most economically powerful of the provinces. The De Witts ruled in uneasy tension with the medieval institutions of the Estates General. Best known by most as occupying French tennis courts in the late 18th century, the Dutch Estates General sought to reestablish constitutional order by finding a head of state, at one time offering the position to Elizabeth I of England. Spinoza and like-minded political theorists supported this new Republic over a return to traditional quasi-monarchy. He sought in earnest to design a political theory which would show that even a headless state could be sovereign, stable, and uniquely free.

In the background of Spinoza's political theory always looms the specter of religious dissention and the passionate and chaotic conflict it could bring. Religious war had dominated Europe in the 16th Century, and many in the United Provinces believed that the Reformation was incomplete. Although the United Provinces were at that

point famous for religious diversity, the ruling classes were primarily Calvinist. The Dutch Calvinists sought to recreate in the United Provinces a religious state, along the lines of Calvin's Geneva, and so were constantly at odds with the republican leaders of Holland, the De Witts. In 1672, a mob of citizens, whipped up into a frenzy by Calvinist preachers, dragged the de Witts through the streets of the Hague, dismembering them along the way, and finally hanging them in the city square. This incident taught Spinoza a powerful lesson: no matter how seemingly powerless individuals are on their own, when they are united they can use their collective power either for the state or against the state.

The historical situation of Spinoza's life provided him with two primary aims: to devise a theory of the state that did not require a unified culture or religion, and to create a political theory which could organize the passions of the multitude.

### Spinoza's Theory of Justice

Since Spinoza's political theory had to account for the reality both of religious and cultural diversity and the role of the state in managing the passions of this diverse multitude, he was initially attracted to Hobbes's contract theory. Spinoza saw Hobbes as having achieved what no other political philosopher in history had – he had created a stable state without assuming the natural sociability of human nature. Hobbes began with the most parsimonious of posits, a state of nature where a multitude of individuals followed only their appetites or desires, with no antecedent social or natural bond. Then, by simply attending to their own self-preservation, Hobbes showed that these individuals could contract among one another to give up their natural rights, will and power and to authorize all the actions of a sovereign, which their contract created. This sovereign (or sovereign assembly) would have the collective power and will of the individuals in the state at its (or their) disposal and so the problem of diversity of wills, religion, and culture and the problem of the instability of the passions could be solved at once. Fear of

the sovereign and fear of the chaotic state of nature would ensure that individuals in the civil state followed the law, and as the single source of normative, religious and cultural authority in the state, the sovereign could ensure unity.

Although Spinoza thought the notion of the contract and Hobbes' conception of the sovereign was theoretically innovative and promising, he was skeptical of its practical efficacy. Could a one-time contractual agreement really bind the wills and power of real individual humans? Was fear the sort of emotion that led to people acting reliably? The answer to both, for Spinoza, was no. Fear, on Spinoza's view, is a passion that weakens individuals, to the point that they may act in a way that is self-destructive. So, even if it would be best for individuals to follow the law, fear, if it is strong enough, could lead them to disrupt the order of the state.

Spinoza was critical of Hobbes' notion of transfer of power and will for several reasons. First, he objected, one never truly transfers one's will and power. As natural human

beings, we retain at least that power necessary for moving ourselves around, and further, we cannot entirely ever give up our capacity to judge. Our judgments, in Spinoza's view, are caused by the ways we are affected by phenomena in the world. Each individual is affected in slightly different ways by the natural forces impinging upon them, and so their judgments and feelings will not be exactly alike. Because our experiences, judgments and feelings are outside of our control, we cannot transfer our feeling or judging to another, since we cannot "give up" being individually affected by external phenomena. Effectively then, for Spinoza, we cannot "consent" to the future actions of the sovereign in advance. We always retain the ability to reject the sovereign's decisions and to resist them with whatever physical power we have.

Spinoza argued that Hobbes' contract did not solve the problem of instituting a stable political state once and for all. Rather, contract theories mistook the real challenge of political philosophy and governance, which is to find ways to gain the consent and agreement of the people in the state

for each and every decision of the sovereign, so that each might support this decision and coordinate their actions accordingly. Consent was not something that could be achieved once in the fictional origins of states and then forgotten, but rather something that had to be obtained over and over again.

Rejecting Hobbes' juridical notion of "natural right" as something that can be transferred Spinoza redefined "natural right" as coextensive with an individual's power and desire. He argued that laws, whatever they may be, required attention to human passions and desires. No contract or agreement would stand without the effective power to enforce it. So, to effectively govern, a sovereign had to gain the consent of the multitude not just once, but over and over again. To effectively govern, the sovereign had to win over the hearts and minds of the multitude.

The central principle of Spinoza's theory of justice can be understood as follows: outside the boundaries of effective political institutions, there is no right, wrong, justice or



injustice. We have only as much right as we have power, and if we wish to realize justice we need to ensure that we have institutions powerful enough to do so. For Spinoza, the power of the sovereign, and thus the power of the state was a function of the power of the multitude, that is, all the individuals in that state, and their degree of the coordination.

### Coordinating the Multitude

On Spinoza's metaphysical view, we, humans, are part of Nature. As part of Nature, we each have a small part of the power of Nature, to act and achieve our aims in the world. Each individual's power can be increased or decreased, and different forms of coordination among individuals can yield more or less power. The most powerful individuals are those who are ruled by joy rather than by fear, and who follow what Spinoza called the law of reason, which means, that these individuals understood themselves as part of the natural world, and understood their passions and what was best for them, that is, what would increase their

power in any particular situation. The more one knows about oneself and the natural world, the more powerful one can become.

Alone, our power is very small, but if we join with others in collective projects, we can increase our power and achieve our collective aims. This is true, for Spinoza, both for individuals and for states. The more states that join together, the more their collective power to act within Nature increases. Nature is indifferent to human ends, individual or collective. There is no guarantee that our projects will be successful. However, Spinoza argues that the more power we have, the more likely we are to envision projects and goals that are realizable and subsequently to have the power to realize them. The more people we coordinate our power with, the better knowledge and understanding we will have of the world, yielding better global policies. Further, the more people involved in discussing and making these decisions, the more stakeholders we will have committed to the realization of

these policies. For Spinoza, the bigger and more democratic one's state, the more powerful it can become.

## Multi-State Dominion and the Conditions of International Justice

For some political theorists today, the idea of a global state is anathema. However, Spinoza believed that there are positive reasons why we might consider a larger polity. In his final work, the Political Treatise, he constructs a model of how such a multi-state polity would operate, and what kinds of institutions would be required. Additionally, he provides conditions for when and why states might join together in the first place.

States join together, on Spinoza's view, for two reasons: if a state is not self-sufficient on its own, or if a state cannot flourish or increase on its own. In the second case, states may be individually self-sufficient, but mutually dependent for their individual flourishing. For Spinoza, the cities of the United Provinces satisfied both conditions.

Individually, they were weak and required mutual protection, but more importantly, together they were much stronger and could be a major economic and trading power only with the cooperation of all. Today, most states satisfy the second condition.

Spinoza argues that there are two ways that states can join together to increase their power: 1) through remaining sovereign and simply entering into alliances with the assurance of pacts, and 2) through creating multi-state dominions.

As for the first mode of alliance (1), Spinoza argued that such alliances ensured only with the force of pacts were as weak as contracts, and without sufficient effective power to enforce them they were invalid. Again, for Spinoza, justice between individuals and between states, requires more than just a promise or contract, it requires effective institutions to enforce those promises. One way to bolster alliances between sovereign states, Spinoza argues, is to increase the number of states involved in the alliance. The more states

allied, the more difficult it would be for one state to defect. The problem with multi-state alliances, however, is that states, unlike humans, are for the most part self-sufficient, and if a powerful enough state wishes to invalidate a pact or break an alliance, it is still possible for them to do so. This is a phenomenon we are familiar with today.

The second (2), and more secure, way of joining states together is to create a sovereign super-state above them. In such a multi-state dominion individual states would be sovereign over their internal affairs, property laws, etc., but there would be a super-state senate and court which would be in charge of issues that concern the states in common and disputes between states.

In order to ensure the stability of these super-state institutions, Spinoza argues that they must recognize the reality of inequalities between states. There will be some states involved which are more powerful or populous, and Spinoza argued they should have a proportionally larger share of both the super-state senate and the super-state

judiciary. This multi-state dominion is the strongest possible form of state, and would lead to empowering its member states, and empowering the individuals within them. Because the representation at the super-state level is proportional, states would vie with one another for population, and each would compete to make their laws and institutions more attractive to individuals in their own and other states. This competition for population would yield better conditions for those within the states. So, governance at the global level can bolster justice and empowerment for individuals in the local and national context. Further, the more stable and powerful individual states and alliances of states become, the better the likelihood for a stable international order.

## Justice, Sovereignty and Metaphysics: Spinoza's Contribution to Global Justice

Spinoza's theory of justice, his conception of sovereignty, and his understanding of human power provide unique

insights and potential solutions for contemporary theories of global justice.

Spinoza's theory of the state and his argument that the power of a state is a function of the power and organization of the passions of those within the state was designed to serve the needs of a diverse polity and thus can be scaled beyond the "nation." Spinoza's theory of justice entails that justice can only be realized in a dominion, which suggests that if we seek justice beyond state borders, we need to create effective institutions, and that those institutions may need to be sovereign multi-state dominions. Finally, Spinoza's metaphysical view that we are all parts of Nature and his view that we can increase our power and knowledge by joining together in large-scale polities give us positive and unique reasons to join together with other states.

We are living in a time of increasing global interconnections and interdependence. Although most political theorists fear that a global polity would be

ineffective at best and tyrannical at worst, Spinoza offers us a model of a multi-state polity that is neither, and which his theory of sovereignty suggests is necessary if we truly wish to realize global justice.

### Related Topics:

Global Federalism

Global Governance

Thomas Hobbes

Natural rights

Social Contract

Sovereignty

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