

Spinoza: Political Thesis (1677) §1

The following is an experiment in “subbing Spinoza”, ie editing an English translation and rendering it into modern language. Of course ideally one would work with the original text but my O-level Latin is not up to that. The English translation I used is at bit.ly/SpinozaPT.

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§1 : INTRODUCTION

§1.1 : Philosophers like to think of the passions that rain down on us as vices that we fall into through our own fault. So they generally mock us, cry over us, blame us, hate on us, especially when they want to look particularly pious themselves.

So they think they’re doing something wonderful, reaching the pinnacle of learning, when actually they are so clever they lavishly praise a “human nature” that exists nowhere, while verbally repudiating that which factually exists. They think of us not as we are but as what they would like us to be.

That’s why they’ve generally ended up writing satire not ethics. They’ve never theorised politics – well never in any useful manner at any rate – but rather thought up some kind of chimera, something formed in Utopia, or in some golden age of the poets – somewhere at any rate where there was least need for it.

So you get an absurd situation where theory is supposed to be an loggerheads with practice. You get this in all sciences, in the sense of useful discourses, and you get it especially in politics. Nobody is considered less fit to run public affairs than the theorists or the philosophers.

§1.2 : Now politicians are typically thought of as people who conspire against us rather than upholding our common interests, and we expect them to be crafty rather than learned.

Nature has certainly taught them that vices will be around for as long as human beings are. So they’ve learned through experience and long practice to anticipate human wickedness, developed these arts (usually prompted more by fear than reason).

For this they are branded enemies of virtue, especially by the religious types. They argues that our rulers should be governed in public matters by the same moral laws that bind individuals in private.

But we have to admit that politicians have written about politics far more happily than philosophers. They had experience as their mistress, and so they taught nothing inconsistent with practice.

§1.3 : I'm certainly fully persuaded that experience reveals to us every conceivable kind of commonly held abundance, and all of this is compatible with us living in unity and in a manner that can be guided or kept within fixed bounds.

So I don't believe that by thinking alone you can come up with something consistent with experience or practice that hasn't been tried and judged already.

We're in a place where we can't live without some kind of general law. But the way laws and public affairs are actually set up is that they are ordained or managed by sharp types: cunning, crafty people.

This makes it even more unlikely that we could cook up a political idea of service to general society that hasn't been thrown up already, that we haven't already worked out somewhere because we had to look after ourselves, because we were intent on some common project, because seeking our own safety.

§1.4 : So when thinking about politics I've resolved to argue through a certain and undoubtable course, deducing things from the very conditions of human nature, looking at how things are in practice, not floating new and unheard of schemes.

I want to investigate the subject matter of this science with the same freedom of spirit we use in mathematics. So I've tried carefully not to mock, cry or hate on human actions, but to understand them.

That's why I've looked upon passions – love, hate, anger, envy, ambition, pity and all the other perturbations of the mind – not as vices built into human nature, but as properties, just as heat, cold, storm, thunder and the like are properties of the atmosphere.

Passions are phenomena that are inconvenient but necessary. They have fixed causes. And we can use our passions to investigate the nature of those causes. The mind has just as much pleasure in viewing them correctly as the senses are flattered by this knowledge.

§1.5 : The following is certain – I've proved it in Ethics (§4.4, corollary 3.31, 3.32 and notes). We are necessarily liable to passions. We are constituted to pity the ill, envy the rich, be prone to vengeance over mercy. Moreover each and every one of us wants the rest of us to live as we think they ought to: they should approve of what I approve of, reject what I reject etc.

So we're all racing to be first and we fall into strife, do our worst to oppress each other. The ones who come out on top are more proud of the harm they've done to others on their way up than they are of the good they've done to themselves.

Religion of course teaches the contrary: we should love our neighbours as ourselves, we should defend other people's rights as much as our own. But this has too little power over the passions. It can win out in the hour of death, when disease has subdued our passions and we lie inert. It can win out in the temples, where we hold no traffic. But it wins least of all where it is most needed: in the law courts and the palaces.

I also showed (note to Ethics §5.42) that reason can do much to restrain and moderate the passions - but we saw at the same time that the road which reason herself points out is very steep.

All this should be enough to persuade ourselves that anyone who thinks we can be induced to live according to the bare dictates of reason, and stop getting distracted by politics - they must be dreaming of some poetic golden age, or some stage play.

§1.6 : A state whose wellbeing depended upon our good faith, whose affairs could only be properly administered by those engaged in them acting honestly - such a state would be pretty unstable.

On the contrary, if you want to ensure the permanence of the state you need to order public affairs so that those who administer them cannot be led to act treacherously or basely no matter how they are guided by passions or by reason.

In fact it doesn't really matter what "spirit" the state's affairs are administered in. Having a liberal spirit, or courage, can be a private virtue, but a virtue of a state has to be something that contributes to its security.

§1.7 : Finally: all of us, barbarians and civilised, frame some kind of customs and form some kind of civil state. If we want to grasp the causes and natural basis for domination, we cannot just derive them through pure reason - we have to derive them from where we are, from our general nature. That's what I intend to do in the next chapter.