

Transcript

Beth Lord - "Hobbes and Spinoza on equality, equalization and equilibrium"

Beth Lord:

So, one of the striking differences between Hobbes's and Spinoza's accounts of the social contract story is that Spinoza does not open his discussion of the state of nature with a reflection on natural equality. In both *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, Hobbes identifies natural equality as a key characteristic of the state of nature. One that causes people to fear and lack confidence in each other. So, in *De Cive* (*Of the Citizen*) he states 'the cause of men's fear of each other lies partly in their natural equality partly in their willingness to hurt each other. Hence, we cannot expect security from others or assure it to ourselves. Look at a full-grown man and see how fragile is the structure of his human body and if it fails all his forth sorry all his force strength and wisdom fell with it see how easy it is for even the weakest individual to kill someone stronger than himself. Whatever confidence you have in your own strength, you simply cannot believe that you have been made superior to others by nature. Those who have equal power against each other are equal and those who have the greatest power the power to kill in fact have equal power. Therefore, all men are equal to each other by nature. Our actual inequality has been introduced by civil law'. Now Spinoza never says anything like this, not in the *TTP*, not in the *Political Treatise* and not in the *Ethics*. Nor does Spinoza express Hobbes's point that no one is naturally superior to anyone else. Spinoza does agree with Hobbes that it is prudent to acknowledge one another's equality once we have formed the civil state. But he does not attempt to ground this on a concept of natural equality. This suggests that Hobbes and Spinoza are doing rather different things. One of Hobbes's purposes is to show that any two human beings have the same relationship as any other two. The question of who comes to rule is therefore largely arbitrary, in the sense that there are no natural reasons for it, but the legitimacy of their rule is not arbitrary because it is based on the mutual contract of everyone with everyone else. Equality is important throughout Hobbes's account. Natural equality in the state of nature gives way to legal equality in the civil state, on the basis of a social contract which assures that people, despite their inequalities of wealth and status, acknowledge one another as equals. But this is not Spinoza's purpose. Spinoza thinks that in the state of nature human beings relate to each other as unequals because they differ in power. Some people are in fact naturally superior to others, so there are natural reasons for who comes to rule. Such inequalities persist into the civil state but are mitigated by forms of legal and economic equality that ensure fairness and keep dangerous passions in check. For Hobbes, equality is a kind of problem to be solved, a natural force to be carefully managed. For Spinoza, equality is a human construct, a tool that the state uses to manage natural forces.

In this paper I'm going to discuss Hobbes and Spinoza's similarities and differences on three related concepts: equality, equalization and equilibrium. By equality here I mean natural equality, but as we will see the meaning of this concept is far from straightforward. By equalization I mean the process by which individuals become civic equals or equals under the law in the civil state. By equilibrium I mean the stable and peaceful state of affairs that we aim to achieve through the social contract. My argument is that despite their different perspectives on equality and equalization, Hobbes and Spinoza converge on the need to achieve equilibrium, which is the most important form of equality a state can deliver.

Now let's start by examining a history of the word equality. The word equality has not always meant what we primarily take it to mean today. Nowadays we understand equality largely as a relation of equivalence between persons that entails certain moral legal and political obligations. Yet this sense of equality has only really been dominant since the later part of the Enlightenment. Prior to that time, equality or equalitas, was commonly used to describe a situation that was proportional or balanced, connoting health, peace and justice. We see this usage quite commonly in ancient and medieval thought. The Roman and Christian traditions bequeath the idea of equality as parity: the idea that God creates every soul equally and that God doesn't pick favourites. While this idea does sometimes serve as a precursor to modern notions of moral equality it was actually frequently used to justify entrenched social hierarchies and relations of domination. Now there are two other senses of equality that we also find in medieval and early modern thought, the third sense is a property of God entailing the identity of God's three forms as God the father, God the son, and God the holy ghost. And then we also have a Euclidean sense of equality as geometrical equivalence, but we're not really going to talk about those two later forms in this paper today. Now Hobbes is often thought to express a concept of natural moral equality and to use that concept to break with the hierarchies and dominance patterns of the past. In his famous opening to chapter 13 of Leviathan Hobbes states 'nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he. For as to the strength of body the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself'. Now what does Hobbes mean in saying that nature hath made men equal? Well one obvious explanation just to go back to this slide is that he means something like sense b here, the parity of souls created by God all men or all humans are created equal. But there's a problem with this reading which is that Hobbes's naturalism entails that he cannot really mean that our immortal souls are created equal by God. It seems that if people are equal for Hobbes, they must be equal in the natural composition of their bodies and minds, or else they are equal in power, which Hobbes defines as the present means to obtain some future good. So, another popular reading of what Hobbes means by natural equality is just that people are all roughly equal in power. But there's a problem with this reading too because Hobbes gives us every reason to believe that people are not equal in these respects. We can even find evidence of that in this very quote. He frequently observes that people differ in strength, reasoning, wit and prudence and that those who are physically stronger more attractive and more prudent among other qualities have greater power. Hobbes clearly does not think that people have equal mental or physical abilities or equal power to seek their advantage. Indeed, Hobbes's point seems to be that we are physically and mentally unequal and that being of greater power confers no particular advantage in a state of mere survival

Hobbes's assertion of natural equality is therefore best understood not as a claim for basic equality but as an argument against natural superiority. He acknowledges natural differences in ability in order to stress that none of them suffices to establish authority, or a superior claim to resources. Even when someone through greater strength or intelligence gains advantage in the state of nature, they are no more entitled to retain it than anyone else. For whatever their difference is in power, each person has equal natural right or liberty to exercise their power. This is the sense in which we are naturally equal. Everyone is equally free to strive against others and everyone is equally vulnerable to being killed. In other words, one individual may not be equal to any other in power, but one relation between individuals is equal to any relation between any other two individuals. For Hobbes then, power is not co-extensive with natural right. When everyone has equal natural right to strive against others, having

greater power entails no lasting advantage, and being weaker entails no greater chances of destruction. However great your power may be, in a situation in which you lack the rights and protections that attach to your power in a civil state your relationship to another person is the same as anyone else's. The state of nature then is a state of relationships of equality between people who are not equal in strength, wealth, wit, prudence, attractiveness and so on. The disproportionality of this situation is part of what motivates us to form a state.

Spinoza however sees things rather differently. For Spinoza power is co-extensive with natural right. In the state of nature, those who have greater power to seek their advantage also have a greater right to do so. Spinoza does not open his discussion with the state of nature with a claim about natural equality but rather with a claim about the vast inequality that exists between nature and any individual within it. So, he says 'it's certain that nature considered absolutely has the supreme right to do everything it can i.e., that the right of nature extends as far as its power does. For the power of nature is the power of God itself and he has the supreme right over all things. But the universal power of the whole of nature is nothing but the power of all individuals together. From this it follows that each individual has a supreme right to do everything it can or that the right of each thing extends as far as its determinant power does'. The right of each thing is co-extensive with its power as Spinoza stresses many times. He goes on to note the difference between the rational and the ignorant, the mad and the sane, and those who live according to their appetites and those who live wisely. That is, he draws attention to our inequalities in strength of mind. Unlike Hobbes Spinoza thinks these inequalities in power directly correspond to disparities in natural right, so there are no naturally equal relationships between individuals. By the supreme right of nature, Spinoza says, fish are masters of the water and the large ones eat the smaller. Hobbes had argued that no one is by nature master of anyone else, but Spinoza suggests here that nature determines certain individuals to mastery in certain domains and determines the stronger individuals to dominate the weaker. Relationships of domination and subordination in the state of nature are not arbitrary for Spinoza as they are for Hobbes. Instead, they have natural explanations and they map on to our natural inequalities of power.

Now it's important to underline that Hobbes takes natural equality in the state of nature to be a bad thing. It makes relations of dominance and subordination arbitrary and it is a cause of war. The state of nature is characterized by disagreement, enmity, strife and insecurity, making commerce, industry, science and the arts untenable. It is a disordered situation in which neither peace, justice nor exchange can gain purchase. The natural equality of the state of nature means that one's survival and success are disproportionate to one's power. Where the strong and the wise have no greater chance of success than the weak and the ignorant one's power to seek one's advantage has no necessary connection to the advantage one attains. So, Hobbes thinks that while no one is born to rule it is disproportionate that the wealthy landowner has no greater chance of success than the slave. So, Hobbes's state of nature is a disproportionate state of affairs to bring about justice, peace, commerce and industry, we must create a situation in which the advantage one gains is proportionate to one's power to seek it. This means that individuals must give up their equal natural right for equal subordination to a common power. Everyone's power to kill and dominate others is rendered equally null by the sovereign, and everyone's vulnerability to others is equally reduced. One kind of equal relationship is thus exchanged for another. In both the state of nature and the civil state, the relationship between any two people is equal to the relationship between any other two but in the civil state this situation is regulated by the overwhelming power of the sovereign. It's only in these conditions that people can securely exercise their power to seek their advantage. Since people are unequal in power, they will achieve unequal success with the stronger and wiser making more money

and friends and rising in status, and that's what Hobbes thinks is the right way for things to be. The state of nature made it impossible for anyone to achieve success proportionate to their strengths. The civil state allows inequalities of power to flourish, which is the foundation of progress. The original contract is therefore an equalizing move in a specific sense. Relationships in the state of nature being equal already don't need to be made equal. They need to be regulated under a common power. This is achieved through making individuals into equal parts of a civic whole. The original contract both establishes the power of the whole and makes the relations between its parts peaceful and just. It is an agreement between every individual and every other to transfer their right to the common power so that everyone relates to everyone else as an equal under the law. It's therefore essential to the contracting process that everyone acknowledges equality. So, Hobbes says in chapter 15 of *Leviathan* 'if nature therefore have made men equal, that equality is to be acknowledged; or if nature have made men unequal; yet because men that think themselves equal, will not enter into conditions of peace but upon equal terms such equality must be admitted. And therefore, for the ninth law of nature, I put this, that every man acknowledged other for his equal by nature. The breach of this precept is pride'. For Hobbes it is rational to acknowledge natural equality whether we are committed to its reality or not. Indeed, nature determines us to do so. Even if we believe that powers and relationships are naturally unequal, we are bound to accept the wisdom of acknowledging equality. Doing so diminishes the tendency to glory and prevents conflicts from arising from perceived insults. It also encourages peace in that equal treatment makes people more motivated to transfer their right and agree to be ruled by others. Since by nature we relate to each other as equals by nature we are able to accept and acknowledge equality in the state.

Turning back to Spinoza let us recall that Spinoza is not committed to natural equality as Hobbes is. Spinoza thinks that in the state of nature people are unequal in power and unequal in natural right and that consequently their relationships are uneven. The transition to the civil state involves the introduction of equal constraints on natural right. All individuals had to agree to rein in their appetites insofar as those appetites urge something harmful to someone else to do nothing to anyone which they would not want done to themselves and to defend another person's right as if it were their own. Through the original contract people transfer some of their power to another and they transfer a corresponding amount of their natural right. But for Spinoza no one gives up their natural right entirely since nature determines us to choose the lesser of two evils it will sometimes determine us to assert our natural right to break a promise or even to renege on the original contract itself although Spinoza goes on to say why it would never be in our interest to do so. Our inequalities of natural right persist into the civil state just as our inequalities of power do. The original contract is however an equalizing move for Spinoza. For we become equals in the civil state in the sense of becoming equal parts of a whole so in a quote that's already been cited today 'in a democratic state Spinoza says no one so transfers his natural right to another that in the future there is no consultation with him instead he transfers it to the greater part of the whole society of which he makes one part. In this way everyone remains equal as they were before in the state of nature'.

This is the first mention of the word equal in chapter 16 of the TTP. Much has been made of this passage for example by Jonathan Israel who uses it to assert that Spinoza is a democratic egalitarian committed to the natural equality of persons. Spinoza does indeed say that democracy preserves the equality that existed in the state of nature, but the broader context reveals that Spinoza is not talking about natural equality, which as we have seen he neither asserts nor alludes to. Spinoza says that each person in transferring his right becomes one part of the whole society and in this way everyone remains equal. So, in what way were people equals in the state of nature? Well in just the same way as parts of a whole. In the state of nature each individual was equally subject to the whole power of

nature and equally constrained by it. In a civil state each individual is equally subject to the will of the supreme power and equally constrained by that. In the opening paragraphs of chapter 16 which we quoted earlier Spinoza presents the whole of nature in terms of its supreme right and power and the individual as a part of that right and power. As individuals we are equally parts of the power of nature and when we join a civil state, we are equally parts of the power of the state. For Spinoza when we join the civil state, we enter into relationships of equality that did not exist in the state of nature. Since relating to one another as equals is not natural to us, we are not naturally determined as we are for Hobbes to acknowledge one another's equality.

Spinoza says in a famous quote from chapter 17 of the TTP 'those who've experienced how changeable the mentality of the multitude is almost despair about it they're governed only by affects not by reason. Rushing headlong towards everything they're easily corrupted either by greed or by extravagant living. Everyone thinks that he alone knows everything and wants everything to be done according to his mentality. He thinks a thing fair or unfair permissible or impermissible just to the extent that he judges it brings him profit or loss. From love of esteem, he disdains equals and will not put up with being ruled by them. From envy for the greater praise or better fortune someone else receives these things are never equal he wishes the other person ill and is delighted when bad things happen to him'.

In this familiar passage Spinoza sets out the affects of the multitude that detract from peace including greed, ambition, pride and envy. Spinoza is also drawing attention to people's inability to acknowledge one another as their equals. We naturally want more than others, think ourselves superior are unwilling to be ruled by those we disdain and are sensitive to inequalities of wealth and honour. In other words, the natural inequalities of power and right of the state of nature which persist in the civil state become the basis for natural self-glorification and resentment. Hobbes's proclamation that it is a law of nature that we acknowledge one another's equality looks quite ridiculous in this context. For Spinoza people are no more naturally determined to acknowledge one another's equality than a lion is naturally determined to acknowledge its equality to a cat.

These natural attitudes are however detrimental to peace. It therefore falls to the state to enforce and encourage forms of equality among citizens. Judges are required to operate according to a principle of parity or equity to have no regard for persons but to treat everyone as equals and to defend the right of each person equally without envying the rich or disdaining the poor. States can distribute land, wealth and honours on egalitarian principles in order to minimize greed and envy. And the sovereign must work to give citizens a sense of equal investment and participation in the state, so that they feel themselves to be equal parts of it with equal rights. The sovereign must present themselves as having qualities that place them above human nature so that no one feels that they are subjecting themselves to their equal. And of course, education is an important part of this plan as well as Mogens spoke about earlier today. These measures feature in the example of the successful Hebrew State that Spinoza discusses in chapter 17 of the TTP, and they recur in the Political Treatise. The civil state equalizes individuals but since there is no natural determination to acknowledge that equality it is wise for the state to impose it. Equality is an important tool with which the sovereign manages the passions and maintains peace. Equality is therefore a matter of social justice and true religion not of natural law.

We see then how far apart Hobbes and Spinoza are on this issue. For Hobbes equality is natural and carries over into the civil state where its anarchic and arbitrary aspects are regulated and managed equality is as it were mandated by nature. For Spinoza equality is largely artificial and it can only be

mandated by the state. There is however another sense of equality on which Hobbes and Spinoza converge. For both of them the primary purpose of the social contract is to achieve peace understood in terms of stability, security, the elimination of conflict and the introduction of the rule of law. In medieval philosophy these desiderata were associated with the Latin term *aequalitas*, equality in the sense of proportionality, balance or equilibrium. A complex whole of interrelating parts is equal in this sense when its parts maintain the right proportions as they change and as they are affected by their changing environment. Now this immediately puts us in mind of Spinoza's concept of a physical body as a whole which maintains its ratio of motion and rest as it changes. Heidi Ravven has written about Spinoza's concept of the body in terms of homeostasis. Jacob Adler has pointed out that this concept draws on medieval Galenism which held that the health of the living body consisted in achieving the right balance of humours among differing and changing body parts. These ideas were still very live in Spinoza's time and we can detect echoes of Galenism particularly in the Short Treatise medieval and early modern thinkers used this Galenic concept of the body as an analogy for the state. Peace like health was understood to consist in achieving the right balance among the state's citizen parts. Peace is the desired state of *aequalitas* or equilibrium in the state and achieving it requires treating the disproportions of the disordered state like a doctor treats a sick or imbalanced body.

Spinoza uses this very analogy in chapter 10 of the Political Treatise attributing it there to Machiavelli. Indeed, the analogy between the healthy body and the flourishing state was already well worn by Hobbes's time. Hobbes sees the state of nature explicitly as disordered first because it is a state of war and anarchy and second because the advantage one gains in the state of nature is disproportionate to one's power. Spinoza does not accept that the state of nature is disordered because the state of nature follows the order of the whole of nature. Still the state of nature lacks the order that is advantageous to us human beings. It encourages the passions makes people enemies to one another and prevents the development of reason and freedom. The cure for this disequilibrium for both thinkers is for people to come together and commit to being parts of a whole parts that agree to relate to each other in a consistent and regulated way. Throughout all the changes that the state undergoes in this way citizens become like body parts that achieve equilibrium through consistent regulated interrelations.

For Hobbes of course this is all quite literal. People become parts of an artificial body as illustrated in the frontispiece of *Leviathan* endowed with a single endeavour that regulates their relations. The will of the commonwealth regulates its parts like the will of a living body. The body for Hobbes is constantly engaged in a process of weighing sensory inputs, desires and feelings in order to maintain its vital motions of breathing, nutrition and blood circulation. The will balances the body's varying desires and aversions to cause actions that achieve the body's advantage. The will of the commonwealth consisting of the transferred right of all its citizen parts similarly has the role of balancing all their needs, wants and feelings to cause actions that sustain the peace and advantage of the whole. As we have seen the acknowledgment of equality is crucial to this because peace and justice are served by everyone actively relating to each other as equals. This forms a baseline of equilibrium on which people can meaningfully seek their advantage. Advantage can become proportionate to power and success can be unequally achieved. A well-balanced society for Hobbes is one where a baseline of equilibrium allows inequalities of status to arise and change smoothly.

For Spinoza the equilibrium of the state is seen in its stability, its ability to maintain its integrity over time. Spinoza thinks that a well-functioning whole is one whose parts maintain their ratio of motion and rest, a principle that applies both to the living body and to the unified body of the state. So here are some relevant quotes from the Ethics part 2 which we'll be familiar to already, quotes that involve

Spinoza talking about how the parts of a body maintain the same ratio of motion and rest to each other and communicate their motion to each other in a regulated way and that's what maintains the identity and integrity of the embodied individual

Part 4 proposition 18 scholium is the key proposition in which Spinoza suggests that powerful analogy between the physical body and the body of the state 'so man I say can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose as it were one mind and one body that all should strive together as far as they can to preserve their being and that all together should seek for themselves the common advantage of all'.

Now if we think about the later propositions of Ethics part four it is striking that Spinoza's brief discussion of the foundations of the state in proposition 37 in the Ethics occurs directly between a series of propositions about agreement in nature at Ethics for propositions 31-36 and a series of propositions about preserving the health and integrity of the body at propositions 38-39. Spinoza suggests that achieving peace and justice in the state in a lasting way pertains to achieving bodily health. Both are linked to good proportionality among parts of the whole and these projects are intrinsically linked. Spinoza argues that we need to preserve the proportion of motion and rest the human body's parts have to one another in order to maintain the body's health and identity. Agreeing in nature with other human beings is good for achieving this, our explicit commitment to agree in nature with others makes us into parts of a whole that has its own proportion of motion and rest. This is good for our bodily health and good for peace. Both our individual flourishing and the stability of the state require our ongoing agreement to relate to one another at a constant rate amidst the changes and affects that we undergo. This agreement is also known as a contract. The stable and peaceful state maintains its intrinsic proportionality which is key to its health and the health of its citizens. If this proportionality is lost the state is subject to dissolution. One of the reasons why the state is always more at risk from internal strife than it is from external threats is that the citizen parts have the power to change how they relate to each other and they therefore have the power to transform that proportion of motion and rest such that the state dies or takes on a new form.

In conclusion for Spinoza as for Hobbes what matters is maintaining the equilibrium of the state understood as its specific proportionality which is determined by the way the citizen parts agree in nature with one another. Proportionality is intrinsically linked to peace and justice for both philosophers. For Spinoza there is no guarantee that people come together in a rational way and in this respect, Spinoza differs from Hobbes. Spinoza takes certain egalitarian measures to be rational and may even think that the best ratio between citizens is one of equality but there is no natural law that requires us to adopt it. A peaceful, just, stable equilibrium can be achieved in a range of societies - authoritarian and democratic, hierarchical and egalitarian - and by a range of approaches some more rational and some based more on the affects. The 'virtue of the state is security' Spinoza says in the Political Treatise; 'it doesn't make any difference to the security of the state in what spirit men are led to administer matters properly provided they do administer them properly'. I think that with Hobbes and Spinoza we are witnessing a moment of transformation of the concept of equality both of them inherit the medieval concept of *aequalitas* or equilibrium along with all of its analogical baggage and uphold it as the ideal peaceful stable form of the civil state. In that sense perhaps we can see Hobbes and Spinoza still as being part of the late medieval or renaissance period, but both are also at the dawn of a new tradition of thinking that egalitarianism should be a goal of the state. That is, that the state should be organized so that citizens relate to each other as equals on a ground of parity. Hobbes does this by locating equality in natural law, while Spinoza takes this kind of equality to be a matter of social justice or religion to be implemented by the state. Both I think privilege equilibrium

over egalitarianism, but they are perhaps the last major thinkers to do so with the new political philosophies of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Egalitarianism becomes such a dominant equality concept that the concept of equilibrium almost entirely disappears. Thank you very much.