

Transcript

Hasana Sharp - “‘I dare not mutter a word’: Truth, lies and political violence in Spinoza”

Hasana Sharp:

Thanks so much to Marie and Dan for organizing this event. It's really fun and exciting to be able to talk to people from all over the world about this one book that we all know. The paper I'm going to present is like many other people's, it is a very much a work in progress, and so I'm very excited for your feedback.

So, Spinoza knew all too well that the conditions of membership in a particular community depends upon the respect of certain discursive norms. Some things you can't say and some things you must. I'm very conscious of this as a parent who's coaching my children on what to say at various points! But Spinoza, obviously he could not accept the terms of membership in the Sephardic Jewish community into which he was born. But his remarks on sedition in the very well-known Chapter 20 of the TTP show that he doesn't think it's possible to disregard discursive obligations altogether. [Quotes:] "yet they can be so strict that they are experienced not only as violent, but as the greatest violence that political power can exert".

So really this paper is just trying to understand why Spinoza uses the superlative form. When, as Mogens Laerke points out in his recent study, Spinoza repeats it again and again. Rule over minds is considered violent, that government which makes it a crime to hold opinions is the most violent of all. So, he repeats the superlative form, and so why not other forms of violence, why is this the paramount example of political violence? It's not as though Spinoza neglects to acknowledge the brutality that rulers may visit upon their people. He notes that a ruler may flagrantly disregard his own laws, slaughter and rob his subjects and rape their women. Why aren't these paradigmatic examples of excessive political violence? Is the claim that repression of free thought and speech is the apex of state violence? An uncharacteristic example of rhetorical extravagance on Spinoza's part. That's what I'm wondering. Certainly, harsh censorship can land subjects on the scaffold, but given that human history is drenched in blood, the claim that the greatest violence a state can exercise consists in the effort to dominate minds and control tongues is a strong one. In what follows I'll outline what violence is according to Spinoza and how the domination of speech through the threat of deprivation, punishment and death is indeed an acute form of violence.

The violence involved in suppressing thought and speech is manifold and profound. Spinoza describes the cost of such violence to the state, to what we might loosely call the collective epistemic resources, and to the constituents that domination aims to script and silence. Spinoza's recognition that obedience to a dominating power requires pretence and deception is the linchpin of an account of how oppression severely degrades the conditions for meaningful communication, and thus the possibilities for thinking and acting in common. I'll conclude with some speculative remarks about why in the TTP Spinoza consistently deploys the superlative form of the adjective *violentis* in reference to the domination of thought and speech, rather than with respect to other possible examples of political violence.

So first, just definition. So before looking closely at ... Spinoza's political writings let's briefly take note of what violence means in the period and how Spinoza uses it. Similar to English, the word *violentia* in Latin implies a kind of transgression, a harmful breach of limits. Although it is often used to refer to an injustice in the early modern period, Spinoza uses the adjective *violentis* in a broad sense to refer to potent disruptive forces. If what makes a force violent and not simply powerful is its destructive and contrary character, it's helpful to identify in any given use of the term what it is that such a force transgresses, violates or opposes. We will see that for Spinoza a violent force is one that opposes a being's nature. The nature of any being whatsoever according to Spinoza, as everyone here knows, is its *conatus*, it's striving to persevere in being as the kind of thing that it is.

Being tiny parts of nature, we are in fact often subject to violence. We're inevitably and universally moved by external force. Often ambient forces act upon us in ways that sustain and amplify our power, such as when a person inhales clean air or enjoys an excellent comedy. Nevertheless, it's far from rare that we undergo encounters with external agencies that contradict our striving, to develop and exercise our characteristic powers. For example, someone might inhale some debris that interferes with her breathing, or he might encounter a police officer who interprets his benign gestures as threatening. Encounters that interfere with one striving to persevere in being can be described as violent, but they may be more or less distressing. Someone is unlikely to be especially angry about the particle that threatened his breathing, but he may be indignant about being regarded and treated as a threat by an agent of the state, especially if this were to occur repeatedly. The affects produced by such experiences then will vary in intensity depending on social patterns, and the meaning we attribute to them. What is important for our purposes is just that a force can be called violent when we experience it to oppose, palpably and strongly, our particular natures. The more something is experienced as an obstacle to our fundamental striving to persevere and to exercise our characteristic powers the more violent it will seem, and the more violently we will be inclined to oppose it.

[speaker interrupts presentation: I'm going to make sure ... I'm going to shut off my email. Sorry about that ...]

[session chair: yeah, we can see it again, thanks.]

[speaker: All right, sorry, I'm like your grandma who calls and asks about the clock blinking at 12 all day long!]

Ok... Spinoza's well-known conclusion to the TTP exhorts his readers to appreciate the virtues of granting everyone the freedom to think what he wishes and to say what he thinks. Whereas Hobbes endorsed restrictions on speech to prevent civil conflict, Spinoza defends much greater latitude for the same reasons. Both thinkers were deeply concerned about the violence that religious institutions and popular mobs might incite against members of the commonwealth who communicate unorthodox and heretical views. Hobbes advocated empowering the state not only with a monopoly on violence, but a monopoly on meaning, in order to protect individuals from the chaotic violence that could erupt from any direction. Spinoza was surely also worried about the civil strife and popular violence that might be aroused by superstitious enthusiasm and inflamed by zealous and power-hungry clergy.

Hence Spinoza asserts that when a government seeks to hold subjects accountable for thought crimes, quote "what rules most is the anger of the mob", end quote. Yet he rejected the solution of strictly prescribing thought and speech. Instead, he declares that the effort, quote "to make men say

nothing but ... what the supreme powers prescribe will be universally regarded as an intolerable violence", and yields, quote "the most unfortunate result", end quote.

So, there are three principal ways in which the strict control of speech constitutes violence. First, because according to Spinoza, quote "men have nothing less in their power than their tongues", end quote. It commands humans to act contrary to how their nature compels them to be. Requiring humans to exercise control over what they say, so as to only say what is prescribed, is tantamount to obligating a table to eat grass.

Second, insofar as subjects manage to obey and thereby succeed at appearing to think and say only what is prescribed, they participate in a culture of pretence, deception and falsity. When obedience and conformity are rewarded and dissent and honesty are punished, social mistrust is inevitable. A society of mistrust not only lacks the kind of institutions that allow people to communicate freely. Mistrust is also an inevitable outcome for any collective life structured by domination. Such domination produces patterns of epistemic violence, such that those without social standing will typically be perceived as deceivers and will find it difficult to be believed, regardless of what they say.

Finally, the domination of thought and speech by the state also constitutes a violence against itself. State action contrary to the striving of one subjects necessarily provokes indignation. Indignation is, according to Spinoza, an inevitable collective response to violent rule and is expressed in the desire that the rulers suffer, quote, "all sorts of bad things", end quote. When a commonwealth is afflicted by such violence, according to Spinoza, this contradicts its own striving to persevere in being since, quote "it does or allows to happen what can be the cause of its own ruin", end quote. In the argument that follows I will focus on the violence suffered by subjects of the commonwealth. But perhaps it is because violent rule over thought and speech threatens civil order altogether that Spinoza considered it to be the most violent government of all.

So, the next section is called action contrary to nature.

So, that it is contrary to nature, to human nature, to expect us to exercise control over what we say, and that therefore the suppression of thought and speech is violent, has been widely discussed in the literature. Nonetheless it's important to lay out the steps of Spinoza's argument. The basis lies in Spinoza's anti-voluntarism about beliefs. He maintains that humans do not have voluntary control over their beliefs, and that therefore it's impossible to quote "prescribe to everyone what they must embrace as true and false", end quote.

What each of us maintains as true and false as well as our feelings of love and hate follow necessarily from our particular histories of experience. Our judgments are simply the ideas that are most vivid and compelling in our minds. Since each of us has a unique experiential history, it follows according to Spinoza that men's minds differ as much as their palettes do. Human mentality and judgment is inevitably diverse and simply cannot be forced into a single mould. Importantly since we cannot but feel love toward whatever benefits us and hate toward whatever we perceive to be a source of harm, we cannot obey laws that command us otherwise. It belongs to the nature of finite experience to think this or that by virtue of the psychological laws of association and memory. Laws that Spinoza analogizes to laws of motion.

Like a physical law our patterns of association cannot be superseded by human decision or legislation. So, you will probably all know this, so in Spinoza's words, "even though we can say that

men are not their own masters, but are subject to the commonwealth we don't mean that they lose their human nature and take on another nature, nor do we mean that the commonwealth has the right to make men fly, or what is equally impossible to make men honour those things which move them to laughter or disgust". Institutions might aim to encourage positive associations with beneficial social practices, doctrines or civil offices, but ruling powers cannot effectively command what is not subject to voluntary control. Efforts to strictly prescribe opinions, judgments and affects will necessarily be experienced as opposed to our particular strivings and thus as violent. The notion of human nature in Spinoza is necessarily controversial. His arguments from human nature may make the reader conscious of nothing so much as the remoteness of Spinoza's thought from our own. I've been thinking about this in terms of the 350-year anniversary, so what in Spinoza is still very current and what is remote, and maybe this language of nature is a bit peculiar, and we have to do some work to translate it into our own context. But whatever human nature is for Spinoza, it certainly does not entail that we all honour, admire or detest the same things. It entails precisely the contrary. Spinoza's claim about how humans retain their nature serves to endorse a context-sensitive understanding of political rule a la Machiavelli, according to which one must recognize the habits, customs values and collective modes of thinking proper to a particular group, in order to avoid arousing their acute resentment.

Nevertheless, humans do have characteristic powers, which include the power of the mind to exercise reason, to understand. Because it belongs to our minds to strive for reason, to aim to see things in terms of their relationships and their common properties, we will also resist doctrines that contradict our understanding. So even if it's rare to act primarily from reason, and even if our understanding is necessarily partial, we cannot but strive ... we cannot but strive to improve it as much as our powers and circumstances allow.

Thus, commands to adopt certain doctrines will necessarily produce intense conflict in our minds, if those doctrines do not cohere with what we think we understand about the nature of reality and human life. If there are forces that seem systematically to interfere with our ability to understand and to strive toward what we consider to be in our vital interest, we will experience this too as violent. The more vehemently norms, rules and laws block our efforts to understand, to join our minds to those of others, and to desire in a wholehearted and constant way, the more violent we will find them.

More unusual and perhaps contentious than his anti-voluntarism about beliefs and affects is Spinoza's anti-voluntarism about speech. Spinoza argues that if it is very difficult to command beliefs, it is even more difficult to control speech.

Humans are just not the kind of beings that are skilled at secrecy. [Quotes:] "Not even the wisest know how to keep quiet, not to mention ordinary people. It's a common vice of men to confide their judgments even when secrecy is needed. So, a government which denies everyone the freedom to say and teach what he thinks will be most violent, but when a government grants everyone this freedom it will be moderate".

So, in the Ethics Spinoza associates the inability to keep quiet with drunks and gossips, but we see in the TTP that neither are the wise able to avoid communicating their judgments. Indeed, the wise and honest, according to Spinoza and Nicolas talked about this, the honestus, find it most intolerable to conceal or misrepresent their judgments. Underlying our inability to keep our thoughts, judgments and feelings to ourselves is, I think, not only our incontinence but the potency of our desire to teach others. It belongs to human thinking to strive to share our thoughts, to join the thinking of others and to make our point of view shared, rather than isolated or anomalous. Both the Ethics and the Political

Treatise point to how we desire from reason to, quote "compose, as it were, one mind and to be led by one mind", end quote, so that together we can pursue the common advantage.

Political efforts to dictate our thoughts and words are predicated on a faulty understanding of human self-control our feelings and opinions escape us, even when we live under acute threat of state or popular violence, we inevitably expose our points of view and encourage others to share them with us. Of course, the Jewish community into which Spinoza was born spent generations practicing their faith in secret, in full awareness that this could result in family separation, exile, torture and or death. Spinoza and his circle wrote and circulated texts at significant risk to themselves. Famously Adriaan Koerbagh paid for his inability to keep his judgments private with his life. Perhaps especially when we are animated by a desire to communicate the means of salvation and happiness, humans will teach what we believe no matter what the cost.

The desire to persuade is part of what makes us experience the regulation of thought and speech as oppressive and violent. Yet we can also see how the desire to persuade and encourage ideological conformity is both an inevitable feature of social life and a source of political violence. In other words, the violent contradiction of our natural striving itself follows from a tendency of human nature. Oppressive and violent rule expresses the ambitious and, according to Spinoza, universal desire to have others think like us, to approve and disapprove as we do. But since our minds are inevitably diverse, and our desire to share them is universal, a conflict resides at the heart of human nature. As Laerke emphasizes in his recent study, our diverse complexions and our universal desire to join others to us entails that we require institutional means to manage at the same time our expressive and persuasive needs, and our inevitable disagreement. But if a state or another common institution such as the church or the family does not allow dissent and complaint, it leaves them only two choices: pretence or punishment. Spinoza tries to persuade his reader that either option is disastrous.

So, this next section is called pretence.

So, at a crucial moment in the famous concluding Chapter to the Theological-Political Treatise, Spinoza alludes to a line from Terence's comedy *Andria*. Spinoza invites his reader to imagine that the freedom to think and speak would be subject to command so effective that no one would, quote "dare mutter anything except what the supreme powers prescribe", end quote. Spinoza here alludes to an exchange between a paterfamilias and a slave charged with serving his young adult son. Simo the paternal authority suspects that his slave is engaged in some kind of plot on behalf of his son and threatens the slave with punishment and death if he discovers the scheme. A sincere explanation of the son's desire to evade the marriage plans his father has arranged, however, could yield punishment or death for his young master to whom the servant is devoted. So Davus the slave has no good options and must navigate a complex terrain of dangers. Davus, as Terence draws the character, aims to serve faithfully the family with whose reproduction and care he is charged. But the relations of domination do not allow him to enlist others openly in bringing about desirable ends. Thus, in response to Simo's efforts to extort a confession that he is lying, a confession that would be his doom, Davus speaks the line to which Spinoza eludes, "I dare not utter a word".

Terence is presumed to have been a slave himself, and part of the comedy of the *Andria* follows from how the master cannot know what to believe, which is a consequence of how the enslaved person's speech is constrained. Terence represents the futility of demanding the truth at knife point. How reliable is information extracted by force? The slave's speech is always by virtue of his station heavily burdened by the strategic context, which is easily recognizable by everyone involved. Words become

instruments for satisfying or diverting the master, but under threat, they cannot be means by which two minds are joined to one another.

In the comedies of Plautus, an especially successful Roman playwright, the trickster slave is a stock character. A classic example is the play *Pseudolus*, where the name *Pseudolus* is the name of the main character, the slave, and it means liar. So, he's the deceptive enslaved protagonist. In Plautus's comedies the trickster slave allows the audience to laugh at the temporary and carnivalesque subversion of power relations. The audience can enjoy the foolish master and even root for the subordinate, especially since the comedy form promises a happy ending that preserves rather than threatens the Roman family. The trickster is a kind of *deus ex machina*, whose masterful art of deception makes anything possible.

Terence modifies the conventions of domestic comedy however to represent the slave more naturalistically, and to convey some of the difficulties that belong to a life and servitude to the Roman family. In contrast to Plautus, Terence's slaves are not effective deceivers. The happy outcomes are credited not to the supernatural powers of the trickster slave, but instead to the invisible forces of fortune. The domestic slave is portrayed as inhabiting an ambiguous and difficult position. On the one hand the slave is entrusted with a family secrets and charged with its care. On the other hand, the shadow cast by the master's arbitrary power makes trust impossible to establish. A slave may need to conceal anything that displeases a master in order to preserve her or his life.

Spinoza's allusion to Terence appears precisely at the point in his argument where he's explaining how speech burdened by domination leads to widespread deception. Spinoza points to how practices of political domination and efforts to severely restrict speech yield pervasive mistrust, and force the dominated to conceal their judgments, motives and aims. Speech constrained by threats of deprivation, punishment or death yield a corrupt social world, replete with treachery. Quote, "the necessary consequence would be that every day men would think one thing and say something else".

So, Spinoza like other republicans points out repeatedly that arbitrary and oppressive rule contribute to treachery, deception and sycophancy. Like the master of a slave, a ruler cannot trust his advisors when they operate under the weight of severe threat. Beneath the thumb of capricious rule, the safest route is to flatter, reassure and endorse whatever the ruler already thinks. there's an epistemic cost to a ruler since they will not benefit from the knowledge of their advisors or servants. Spinoza underlines in both of his political treatises how rule is solitary and precarious when others fear sharing what they really think with those in power.

So, Spinoza seeks to persuade his readers that sovereign power is less secure when it is hostile to frank speech. There is no truth in a commonwealth of pretenders, which can only be a theatre of pretence, flattery and deception. The conditions for the collective production of adequate ideas are weak. At the same time Spinoza acknowledges that the cost is not only to those in power. Part of what is violent and ruinous about burdening speech with the threat of deprivation, punishment and death, is that under such oppression subjects' lives depend upon knowing and, he says, how to pretend to be what they are not.

Under such circumstances communication is arguably not performing an epistemic function at all. Strict censorship is a demand for verbal expressions of obedience. If speech directed at political or other authorities is constrained by a short menu of possibilities, the speaking subject occupies a

tactical situation that renders her literally incredible. The experience of being confronted and required to comply in words is especially common among groups that are marginalized or dominated.

In 17th century Amsterdam, if you belong to a minority religious group, a recent immigrant community or you associate with free thinkers, you will find yourself more often under suspicion from the state and other authorities. The ability to navigate the social context to avoid punishment, Spinoza laments, demands that you know how to pretend. Clearly Spinoza thinks this is repugnant to a virtuous and honest person whose beliefs are constant and firm. Spinoza also claims that the more we enjoy the power to reason, the more we desire to participate in a community of thought with others. Thus, the demand to keep quiet will be particularly unbearable to those whose thoughts are clear and powerful, by virtue of which they cannot but desire to join their minds to those of others.

So many thinkers reflecting upon oppression have emphasized how profoundly diminishing it is to be constantly suspected of dishonesty. To be addressed as someone whose thoughts and testimony are suspicious or invalid. The relation between a master and a slave, or between a despotic ruler and a subject, is one of brute domination. It involves an acute power differential that explicitly and radically constrains the possibilities of communication. Gayatri Spivak famously names systematic barriers to being heard and believed, which can be severe for the least powerful, "epistemic violence". Histories of domination, Spinoza helps us to see, produce let me always say produce the epistemic violence that leads to phenomena such as what Kristie Dotson calls testimonial smothering. Dotson focuses on how frustrating and dangerous communicative contexts produce patterns of silencing and self-silencing among disadvantaged groups. On the one hand, if you're a member of a group that has been stereotyped as ignorant or unreliable, your experience and expertise are less likely to be sought and more likely to be dismissed. On the other hand, as a member of a marginalized group, you may withhold your own knowledge, due to the perceived dangers burdening your speaking context. Dotson describes how women of colour aware of ... how racism and sexism structure their credibility as speaking subjects, will sometimes smother their own testimony in anticipation of the costs of frank speech.

Importantly, these situations of epistemic violence reflect social and political conditions past and present, practices of domination. Epistemic violence does not follow from mere prejudice, but it's a feature of domination. Dominating social conditions practically and logically require distrust. Spinoza refers to the enslaved person who dare not utter a word to a suspicious master, and to the political dissident whose honest advice may land him on the rack, but there are numerous examples in social and political life, past and present, in which the acute vulnerability of the speaker to violence or deprivation, radically undermines the possibility of genuine communication. Imagine being questioned at the end of a soldier's rifle. Think of the many employees who can be fired at will for criticizing their employer, or for communicating their genuine opinions or feelings to a customer. Consider an early modern bourgeois woman who must marry or join a convent to live in marriage, Mary Astell observes bitterly, it is considered, quote "a wife's duty to suffer everything without complaint", end quote.

There are many social circumstances in which one risks a great deal by complaining, objecting or even reacting in a sincere way to something unpleasant or terrifying. But it's not a coincidence that those with lower social status or less social power will more often find themselves in a context where they are asked to use their words or gestures to communicate compliance rather than their thoughts. And it is precisely their lack of status and power that defines the risks entailed by their honesty. They are asked to affirm those in power, to bow and scrape, or else to suffer the consequences. It is thus

not everyone equally, but especially the less powerful who will be regarded as sneaky, wily, deceptive or frivolous.

When Spinoza describes liars and sycophants, he most obviously points to ambitious men, quote "he says contemplating money in their coffers and having bloated bellies", end quote. He suggests that those in power will not be served by their own laws, because their courts will be populated by those without integrity who treat words as mere instruments to secure comfort and influence. He warns that flattery and treachery would be encouraged, since the vicious would simply say whatever will bring them the most profit. But it's the powerless who have the most to lose if they don't know how to pretend what they are not ... sorry, don't know how to pretend to be what they are not. And when one is a member of what we might anachronistically call an over-policed community, one is more often confronted and required to engage in such pretence. In particular members of less powerful groups are forced to make respectful gestures to the powers that dominate them, and they are admonished not to complain even as they are beaten or threatened with exile, death or imprisonment.

So, Spinoza warns that warns those in power that demanding such intolerable servility will be a danger to the state, because the people cannot help but admire those who refuse to engage in such debasing rituals. Spinoza argues that a free and virtuous person will find pretence especially painful, and one and will also be less likely to fear punishment including death. ... That a free man does not act deceptively insofar as he is free. If he were to seek to save himself from present danger through deceit, he would agree with others only in words but not in fact.

Steven Nadler interprets freedom to follow from the striving not only to preserve our being, but to preserve a particular kind of nature, one which is defined by our desire for intellectual perfection. Importantly developing this power depends upon being able to forge commonalities with others, which Spinoza describes as agreements in nature, something we've talked about a lot the past few days. Since deception involves agreeing only in words while opposing one another in fact, it contradicts the possibility of agreeing in nature. The free person according to Nadler will not deceive, since the free person strives not just for duration but for perfection, that depends upon being able to join together with others. So, Nadler is right in my view that humans strive not only to live but to perfect their natures, the powers characteristic of their being. Likewise, he rightly observes that deception is a form of separation, antagonistic to the project of joining together that reason recommends.

But notice that if one is confronted with the present danger of death that could be avoided only by a lie, one is likely in a situation in which someone is threatening your life with the exercise of arbitrary power. Thus, politically speaking, one simply is not free. There's little to no possibility of using words to join the mind of the person threatening you. You are opposed in fact and words cannot align you. Situations in which it is very difficult if not impossible to come together with words due to pervasive dangers are not uncommon in social and political life, and no amount of virtue can reliably rescue us from them as long as domination is unchecked.

Spinoza's only assurance is that unchecked domination will turn the scaffold into a stage where exceptionally honest ... individuals will perform their virtue by accepting death rather than dishonesty. He claims that such a display of sovereign power can only be regarded as antagonistic to the common welfare, and thus as violent. And he promises no one has sustained a violent rule for long.

So, here's my final little section which isn't quite a section, it's just a concluding thought. So, Spinoza accepts the need for institutions that are upheld by force, and acknowledges that the establishment of

civil order often occurs through repressive violence. When he acknowledges this however, he often qualifies his assertion about the necessity of state power with remarks such as the following: [quotes] "human nature does not allow itself to be compelled in everything". He proceeds to issue the warning mentioned above, citing Seneca's tragedy, the "Trojan Women", "no one has sustained a violent rule for long". Those who rule by terrorizing their subjects, motivating obedience with threats of deprivation, punishment or death, will themselves live in fear. Their subjects can't help wanting bad things to happen to them. When they can, they help to bring them about.

In the Political Treatise, Spinoza describes a scenario in which subjects are no longer driven to destroy their rulers. They have been enslaved to the point that they barely think of the future at all. They obey resignedly, desiring only to avoid death. Spinoza claims that this is slavery and not political rule. Through bloody conquest, enslavement and attacks on kinship such as those described in the Trojan Women, what exists is a wasteland or a desert rather than a commonwealth.

When he identifies censorship as the greatest form of political violence, perhaps Spinoza means to exclude those forms of political life that ought to be called wastelands rather than commonwealths. When people are ruled to be slaves rather than subjects, they are already deprived of what Spinoza calls a human life and fear of evils governs their entire existence. Their social and affectionate relationships are constantly burdened by threat. If people ... sorry ... once this happens even the wasteland cannot be sustained.

The effort to dominate thought and speech in contrast is a normalized part of political violence and cannot be avoided altogether. There are always some terms of discourse to which members of a community must agree. But any commonwealth worthy of the name must moderate and control its power and striving to mould the judgments, and prescribe the speech of its constituents, lest it become intolerably violent and arouse collective indignation. Thus, strict control of thought and speech may be the most violent expression of political rule, but there are extreme forms of violent social order that perhaps do not deserve to be called political at all. Thank you.