

## Transcript

### Jimena Solé - "Truth, obedience and freedom in Spinoza's TTP"

#### Jimena Solé:

Thank you very much Antonio for this wonderful introduction. I will thank first of all Dan and Marie for this wonderful invitation, for this wonderful organization, it's really nice to see many of you again who I've already met and to be able to discuss ideas and exciting topics with such experts is always a privilege.

So, the title of this presentation is "Truth, obedience and freedom: Some considerations on Spinoza's concept of politics and its relation with philosophy". One of the central thesis on which Spinoza builds his defence of the freedom to philosophize in the TTP is the separation between philosophy on the one hand and theology and politics on the other. Spinoza states that 'the aim of philosophy is quite simply truth' while theology and politics aim at obedience which consists in carrying out orders 'simply by reason of the authority of a ruler'. Whether in view of a pious life or in view of a peaceful and secure coexistence, both theology and politics control the behaviour of human beings through mechanisms of domination, which resort mainly to fear and hope. Philosophy on the other hand, as a rational investigation of truth excludes coercion and requires freedom. Both realms are thus completely divided between theology and philosophy. Spinoza writes 'there is no relation and no affinity'. Not only the aims but also the bases differ completely, when philosophy rests on universally valid actions obtained through the study of nature, theology is based on history and language and is derived only from scripture. The distinction between them implies that neither should be ancillary to the other.

So also, between politics and philosophy we find an abyss. In examining the foundations of the state. Spinoza argues that no one is able to transfer to another his natural right to reason freely and to form his own judgment nor can he be compelled to do so. No civil authority legitimately possesses the right to impose doctrines or beliefs, however neither can philosophy impose itself on politics or try to replace it. The idea of a community of wise men living in harmony without the need for civil laws is utopian. Human beings are usually driven by their pleasure and dominated by greed, glory, envy, anger which usually lead to conflict. Therefore, they require rules that guarantee peaceful coexistence and authorities to enforce them. Philosophy and politics are thus completely separate spheres. One might say they are even opposed ones. However, this separation and opposition are called into question in the last chapter of the TTP where Spinoza claims 'the purpose of the state is in reality freedom'.

So, in what does this freedom consist and what is the relation its relation with obedience? The next few pages are devoted to trying to find an answer to this question. To do so I will analyse how Spinoza conceives freedom, obedience and the relations between them, firstly in violent and moderate states, and secondly in a democratic state. My analysis aims to show that Spinoza operates a resemantization of the concept of obedience which consists in abandoning the usual sense of obedience as acting by authority, to understand it as living according to reason. The possibility then arises of rethinking Spinoza's concept of the political and its relation to philosophy. I will devote to this the third and last section where I suggest that Spinoza employs a plurivocal concept of politics and also a plurivocal concept of philosophy. Indeed, not every state aims at obedience, and philosophy is

not always understood as the sheer search for truth. I will show that philosophy and politics - as Spinoza understands them - are neither separate nor opposed, but inseparable and complementary.

So, first point, obedience and freedom in violent and moderate states. We said that Spinoza recognizes that no society can subsist without authority and coercion, without laws that moderate and control men's lust and their unbridled impulses. 'Yet human nature will not submit to unlimited repression', he adds, and points out that, as Seneca teaches, no one has long contained states that depend on violence, while the moderate ones are stable. It follows that there are different types of political orders: 'the most tyrannical government will be one where the individual is denied the freedom to express and communicate to others what they think what he thinks and a moderate government is one where the freedom is granted to every man'. In the TTP's preface, Spinoza famously accuses as violent those monarchical regimes which use religion as an instrument to infuse fear and control men to the extent that 'they fight for their servitude as if for salvation'. Forced to obey orders that are only for the benefit of their kings, human beings are transformed into slaves. This cannot happen in a moderate state or free commonwealth, where no one would dare to coerce the citizens free judgment. In these states only deeds but not words are punished, and everyone is allowed to express their own opinion, provided they obey civil laws. This is according to Spinoza the case of the Dutch Republic 'where nothing is esteemed dearer and more precious than freedom'.

The most violent state and the free or moderate state are presented as the two extremes of an arc that we may assume encompasses different political structures that grant freedom of thought and expression in varying degrees. Nevertheless, they all require absolute obedience to their laws, based on the authority of the supreme political power. Indeed, in moderate states, citizens remain in full exercise of the right of thought and expression, even if they often have to act contrary to what they think is good and to what they openly profess.

It seems like we have found a possible answer to our question. We could think that, by claiming that the end of the state is freedom, Spinoza is referring specifically to moderate states and to freedom of thought and expression. As we have just seen, this freedom is perfectly compatible with obedience to the laws that regulate a peaceful and secure common life. The separation between politics and philosophy is complete. Neither of them represents a danger or an obstacle to the other.

However, is this the meaning of the statement? Can freedom as the purpose of the state be reduced to the mere absence of external obstacles to think and express one's ideas, while the requirement to obey the laws even if they are absurd or harmful remain intact? I think not. Moreover, I think this becomes evident in the analysis of another configuration of the political, one that interests Spinoza the most, the democratic commonwealth.

So, point two: obedience and freedom in a democracy.

As we know Spinoza conceives democracy as a united body of men that collegially possess sovereign rights over everything in its power. Therefore, the democratic state is 'the most natural form of state approaching most closely to that freedom which nature grants to every man'. What is the freedom that characterizes life in a democracy and how does it relate to obedience an inevitable requirement of all political association?

Relatively early in the development of the TTP, democracy is revealed as a political form that differs from those other forms just discussed since according to Spinoza obedience 'has no place in a

community where sovereignty is vested in all the citizens and laws as sanctioned by common consent'. Unlike the slave, who must obey orders that seek only the advantage of those who command, the subject - the citizen of a democratic state - is that who 'by command of the sovereign power act acts for the common good and therefore for his own good also'. Since they do not transfer their right to another, but all possess it corporately, the members of a democratic state live according to laws that give themselves that they give themselves. Indeed, the supreme law of a democratic state is 'the welfare and the of the whole people not the ruler'.

Here we find a first difference between meanings within the concept of obedience. The difference between a subject and a slave does not lie in the fact that they carry out orders, but in the purpose of the action ordered. There is obedience when the law commands one to act for the benefit of another. In this sense, there is no place for obedience in a democracy, where laws aim at self-benefit. Therefore, Spinoza concludes, that 'the commonwealth whose laws are based on sound reason is the most free for there everyone can be free as he wills that is he can live wholeheartedly under the guidance of reason'.

In a democracy, obedience is replaced by freedom. However, I think it is clear from the above that the freedom that defines life in a democracy is not limited to freedom of thought and expression. It is not just a matter of thinking: it is also a matter of living freely, living according to the guidance of reason, aiming at one's advantage, which is also the advantage of the community. And given that reason is fully in favour of peace and that peace is only achieved if the laws of the state are observed, Spinoza concludes that 'the more a man is guided by reason that is the more free he is the more steady fastly he will observe the laws of the state and obey the commands of the sovereign whose subject he is'.

However, as we know, we are finite and usually subject to our passions, so we do not always manage to recognize that complying with civil laws is in our own best interests. Thus, it is frequent that citizens in a democratic state do not feel free but oppressed by the laws. In this sense Spinoza points out some pages later that 'the obedience is not so much a matter of outward act as internal act of the mind'. We discover here a new sense of obedience, which we could identify as fictitious, just as we are mistaken to consider ourselves free when we believe that we act by the decree of an unconditioned will, so we are mistaken to believe that we obey when we comply with a civil law founded on reason and proclaimed by the whole of society.

In this same sense Spinoza states in the TP [Political Treatise] chapter 2 paragraph 20 that we usually call obedience the constant will as prescribed by reason to control the appetites, and he argues that he would approve of this definition if human freedom consisted in giving free reign to appetite and desire. However, he warns, freedom is not opposed to reason nor does it consist in everyone living as they please. On the contrary, 'since human freedom is the greater as a man is more able to be guided by reason and control his appetites', Spinoza concludes that 'it is only with great imprecision that we can call the life of reason obedience'. We believe that we are being obedient when we moderate our passions and act rationally. But in doing so, we are acting according to our reason, we are being free. We deceive ourselves, just as an angry child thinks that they freely seek revenge or a timid man that he freely seeks flight.

Spinoza thus performs what we could interpret as a resemantization of the concept of obedience. The notion of obedience as following orders 'simply by reason of the authority of a ruler' characterizes the life of men in violent and moderate states, but has no place in our democratic commonwealth. If we are to speak of obedience in a democratic state, then we are referring, with great imprecision, to living

according to reason. Those who, controlled by their passions and their inadequate ideas, experience the obligation to obey the law as an external imposition, as something harmful to them, and not as a command of their own reason, will feel that by obeying the laws they are limiting their freedom. As I suggested, this is but a fictitious idea of obedience, connected to an equally fictitious idea of freedom as the possibility of living according to one's pleasure.

As I anticipated, this resemantization of the concept of obedience allows us to question Spinoza's characterization of the political as the realm of obedience and to rethink its link with philosophy. I would like to devote the rest of my presentation to share some considerations on this issue.

So, we are now in the third and last section, philosophy and politics. If obedience can be understood in an imprecise sense as living according to reason, then the concept of the political, defined as the realm of obedience, becomes plurivocal. Indeed, the realm of the political encompasses both what Spinoza calls violent and moderate states and democratic states, where obedience, resemantized, overlaps with freedom. Admitting this plurivocity allows us to rethink the separation and oppositions between politics and philosophy that, as we have seen, underpins the TTP's argumentation.

We know that the main purpose of the TTP is to defend the freedom to philosophize in the wake of a monarchical restoration, which would bring the hardening of censorship and religious persecution. Emphasizing the separation between politics and philosophy makes it possible to establish their independence and to argue that there is no incompatibility between obedience and civil laws and freedom of thought and expression. But this but is freedom of thought and expression enough for the existence of philosophy? Is it possible for philosophy to flourish in a moderate state?

If we focus on Spinoza's characterization of philosophy in the TTP, as the search for truth founded on universally valid actions obtained through the study of nature, we could argue that philosophy is a purely theoretical and contemplative science, capable of existing in political constructs of obedience to external authority, if freedom of expression is granted. Philosophers would be allowed to develop their theories, publish and teach them, on condition that they always obey the laws of the state however irrational and contrary to their benefit. But, is this how Spinoza conceives philosophy?

I believe that in the same way that the TTP fosters a plurivocal concept of politics, so too the concept of philosophy, throughout Spinoza's work, exhibits different meanings. In the Ethics, Spinoza does not offer a definition of philosophy, and the few times he mentions philosophers there he does so in order to criticize them for pretending to explain reality by referring to ideas of their own imagination. But if we take the TTP's definition of philosophy - as the search for truth that rests on universally valid axioms - and interpret it in the light of the doctrine developed in the Ethics, we learn that this search for truth is not a theoretical and contemplative exercise aimed at increasing knowledge but the very search for happiness and freedom.

Indeed, the Ethics makes it clear that to conceive true ideas through ideas, to exercise reason and intuitive science, is the highest virtue of the human mind and gives rise to the intellectual love of God, which is its highest contentment. Moreover, and primarily, the Ethics teaches that to conceive true ideas is to be free; it consists in being the adequate cause of what happens in our mind (and our body), it is to exercise one's own power autonomously. Therefore, the end of philosophy thus understood coincides with what the final chapter of the TTP establishes as the real purpose of the state: freedom. This freedom is not reduced to the free circulation of ideas, which could very well just be obscure and confused ideas, prejudices and errors that keep men deceived and motivate passions

that sink them into slavery. It consists in living according to one's nature, living according to reason, being autonomous. In this sense, philosophy reveals itself not only as an activity of the whole individual - and not exclusively of his mind - but also as a transformative activity, insofar as it increases the power of individuals and of the society, and motivates active affections such as nobility, which have a positive impact on inter-subjective bonds.

The resemantization of the concept of obedience, which led to the recognition of the pluriposity of the concept of the political, together with the acknowledgement of the plurivosity of the concept of philosophy itself, allows us to discover the coincidence of the aim of particular forms of the political - a democracy - and philosophy in the sense that Spinoza carries it out in the Ethics. Both have freedom as their purpose, understood as living according to one's own nature, as the autonomous exercise of one's own power. The separation between philosophy and politics is replaced by an intimate connection, which opens up the possibility of thinking of them as complementary. Indeed, a democratic state that does not reduce peace to the absence of war, or security to the abundance of material goods, also actively encourages the arts and sciences, which are inseparable, as Spinoza acknowledges in chapter 5 of the TTP, for the perfection of human nature and its blessedness. Moreover, the collective nature of the search for truth, which Spinoza had already explicitly established at the beginning of the TIE [Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect] highlights the impossibility for the ends of philosophy to be achieved outside a social structure that guarantees the conditions that makes it possible, by dealing, among other things, with education and health. Thus, I believe it is correct to conclude that only an authentic democracy can philosophy flourish and that the pursuit of freedom is always a political-philosophical endeavour. Thank you very much.