

Transcript

Steph Marston - "Recognition-rebellion-freedom: emergent identities in Spinoza's political philosophy"

Steph Marston:

So just to kind of set the scene. In general, what I try to do in my writing about Spinoza is to articulate my sense that Spinoza's political works are really like the culmination of his philosophy, in this attempt to understand the domain in which human freedom is framed, lived and constantly reimagined. So, it's fundamental that that Spinoza's political philosophy is integrated into his metaphysics and his philosophy of affect, and so forth. So, for that reason I'm... what my main interest is in how we should understand how the epistemology and psychology of the Ethics are playing out in the political domain. So, I'm not so interested in Spinoza's own political ideas even in so far as we can speculate as to what those might have been. I don't think those matter so much. I think that Spinoza could be wrong about his own political commitments in the context of his own philosophy. And I tend to think that interrogating the Spinozan mechanics as it were to some extent does tell us something. We touched yesterday on the thought that Spinoza is more useful for diagnosing political issues sometimes, than for resolving them. But I do think that when we interrogate how the politics works then we can think that there are at least some indications of what counts as good and less good practice in politics.

So, my paper's motivated by the central tension in the TTP which several speakers have already mentioned. That on the one hand the state is able to legitimately demand obedience, absolute obedience, from those who live within it even when as he says: "Those who hold power command the greatest absurdities". And on the other hand, the purpose of the state is freedom. So, the state is the arena for the realization of human freedom. So, I want to highlight some important elements in Spinoza's general characterization of the state, which I take to extend to social formation in general. So, we talk about the state, but it needn't be a state it might be just a more like a community group, or or any kind of self-determined to some extent group of people. So, first of all states and other social formations are embodiments of ... they embody a partial recognition among people. So, when I say recognition, I'm not suggesting that there's some special perception of a shared essence of humanity or subjectivity. But rather in line with Spinoza's stipulation that we know ourselves and other things only through the ideas of our bodies. The recognition is phenomenological. We recognize some similarities of effect between ourselves and others. Effects such as appearance or actions or affective responses to the world. And to recognize such similarities is to recognize a potential for engaging in shared projects. It's a recognition of at least a partial agreement in nature. And to take joy in such potential as offering the opportunity to increase our power of persevering in being. And to deflect any thought that this is perhaps an over optimistic picture whether on Spinoza's part or on mine, I'd say that such phenomenological recognition grounded in inadequate ideas is only partial, and it needn't even be mutual or symmetrical. So, recognition might include, I'm not saying this is the optimal case, but recognition might include recognizing another human being as a potential source of one's own empowerment and enslaving them. The notion of a shared project only needs to be one which human beings work together. So how they work together is going to be unimportant for that general principle of recognition grounding social formation.

Because it seems to me that philosophically Spinoza must be committed to the thought that any social formation, whatever degree of inequity it involves, is just more empowering for all those involved in it, than the hypothetical limit case of a solitary human being. But of course, that doesn't in any way exclude us from judging some social formations as being really better than others, in either a pragmatic or indeed a philosophical sense. So that's the first thing. Social formations are grounded in recognition, recognition of agreement in nature.

And second: social formations are discrete entities, with their own power to persevere in being. In other words, they're not just aggregations of the people who hold citizenship or live within their laws or whatever. So, in the Ethics we see that the compositionality by which individuals that agree with nature can increase their power in a shared project, gives rise to a new entity which wields their combined power and that has to be wielded in a unified way, even while each person party to the entity retains their natural right. And the consequence of that, is that in any shared project there are two dimensions of potentia: that of the project itself, in this case the state, and that of the people who comprise the shared project. And further since states are grounded in only partial recognition among people, for example their perceptions of each other's usefulness, the ontological potentia of the state is always different from and typically a kind of diminished version of that of its people.

So, with those two thoughts in mind, we can think that even if social formations and collective entities or although they are grounded in recognition, they're elaborated and sustained by imaginations, which build into the shared narratives of agreement in nature that we call culture and history. Which generate effective attachment to states. And which thus form a part of their power to persevere in being. Indeed, such narratives increase the power of the state and of its people. Although they do come at a price. So Hasana Sharp has pointed out that the conjunction of recognition and imagination tends to crystallize certain kinds of identities, like tribes or nationalities, genders and so forth, in a way which appears inimical to the kind of holistic conception of nature that we find in Spinoza. So, while recognition enables cooperation, the imaginations and the affects that hold social formations together by including those ... by appealing to those who are recognized as similar and including them within the body - are liable also to exclude and estrange others. And to do so often actively and intentionally. So paradoxically those empowering narratives create exclusions, which limit the collective potentia of the social formation which practice ... which generate the narratives.

So, an essential aspect of Spinoza's philosophy is that we attain freedom in the form of blessedness by overcoming imaginations which limit our freedom, and by learning to govern our affects, especially sad or disempowering affects. So social formations may increase their potentia by overcoming the privations of understanding inherent in their exclusionary narratives, one might think. And so that would increase the extent of recognition among its people. However, Spinoza's philosophy of mind suggests that it's not possible to achieve that simply through exercising our reason. Rather in order to overcome the imaginations which determine who does and who does not enjoy the advantages of political inclusion, whether that be in the form of citizenship rights or access to advantages such as education or justice or health, we must be able to recognize how excluded others define and narrate themselves. That creates the conditions for being able to extend our understanding as it were. In other words, empowering political change, whether it's revolutionary or evolutionary and adaptive, originates not in the dictates of reason, but in excluded imaginaries. The means by which people who are one way, or another marginalized by existing historical and cultural narratives create alternative identities, in seeking their own empowerment. And increasing our freedom requires receptivity to such disruptions of our established cultural and historical narratives.

In the political writings, Spinoza articulates this principle by repeated appeals to the advantage of government which consistently seeks out and makes use of the insights and understanding of the people who live under its laws. It's not only the hypothesized democracy of the TTP which avoids the greatest absurdities by involving a large number of people, and implicitly a wide diversity of opinion in the processes of politics. His discussions of monarchy and aristocracy point in the same direction, with limits on the tangible distribution of power offset by mechanisms by which those who have power should consult with those who do not, and by warnings about the threat which excluded multitudes and foreigners might pose to the stability of the state.

But cultivating the receptivity needed to create the conditions for increasing the potentia of the state is no simple matter. Given that the identity of those within the state, and arguably especially those who hold power, is bound up with the very institutions and narratives ... those very institutions and narratives seen as ... sorry, bound up with the institutions and narratives which exclude others. So effective experiences of those institutions and narratives as empowering or successful stands in the way of an appreciation of their limitations. Further, there's just no easy solution to this relative privation of political understanding in the form of taking inspiration from other states or societies, for example, because interpreting and contextualizing the examples of others is equally affectively charged. Learning the lessons of history as Spinoza often appears to aspire to do in both the TTP and the TP means understanding all of the advantages and disadvantages of one's own political context. But it seems that those who already enjoy political rights are not in the optimal epistemic position to achieve the understanding which would enable consideration of how to increase the collective potentia of the state.

So, what are those who don't enjoy such rights but wish to lay claim to them? In effect they're rebels, at least in the terms of the TTP. They stand at the limit of the political in exemplifying the probation of the current laws and institutions of the state relative to the potentia of its people. So, Spinoza... there's been quite a bit of scholarship around Spinoza's use of positive exemplars as a source of political insight in Spinoza's writings, so we have exemplars of reason in the Ethics, exemplars of scripture in the TTP, exemplars of history in the Tractatus Politicus. And I suggest that the rebel functions in Spinoza's writings as a negative exemplar. A source of political insight into the consequences of a mismatch between the state's potentia and actions, and the constituted potentia of its people. A rebel needn't even be overtly political. Anyone is a rebel in effect who finds themselves unable to obey the laws, or who cannot suppress seditious opinions which are such as "to destroy the agreement by which each person surrendered his right" as Spinoza says in Chapter 20 of the TTP. Destroying the agreement, those situations seem surprisingly commonplace really. So, on Spinoza's account people cannot help but speak and act on their thoughts and that means that laws which for example exclude women from entering public spaces or which criminalize homosexuality, or which have effects of racial discrimination, are by definition never fully upheld, even by people who aren't directly affected by them but simply disagree with them and may just be impossible to comply with by people who are directly disadvantaged by them. So, the the position of the rebel need not be a self-conscious revolutionary position, it may simply be somebody who's standing right at the limit of what's possible within the institutions of the state.

As negative exemplar, the rebel offers an opportunity for recognition of the state's failure to enhance potentia for some of its people, and of how it might increase its own potentia and the potentia of all by addressing this failure. The rebel enacts a contrary position, in that they act in accordance with their natural right on the one hand, but against the right of the state and therefore against the enhancement of their own power on the other. If the state is the expression of partial agreements in nature and a

way of life, the emergence of such contrary positions can be understood as showing a means for enhancing the potentia of both state and people. For example, by cultivating the coexistence of diversity and ideas and way of life, and so providing greater opportunity and capacity for people to be affected in different ways. The rebel acts as a negative exemplar not in providing an alternative narrative perspective of which the politician needs to take account, because it's in the frame of political discourse, but by showing or enacting the incompleteness, that is the inadequacy, of the state's current constitution and sustaining fictions. At the revelation of this inadequacy, the imperative on the politician is to extend her understanding of how things are rather, than simply falling back on the reaffirmation of those now contested fictions. We can thus see that good politics means the state moves from simply reifying or embodying recognition to cultivating and enacting new recognitions. Thank you.