

Power, State and Freedom: An Interpretation of Spinoza's Political Philosophy. By Douglas J. Den Uyl. Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum. 1983.

Many people do not realize that the reason why they are so often ripped off and mugged is that no one has yet produced a satisfactory political philosophy—which is also why we lost the Vietnam War, why terrorism triumphs, why Kennedy clobbered Bork, etc.

Evolution, which doesn't really care for either species or individuals, but cares more for species than for individuals, once solved the hardest problem of political philosophy—free riding—as a corollary to the invention of language.

Creatures without language are limited in their beliefs—anticipations of experience—to matters that impinge directly on their well-being: they have “sets” to the edibility of this, the danger of that, the tactical effectiveness of such-and-such a stratagem for capture or evasion. These simple beliefs—call them “low”—have the advantage of being nearly all true, for they concern survival and evolution weeds out the ones that misrepresent how things are.

With language come imagination and capability of lying and story-telling. Beliefs that are not true can now survive if they are about things and circumstances that do not make a direct and vital difference to survival. Call these “high” beliefs. Some of them, though literally false, can even enhance changes for survival if they promote individual vigor and social coherence: our chief is the great-great-grandson of the sun, my luck is bound to change for the better, the Powers that rule the world will aid us in our battle against the wickedness of our enemies, and they will surely punish me if I disobey the commands they transmit through the council of elders.

Low beliefs are the same for all peoples; high beliefs differ from tribe to tribe; nevertheless they are *beliefs*, sets toward experience. The propensity to have high beliefs, developed through the ninety-nine per cent of the human era when hunting and gathering in tribes of thirty or forty was the only mode of living, took on even more importance with the advent of agriculture and large communities. High beliefs were the glue holding these aggregates together as organic unities.

Of course that was (and is) not the only social function of high beliefs. They were the official answers to all questions about how things hang together, who causes them, and why. They defined and justified all values and all status that did not depend directly on demonstrable prowess. High beliefs were what gave meaning to existence.

But language led eventually to science, and as a result this neat solution came unstuck, creating a need that still remains unfilled.

Thales and his successors ruptured the invisible membrane that had kept high and low belief systems separated. For science too implies a world view, based, however, not on edifying fictions but on logical synthesis and extrapolation of low beliefs. (Logic and mathematics are low.) From Anaxagoras to Darwin and beyond, slowly but inexorably, the low beliefs have eaten up the high, even among the vulgar. This is good news and bad news. The good is that at last the received account of how things are is largely *true* (pace such people as Aristophanes, William Jennings Bryan, and Richard Rorty); the bad is that when high descriptive beliefs go, high normative beliefs cannot survive either—yet low beliefs seem incapable of grounding any evaluations beyond those connected to pleasure and pain as experienced by individuals. That seems insufficient either to justify or to motivate acceptable behavior.

Philosophy is the attempt to come to grips in some rational way with this theoretical and practical impasse. (What 'rational' signifies in this context is far from clear.) That is why all the really important philosophy was done in fifth and fourth century Greece and seventeenth and eighteenth century western Europe, the locales of the most seismic high/low crunches.

Political philosophers have two questions to answer, one easy, the other hard. The easy one is: why is it a good idea to have a State, that is, a hierarchical (leaders and followers) organization of people with compulsory membership and rules of behavior enforceable by physical coercion? The answer, provided first by Hobbes in the modern period, is that even the worst State is better than anarchy. Few have dissented.

The hard question is: Why should *I* support the State (by obeying its laws—including tax assessments, military draft, etc.)? It is not enough to reply: Because you just now admitted that the State is a good thing, hence good for you. All that follows from that admission is that it is a good thing for me that *other* people should obey the laws. True, if I disobey I lay myself open to the deliberate unpleasantness of the sanctions; but what if the risk of getting caught is slight or nil, and the gain of disobedience is great? Why shouldn't I be a free rider if I can? Game theory seems to endorse this as paradigmatically rational behavior, once the countervailing factors postulated by high beliefs have been eliminated.

Hobbes' philosophy, thought to be so hard-boiled, does not surmount the problem. All he says specifically about free riding (e.g. *Leviathan* chapter 15) is that it is hard to get away with. Moreover, his Laws of Nature, allegedly the dictates of reason, retain a crucial high-belief-generated normative element: I am obliged to *trust* the Sovereign to enforce the laws properly.¹ Even more obviously, the theory cannot account for my obligation to defend the Sovereign at mortal risk to myself, since I am supposed to subject myself to him in order to protect my life, and can never forfeit my right to do so.

Does Spinoza fare any better?

The view is widespread that in political philosophy Spinoza is a mere footnote to Hobbes, differing in a preference for democracy and offering a defense of free speech but otherwise sharing his principles. One of the many merits of Professor Den Uyl's excellent book is its showing of profound differences at the ground level. One of them is that Spinoza's theory, unlike

Hobbes', is devoid of normative principles (except "to increase power," p. 154). It is concerned only to show what the State *is*, and what, in consequence, the individual confronted with its power *must* do. "The reader must continue to keep in mind," Den Uyl notes (8), "that Spinoza's natural law doctrine is actually a doctrine of natural laws in the current scientific sense." Spinoza thoroughly detranscendentalizes the State—a process that in his time and place mainly consisted in showing the irrelevance of the Bible to political debate.² Nor does the State have any moral foundation: moral rules are generated by the State, not vice versa.³ And their sacrosanctity consists only in the *fact*, when it is a fact, that violators will be punished—here and now, of course. In the states of nature of both Hobbes and Spinoza, the individual has a right to all things that he has the power to obtain. But Spinoza's man, unlike Hobbes', never leaves the state of nature:⁴ power and right are coextensive, and even in society "one has the right...to break any moral rule provided that one has the power to do so." (9)

Spinoza was a "methodological individualist" (67) who held that "institutions are nothing more than individuals acting according to some specific pattern." As we are told in the *Ethics* (Part 3 Proposition 7), what any individual is, essentially, is a power of self-preservation. The State, therefore, is "not...something organic, but simply...the effective organization of individual power." (71) As it is a law of nature that every individual exerts its essential power to its fullest capability, the State comes about because social order is a necessary condition (as Hobbes emphasized) for the exercise of individual power. Social order is synonymous with (internal) peace. A condition of peace, security, and harmony, then, is what a State *is*. This is not the same as saying that the State comes into existence *in order to* produce peace. Unlike Hobbes, Spinoza did not believe that the general run of men can be moved by reason. Society is natural to humanity in that the existence of many human beings as isolated atoms is impossible—thought consideration of what such a "state of nature" might be like is useful for analytic purposes (what Den Uyl Teutonically calls "the absolute moment"). There are temporary and unstable conditions ("the intermediary moment"), however, in which men used to living in a State find themselves without one: Spinoza instances the Jews after the flight from Egypt. Even in such conditions, Spinoza believed, men would not form a State by voluntarily and rationally entering into a contract; rather, their passions would make them follow a "charismatic leader," a "hero founder," e.g. Moses, whose own motive was love of ordering people around.

"In essence," says Den Uyl, "Spinoza's prescriptive political philosophy amounts to little more than the recommendation that the *civitas* focus its attention on what is most fundamental to social order—namely, peace—and leave people free to pursue their own desires on all other matters." (118) He was a Minimalist, in the current jargon—but "by no means a theoretical libertarian," (91) because he was not opposed to a certain kind and degree of *paternalism*: when government acts *for the benefit* for the governed, it does not enslave them.

Indeed, Spinoza did not even envision separation of Church and State. All kinds of religious sects should be tolerated, he recommended, but the Established Church should be housed in magnificent structures while the Dissenters' chapels should be small and plain!

Perhaps it is a sufficient explanation of Spinoza's stance, that church-state separation was an idea whose time had not yet come. But it seems more likely that he advocated *subordination* of Church to State, as did Hobbes,

in the belief that inasmuch as most men are guided not by reason but by passion, high beliefs are indispensable for the preservation of social unity—peace. Which is (if I am right) Spinoza's solution, such as it is, to the hard problem of political philosophy: While fear of punishment can never be dispensed with, "the desire to obey and to enthusiastically follow the commands of the rulers is a more effective and efficient means of securing obedience" (84); and only high beliefs can produce this desire and enthusiasm. Though free of them himself, he did not envisage a day when the common people would be. Or, at least, he strove to postpone to day: how else are we to explain his opposition to having his *Tractatus* translated into the vernacular?

He was, I suppose, partly right and partly wrong. Right, in that the passion for high beliefs is built into the human DNA and will be around, if we are, for eons yet. Wrong, in that high beliefs are Protean in their contents and have moved away from their former focus on the Holy Scriptures and fastened upon even more sinister objects.

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1. See my article "More Than Consent: The Born-Again Hobbes," forthcoming in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*.
2. Three-quarters of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is devoted to this enterprise. It is one of the landmarks of Western thought, but fights a battle so thoroughly won—at any rate among educated people—that it is now tedious to read what Spinoza and his publisher risked their lives to bring us.
3. Hobbes made the same claim, but fudged it. Spinoza was consistent.
4. The author twice notes (15, 68) and twice forgets (23, 111) this pronouncement.