

On Obedience in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*¹

Jonathan K. Crane, *University of Toronto*

A full century before the revolutions of emancipation in Europe and in North America, Baruch Spinoza published his *Theological-Political Treatise* (the *TTP*) in 1670, arguing that the best civilized society is one in which religion and state are not coequal. Spinoza's sophisticated critique of then-contemporary models of structuring society was received as "harmful and vile," "subversive," and "blasphemous." (Spinoza 2001, vii—hereafter "S"). However dangerous it may have been perceived, Spinoza's seemingly prescient work anticipated the 18th century struggles to create more ordered, free and reasonable civilizations. Perhaps his work prior to emancipation can help us further understand and possibly liberate ourselves from our modern conflicts between religion and state.

Spinoza identifies religion and state as two humanly-constructed social organizing mechanisms. Both mechanisms induce obedience to manage tensions between personal pursuits and collective preservation. It is Spinoza's treatment of the role obedience plays in ordering society that this essay explores. A close reading of the *TTP* reveals that Spinoza analyzes religion and state along a particular-universal axis, and thus he addresses four social organizing mechanisms. These are: in the religion arena, the particular religion is Judaism and the universal is his conceptualization of an ideal catholic faith; in the political arena, the particular governing structure is theocracy and the universal is an idealized democracy. Contemporary scholarship on obedience in the *TTP* rarely distinguishes *religious* obedience from *state* obedience, a gloss that unfortunately elides differences between these two overarching mechanisms (e.g., Balibar 1998; Belaif 1971; Den Uyl 2000). Furthermore, insufficient attention is given to distinguish Jewish and universal forms of obedience (e.g., Rice 1994; Huenemann 2000) and

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion Annual Meeting, London, Ontario, May 2005.

to contrast obedience in theocracy from obedience in democracy (e.g., Barbone 2000).

Exploring obedience in each of these quadrants uncovers a further dimension stretching from within to without. At one end is a *commanding* system. Commands are exogenous, external to an individual obedient. The heteronomy involved in a command system locates authority outside the individual self. At the other end is a *demanding* system. Demands are more endogenous, internal to an individual who is obedient. The autonomy involved in a demand system locates authority inside the individual self. In short, a commanding system carries an external-impetus connotation and a demanding system relies more on internalized compliance. This distinction comes to the fore as we turn now to exploring Spinoza's account of obedience in religion, first in Judaism and then in his catholic faith, and then in governance, first in theocracy and then in democracy.

Dogma: Judaism

Spinoza's take on Judaism emerges from his literal reading of the Bible, which, interestingly, is one of the earliest applications of reason to biblical exegesis: that is, the text is to be read as it is, not as we would want it to be. In so doing, Spinoza identifies Moses and God as the two central characters who shape the role obedience plays in Judaism. Moses sought "not to convince the Israelites by reasoned argument, but to bind them by a covenant, by oaths and by benefits received; he induced the people to obey the Law under threat of punishment, while exhorting them thereto by promise of rewards. These are all means to promote obedience, not to impart knowledge" (S, 159). Because he relies on threats, punishments and rewards to induce compliance, Moses ensures that Israelites "should never act of their own volition but always at another's behest, and that in their actions and inward thoughts they should at all times acknowledge that they were not their own masters but completely subordinate to another" (S, 65).

God, on the other hand, induces obedience by taking recourse not to coercion but to awe. By first doing spectacular acts God inspires belief that leads the Israelites to transfer their natural right to God—a transfer they did freely without forcible coercion. The threefold significance of this claim is that, first, the Israelites agreed to equalize themselves before God: each has similar access to and is vulnerable to God; second, each individual freely conceives the community's

ordered life more important than personal liberty; and finally, only by humans choosing to transfer their right to God was the Covenant between Israel and God created—and not by God choosing Israel (see Novak 1997). Overall, Judaism induces obedience primarily but not exclusively from exogenous human and divine commands.

Dogma: universal catholic faith

Spinoza extracts from Judaism the principle of loving one's neighbor and places it at the center of the universal catholic faith he deems more ideally suited for the modern world. He couples this principle with a God who loves justice and charity whom all must obey. These two elements are the backbone of the universal faith:

A catholic faith should therefore contain only those dogmas which obedience to God absolutely *demand*s, and without which such obedience is absolutely impossible. As for other dogmas, every man should embrace those that he, being the best judge of himself, feels will do most to strengthen him in love of justice. (S, 161)

The words “embrace,” “judge,” “feel,” and “strengthen” suggests an interior form of obedience comprising both rational and non-rational faculties.

Reason's function in the catholic faith is highlighted in the fact that this faith does not incorporate revelation. Divine commands are commands precisely because we cannot fathom their cause.

Once [their cause] is known, they cease to be commandments, and we embrace them as eternal truths, not as commandments; that is, obedience forthwith passes into love, which arises from true knowledge by the same necessity as light arises from the sun. Therefore by the guidance of reason we can love God, but not obey him; for by virtue of reason we can neither accept divine commandments as divine while not knowing their cause, nor can we conceive God as a ruler enacting laws. (S, 239n34)

Spinoza hereby differentiates those who obey God from those who love God, that is, those who obey exogenous commands from those who obey internal demands deriving from reason.

And yet reason is not fully sufficient in this universal faith to acquire adequate knowledge and love of God. External motivations like divine and brotherly exhortation and good parenting are necessary complements for achieving knowledge and love of God (S, 103). In

sum, obedience in Spinoza's catholic faith, like in Judaism, relies on internal and external motivations. The significant differences are that the universal faith depends heavily on reason, not awe and fear, and its external motivations are not commands *per se*.

Governance: theocracy

Theocracy, as the particular form of governance, also focuses on Moses and God. Spinoza identifies two theocracies in the Jewish tradition: the first was the direct covenant with God. This emerged as a reward for the Israelites already being ordered and controlled—not because the community had some profound knowledge or unique spiritual attainment (S, 38–39). In this early governing structure God ruled directly, and it was known as a Kingdom of God. With God at the helm, this governing structure was *both church and state*. For this reason Spinoza calls this early covenant a theocracy.

The second theocracy occurs after the Israelites emerge from slavery in Egypt and suffer their new found freedom. Spinoza speaks of two versions of the new theocracy. The one I call “Moses as shrewd politician” involves Moses consolidating power to regulate the masses through reasonable rules. Not wanting people to shirk their obligations, he established a state religion to inspire compliance from devotion rather than from fear. Because Moses understood the people to be incapable of self-rule he instituted governing structures continuously reminding them that they lived according to the law's commands and training them to feel that their obedience to these laws was freedom *par excellence*.

The other version, “God as central convener,” has God waiting to cut a covenant with the people until they satisfied themselves in their belief in God's saving powers. “For it was through this belief, that God's power alone could save them, that they transferred to God all their natural power of self-preservation...Since the Hebrews did not transfer their right to any other man, but...they all surrendered their right on equal terms...it follows that this covenant left them all completely equal, and they all had an equal right to consult God, to receive and interpret his laws; in short, they all shared in the government of the state” (S, 189–190).

That each Israelite contributes to the governing of society is a capacity denied them in the other version. Spinoza reconciles this apparent contradiction with the following observation of Exodus 20.

Upon witnessing God's spectacular acts the overwhelmed Israelites plead Moses to intervene on their behalf. "By this [request, the Israelites] clearly abrogated the first covenant, making an absolute transfer to Moses of their right to consult God and to interpret his decrees. For at this point what they promised was not, as before, to obey all that God should speak to *them*, but what God should speak to *Moses*" (S, 190. Emphasis added). Whereas God ruled directly in the first theocracy, God's rule is mediated by Moses in the second.

Spinoza's prognosis of both the mortal and divine versions of the mediated theocracy is dim. He offers two explanations. From a positivist interpretation, had God intended the theocracy to endure, God would have instituted different laws and government. From an anthropological perspective, the demise of the Israelite polity may have emerged from the failure of Moses' sanctions, which no longer held influence over the populace, or from the fact that their training to obey was insufficient, or that the people no longer identified with the dominant religious leaders. Regardless of why the mediated theocracy failed, Spinoza characterizes the obedience theocracy induces generally as one that relies heavily but not exclusively on exogenous commands—whether directly or indirectly from God.

Governance: democracy

Democracy, like theocracy, also relies on the transfer to a central authority the right of self-preservation. The significant difference is that this transfer is not so complete so as to obviate the central authority from consulting individuals who freely gave their rights. The consultative nature of democracy results from and reinforces the fact that individual citizens retain some independence. Two forms of independence are critical: reason and inward religion—and both pose dangers for the welfare of the society—one from below and one from above.

In as much as citizens agree to live by the dictates of reason, their very use of reason endangers the sovereign. Because citizens are free to interpret civil laws and may reject them should they be deemed unreasonable, rulers must rule in favor of social welfare. On the other hand, citizens agree to obey the laws of the sovereign—even seemingly irrational ordinances that may injure personal welfare—as only the sovereign, according to Spinoza, knows what is best for society. In short, a democracy is a mutually reasoned agreement between subjects

and sovereign: it is a contract by the rulers to legislate for the common good and by the ruled to obey even irrational laws.

In regards to faith in a democracy, Spinoza says:

No one can exercise piety towards his neighbor in accordance with God's command unless his piety and religion conform to the public good. But no private citizen can know what is good for the state except from the decrees of the sovereign, to whom alone it belongs to transact public business. Therefore no one can practice piety aright nor obey God unless he obeys the decrees of the sovereign in all things. (S, 215–216)

Placing piety in the hands of the sovereign endangers the populace to the degree that a sovereign ill-conceives the public good. Spinoza attacks monarchies and aristocracies as particularly prone to abusing their prerogative to define piety by trying to control both actions *and* religious opinions. To protect against these malignant governing practices, Spinoza asserts that exercising piety in a democracy must “accord with the peace and welfare of the commonwealth” (S, 212). That is, should a sovereign say a specific act is pious yet it harms the public good, it cannot be good and should be ignored.

Obedience in Spinoza's ideal democracy emerges from a complex mixture of internal and external forces. The internal forces are reason and faith; the external ones are the rulers consulting the ruled, and the ruled depending on the sovereign to determine what is best for the state. In short, obedience in a democracy holds everyone in check, from within and from without, from above and from below.

Internal Challenges

In addition to these *what* and *why* questions of obedience, three other dimensions internal to Spinoza's thought deserve brief attention. *Who* is obedient? What are the differences between the masses and elites, between the faithful and the educated? *How* do people exercise freedom of choice and freedom of will? And, finally, *what* does obedience look like *when* God is coextensive with Nature—a central tenet of Spinoza's *weltanschauung*? Each poses interesting challenges to Spinoza's conceptualization of obedience.

People serve different roles in society, and each role entails particular forms of obedience. In the secular realm:

Although children are duty bound to obey all the commands of their parents, they are not slaves; for the parents' commands have as their chief aim the good of the children. We therefore recognize a great difference between a slave, a son, and a subject, who accordingly may be defined as follows. A slave is one who has to obey his master's commands which look only to the interests of him who commands; a son is one who by his father's command does what is to his own good; a subject is one who, by command of the sovereign power, acts for the common good, and therefore for his own good also. (S, 178–179)

Also in the field of piety people are differentiated by their need for Scriptural narratives. Whereas “common people” need Scripture to instill obedience and devotion, clergy are obliged to obey their faith because it is their job to model what they instruct. On the one hand, Spinoza asserts that each person regardless of social position is capable of obeying. On the other hand, not everyone arrives at such obedience through the same pathway. Spinoza identifies two training mechanisms that promote obedience. The first, religious discipline, as admired in the Jewish tradition, leads the faithful to feel *as if* they are free even when they obey external commands. The second is education, which generates compliance via personal rational decision-making. The educated often become philosophers who, according to Spinoza, have few needs that only the state could meet. Whenever philosophers did interact with the state, they would rationally determine it to be in their interest to comply with the sovereign's decrees. For those people not susceptible to either training approach Spinoza endorses the use of threats of punishments for transgressions and promises of rewards for compliance. So as to avoid overwhelming a state with the responsibility of intimidating every person with sanctions, it would be better to nourish these training mechanisms as much as possible. Spinoza therefore advocates nourishing freedom of reason and freedom of religion.

The difference between freedom of choice and freedom of will boils down to the following distinction for Spinoza. Those who exercise the former decide between alternatives already extant, whereas those who implement the latter create the options from which they shall choose. Seen inside the religious arenas, there appears to be greater freedom of choice within the catholic faith than in Judaism. This is because Moses determines what is best for all and thus for each in Judaism, whereas in the catholic faith every individual is obliged to adapt dogmata so

as to better manifest personal true piety (that is, works of love toward one's neighbor). And yet Spinoza claims that "inward worship of God and piety itself belong to the sphere of individual right which cannot be transferred to another" (S, 212). That inward piety is inalienable and non-transferable suggests that it is a right antecedent to any social contract or covenant (S, 164, 173). Being responsible to create the particulars of one's own faith instead of merely choosing from among options others put forward is thus an exercise of freedom of will. There is one caveat to this freedom of will in regard to piety: people may do so only to the degree that each knows God. Knowledge of God, whether by philosophy or revelation, is our supreme good because God is the supreme first cause of all things. Knowing God as first cause is to love God "in true freedom with all our heart and mind" (S, 52). It is therefore possible to enjoy internal freedom of will (by knowing God) *and* be constrained in one's freedom of choice. This is because governing powers are responsible for determining what is true justice and charity. Democratic structures enable individual voices to contribute to the scope and shape of what constitutes true justice and charity for a society. Because each person in a democracy already agreed "with the full approval of reason" (S, 224) to abide by the rules set forth by the democratic powers, each therefore lives externally constrained and internally free. While those who know God freely abide by these external limitations, others who do not know God do not enjoy freedom of will but only freedom of choice of whether (or not) to obey the sovereign's rules.

Spinoza's God co-extends with nature and "all that God wills or determines involves eternal necessity and truth" (S, 72). Just as Nature as a whole adhered to the totality of divine decrees and can do no other, so too does every individual thing within Nature act only according to the laws of its nature. "Nature, then, always observes laws and rules involving eternal necessity and truth although these are not all known to us, and thus it also observes a fixed and immutable order" (S, 73). Humans, as *particula* (or *natura naturata*) in Spinoza's Nature are therefore "determined to exist and to act in a definite way" (S, 174–175). Moreover, "nothing can happen in Nature to contravene her own universal laws, nor yet anything that is not in agreement with these laws or that does not follow from them" (S, 73). Therefore, humans (can) neither obey nor disobey Nature, that is, God. Were obedience only action produced by the presence of an authoritative command, as Rice asserts, we must conclude that humans

cannot obey God, because God, as *natura naturans* (the eternal and infinite essence and first cause), does not command per se. Or, were obedience only voluntary, as according to Den Uyl, again we must conclude that humans do not obey God because they can do no other than behave according to Natural Divine Law; willingness does not apply. Are humans, therefore, automatons, formulaically determined and mechanistically functioning beings? Spinoza has two answers. Yes: in a time prior to reason and religion humans lived only according to the dictates of passion. In this state of raw nature humans can do nothing but inflict injury upon each other. This violence is neither good nor bad, as moral valuations do not exist in this state of nature, lacking the knowledge that one is duty bound to obey God (S, 175, 181). Humans can do nothing but function as so designed. On the other hand, humans are not doomed to this state of nature of mutual injury. The only escape is revelation:

Indeed, this knowledge [of a duty to obey God] cannot be attained by any process of reasoning...Prior to revelation nobody can be bound by a divine law of which he cannot be aware. (S, 181).

With revelation moral categories are possible, and only after the categories are agreed upon do people formulate laws through which they protect themselves from each other and from their own appetites. That is, society presupposes revelation and religion presupposes reason:

For if men were by nature bound by the divine law, or if the divine law were a law by nature, there would have been no need for God to enter into a contract with men and to bind them by covenant and by oath. Therefore we must concede without qualification that the divine law began from the time when men by express covenant promised to obey God in all things, thereby surrendering, as it were, their natural freedom and transferring their right to God in the manner we described in speaking of the civil state. (S, 182)

People reason that it is in their interest to promise obedience to God. Because *promising* obedience is a far cry from actually obeying, securing *actual* obedience is left in the hands of human authorities. Human sovereigns, whether religious or secular, are bound to obey God's decrees, particularly when there is a "sure and indubitable revelation" (S, 182). Without such metaphysical clarity, sovereigns may decree according to their own decisions. Whatever correlation there is between human behavior and divine command when there is

no clear sign, it obtains to the degree that human sovereigns decree in accordance to divine command. This, however, is not direct obedience to God but obedience to human authority.

Implications of Spinoza's obedience

Before concluding, a few reflections on these four approaches to ordering society. The above analysis highlights the fact that religion, be it a particular tradition like Judaism or an idealized universalist faith, and governing structures, whether a theocracy or a democracy, differently depend on internal faculties. Some, like Judaism and theocracy, appeal to nonrational faculties like fear and awe. Others, like Spinoza's ideal catholic faith and democracy, call more upon reason to induce obedience.

Similarly, all forms rely upon rules to order society. The significant difference here is the source of those rules. Not only do the two faiths claim divine authorship of their central rules, so too does theocracy. In contrast, the rules found within a democracy emerge primarily from human deliberation. Human participation in shaping the rules is found more in Spinoza's catholic faith than in Judaism. Given these differences, we can place these four ordering mechanisms along a continuum between the most *heteronomous* to the most *autonomous*—that is, from the most reliant upon external authority to the most reliant upon internal authority: Judaism, theocracy, catholic faith and democracy.

This is not to say that Judaism and democracy share nothing in common. Rather, Spinoza emphasizes that no system generates obedience in any pure form—be it heteronomous commands or endogenous demands. For example, democracy, like Judaism, uses *commands* or laws to ensure individual and collective security, and Judaism, like democracy, needs individuals to individually choose, or autonomously *demand*, to transfer their right to self-preservation to the central authority.

Shifting our focus from society to the individual highlights the significance of Spinoza's thinking. Because no system is entirely commanding or demanding, individuals therein cannot be considered as totally thoughtless slaves or as absolutely anarchically autonomous. Claiming faith as one's ordering principle does not deny one exercising autonomy, and conversely, claiming reason as one's ordering principle does not preclude complying to someone else's authority. Moreover, people of faith and people of reason share a common concern to create an ordered and secure society in which each can function free from

fear and “may best preserve his own natural right to exist and to act, without harm to himself and to others” (S, 223).

Spinoza's insight is that no single approach has the monopoly on success for creating a compliant and secure person or civilization.² It is as if he argues that these approaches and their advocates need not pretend to be mutually allergic, incompatible or exclusive. None by itself is a panacea to conflict. Even though his is a call to shift from a predominantly religiously-infused way of ordering society, he does not advocate relying only upon reason and humanly-constructed democracy. Perhaps Spinoza's both-and appreciation of what it means to be human can alleviate contemporary either-or struggles between faith and reason, between theocracies and democracies.

2. Indeed, there are multiple ways and reasons why people obey. Sharp, in his classic study of nonviolence, delineates the following reasons why people obey: habit, fear of sanctions, moral obligation, self-interest, psychological identification with the ruler, zones of indifference, absence of self-confidence among subjects. Within feelings of moral obligation there are motives of the common good of society, suprahuman factors (like God), legitimacy of the command, and conformity of commands to accepted norms (1973, 19–24). Reasons within the Jewish tradition to obey include (a) becoming purified by the law; (b) obeying as a favor to God; (c) obeying gives Israel a unique identity; (d) the law makes Israel beautiful; (e) the law is a blessing; (f) obedience is obliged even without understanding. See *A Living Tree* by E. N. Doff & A. Rosett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pages 246–249.

References

- Bagley, P. J. (editor) (2000) *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Balibar, E. (1998) *Spinoza and Politics*. Translated by P. Snowdon. London: Verso.
- Barbone, S. (2000) “Power in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*,” in *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize* (ed. P.J. Bagley), 91–109.
- Belaief, G. (1971) *Spinoza's Philosophy of Law*. The Hague: Mouton.
- De Deugd, C. (1987) *Spinoza's Political and Theological Thought*. New York: North-Holland Publishing Co.
- Den Uyl, D. J. (2000) “Power, Politics, and Religion in Spinoza's Political Thought,” in *Piety, Peace, and Freedom to Philosophize* (ed. P.J. Bagley), 133–158.

- Huenemann, C. (2000) "Spinoza and the Light of Scripture," in *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize* (ed. P.J. Bagley), 45–63.
- Kaplan, F. (1973) "Le salut par l'obéissance et la nécessité de la revelation chez Spinoza," in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 78/1:1–17.
- Klever, W.N.A. (1984) "Power: conditional and unconditional," in *Spinoza's Political and Theological Thought* (ed. C. de Deugd), 95–106.
- Levenson, J.D. (1983) "Covenant and Commandment," in *Tradition* 21/1 (Spring): 42–51.
- Levinas, E. (1990) "Have You Reread Baruch?," in *Difficult Freedom: essays on Judaism* (trans. S. Hand), 111–118.
- Levine, E. (1978) "A Note on Obedience to Law in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," in *Iyyun* 28/4: 292–296. (In Hebrew)
- Novak, D. (1997) "Spinoza and the Doctrine of the Election of Israel," in *Studia Spinozana* (13): 81–98.
- Pines, S. (1987) "Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the Jewish Philosophical Tradition," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (eds. I. Twersky & B. Septimus), 499–521. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rice, L. (1994) "Faith, Obedience, and Salvation in Spinoza," in *Lyceum* 6: 1–20. (Page numbers refer to a copy sent directly from the author, not to the published pages.)
- Rosenthal, M. A. (2000) "Toleration and the Right to Resist in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*: the problem of Christ's Disciples," in *Piety, Peace, and Freedom to Philosophize* (ed. P.J. Bagley), 111–132.
- Sacksteder, W. (1984) "Communal Orders in Spinoza," in *Spinoza's Political and Theological Thought* (ed. C. de Deugd), 206–213.
- Sagi, A. (1995) "Models of Authority and the Duty of Obedience in Halakhic Literature," in *AJS Review* (20/1): 1–24.
- Sharp, G. (1973) *The Politics of Nonviolent Action. Part One: Power and Struggle*. Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers.
- Spinoza, B. (2001) *Theological-Political Treatise*. Second Edition. Translated by S. Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Spinoza, B. (1994) *A Spinoza Reader*. Translated by E. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.