

Topic: 1 (Spinoza)

Freedom, Security and Multiculturalism in Modern Societies

There is a painting by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte depicting the concept of human liberty as a room with one window opening onto a bright blue sky with clouds like puffs of smoke and another onto a Renaissance-style female nude. In the middle of the boxlike room, where the three walls are as intimidating as the windows are liberating, there is a cannon aimed at the viewer of the painting. Magritte's perspective on human liberty invites reflection on the concepts of freedom vs. security, which is a central dilemma for thinkers who have aimed at creating the best form of state. How far can a state allow its individuals to be free? Is there, or should there be a limit to freedom, and where and how can a state draw the line between what is a necessary limit to freedom and what would be described as an infringement upon the "natural" rights of human beings? In modern societies the cannon has been turned towards "the other," who is intruding upon the scene with different notions of liberty, as well as to the window depicting the infinity of the sky, which can be interpreted as the freedom of society as a whole.

The transition between Spinoza's idea that the aim of a government is not "to rule, or restrain, by fear, nor to exact obedience" but that it is to make sure that "everyman... may live in all possible security" has not been treated as the contrast that Spinoza expresses it to be. A tradition of philosophers have argued that exacting obedience, if not inspiring fear, is a necessary condition for achieving "all possible security," which Spinoza holds up as the aim of a state, and not contradictory to its achievement as Spinoza argues. Plato, in *The Republic*, visualizes the ideal society as one where a group of men with presupposed wisdom, i.e. the philosopher kings, have the right, as well as the responsibility of ruling the masses. Because of their knowledge and experience, they are regarded as having better judgment than the rest of the people. In the Cave Allegory, Plato uses the metaphor that these men have seen sunlight, while the rest of society is made of people who can only see its shadow. Plato's oligarchic description of the ideal state can easily be exploited and turned into the tyranny of a group of people given limitless power. Even if these philosopher kings prove incorruptible – which is highly unlikely – there is no proof that their decision will be the best for the people. In the light of the modern idea of democracy, it is easy to dismiss Plato's republic as anti-democratic, and therefore as having lost its validity in the politics of modern societies. However, it must be kept in mind that Plato also had the best interest of the people in mind and he would support the idea that his republic aimed to grant "all possible security" to its people.

People have a tendency for obedience. This may be an inherent quality or it may be socially constructed, but it has been proved to exist. The Milgram Experiments, conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960's, have asked subjects to ask certain questions to another subject (one of the experimenters in disguise) who was tied to electrodes. The questioning person was then asked to give the answering subject an electric shock each time he gave the wrong answer. Slowly the voltage of the shocks was increased, but the person conducting the experiment ordered the interrogator to keep giving the shocks. Even when the interrogator saw the other person writhing in obvious pain, he continued to give the shocks simply because he was ordered to do so. Totalitarian regimes have found the combination of

people's tendency to obey and the Platonic vision of a group of people holding all authority to conveniently serve tyrannical purposes. In fact, the Nazi regime relied more on the routine of officers doing what they were told, or what was set as their duty, rather than on pure evil. This is the situation coined by Hannah Arendt as the banality of evil. It exemplifies the catastrophic results of Plato's idea taken to extremes. Spinoza's judgment that the state must not be based on obedience has proved accurate, but the idea of "living in all possible security" remains to be reconciled with the idea of liberty.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau argues that there must be a contract between the people and the state, whereby people consent to give up certain rights, or accept limits to their freedom in order to benefit from the social privileges that the state can provide. Although Rousseau's ideas are pro-democracy, he still belongs to the tradition in political philosophy that follows the line of Plato. In other words, Rousseau does not support the full liberty of the individual; he values communal wealth and harmony, or communal rights, over the rights of the individual. Spinoza's description of everyman's "natural right to exist without injury to himself and others," raises the question of what it means to injure others. Others (or society) might be injured by James Joyce's *Ulysses* and it may be argued (in fact it has been argued) that the obscenity of this work is a threat to society's security. Rousseau's philosophy would support the suppression of Joyce and the censorship of *Ulysses* over Joyce's natural right to express himself freely. He as an individual must give up his right to say what he thinks if he is regarded as a threat to society. As much as Rousseau aims to maintain the functioning of the state and of society through sacrifices on the part of the people, he fails to reconcile individual liberties with social welfare.

This situation is one of the inherent flaws of modern societies and results in clashes of opinion and controversy, which is often solved by suppression and censorship. Isaiah Berlin acutely summarizes the situation in his essay entitled "On Freedom." Berlin divides the concept of freedom into two: Positive freedom and negative freedom. Although it can be argued that freedom is not so simple as to be divided into two, the categorization is convenient for the case at hand. Negative freedom is the sense of freedom conventionally understood: The freedom of the individual to live free from restraint. The liberal, individual-based tradition following Locke adheres to such a definition of freedom. Positive freedom, on the other hand, is what Rousseau would have defined as freedom: It is the freedom of society to be free from offense, injury, or threat. Positive freedom necessitates the limiting of the individual for the general good. To give an example, in the case of the fatwa declared by Iran against Salman Rushdie due to the presumably insulting description of Mohammed in *The Satanic Verses*, negative freedom would defend that Rushdie has the right to write what he thinks and that the Iranian state has no right to persecute him. Positive freedom, on the other hand, would argue that the Muslim community has the right to be free from insult, and since their religion, which is the core of their identity, was insulted, Rushdie has committed a breach of their freedom.

It is impossible to come to the conclusion that one or the other of the sides in such a case is absolutely right. Both sides are right from their own perspective. Spinoza's ultimate aim of man's "natural right to exist and work, without injury to himself and others" is insufficient in solving this dilemma. A man's natural right to exist (or express himself) may involve injury to others. If injury to others is taken as the standard for setting limits to human freedom, it is easy to end up with the tyranny of the majority, whereby what the majority considers offensive can be used to suppress minority groups and their members.

Multicultural societies, where values and traditions differ from one ethnic or religious group to another, are faced with the problem of having to judge and unite these diverse cultural groups by a single set of laws assumed to be true for all. Spinoza mentions the "natural right to exist." There are other rights assumed to be natural, and aimed at creating a

better society for all individuals, but it can be argued that these rights take as their basis certain Western values based on individuality, which may not be shared by minority groups that want to preserve their communal identities and express themselves in terms of this group identity. (Kymlicka) A state may declare an official language and decree that everyone must be educated in this language, while a minority group may want their children to learn their own language at school as a way of protecting and continuing their linguistic tradition. This is a harmless enough request to make. Then again, a minority group may also say that according to their tradition if somebody from a different clan kills a member of their own clan, tradition dictates that they take revenge and kill somebody else from the other clan, thus creating a blood feud where “civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (*Romeo and Juliet*). This is not such a harmless request. It directly contradicts each man’s “natural” right to exist (although that particular group may not describe this as a natural right). How far should the state permit the laws and values of cultural groups within society to be practiced and amalgamated into the laws of the state?

While Will Kymlicka identifies and discusses the problem at length, he does not propose a solution. Forcing minorities to conformity would lead to a process of otherizing. “You are different,” the state would have declared. “Therefore you are wrong. You must accept the rules I set.” This is not a constructive approach. Reconciling Spinoza’s desire for security with his condition of existing without injuring others can only be achieved through a mutual intercommunal dialogue. The Iranians must question the reasons why Rushdie may have written *The Satanic Verses* and Rushdie must try to understand the bond between Iranians and their religious belief. The state should try to see that education in a different language at schools might not be a threat to national security and the clans mentioned must see that killing each other forever is not going to resolve the feud. Multiculturalism is essential in a democracy and democracy should be an inclusive rather than an exclusive regime. To return to the Magritte metaphor, different cultural groups should each give a hand to lift the cannon out of the room and out through the window with the blue sky, so that the nude lady looks on into the empty room without besmirching her Eve-like purity.