TEXTS

Ad secundam objectionem respondeo negan
do nos liberam habere potestatem judicium
suspendendi. Nam cum dicimus aliquem judi-
cium suspendere, nihil alid dicimus quam
quod videt se rem non adequate percipere.
Est igitur judicii suspensio revera perceptio et
non libera voluntas (E2p49s).

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F. Buyse

Lex

The word lex and its Dutch synonym wet
occur in all of Spinoza’s works. These words
are primarily combined with ‘God’ or
‘nature’, but also with ‘human’, ‘Hebrew’,
‘human reason’ or ‘pure intellect’. The com-
plex nature of the concept appears from its
main discussion in the Tractatus theologico-
politicus chapter 4, which starts with an
overall definition: ‘the word lex taken in its
absolute sense [as such], means that accord-
ing to which each individual thing – either in
general or those of the same kind – act in one
and the same fixed and determinate manner’.
Further, a law may depend either on nature’s
necessity or on a decision of the human will.

As to the first category, these laws follow
from the nature or definition of a particular
thing. The universal laws of nature, those
according to which all things happen and are
determined, are the eternal decrees of God,
which always involve eternal truth and neces-
sity (TTP 3). Only in this respect is natural
law to be called divine law. Although these
expressions frequently occur in scholastic
and pre-modern discourse as well, the Spinoz-
istic notion of a natural law without a divine
lawgiver who promulgates these rules is rela-
tively new. In this respect Spinoza’s view is
intimately linked to that of Descartes who in
the Principia philosophiae 2.37 defined the
laws of nature as ‘rules which may be known
by means of God’s immutability’ and like
Newton later on identifies these rules with
the laws of mechanical motion.

Spinoza stated that commonly the word
‘law’ is applied to natural phenomena only
by analogy. It seems that in a proper sense we
call ‘laws’ only those rules which depend on
human will, i.e. the second category of laws.
For as Spinoza clarifies: ordinarily ‘law’ is
used to mean simply a command which men
can either obey or disobey, in as much as it
restricts the total range of human power
within set limits and demands nothing that is
beyond human power. ‘Thus it is expedient
to define law more particularly as a plan of
life laid down by man for himself or others
with a certain object’. The legislator may
establish law with respect to an end to be
achieved. This end should not be understood
as a goal which should be in conformity with
higher, God-decreed law.
Such notions in part sum up the gist of scholastic discourse as is apparent from the contemporary dictionaries. Chauvin for example observed that ‘a law is a rule of a moral action’ and Goclenius stated ‘a law taken as such is a rule and measure of human actions’. Moreover, this linking of law with an end was an intrinsic part of Thomistic tradition. Aquinas in his famous question 90 on ‘the essence of the law’ in the *Summa theologiae* part 1 stated that ‘law is nothing else than an ordinance of reason for the common good’. Spinoza links this notion elegantly to the voluntaristic tradition originating in Duns Scotus and Ockham, by focusing on the will of the legislator, observing: ‘However, as the true object of legislation is only perceived by a few, and most men are almost incapable of grasping it, though they live under its conditions, legislators promise’ rewards and punishments. ‘Thus endeavouring to restrain the masses, as far as may be, like a horse with a curb’. Hence a law is a mode of life ‘enjoined on men by the sway of others’ and ‘those who obey the law are said to live under it and to be under compulsion’ (TTP 4). This conception of law takes human nature as its starting point. Moreover, Spinoza continues his survey of the notion of law by disconnecting the traditionally linked notions of law and morals: ‘sin is action that cannot lawfully be done, i.e. is prohibited by law’ (TP 2.19). Sin cannot be conceived except in a state with its civil law.

A distinct feature of Spinoza’s political thought is that in the first instance he does not argue from the first (quasi-mechanical) conception of law. By observing that ‘laws prescribe or prohibit behaviour ordained to achieve a goal’, he infers that a ‘law which depends on human will is one which men ordain for themselves and for others in view of making life more secure and more convenient, or for other reasons’; such a law is more properly called *ius* (ordinance). Generally Spinoza follows the common usage of law and right, which imply different perspectives on behaviour. Human laws are imperative general rules regulating human or institutional behaviour. They forbid, prescribe, or enable certain behaviour; in this way they establish a normative order. These civil laws are the basis of rights, for these general rules address persons and institutions which derive the right (or competence) or obligation to act. *Ius* (right) generally expresses the liberty to act in the sense of that part of a citizen’s natural right which is allowed and left by the civil laws, as Hobbes writes in *De Cive* 13.5. It is the liberty left to the subject addressed by this general rule to behave in a certain way, be this subject a citizen, society at large, or (an organ of) the state. In case of a prescriptive rule, for example, an individual may be obliged to behave in a certain way and the state has the right to enforce obedience. In the end, however, for Spinoza one’s right is always determined by one’s natural right; a man’s right extends as far as his power does (TP 2.3–4).

As for ordained law, this is to be divided into human law and divine law (TTP 4.3). Human law is a rule of conduct whose sole aim is to safeguard life and the commonwealth, whereas divine law aims at the supreme good, the true knowledge and love of God. This law is a divine law for it is a way of life ordained by us in as far as we know God. These divine laws consist of divine commands, which are ordained as it were by God, that is by our notion of him in our minds. Thus, the philosophical life may well be called a ‘divine law’ and is dealt with in general ethics. The aim of this divine law, the true knowledge and love of God, can be achieved through the knowledge of natural
phenomena; the greater our knowledge of natural phenomena, the more perfect our knowledge of God’s essence. Consequently, in this way, these so-called divine laws are connected to natural law or divine law in the first (proper) sense. Spinoza calls the divine law which is deduced from human nature, the natural divine law. Such laws are universal and exclude the belief in historical narrations, presumably about their promulgation.

As for the other kind of ordained law, human law, Spinoza regards it as an agency to safeguard life and the commonwealth. Civil law, therefore, is an important means by which the state can achieve its end, i.e. the peace and security of the citizens. The law preserves their liberty by coercing citizens to act in a particular way. Law as a means to create security for people by ensuring their peaceful cooperation reflects in a way Machiavelli’s statement in the Discorsi 1.3 that it is the laws that make them good. Citizens of a state are not in a position to decide what is just or unjust, right or wrong; they must submit their will to that of the commonwealth. For citizens, the state is a cooperative enterprise for their mutual advantage, so they have to obey its commands and ordinances, which must be taken to be the will of all. Thus, the citizen acts in his own interest by obeying the civil laws. Therefore, he is one who recognizes the true plan of the civil laws and their necessity and acts accordingly in a steadfast spirit and ‘on the basis of his own decree, not, in truth, some alien one’ (here, the idea of self-legislation – Rousseau, Kant – is dimly visible). Furthermore, the right of ‘being one’s own judge ceases in the civil state’ (TP 3.3). This right rests only with the ruler of the state; the commonwealth has the (civil) right to enact laws and to interpret and enforce these laws (TP 4.5–6).

The commonwealth or the state is the sole author of the laws and, therefore, is not bound by them. However, there are limitations to its power, for the commonwealth is bound by natural law. Civil laws which conflict with nature’s necessity go beyond the limits of human power and will not be obeyed. Civil laws should not demand the impossible, be it actual behaviour or a particular attitude towards the law, such as respect for a law which actually moves people to disgust. Otherwise, the subject (citizens) will not be willing to act in one and the same fixed and determinate manner, and the law might not be called a proper law anymore. Civil laws, therefore, should inspire obedience, rather than rely on force.

Thus, civil laws are posited, established by the state, and laws are not determined by moral essences like good or evil. By contrast, traditional natural law theory offers arguments for the existence of a ‘higher law.’ In the natural law theory of the Middle Ages God lays down express commands for all mankind, which served as the higher standards for positive law. According to Thomas Aquinas human (positive) law, which deflects from the higher law, the law of nature, is not law. Spinoza denies this teleological essence of law, nor does he advocate a voluntaristic conception of law. Unlike Hobbes he views law as not simply voluntas or will (cf. Leivathan 26). Therefore, the power of the legislator is not unlimited, his commands have to take into account the power of the subjects. This power is determined by the laws of nature, for ‘man, whether guided by reason or mere desire, does nothing save in accordance with the laws and rules of nature, that is, by natural right’ (TP 2.5). Good laws enhance the citizens’ power which in turn increases the power of the commonwealth and the sovereign. Spinoza, therefore, views
the relationship between state and citizens ex parte populi, as Bobbio rightly remarks (1989, p. 144).

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Liber

Applied to ‘cause’, ‘imagination’, ‘man’, ‘multitude’, ‘Republic’, the adjective liber is not the opposite of ‘necessary’ but of ‘compelled’ (cf. Ep 56). ‘That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its own nature alone, and is determined to action by itself alone. That thing, on the other hand, is necessary or rather compelled which by another is determined to existence and to action in a fixed and prescribed manner’ (E1def7). In this respect only God is a free cause and his will a necessary cause (E1p17c2, E1p32). With this definition Spinoza imitated tradition. Chauvin, for example, observed that ‘free’ in its most general sense means a thing liberated from its restraining ties or impediments. In this sense it can be attributed to inanimate things, such as stars, as he argues by referring to Cicero’s De natura deorum. Hence, to be free is not to be determined or to act without cause, and Spinoza rejects the doctrine of a free, that is an indeterminate, will (E2p48, E3p2s). Men have the illusory belief that they are free because they are aware of their appetites while not knowing the causes which determine them. There is no free will, such as Descartes believed in; all actions are determined by causes and obey the law of necessity (E2p49s). Even in God the infinite will cannot be called ‘free cause’ but only ‘necessary’, because it is determined by the attribute of thought. It does not follow that freedom is an illusion, for one must distinguish the internal necessity of one’s nature from external necessities. To be free is not to do as one pleases, it is to live under the guidance of reason.

In Ethics 4, propositions 67–73, Spinoza draws the portrait of the free, reasonable man and shows that he does not live alone but amongst the others and obeys the laws of the state. To obey is not the opposite of being free. It depends on the nature of the order, whether it is useful or harmful to the agent who must carry it out (cf. TTP 16). In a free republic, submitting to orders has nothing to do with slavery; it means obeying the law of reason, and thus being free.

**TEXTS**

Dat de wille geen zaak is in de natuur, maar een verzieringe, men niet en behoeft te vragen of de wil vrij of niet vrij is (KV 2.16). De waare kennis maakt ons vrij van die passien (KV 2.19). Rem libere agamus, ejusque causa simus, non obstante, quod eam necessario et ex Dei decreto agamus (Ep 21). Definitionem libertatis. Vides igitur me libertatem non in libero decreto ponere. Ex. gr. Lapis (Ep 58). Ex libero animo societati parere ... solus ille liber, qui integro animo ex solo ductu rationis vivit (TTP 16, G III, 181–2). Ea res libera dicetur, quae ex sola suae naturae existit, et a se sola ad agendum determinatur (E1def7). Solum Deum est causam liberam (E1p17c2). Voluntas non est causa libera, sed necessaria (E1p32). In mente nulla est absoluta, sive libera voluntas (E2p48); E2p49s. Qui igitur credunt, se ex libero mentis decreto loqui, vel tacere, vel quicquam agere oculis apertos...
Originally published as the Continuum Companion to Continental Philosophy, this book offers the definitive guide to contemporary Continental thought. It covers all the most pressing and important themes and categories in the field - areas that have continued to attract interest historically as well as topics that have emerged more recently as active areas of research. Twelve specially commissioned essays from an international team of experts reveal where important work continues to be done in the field and, valuably, how the various topics intersect. Featuring a series of indispensable researc