

DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.56550/d.3.2.5">https://doi.org/10.56550/d.3.2.5</a>	Original research article	
Received on: February 2, 2024	Accepted on: December 16, 2024	Published on: April 30, 2025

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## SPINOZA'S VIEW OF FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND SPEECH (*LIBERTAS PHILOSOPHANDI*) IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

### Abstract

Spinoza's notion of freedom of philosophizing emerges from his arguments for achieving safety and freedom of society as the state's main aim. Freedom, as explained in his *Ethics*, is a paradoxical concept since on the one side, it implicates the necessity and natural lawfulness of human's desire for preservation (*conatus*), but on the other side, it is regarded in a higher sense as a moral and cultural endeavor. The notion of freedom of thought and speech in *Theological-Political Treatise* should be considered with psychological features of human nature, like a desire for others to approve of the things they think/do/express (EIIIP29). The state's role in achieving the security of society, according to Spinoza, has to be delicately connected to the freedom of philosophizing which presupposes a harmonious community of individuals who practice tolerance and use judgment wisely while restraining negative affects like hatred, anger, envy, etc. Currently, there are potential constraints of speech in academic circles, it is of utmost importance to understand what freedom of philosophizing could mean. Spinoza's political philosophy could give us a thorough explanation and wise suggestions for the regulation of speech in the public sphere.

Keywords: freedom of philosophizing; restriction of speech; desire for preservation (*conatus*); human nature; affects; reason; judgment; society

## SPINOZAS AUFFASSUNG VON GEDANKEN UND REDEFREIHEIT (*LIBERTAS PHILOSOPHANDI*) IN EINER DEMOKRATISCHEN GESELLSCHAFT

### Zusammenfassung

Spinozas Auffassung von der Freiheit des Philosophierens ergibt sich aus seiner Argumentation für das Erreichen der Sicherheit und Freiheit der Gesellschaft, was der Hauptzweck des Staates ist. Freiheit ist, wie er in seiner *Ethik* erläutert, ein paradoxer Begriff, da er einerseits die Notwendigkeit und natürliche Gesetzmäßigkeit des menschlichen Erhaltungswillens (*conatus*) impliziert, andererseits aber in einem höheren Sinne als moralisches und kulturelles Bestreben betrachtet wird. Der Begriff der Gedanken- und Redefreiheit im *Theologisch-politischen Traktat* sollte im Zusammenhang mit psychologischen Merkmalen der menschlichen Natur betrachtet werden, wie dem Wunsch, dass andere die Dinge, die man denkt/tut/ausdrückt, gutheißen (EIIIP29). Die Rolle des Staates bei der Gewährleistung der Sicherheit der Gesellschaft muss nach Spinoza mit der Freiheit des Philosophierens verbunden sein, die eine harmonische Gemeinschaft von Individuen voraussetzt, die Toleranz üben und ihr Urteilsvermögen weise gebrauchen, während sie negative Affekte wie Hass, Zorn, Neid usw. zurückhalten. In der heutigen Zeit, in der es in akademischen Kreisen potenzielle Beschränkungen der Meinungsäußerung gibt, ist es von größter Bedeutung zu verstehen, was die Freiheit des Philosophierens bedeuten könnte. Spinozas politische Philosophie könnte uns eine genaue Erklärung und weise Vorschläge für die Regulierung der Rede im öffentlichen Raum liefern.

Schlüsselwörter: Freiheit des Philosophierens; Beschränkung der Rede; Wunsch nach Bewahrung (*conatus*); menschliche Natur; Affekte; Vernunft; Urteil; Gesellschaft

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In this paper, I argue that Spinoza's concept of *libertas philosophandi*, which is inferior to the concept of freedom of thought and speech in general, should be analyzed not only in the context of his political philosophy (in his *Theological-Political Treatise* and unfinished *Political Treatise*), but also in the broader philosophical context of his *Ethics*. Freedom for Spinoza is a process of liberation from "bondage to passions" on the individual level, but it can also be realized, on the level of society, in a harmonious community of individuals who practice tolerance and use judgment wisely, while restraining negative affects like hatred, anger, envy, etc. Freedom, as explained in *Ethics*, is a paradoxical concept since it is described, on the one

hand, in terms of an internal causation (*causa sui*, EI, D7) and the natural lawfulness of the necessary human desire for preservation (*conatus*, EIII, P6-7), and on the other, as a moral and cultural collective endeavor that is, as such, possible only in the community. The notion of freedom of thought and speech in *Theological-Political Treatise*, if studied properly, should be considered in relation to psychological features of human nature, like a desire for others to approve of the things they think, do or express (EIIIP29). A holistic view of the relationship between notions of freedom, security, safety, tolerance, and censorship in a democratic state could only help open possible solutions to the multiple challenges of various speech restrictions in the postmodern world.

## 1. Definition and description of the concept of freedom in *Ethics*

The concept of freedom in Spinoza's philosophy is complex since it is related to concepts of causality, determinacy, and activity. The defining of the free thing includes concepts of essence and determination that are in need of explication. It is also controversial because we can, in our interpretation of Spinoza's concept of freedom, discuss about levels of determination, activity/passivity, and whether there is a graduation of freedom in the practical sense. Spinoza defines freedom in *Ethics* as causation, i.e. a free agent is the agent who exists and is determined to action solely by himself/herself (EI P7, P17C2). The concept of the activity is also related to causality. A person who is free is active and is an adequate cause of herself. An adequate cause means that certain effects can be understood through the nature or essence of a person alone, rather than through the influence of external things upon her (E III, D8). In the strict sense and by the definition, in Spinoza's metaphysics, there is only one truly and actually free thing, and that is *substantia infinita*, *causa sui* or *Deus sive Natura*, all there is, the whole of the nature or God. That is why Spinoza, defining freedom as self-causation and that which "exists by the necessity of its very nature and is determined by itself to act" (EI P17C2), assigns it exclusively to substance or God. Due to the specific definition of substance, which claims that "in the nature of things there is nothing but substance and its modes" (EI, P28), Spinoza comes to the position of monism.

According to this monistic, even deterministic view, it seems as if there is no place for the freedom of the individual except for *substantia infinita*. But

does Spinoza nevertheless places humans in a position from which they can be the cause of some effects, and where they can achieve some freedom? If there is such a position, it is not, in Spinoza's development of thought, left without paradoxes. Spinoza attempts to address the question of a path to liberation from the complete determination derived from external factors through his rational monistic philosophy.

One of the differences between substance and finite modes (including animals and humans) is the extent to which it is possible to be determined internally, i.e. to act from its essence and not be determined by another thing or force. Since humans as modes of two attributes, thought and extension, are constantly and strongly influenced by the multitude of external things (*EIII* 51), viewed as external causes, there must be doubt about the possibility of attaining true freedom. This raises a very important question: can a person be free in the same manner and according to the definition of *causa sui* or God? Could an individual act in accordance with his (true) nature, and what would be the true nature or essence of a person as a mode? Is it possible for humans to experience any form of freedom by acting differently than God or Nature? We now enter the realm of practical freedom, specifically freedom in both the society and the state.

Spinoza describes that humans can never be completely self-determining or never the cause of their own existence; nevertheless, the freedom for individuals in the context of causation depends on the proportion to which their behavior (thoughts and actions) follow from their essence or internal rather than external causes. It is possible for humans to liberate themselves from the deep influence of passions (passive affects), i.e., from external things as their causes, but only gradually, and maybe never completely. According to part IV of Spinoza's *Ethics*<sup>1</sup>, action and passion exclude each other as categories, and they vary in inverse proportion to each other:

„When an individual manages to form adequate ideas of the causes of her passive affects, she ceases to merely passively undergo the effects—affections and

<sup>1</sup> In the fifth part of his *Ethics*, Spinoza acknowledges that humans, as long as they aspire to the highest form of living, that is, the life of a philosopher who seeks truth and wisdom or understands the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, can attain real freedom, and experience true joy or arrive at a state of blessedness (*beatitudo*). This is not so easy to attain, but that does not mean it is impossible (*EV*, P42S). See more in: Waibel, V. L. (2012). Philosophieren als Weg. Anmerkungen zu Spinoza und Fichte mit einem Exkurs zu Hölderlin. In V. L. Waibel (Ed.), *Affektenlehre und amor Dei intellectualis. Die Rezeption Spinozas im Deutschen Idealismus, in der Romantik und in der Gegenwart* (p. 200-230). Hamburg, Germany: Meiner.

affects—produced in her by the impact of external things. In adequately understanding these causes she acts through her own nature or power, and therefore according to a principle internal to her, of which she is the adequate cause. If action is the elimination of passion through the formation of adequate ideas of one's passions, then becoming more active is simply the process of becoming less passive, less subject to passive affects." (Armstrong, 2018, p. 43)

Through the weakening of passive affects, Spinoza claims, active affects, those that have their cause in the mind, have exceptional significance and serve as so-called *remedium affectuum* (EV, P4S), i.e., as a tool in the process of liberation from passion and inadequate knowledge.

It seems, although some interpreters and scholars claim the opposite, that in a practical sense, for Spinoza, humans have an open window for achieving practical freedom through the highest faculty – thinking and free judgment that affects moral actions, which at the same time evokes feelings of the highest kind of pleasure. Although his *Ethics* is viewed as more descriptive than prescriptive, humans' rational nature can be examined, according to Spinoza, not as some blind causality of the mind, but as an element of conscious action. This is an important step in looking for the possibility of freedom in Spinoza's philosophy.

## 2. Freedom as a result of the striving of wisemen (E4P35)

We find the *conatus* principle for the first time in Spinoza's thought directly explained and posited in E3P6 where he claims: "Each thing, insofar as it can (*quantum in se est*), strives to persevere in its own being." The notions of the activity, passivity, power, and thing's essence are tightly intertwined in *Ethics*. To preserve oneself is of the utmost significance; it is an existential drive embedded in all there is, but there is, however, a slight difference between all material things (*res extensa*) and humans. The difference is in the awareness of the *conatus* drive. This all-encompassing universal natural impulse or drive for self-preservation and well-being in the context of society is appropriate to analyze, specifically with an emphasis on that awareness. Whether it can be interpreted as consciousness and purposefulness is partly problematic when we take into consideration the rest of Spinoza's ontology. What can be said about this drive in humans in the accordance with Spinoza's development of this argument is that harmonized intellectual faculties like imagination, judgment, and reason are not separable from the desire to

preserve oneself. These faculties, if well-functioning, actively participate in the process of preservation. Intentionality as an element is thus reflected in the desire for self-preservation of a rational being or in the mental *conatus* as well.

The desire for self-preservation encourages the individual not only to maintain himself or herself, as we assume is the case in a simple organism, but to do so hopefully in the best possible way, which is “to stick to the common life and benefits, and consequently (...) to live according to the general decision” (*EIV*, P73D). In defining this universal natural drive for maintaining the quality of life and well-being, we move from the sphere of purely instinctive passive drive to the sphere of rationality, from the sphere of individuality to the sphere of the communal and society. Human beings, although, according to Spinoza, only modes like others, are able to regulate their striving for self-preservation in relation to their coexistence with other rational beings (modes). To preserve oneself for Spinoza essentially means to desire to live in a community where each individual, ruled by reason, strives for the same collective well-being.

In order to preserve and survive, but also more than that, a person needs another human, a community, and, in the widest sense, a state. The more citizens are governed by reason and are able to feel active affects as a result of their intellectual activities, the more useful such a community is in terms of fulfilling the desire for preservation and obtaining more permanent peace:

„...nothing is more advantageous to man than man. Men, I repeat, can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they should all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were, one mind and one body, and that all together should endeavor as best they can to preserve their own being, and that all together they should aim at the common advantage of all. From this, it follows that men who are governed by reason, that is, men who aim at their own advantage under the guidance of reason, seek nothing for themselves that they would not desire for the rest of mankind; and so are just, faithful, and honorable.“ (*EIV*, P18S)

There is a danger in understanding this part of Spinoza’s thought as egoistic, almost Machiavellian and purely power driven. But we should be careful with this statement and have a holistic approach in the interpretation of his *conatus* argument. Power or activity in Spinoza’s philosophy is central, but it is always, when concerning humans, a power of the body connected with its relation to affects (*EIII*, D3) or, more importantly, the activity of the mind from which, if it is a form of self-reflection, arises self-contentment

(*acquiescentia in se ipso*) (EIII, P55S). The mind has the power over passions that can diminish our activity of body, and in this sense we are witnessing Spinoza's descriptions of virtues and their 'power'<sup>2</sup>. Along these lines, the *conatus* of the mind itself is seen as a virtue (EIV, P22), which signifies that it cannot be analyzed simply as an egoistic drive by which others become useful for the satisfaction of our own passions. Rather, we share a common rational nature by living virtuously. When we are virtuous, we are increasing the power of our body and mind; it is the only way in which our activity can rise up. For Spinoza, the notion of the concordance and shared nature is at the core of his ethics. Although he claims that many external things affect us in many different ways, when we act according to the laws of reason, we can embody our true essence, which is the one most beneficial for us as well. When humans are subjected to their passions, they cannot agree in nature (EIV, P35). In that case, they cannot share a similar nature or essence because there cannot be any regularity or consistence in their actions and behavior: „Hence, there are as many kinds of each emotion as there are kinds of objects by which we are affected, and men are affected in different ways by one and the same object, and to that extent, they differ in nature.“ (EIV, P33p) When, on the other side, individuals agree in essence (*natura*), then they similarly strive for a higher activity of reason and understanding of the world and themselves; they use similar methods because they strive towards the same goal. Their intellectual *conatus* gets a form of agreeable interaction.

„When individuals act together in this way to construct a shared nature, they cease to act as compelling external forces in relation to one another and become instead co-actors in a common enterprise from which all benefit, since they are now supported, rather than thwarted, in their striving, by the combined power of others.“ (Armstrong, 2018, p.13)

It is difficult and complicated enough to be under the different external forces of things around us and to struggle to act as freely and actively as possible. Not to agree with other individuals around us is only to add more external influence to our striving to be active. So Spinoza in this context suggests that it is only beneficial for us to „agree in nature,“ i.e., to cooperate rationally with other citizens in our community in order to mutually ease many burdens in our lives.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Zovko, Marie-Élise. (2014). Impassioned by passion: Knowledge and love in Plato and Spinoza. 32. p-140 – 172.

### 3. *Libertas philosophandi*, academic freedom (freedom to teach and advise), speech restrictions

Striving to agree in nature with other rational individuals and thus to form pleasant and functional community is connected with the specific notion of *libertas philosophandi*.

This notion is not originally Spinoza's. Italian natural philosophers like G. Bruno, Tommaso Campanella, Gassendi, etc., used it in their philosophical thinking as well (Laerke, 2021, p. 19, 20). Spinoza inherited this notion, which was especially relevant in the seventeenth century Europe in the context of the polemic about the natural philosophy and theology. For Spinoza, it was obvious that philosophy should be free from theology; he criticized the scholastic period for thinking that „reason ought to be the handmaid of theology” (Spinoza, 2002, TTP, p. 394).

Some scholars and philosophers, such as Leo Straus, L. S. Feuer, Beinert, Smith, and others, propose the identification of *libertas philosophandi* and negative freedom, i.e., freedom from the constraint of speech. But if we are to stay coherent and understand the wholeness of Spinoza's ethical thinking, it is best to interpret the notion of freedom to philosophize in relation to his *conatus* argument. In the arguments and propositions related to the conservation and preservation, practical freedom is viewed not only as mere survival, but as more proactive drive. According to Spinoza, not only do things strive to preserve their essence, but they also “resist anything that might abolish their existence” (EIII, P6p). Not only do they maintain themselves in a state that is good and useful to them until something outside changes it, but they actively resist and oppose change. In a relation to rational drive, the mind is not just trying to think about the ideas that it has at the moment; it is also trying to get rid of the bad ideas (inadequate ideas), confused ideas that can reduce the ability to act. These confused ideas can arise from various sources: imagination, testimony, memory, ideas that are the result of ill-formed association of ideas of the body, etc. The mind, nevertheless, is diverted from imagining what its power and the power of the body diminishes (E IIIP12, P13). It does so by searching for the true causes of our ideas and by transforming passive affects into active ones. The mark of proactivity in the aspirations of the body and mind is manifested in opposing all that weakens and diminishes their power. In this conflict and striving to change for the better, the body and the mind are not governed by some hard law of nature, but by a striving that has strong elements of the

affective in it. The mind is certainly aware of the desires of the body, and because of that awareness (the idea of the state of the body), a person is even able to act teleologically, which in Spinoza's philosophy means to accomplish his or her rational conatus. This conative drive can be more easily and fully achieved in the community of equally rational beings who will, since they are aware of their conatus, strive to increase their activity of the mind, i.e. to act rationally. The more they help each other in this endeavor, the more successful they will be. To be more active rationally, humans engage in free philosophizing.

To be terminologically precise and clear, in the it is important to avoid the mistake of identifying the notion of *libertas philosophandi* with the term of permission to say what one thinks (*licentia*). Permission to say what one thinks is rather a prerequisite for the realization of *libertas philosophandi*. However, freedom to philosophize is not an end in itself. Guided by a rational drive for preservation, it is essential for citizens to think for themselves and to freely express their opinion:

“Spinoza's freedom of philosophizing is not grounded in legal permission enshrined in civil law but in a natural authority inseparable from human nature. (...) Spinoza describes free philosophizing in terms of an ‘authority to teach and advise’ closely related to a freedom of judgment that belongs to all human beings in virtue of their humanity. Moreover, free philosophizing is the intellectual activity of a community.” (Laerke, 2021, p. 4).

While permission to say what one thinks is a broader concept, it is also a necessary condition for the freedom of philosophizing, which is much more positive and beneficial for society. The faculty of judgment as such has to be exercised in order to become attuned, and this can be carried out in the process of free philosophical dialogue. In this sense, the advantageousness of an individual can be realized only in the society that allows the freedom to philosophize as the expression of human nature and conative striving. It is at the same time the freedom in a mutual and universal sense, since „men who aim at their own advantage under the guidance of reason, seek nothing for themselves that they would not desire for the rest of mankind“ (EIV, P18S).

Against the people who wish to take away the freedom to philosophize, Spinoza has only the harshest words. He holds that those who “censure publicly those who disagree” and “persecute in a hostile spirit” are “the worst men” (TTP, G III.8–9|C II.70–1). For Spinoza, the faculty of judgment in

the form of its free expression cannot be directly suppressed. No one will ever “be able to stop men from making their own judgments about everything according to their own mentality.” This faculty is always accompanied by expression in speech, for “not even the wisest know how to keep quiet, not to mention ordinary people.” (TTP XX, G III.240|C II.345). So the law that would require citizens to stay quiet about all sorts of questions is pointless because it is not in human nature to suppress their tongue. Spinoza claims that the legislative structure cannot put restrictions on the expression of judgments; that would be absurd because it is natural to express our thoughts and judgments.

However, Spinoza opposes the permission to speak (and think) to the permission to act. This is connected with Spinoza’s opinion about the possibility of governing our ideas that arise in our relationships with other people who can have an influence on us. Our passions are often the result of wrongly connected ideas about the source or cause of our affect. We suppose that somebody’s behavior is the cause of our sadness, hatred or envy, for example, when the real cause lies somewhere else, usually in our passivity and misunderstanding. Acts, on the other side, are seriously considered and Spinoza states that there should be laws and restrictions with regard to the behavior and action:

„Each person . . . surrenders only his right to act according to his own decision, but not his right to reason and judge. So no one can act contrary to the decree of the supreme powers without infringing on their right. But anyone can think, and judge, and consequently also speak, without infringing on their right.“  
(TTP XX, G III.241|C II.346)

Nevertheless, citizens who complain about some issue, law, or state restriction privately, and do not speak about their concerns publicly, for Spinoza, are rioters and rebels. What is the difference between rebellious, illegitimate speech and legitimate protest? Whenever citizens address the sovereign power publicly, they are understood to do so with the intention to speak on behalf of the collective body of citizens. It should always and in principle be presented as if it reflects the position of all, and must be evaluated as such. This can be done through petitions, conversations, public discussions, and disputes. In sum, Spinoza states that the exchange of judgments in society should always be in public form. This way, the individual can be prevented from acting in a way that is determined solely by his selfish passions.

Permission to speak (to express judgments) and free philosophizing are related. However, state protection of public speech is only a first step towards creating an of the environment for the freedom of philosophizing. For Spinoza, there is a natural right of authority to teach and advise, i.e., *libertas philosophandi*, that he views as the right that goes beyond civil laws. This right is connected with human nature as such, and it should not be regulated simply by a civil law. However, people can use this right to publicly teach and advise for different reasons. They can exercise it to „advance the collective freedom of themselves and others for mutual benefit, or they can use it to confirm their own submission to prejudices or to deceive others into submitting to their own authority.“ (Laerke, 2021, p. 85).

Spinoza himself refused a professorship at the University of Heidelberg in 1673., when he was offered a position as a chair of the department of philosophy, with the promise that he would enjoy the freedom to philosophize. One of his reasons for refusal was his concern about the limits of the freedom to philosophize that was implied in the professorship invitation letter by mentioning how, in the exercise of his freedom to teach at the university, Spinoza would not want to disturb the publicly established religion<sup>3</sup>. The delicate separating line between *libertas philosophandi* and speaking one's mind without the aim of truly benefiting society is precisely displayed in Spinoza's decision not to teach as the professor of philosophy under the implications of possible external control of the university authorities. He would never compromise his freedom to philosophize, and so he refused the conditioned position. Little did he know how his philosophical writings and thoughts would be influential to this day.

When the state, through its legislative structure, defines the permission to speak, the society still does not step into the sphere of free philosophizing. To speak freely, i.e., to live in a state where there are no restrictions on speech, is only a precondition for the freedom of philosophizing. If citizens use this precondition to deceive others, to usurp their freedom, and to submit their judgments to their own authority for their own sake, then this precondition of permitted speech is being misused. If it is the used for the development of thinking and for the benefit of society, then it becomes fruitful. As in all other behavior, so also in the acts connected with the permission to speak, an individual should try to become free from passions and to behave under the dictates of reason. By doing so

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<sup>3</sup> cf. Israel (2023), 924 – 925.

“anyone can think, and judge, and consequently also speak, without infringing on [the right of the supreme powers], provided just that he only speaks or teaches, and defends his view by reason alone, not with deception, anger, hatred, or an intention to introduce something into the republic on the authority of his own decision.” (TTP XX, G III.241|C II.346–7)

Permission to speak freely, Spinoza states, should be used only for the purpose of achieving the freedom of philosophizing, and that means the freedom of every citizen. Freedom of philosophizing therefore cannot be regulated by law; it will depend on the human rational strength over passions. In this sense, legal permission to speak does not mean that citizens should speak whatever they want, under any motive whatsoever; what they should philosophize about has to be judged previously as beneficial for the well-being of the society, i.e., for the fulfillment of the collective conatus.

#### 4. Spinoza’s notion of “violent rule over minds“

Although it may seem that our western civilization today is far more developed in relation to freedom, rights and interpersonal communication, when we analyze the notion of violent rule in Spinoza’s thinking, we can notice the roots of many problems we encounter in modern societies. It is almost surprising to see how Spinoza describes state authority, which enforces restrictions of speech, as the most violent: „government which makes it a crime to hold opinions—which each person has a right to hold, a right no one can surrender—is the most violent of all” (TTP XVIII, G III.225|C II.327). This violent imposing is even worse than any kind of punishments that can be financial or material. To control what citizens think is, for Spinoza, in times of turbulences regarding new voices that have advocated for the independence of thinking from theology, for example, the suppression of freedom of judgment as a natural capacity in the most serious way. Indirectly, by restricting speech, the violent government is attempting to restrict thinking by influencing personal judgment. This violence can be carried out on a much deeper level than any physical punishment, since it tends to command the minds of citizens. Spinoza claims that this enforcement can never be realized completely, but only superficially, because it is very difficult for a person to control her tongue (EIII, P2S), and almost impossible to control her mind (TTP XX).

What sometimes motivates individuals who have the possibility to teach and advise can be, according to Spinoza, deception, pride or flattery. These

are all dangers that can arise in a state that allows free speech, but nevertheless, this risk is worth taking. To freely philosophize, however, presupposes of those engaged to be free as defined in *Ethics*: „The free man never acts deceitfully, but always with good faith“ (EIV, P72). Hence, teachers, speakers, advisors and whoever engages in the public speech must be truthful and sincere.

Through the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza's plan is to elucidate not only how freedom of thought and of philosophizing can be achieved, but also how it can be manipulated. This can be done through all sorts of deceptions and flattery (TP VII.27). Prejudice is also one of the obstacles towards free philosophizing, since people:

„look on ideas . . . as mute pictures on a panel, and preoccupied with this prejudice [*praejudicio praeoccupati*], do not see that an idea, insofar as it is an idea, involves an affirmation or negation.“ (EII, P49S)

Even our ideas, which we might think are our own, can be burdened with prejudice, as Spinoza describes in *Ethics*. We interchangeably use images, words and ideas, while these are different things. The relation between words and ideas is a problem of terminology and may be easier to solve, but the relation between images and ideas is more complex since it encompasses one of the deepest philosophical problems. This is the problem of having the ideas of which we cannot form an image (in our imagination), and the problem of wrongly connected images (coming from the faculty of imagination) and ideas. Prejudices in this context are a matter of a profound understanding of the connections we form in the sphere of ideas.

To achieve *libertas philosophandi*, it is not enough to ensure that there is a law permitting free speech. Citizens should be so educated as to not deceive, and to have good faith:

“a person's faculty of judging can . . . be subject to someone else's control insofar as the other person can deceive him. From this it follows that a mind is completely its own master just to the extent that it can use reason rightly. Without good faith and the absence of deception, free philosophizing begins to collapse from within.“ (TP II.11)

Flattery (*adulatio*) and pride (*superbia*) are also characteristics of unfree citizens and are a danger to the freedom of philosophizing. Teachers, advisors, professors, and others engaged in public areas, according to Spinoza, should not be liars or flatterers to their pupils or to rulers and governments.

If there is a strong censorship and restrictions on public speech, it can only result in higher number of flatterers (TTP XX). Additionally, there is another participant in this tyrannical state where freedom to philosophize is disappearing:

“For that government which makes it a crime to hold opinions—which each person has a right to hold, a right no one can surrender—is the most violent of all. Indeed, when this happens, what rules most is the anger of the mob.”  
(TTP XVIII, C III.225|C II.327)

Spinoza’s comment obviously was provoked after thinking about the unfortunate event that happened in 1672. when he witnessed an angry mob murder his friend, statesman and public person, Johan de Witt, and his brother Cornelis, who were falsely accused of treason<sup>4</sup>. Spinoza completely stood against this violent act and recoil at it.

What today can be noticed implicitly in the forms of current protests and demonstrations, for example, when they become violent and aggressive, is similarly a ‘rule of the mob’. This dimension of modern societies, where laws are sometimes enacted not through the process of democratic elections, but through and after violent demonstrations, can suggest the danger of the ruling of „the mob“. Instead of allowing our free societies to be governed by public figures who use flattery and deception in their arguments or by the mob who violently imposes some hasty unmindful changes, we should, according to Spinoza, strive to educate free thinkers and create a public environment for free philosophizing.

## 5. Today’s Cancel Culture, Hate speech, etc.

To comment on contemporary social phenomena that are connected with problems of censorship and public speech restrictions, who could be a more appropriate example than the philosopher whose works were forbidden for a very long period of time? Not only that his works were confiscated and forbidden, but even worse, their interpretation was inaccurate due to the deliberate attempts to look at his thinking merely as negative, destabilizing and seriously dangerous to the public:

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<sup>4</sup> See details in: Nadler, Steven. (2020). *Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die*. p. 224.

„it was long forbidden to teach the essential components of Spinoza's philosophy which indeed remained heavily veiled for centuries. At the heart of Spinoza's philosophy was his quest to uncover what makes 'life worth living', what defines and explains the good life both individual and collective.” (Israel, 2023, p. 1208).

Following this, and in the light of Spinoza's freedom of philosophizing, I will shortly examine modern phenomena of speech restriction through the movement of *Cancel Culture* and other forms of social media platform cancellations and restrictions. The first instantiations of the term 'Cancel culture' have been attributed to users originating the hashtag “#cancelled” on Twitter around 2015. Soon after that, this practice spread out quickly. As Eve Ng writes in her 2020 article *Reflections on Cancel Culture and Digital Media Participation* cancellation:

„is, the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues.”<sup>5</sup>

Many public figures, like professors, politicians, artists and others, have experienced cancellation. Usually the cancellation was initiated because cancelled individuals were involved in the so-called 'hate speech'<sup>6</sup>, which is still ambiguous and not fully defined term. Parameters for this term are constantly changing, and there is no specific limit for defining it. Unpleasant experiences of those who were cancelled not only virtually, but also with regard to their businesses, professions or practices, raised the alert among the advocates of cancellations. Often, the critical remarks of those cancelled, when given the opportunity to explain more extensively their thoughts,

<sup>5</sup> Ng, Eve, 623.

<sup>6</sup> „Hate speech, speech or expression that denigrates a person or persons on the basis of (alleged) membership in a social group identified by attributes such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, physical or mental disability, and others. (...) Proponents of the traditional liberal position fear that a principle of censorship will lead to the suppression of other unpopular but nevertheless legitimate expression, perhaps even of the criticism of government, which is vital to the political health of liberal democracy. They argue that the best way to counter hate speech is to demonstrate its falsity in the open marketplace of ideas.“ Curtis, W. M. (2024, January 18). hate speech. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hate-speech>

were understood differently, but the public canceling verdict was already carried out with all its consequences.

Another existing practice and a strategy for attaining tolerance and equality is the sociological concept of proportional representation. The idea of this concept, that a group should represent the diversity of its population, is used as a principle to guide actions and selections on many public levels, from academic and sports communities to public and other popular circles (art, entertainment and media). However, in the context of the above analysis of Spinoza's *libertas philosophandi*, we need to be cautious when applying the principle of sociological proportional representation as a means for avoiding injustice. Even though it might seem that speech restrictions, cancellations and numerous regulations on public expression can suppress 'verbal offense', that is not obvious in practice.

In accordance with Spinoza's view on freedom of philosophizing and Plato's description of a just state and justice in general as: "working at that to which (a person) is naturally best suited", and "to do one's own business and not to be a busybody" (*Republic* 433b), we have to seriously analyze the criteria of speech restrictions and the proportional representation of individuals in civil and state organizations (academia, sport, government, etc.). Our noble wish to have a just society by including different individuals in it has to be, in my opinion, guided by the wisdom of the classics, and among them Spinoza, by considering that the principles that lead us to equality cannot be corrupted, ill-formed, subjective, private, selfish or otherwise. The principles that guide us in creating a democratic state and just society should be rational, based on individual professional merit and achievements. To publicly speak freely, and more than that, to philosophize freely by presenting rational judgments to public, is the first step on our way to live in a mutual respect and tolerance in a true sense.

## Conclusion

Spinoza's arguments for the freedom to philosophize are connected with his ethical and political philosophy. Freedom to philosophize, to publicly express judgment, and the authority to freely teach and advise, all flow from Spinoza's *conatus* argument and are closely related to his philosophy of activity, passivity, affects and virtues understood as mind's power over passions. To properly and adequately analyze and interpret the notion of *libertas philosophandi* not merely as freedom of speech, we need to understand it

in the context of psychological features of human nature or essence. There are many influences on our nature, but we should strive individually and collectively to be as rational as possible and in that sense as much active and free. This rational *conatus* can also be realized through free philosophizing.

While we are free to speak, teach, advise and express our judgments, we have to understand the reasons for disagreement. Characteristic of free democratic society is not the agreement, although we can attend to such an ideal. Rather, we should learn to „openly hold different and contrary opinions, and still live in harmony.“(TTP XX, G III.245|C II.351) Restriction or cancelling of public speech will never eliminate disagreements; we should learn how to behave and communicate despite disagreements.

The state, according to Spinoza, has an indirect role to play in fostering freedom; it minimizes the forces that oppose our rational striving by allowing free speech. Freedom promoted in a liberal democratic state cannot prescribe laws on each and every level of conduct between citizens; if the government strives to generate that kind of legislation, there is a danger that it may collapse into tyranny controlling all aspects of our lives. Hence, it is a thin line between offering security by constituting laws for the protection of citizens and giving no freedom and space for opposing thoughts and views. It is crucial to see how we can implement Spinoza's ethical and political philosophy, especially his view on the state's role in protecting and freeing its citizens, in our modern aspirations for tolerance, equality, and justice. Spinoza was a profound thinker who insisted on the freedom of thought and speech that would be guaranteed in the state establishment that will give its citizens a protection against various kinds of abuses of power<sup>7</sup>.

It seems that the best manner in which every citizen can truly be free, but also protected, lies not so much in the constitution of numerous laws as in promoting freedom to philosophize. The promotion of this reasonable acting and judgment can be realized in concreto through education, emphasizing the importance of humanistic and classical studies. The aim of education, besides acquiring new knowledge, should be to strengthen the ability to *act from reason*, to form maxims according to universal moral values, and to cultivate judgment in order for citizens to be able to draw conclusions by themselves. Thereby, we will not see our fellow citizens as opponents or as *external things* that only have influence on us by giving rise to our passions,

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<sup>7</sup> About the political and social environment in Spinoza's lifetime in Amsterdam, Hague and other cities he lived in, see more in: Nadler, Steven (2001). *Spinoza's Heresy. Immortality and the Jewish Mind*. p. 16 – 42.

but as our equals with whom we can create great communities that will increase our activity. In *libertas philosophandi* as a process of free dialogue, there is an important step in realizing that the most free, joyful, and satisfying way of living is living together *under the dictates of reason, where every man shares the same nature*.

## Acknowledgements

This paper is published as a part of the research project “Intersubjectivity of Hermeneutic Consensus” (IP-2022-10-5175), funded by the Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ)

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