



Spinoza *on*  
Philosophy, Religion,  
*and* Politics

*The Theologico-Political Treatise*

SUSAN JAMES

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,

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First published 2012

First published in paperback 2014

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-969812-7 (Hbk)

ISBN 978-0-19-870121-7 (Pbk)

# Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics

## Acknowledgements

I would not have been able to write this book without the support of Birkbeck College London, and am deeply grateful both to the College, and to my colleagues and students in the Department of Philosophy. It's a particular pleasure to acknowledge my intellectual debts to Alan Coffee, Alexander Douglas, Gabriella Lamonica, Benedict Rumbold, and Stephanie Marston, whose outstanding work on Spinoza and related topics has no doubt influenced me more than I know.

I first began to try to write about the *Theologico-Political Treatise* in the calm surroundings of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, where I was a Fellow in 2003–4. It is hard to imagine a more sustaining or comfortable environment for academic work and I am grateful to the then Rector, Dieter Grimm, and to Joachim Nettelbeck, Gesine Bottomley, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, Christine von Arnim, Katarzyna Speder, and the rest of the staff for their professionalism and kindness. At the Wissenschaftskolleg I encountered a remarkable community of scholars, whose seminars, workshops, and discussions were a continual source of argument and pleasure. Ronit Chacham, Peter Hall, Pascal Grosse, Stephen Greenblatt, Bernhard Jussen, Dominique Pestre, Robert Pippin, Nono Raz-Krakotzkin, Beate Rossler, and Ramie Targoff: thank you for your companionship and conversation throughout a memorable year.

In 2008 I was fortunate enough to be able to present an earlier draft of this book to a graduate seminar in the Department of Philosophy at Boston University. I should like to express my gratitude to the Department for inviting me to be the John Findlay Visiting Professor and give the Findlay Lecture, and to the members of the seminar for their searching questions. I also have particularly happy recollections of discussions with Aaron Garrett, Charles Griswold, Amelie Rorty, Suzanne Sreedhar, and Daniel Star, who were outstandingly generous with their time and thoughts in the midst of a busy term.

A number of universities and conference organizers have invited me to give talks about aspects of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and I have continually revised my ideas about it as a result of discussions with philosophical audiences at the University of Cambridge, Columbia University, the Universities of North Carolina, Dalhousie, Durham, Frankfurt, and Groningen, the Humboldt University, the Universities of Helsinki, Hull, Leeds, Manchester, Michigan, Middlesex, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Saint Andrews, Sussex, Sydney, Toronto,

Texas A and M University, the University of Utrecht, and the European University Institute. I am equally indebted to the comments and suggestions I have received at meetings held by the American Philosophical Association, the British Society for the History of Philosophy, the Forum for European Philosophy, the Humanist Society, the Political Studies Association, the Royal Belgian Academy, and the Vereniging het Spinozahuis.

I also have some more practical debts to acknowledge. Alexander Douglas has generously taken time off from his own research to help me prepare the footnotes of this book, and has compiled the bibliography. I am truly grateful for his learned and indefatigable assistance. At the Oxford University Press, Peter Momtchiloff has as always been an ideal editor, invariably acute, calm, decisive, and encouraging. Sarah Parker, Jenny Lunsford, Eleanor Collins, and Subramaniam Vengatakrishnan have overseen aspects of the book's production with great friendliness and efficiency; and the manuscript has been copy-edited by Barbara Ball and Joy Mellor who prompted me to correct some nasty errors. I feel extremely fortunate to have had the benefit of their wide-ranging expertise.

Although it has a single name on the cover, this book is really a collective product—the fruit of work by a long tradition of experts on Spinoza and seventeenth-century philosophy, on which I have drawn, and to which I have tried to contribute. Among contemporary Spinozists, I am particularly conscious of having learned from Lilli Alanen, Étienne Balibar, Aaron Garrett, Michael Rosenthal, Piet Steenbakkers, and Martin Saar, as well as from a number of scholars who have given me particular kinds of help along the way. With characteristic generosity, Ed Curley has shared his great store of knowledge and allowed me to use his unpublished translation of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Stephen Nadler kindly agreed to read this book for the Oxford University Press and relayed suggestions and encouragement; a second, anonymous referee worked through the text with extraordinary care and made many valuable suggestions; Amelie Rorty's grasp of the cheerfulness inherent in Spinoza's philosophical system remains inspiring; and Theo Verbeek's combination of learning and scepticism is a tonic. My greatest debt is, however, to my friend Moira Gatens, with whom I have discussed Spinoza over many years. Her outstanding and politically probing work on his conception of imagination is for me an exemplar, and is integral to the argument of this book.

Among friends and colleagues, philosophical and otherwise, Mark Goldie and Kinch Hoekstra have given me valuable and time-saving advice, Martin Van Gelderen has helped me to understand the history of the Dutch Republic, and Diana Lipton offered me a glimpse of the tradition of biblical interpretation with which Spinoza would have grown up. Invaluable combinations of sup-

port, encouragement, and ideas have come from Kum Kum Bhavnani, Judy Davies, Cynthia Farrar, Miranda Fricker, Cheri Frith, Raymond Geuss, Jen Guttenplan, Sam Guttenplan, Jen Hornsby, Melissa Lane, Michael Moriarty, Lyvia Morgan, Tori McGreer, Sarah Patterson, Philip Pettit, Jim Tully, Michelle Spring, and Catherine Wilson. My deep and lasting gratitude to them all.

Life without these friends would be unimaginably poorer, and life without my family would not be worth living. This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Elisabeth James, who died as it was conceived. While working on it, I have been sustained through better and worse times alike by Olivia Skinner, Marcus Skinner, and above all Quentin Skinner, whose confidence in the project never failed. He has discussed the book at every stage, commented on several drafts, and probably now knows more about Spinoza than he would wish. My debt to him is immeasurable.

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# Introduction

One of the cultural images of Spinoza that has come down to us is of an unworldly philosopher who shunned society and devoted his life to the articulation of a highly abstract metaphysical system.<sup>1</sup> Spinoza was indeed an ascetic person, who lived simply amidst the burgeoning luxury of seventeenth-century Holland, so that this picture of him is not altogether wrong; but it is a partial representation, or what he would call an inadequate idea. To appreciate the scope and fecundity of his thought, we need to supplement it with a more sociable image of a man who was neither solitary nor isolated, but was deeply concerned about the condition of the society in which he lived. This Spinoza had many friends who shared his intellectual interests, and was connected to a number of outstandingly original scientists and philosophers. He was a close follower of Dutch theological and political debates, and his interventions in them made him a famous, and in some quarters a notorious, figure. By the end of his life he had become something of a celebrity, a philosopher known as much for his radical views about the organization of a good society as for his metaphysical account of God or nature.

Of the six major works that Spinoza produced, only two were published during his lifetime. One of these was the *Theologico-Political Treatise* of 1670, in which he discussed some of the most divisive and contentious problems then being debated in the Dutch Republic. The book confirmed his reputation as a radical, and according to some people as an atheist, and excited the opposition of religious and secular authorities alike. However, his readers were only able to appreciate his philosophy as a whole when, after his death, his friends published a complete edition of his *oeuvre*. This contained his most comprehensive

<sup>1</sup> One influential source for this picture is Pierre Bayle's article on Spinoza in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697). Bayle says that when Spinoza had retired to the countryside he would sometimes not leave the house for three months at a time. See Pierre Bayle, *Écrits sur Spinoza*, ed. Pierre-François Moreau and Françoise Charles-Daubert (Paris: Berg international, 1983), p. 22.

philosophical text, the *Ethics*, on which he was working when he broke off to compose the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and to which he returned once the *Treatise* was finished. Although these two works vary enormously in style and scope, they are intimately connected. In the *Ethics* Spinoza offers a long philosophical defence of a particular conception of the good life. By cultivating and sharing our capacity for philosophical understanding, he claims, we can learn how to live in ways that avoid the psychological and social conflicts that are usually so prevalent, and approach an ideal of maximal harmony and empowerment. Achieving this ideal is a difficult process, which always remains incomplete, but its rewards are such that we have every reason to work towards it and get as far as we can.

Couched in the abstract terms that dominate the *Ethics*, the good life is liable to seem a distant goal, attainable, if at all, by only a small number of philosophers in circumstances far removed from the hurly burly of everyday political life. But this is not how Spinoza conceives it. For him, striving to create ways of life that are genuinely empowering and rewarding is an immediate and practical project, to which he and as many as possible of his fellow Dutch citizens can, and should, commit themselves. If they are to make any headway, however, they will first have to foster conditions in which their efforts have a chance of flourishing; and in order to create such conditions they will have to overcome a number of obstacles. This programme drives the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, which is in effect an analysis of the conditions in which the Dutch Republic will be able to sustain a way of life informed by Spinoza's philosophical ideal. It brings his comparatively abstract goal down to earth by spelling out some of its main political and theological implications, by identifying the most important barriers that currently stand in its way, and by showing that they can safely be removed. The *Treatise* translates a philosophical sketch of the good life into a reform plan for a particular community, designed to enable it to cultivate a more harmonious way of life, and to strengthen its capacity to deal with conflict and stress.

The main obstacles that impede the capacity of the Dutch to work constructively towards a more satisfying existence revolve, in Spinoza's view, around the relations between philosophy, politics, and religion. Individuals are best placed to co-operate when they are as free as possible to live as their own ideas dictate. They need to be free to philosophize, as Spinoza puts it, and free to worship in their own fashion. As things stand, these capacities are suppressed by established religions, above all the Dutch Reformed Church and its political allies, who take it upon themselves to dictate what philosophical claims are acceptable and what dogmas the faithful must accept. A large part of Spinoza's

task is therefore to overturn this religious outlook. By showing where it goes wrong, he aims to discredit its authority and make way for a form of religious life orientated towards his own harmonious ideal.

Religious and philosophical pluralism are, therefore, preconditions of a peaceful community that can dedicate itself to learning how to improve its way of life by understanding its own situation and potential. But these conditions also need to be sustained by a political system with the same aims, and can easily be thwarted by an oppressive form of rule. Focusing again on the United Provinces, Spinoza defends its republican form of government and speaks up against the supporters of a mixed constitution. The best way for the Dutch to promote increasingly harmonious ways of life is to live in a republic that encourages freedom of worship and the freedom to philosophize.

This bare outline of Spinoza's programme provides a sense of the overall argument of the *Treatise*, and indicates how it complements the philosophical argument of the *Ethics*. But it cannot begin to do justice to the depth and subtlety of his discussion of theologico-politics, or to the determination with which he defends his views against a wide range of opponents. It is this more detailed level of argument, as much as its overarching theme, that philosophical commentators have found so stimulating and have put to many kinds of use. Some have mined it as a source of insight into contemporary problems, exploring Spinoza's work for pertinent themes and arguments.<sup>2</sup> Others have read his work teleologically, interpreting him as an early advocate of contemporary values such as free speech and democracy.<sup>3</sup> A third group has explored the relationship between Spinoza's treatment of theologico-politics and that of other individual philosophers such as Hobbes.<sup>4</sup> A fourth has concerned itself with his debts to particular traditions, such as Judaism.<sup>5</sup> And a fifth has placed

<sup>2</sup> See for example Louis Althusser, 'On Spinoza', in *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1976); Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999); Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> The most celebrated current exponent of this approach is Jonathan Israel. See his *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Edwin Curley, "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly" or How to Read Hobbes' Theologico-Political Treatise', in *Studi su Hobbes e Spinoza*, ed. Emilia Giancotti (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1996); Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Steven M. Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Heidi M. Ravven and Lenn E. Goodman, eds., *Jewish Themes in*

Spinoza's *Treatise* within some canon, whether of rationalists, Cartesians, or Dutch philosophers.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these approaches has illuminated aspects of Spinoza's work, and this book is deeply indebted to all of them. Nevertheless, it aims to do something different. Works of philosophy are best understood as contributions to ongoing conversations or debates. They question or support, challenge or defend, and even ridicule or dismiss. In some cases, such as Spinoza's *Ethics*, this is not immediately obvious: the geometrical style in which the work is presented is designed to make it appear self-sufficient, and largely removes traces of the conversational partners whose claims are implicitly contested. But in the case of the *Treatise*, where Spinoza argues furiously against a sequence of theological and philosophical opponents, these motivations are impossible to miss. Here philosophy is not so much a conversation as a struggle—a fight against a powerful and deeply entrenched outlook, over issues that both sides regard as utterly fundamental.

Because Spinoza is not only advocating a position of his own, but trying to persuade his readers that his opponents' views are irretrievably flawed, the *Treatise* is shaped by the positions it is contesting. To vindicate his programme, Spinoza has to discredit the theological and political positions that stand in its way; and in order to appreciate both what he is saying and why he is saying it one needs to understand what views he is attacking. For seventeenth-century readers, familiar with the milieu in which the *Treatise* was written and the debates in which it intervened, this would have been relatively straightforward. But it is much more difficult for us. Spinoza addresses himself to problems from which we are estranged and factions that have long ceased to exist, and does not pause to set out their positions in a way that nowadays makes the force of his own arguments perspicuous. To follow him, and to grasp the significance of his claims, it is not enough to explicate his text: one must also set it in the context of the sequence of theological and political debates to which he is contributing.

A great deal of illuminating research has been done on Spinoza's various allies and opponents: on the group of Dutch Cartesians to which he both does and

*Spinoza's Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Wiep van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637–1650* (Carbondale, Ill. Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

does not belong; on the conservative Calvinists who opposed them; on more moderate strands of Calvinism with which he sometimes allies himself; and so on. These groups and their convictions form landmarks, some clearer than others, in the intellectual landscape through which Spinoza is journeying, and he relies on them to pinpoint his own position. In what follows, I draw extensively on this impressive body of research. But whereas it has largely been used to cast light on Spinoza's treatment of particular themes, I use it to interpret a particular text. I try to reconstruct the variety of interconnecting polemics that organize the *Treatise*, and offer a systematic account of the argument that Spinoza builds up by opposing them. Rather than focusing on a specific aspect of the text—for example its theory of biblical interpretation, its construal of revelation, its defence of religious pluralism, or its analysis of the state—I trace the course of the struggle on which Spinoza is engaged and follow him as he develops his case, addressing first one set of opponents and then another. If one were to take any single section of his polemic, it would of course be possible to reconstruct the debates to which he is contributing in more detail, and to recover a richer set of allusions and controversies than those I have discussed. But the benefits of detailed argument have to be weighed against the pleasures of an overall picture, and I have mainly opted for the latter.

Although attempts to examine the *Treatise* as a unity have not been common, there are, I think, a number of reasons in favour of this approach. The habit of moving easily from one of Spinoza's texts to another, implicitly assuming that his works cohere, is deeply entrenched among commentators and sometimes justified. As it happens, Spinoza is the kind of systematic philosopher who gradually extended his grasp of a set of core problems by approaching them from different angles, steadily building up the structure and implications of a distinctive philosophical outlook. In many cases, then, one text functions as a mirror in which one can get a fresh view of arguments contained in another, and it would be foolish to deny oneself the insights that this mode of interpretation yields. Nevertheless, Spinoza's texts are far from forming a seamless whole. Written for various audiences and diverse purposes, they operate on a number of levels and use different methods to win the agreement of their readers. The context in which a point is made alters its valency, so that it can be dangerous to uproot an argument from one text and plant it in another.

To appreciate what Spinoza is trying to achieve in the *Treatise*, one needs to be sensitive to the levels at which he is arguing in its different sections, and to the way that each level contributes to the overall goal of this particular text. The best way to observe this rule, so it seems to me, is to follow the development of the *Treatise's* polemic from beginning to end, concentrating both on

what it advocates and on what it rejects. The benefits of this approach are partly historical. It enables one to reconstruct, at least in part, the ground-clearing aspect of Spinoza's enterprise, by revealing what he regards as the main obstacles to an empowering way of life, and what he takes to be wrong with them. It allows us to see the *Treatise* not just as a set of more or less appealing claims, frozen in the past, but as an active theologico-political intervention in the politics of its time and a bid to redirect the course of power. Perhaps this should be enough; but in the case of such a wild and suggestive work as the *Treatise*, approaching it systematically and contextually also yields insights of general philosophical interest, which bear on our own predicament as much as on that of the Dutch state in the second half of the seventeenth century. These will emerge as we go along, but they include Spinoza's analysis of superstition; his account of the relationship between theological and philosophical thinking; and his analysis of the affinities between religion, politics, and philosophy, each of which contributes in its own way to the creation of a harmonious and empowering way of life. What we do with these conclusions is up to us. But the better we understand the interlocking set of positions that Spinoza defends in the *Treatise*, the more clearly shall we be able to hear them.

# Chapter 1

## Spinoza's Project

During the 1640s René Descartes became embroiled in a series of disputes with a group of Dutch professors at the Universities of Utrecht and Leiden who attacked the theological orthodoxy of his philosophical method and conclusions.<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 1647, immediately after composing a letter of protest to the curators of Leiden University, Descartes complained to one of his regular correspondents, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, that his difficulties with the Dutch were exacerbated by the form of their political organization. In Holland, he wrote, 'as is ordinarily the case in all states run by the people', the theologians who are most insolent and shout the loudest have the most power.<sup>2</sup> This being the case, it was hardly surprising that Gijsbertus Voetius, Rector of the University of Utrecht and one of the Dutch Reformed Church's most combative and vocal theologians, had launched a campaign to get the teaching of Cartesian philosophy banned, and with the help of allies at Leiden had pursued it for the past six years.<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth responded sympathetically but calmly. Disagreements

<sup>1</sup> For a full account of this dispute, see Wiep van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637–1650* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), pp. 13–33; Theo Verbeek, 'Tradition and Novelty: Descartes and Some Cartesians', in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, ed. Tom Sorell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Descartes to Elisabeth, 10 May 1647, in René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1974) vol. V. p. 17. References to this edition of Descartes' works will be abbreviated as 'AT' below. Translation from *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes* ed. and trans. Lisa Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> Gijsbert Voet, or Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), was the primary professor of theology and the Rector of the University of Utrecht during and after Descartes' final residence in the Netherlands. A staunch defender of orthodox Calvinism, he became one of the most powerful critics of Cartesian philosophy, which had come to the attention of the theological faculty at Utrecht by way of Descartes' friend, the professor of medicine Henricus Regius (1598–1679).



of this kind were, she explained, just part of the price that the Dutch pay for their liberty. Although theologians can speak their mind in all societies, their liberty knows no restraint in democratic states such as Holland, where conflict is consequently prone to arise.<sup>4</sup>

Descartes and Elisabeth were both beneficiaries of the freedoms that the Dutch prized so highly. He had moved to Holland in 1628 and had remained there for many years, pursuing his philosophical and scientific work without interference from the authorities. Her family had taken refuge in The Hague after her father, the Elector Palatine, had been ousted from power and driven from his territory.<sup>5</sup> However, in this exchange of views they dwell on the limitations of the state that had made them welcome. Republics or democracies such as the United Provinces tend to privilege liberty; but by allowing freedom of judgement and thus of worship, such states not only permit theologians to uphold their theological opinions, but also give them power to oppose views of which they disapprove. As a republic, then, the United Provinces is vulnerable to theologically driven conflicts, of which the Voetian attack on Cartesianism is just one example.

Judging from the long drawn out history of this particular dispute, Elisabeth and Descartes had a point. What began as a local disagreement about the Utrecht university curriculum turned in the course of the 1640s into a highly politicized split, which extended far beyond academia and shaped Dutch political life for several decades. On the one side, orthodox Calvinist theologians led by the tirelessly polemical Voetius defended the teaching of Aristotelianism as the only philosophy consonant with Scripture and thus with true religion. Cartesianism, they argued, represented a heterodox threat to faith and did not belong in Christian universities, where philosophy should be subordinated to theology. On the other side, Descartes' advocates defended his novel philosophical approach to the investigation of nature, despite the fact that some of its results conflicted with claims made in the Bible. Cartesian philosophy was in their view independent of theology and did not threaten the essential teachings of Scripture. There was therefore no reason why it should not be taught.

As this conflict developed, each side became roughly aligned with a broader political party on which it relied for support. The Cartesians looked to the

Descartes complained of Voetius' abusive and threatening remarks in the *Letter to Father Dinet*, appended to the second edition of his *Meditations*, published in 1642.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth to Descartes, May 1647, AT V.47, Shapiro ed., *Correspondence*, p. 162.

<sup>5</sup> Shapiro ed., *Correspondence*, pp. 7–8.