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978-0-521-88229-3 - Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide

Edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal

Excerpt

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## Introduction

*Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal*

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* was a notorious book in its own time both for what it attacked and for what it advocated. Spinoza did not hesitate to call into question traditional religious – and not only religious – pieties. He attacked the common understanding of prophecy as either a privileged and supernatural form of knowledge or a disguised mode of philosophizing. He denied that miracles, as violations of the Laws of Nature, were possible and claimed that belief in them demonstrated ignorance and undermined any adequate conception of God. Just as he hoped to demystify the content of Scripture, Spinoza sought to call into question its origin. Relying on historical and linguistic analysis, Spinoza argued that Scripture is itself a human artifact written and composed by several authors and editors over time. But Spinoza was not a skeptic about all things. He claimed that prophets used their vivid imaginations to advocate obedience to a social order in which justice and charity were paramount. He believed that the political model of the ancient Hebrews could be imitated in certain key respects. Spinoza's *Realpolitik* – his identification of right with might – led him to rather surprising conclusions. Unlike Hobbes, whose social contract theory justified absolute monarchy, Spinoza argued that democracy was a preferred form of government. And, finally, he thought that the state would be better off if it granted limited religious toleration and the freedom to philosophize.

These views ignited a firestorm of protest when the *TTP* was published anonymously in 1670. Some philosophers, like Leibniz, read it and felt compelled to reject its scandalous views. Others admired it, albeit with some qualifications. Thomas Hobbes was reported by his biographer to have said after reading it, “I durst not write so boldly.” The authorities banned it, but its notoriety and depth of argument managed to secure an abiding interest and influence nonetheless. In our own time, its reception has been uneven. In Europe, especially in France, interest in the book remains strong. In the United States, since Edwin Curley wrote his “Notes

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on a Neglected Masterpiece” in the late 1980s, there has been a resurgence of interest in the *TTP*, both among younger and more established scholars.

A possibly true, possibly fictitious story tells of a visit by the Italian fascist ambassador to France who, in the mid-1920s, paid a visit to the grave of Georges Sorel (1847–1922), the philosopher and prophet of modern political violence. On his way back from the tombstone, so goes the story, the Italian ambassador saw another diplomatic delegation approaching the grave. These were none other than the Russian-Bolshevik ambassador and his people, who had also come to pay their respect to Sorel's legacy. Just like Sorel, Spinoza's legacy has been claimed by a very wide variety of ideologies and intellectual streams. For many, Spinoza is the great atheist of modern philosophy, while for others he is considered an “acosmist,” i.e., a radical religious thinker who denies the reality of anything *but* God. Some have considered him the herald of Marxist materialism, while others have suggested that Spinoza was the founder of the tradition of liberal political thought. Indeed, Spinoza has been taken to be the hero of many, perhaps too many, irreconcilable “-isms,” from Zionism through Conservatism, Liberalism, Materialism, Idealism, Secularism, Federalism, etc. In the current collection, we would like to set aside these great ideological debates and try to read Spinoza on his own terms, without reducing his thought to any of the ideologies with which he shared some (admittedly interesting) ideas.

In our *Critical Guide* to Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, we would like to show the range of recent work being done on a variety of topics concerning the *TTP*. The goal is to call attention to the richness of the *TTP* in terms of both its historical influence and its philosophical contribution. We hope to do this through thirteen original essays, which do not present surveys of their various subjects, but rather represent some of the best current research in Spinoza scholarship. A particular motivation behind this collection is the desire to bring leading Spinoza scholars who have so far concentrated their work on Spinoza's major philosophical text, the *Ethics*, to a careful and rigorous examination of the *TTP*. The essays are predominantly from well-established scholars, but we have solicited work from some of the best younger scholars as well. We hope that this volume will serve to stimulate even more interest in the *TTP* among specialists in early modern philosophy, as well as among those more broadly interested in such topics as metaphysics and political philosophy.

The *TTP* is a particularly difficult book for the modern reader, especially the philosopher. First of all there is a great deal of discussion of two subjects, history and the Bible, both of which have been subsequently relegated

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to other experts in the modern university. Just as in the case of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the sections on religion have more often than not been neglected in favor of those sections obviously dedicated to political theory, such as Chapter 16. In this collection, we have essays that treat the work as a whole and take us in several interpretive directions. Some show us how Spinoza's thought developed in relation to his intellectual context, whether in his engagement with Jewish thought or with other contemporary seventeenth-century thinkers. Many of the essays demonstrate in various ways the mutual relation of the *TTP* with Spinoza's philosophical *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*. Several demonstrate the ways in which the explicitly political arguments of the *TTP* are related to the earlier sections on prophecy and Scripture.

**Edwin Curley** has been one of the leading scholars of Spinoza for decades, and his masterly studies and translations have done much to stimulate the resurgence of interest in the *TTP*, especially among American scholars. His essay in this volume examines Spinoza's correspondence with his former student Albert Burgh, which dates five years after the publication of the *TTP*, and contributes to our knowledge of Spinoza's relations with his immediate circle. Although the exchange is dated after the publication of the *TTP*, Curley shows how it relates to several of the key themes of the earlier work, in particular, the meaning and role of a universal religion. While other commentators have focused on the role of miracles in the exchange, Curley thinks that the debate over the status of the Catholic Church is more central. Whereas Burgh defends the Catholic Church as the only true representative of revelation, Spinoza claims that Catholicism and indeed all forms of Christianity are based on superstitious beliefs. Nonetheless, Curley argues that, according to Spinoza, even if a religion has superstitious beliefs, i.e., those that are contrary to reason, the state should tolerate it as long as it promotes beneficial conduct.

Because the text is so difficult the more we understand about the genesis and context of the *TTP*, the better we can understand the structure and point of its arguments. In "The text of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," **Piet Steenbakkers** looks closely at several key questions: the origin of the *TTP* and its relation to a supposed earlier draft; the printing history of the text and the distinctions among the editions; the early translations of the Latin text; the annotations that Spinoza added in 1676 to the first edition of 1670; and later editions of the Latin text. These comments enrich our understanding of the composition of the text, its place within Spinoza's development, and its subsequent reception. With these details we can see just how widely and by whom the text was diffused. Modern

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scholars enjoy an unparalleled access to well-edited texts and Steenbakkers chronicles this process and explains how this was accomplished.

Much recent work has looked at Spinoza in the seventeenth-century context, emphasizing, for instance, his important intellectual ties to Descartes and Hobbes. But as H. A. Wolfson's pioneering, though flawed, study of 1934 made clear, Spinoza also owed a profound debt to medieval Jewish thinkers. Two of our essays throw some fresh light on Spinoza's relation to the Jewish philosophical tradition. **Warren Zev Harvey** has already made many important contributions to our knowledge of this relation. In "Spinoza on Ibn Ezra's 'secret of the twelve,'" he discusses the influence of the commentator Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, who, besides Moses Maimonides, was the medieval author who had the most influence on Spinoza's treatise. Harvey focuses on Spinoza's discussion in *TTP*, Chapter 8 of Ibn Ezra's "secret of the twelve," whose meaning is open to several competing interpretations. Harvey locates Spinoza's use of Ibn Ezra in the context of medieval supercommentaries, i.e., the commentators on Ibn Ezra, in order to point out precisely where Spinoza's critical view on the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is original.

In his chapter, "Reflections of the medieval Jewish-Christian debate in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Epistles*," **Daniel J. Lasker** looks at a new and unexplored source in the Jewish tradition. While Wolfson cataloged possible parallels and influences on Spinoza from medieval Jewish philosophical tradition, Lasker examines medieval Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature. He demonstrates that this literature was available to Spinoza and that there are significant parallels in the content of the *TTP* and various works. The *TTP*, Lasker remarks, had a double critical intent – on the one hand, it criticized the religion of Spinoza's birth, and on the other hand, it questioned, distinctly more cautiously, some of Christianity's dogmas – and Spinoza drew on the polemical literature to help him accomplish both tasks. Spinoza did not intend to demolish religion, but rather to purge them of both Judaism's and Christianity's weakest claims and thereby make both suitable to play their role in society as promoters of charity and justice.

If the genesis and context of the *TTP* are important to our understanding of it, so too is its reception and subsequent influence. No one has contributed more to this field than **Jonathan Israel**, who, in his chapter, "The early Dutch and German reaction to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: foreshadowing the Enlightenment's more general Spinoza reception?," points out that, contrary to the views of some recent scholars, Spinoza was discussed more frequently and indeed was more central to the

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Enlightenment than any other philosopher. In particular, he notes that no other book “matches the *Tractatus* or the *Ethics* as a candidate for the honor of being the most analyzed, refuted, and – what counts most – obsessively pored over, wrestled with, and scrutinized text of the era 1670–1820.” Israel examines the early Dutch and German responses and shows that these debates helped determine the axes along which the later Enlightenment discussions were organized. The German response, of Jakob Thomasius, for example, is notable for its emphasis on the supposedly pernicious implications of Spinoza’s advocacy of freedom of speech and expression. He also looks at the response of particular intellectual circles, such as the Dutch Cartesians, the Lutherans, and Socinians.

While Jonathan Israel surveys the German reception of Spinoza, **Mogens Lærke** dedicates his chapter to a detailed analysis of “G. W. Leibniz’s two readings of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.” The point is to discover how a profound and influential philosophical reader shaped the meaning of the treatise in his time. Lærke provides a commentary on Leibniz’s relation to each of the key religious (in particular the Socinian) and philosophical views that influenced his reading of the *TTP*. One of the most interesting aspects of the chapter has to do not with something Leibniz says about Spinoza but precisely with a subject on which he is silent. Lærke notes that while Leibniz discusses at some length Hobbes’s social contract theory he barely mentions Spinoza’s political theory of either the *TTP* or *TP* at all. Lærke suggests that the intersection of Spinoza’s necessitarian metaphysics with his theory of natural rights made his views resistant to the strategy of conciliation Leibniz had employed in the case of Hobbes’s theory.

Most scholarly attention has been focused on the critique of religion and the political theory of the *TTP*. Relatively little has been said about its metaphysics. As **Yitzhak Y. Melamed** shows in his chapter, “The metaphysics of the *Theological-Political Treatise*,” that is unfortunate, because we can learn about the development of Spinoza’s system and also about some key doctrines that are actually discussed in more depth than in the *Ethics*. Melamed first discusses two fundamental metaphysical principles that can be found in both works – the principle of sufficient reason and the ontological and epistemological priority of the infinite – and that are central to the critique of anthropomorphism in the *TTP*. He then goes on to analyze the positive conception of God and notes that in the *TTP* Spinoza makes the radical claim that God is identical with nature. Despite Spinoza’s apparent disagreement with Maimonides’s method of interpreting Scripture, Melamed explains that in fact, when it comes to the understanding of God’s nature as revealed in their respective discussion of the Tetragrammaton, Spinoza

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concur with his medieval predecessor in claiming that God's essence is nothing but his necessary existence. The *TTP* is certainly a polemical work and metaphysics was not its central concern. Although Spinoza did not cover every key doctrine (such as the distinction between substance and mode) in the *TTP*, Melamed shows that this work nonetheless provides us with some important insights into Spinoza's metaphysics.

Two chapters are notable for the ways in which they combine a deep analysis of the political doctrines of the *TTP* with careful attention to the metaphysical doctrines that are so central to Spinoza's philosophy. In "Spinoza's conception of law: metaphysics and ethics," **Donald Rutherford** gives us another, more specific path to link the *TTP* to the larger project of the *Ethics*. According to Rutherford, in the *TTP* Spinoza reinterprets the idea of law in the Hebrew Bible, in which God gives the law that the people are to obey, to one in which law is no longer a literal command but something individuals discover through reason and the investigation of human nature itself. Rutherford focuses on two central questions: How does the idea of a law bridge the natural and the normative? And how does the idea of the law ground the systematic unity of the ethical theory? Central to Rutherford's account is his reading of Chapter 4, where Spinoza distinguishes between two kinds of law, one that is descriptive and metaphysically basic, the other that is decreed by humans and is prescriptive. This distinction is particularly helpful in making sense of how Spinoza uses the notion of a "natural right" in Chapter 16 and the problem of state formation. Natural rights are understood in terms of descriptive laws of nature and they do not, as such, have a prescriptive or normative content. "Laws of human nature," on the other hand, are based on reason and apply to our particular situation. They teach us that for our own good (and not that of nature) we should transfer our natural right to the state, which then has the power to enforce the prescriptive laws of human nature. Rutherford notes, however, that this distinction is not always so clear-cut, and he explores the ambiguity in the idea of acting according to the dictates of reason. On the one hand, because we have the power of understanding, reason does define our nature to some extent and to act on its insights is simply to act in accordance with our nature. On the other hand, because we are only imperfectly rational, the laws of human nature appear to us as prescriptive to the extent that we recognize the intrinsic motivational force of their reasons. Rutherford also points out that divine laws have the same dual structure, a fact that helps explain the structure of the *Ethics*, where the first parts refer to divine law as descriptive, while the later parts use it prescriptively. The fact that prescriptive laws are ultimately based on

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descriptive ones also helps us understand the sense in which Spinoza can talk about making ethical decisions in a deterministic metaphysical system. Although the *Ethics* is always in the background, nonetheless, it is the *TTP* that offers the richest account of law in Spinoza's system, and Rutherford's analysis will be essential reading to those who seek to understand it.

Spinoza does not hesitate throughout his work to make strong moral judgments. He criticizes the emotions of indignation and pity, as well as practices such as lying or the pursuit of physical pleasure. What justifies these judgments is a doctrine of egoism and the ethics of self-interest based on it. However, as **Michael Della Rocca** notes, there are some problematic cases, such as lying, in which we are prohibited to do something that may very well be in our obvious self-interest. Likewise, in his political theory, it seems that it may be in the self-interest of citizens living under a despot to rebel, yet Spinoza forbids rebellion. Even more perplexing, perhaps, is that Spinoza condemns the successful rebel as well. To solve these problems Della Rocca goes back to the foundations of Spinoza's theory, which he finds in the principle of sufficient reason. What is wrong with most moral theories is that they ground their judgments in some *arbitrary* standard external to the object. What Spinoza is looking for is a standard of goodness that is intrinsic to the thing itself, which he finds in self-preservation. Della Rocca then invokes what is often thought of as another problematic claim in Spinoza's system – the notion that another person by being similar to me and acting rationally thus benefits me. He defends this claim in light of the principle of sufficient reason, and he demonstrates how it works in Spinoza's account of the social contract. An individual can be judged (non-arbitrarily) to have sought self-preservation when he joins others who are also rational (and thus similar to him) in the establishment of a state whose point is to aid their individual self-preservation. The rebel cannot be deemed to have met the normative standard of self-preservation either of himself or the state because the very act of rebellion violates the constraint of rational similarity. It is an arbitrary action and thus immoral in terms of Spinoza's egoism. One of the great virtues of this essay is that it shows persuasively how both the method and content of Spinoza's political theory relates to his broader epistemological and metaphysical project. It is that perspective that leads Della Rocca to question in conclusion whether from God's point of view there really is any moral judgment at all.

There are also some new contributions to the study of the central political ideas of the *TTP*. The core of Spinoza's political theory is found in Chapter 16 and it is clearly influenced by Hobbes's idea of a social contract. In his chapter, "Promising Ideas': Hobbes and contract in Spinoza's



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political philosophy,” **Don Garrett** reconsiders the relation of Spinoza to Hobbes’s theory. He poses several puzzles that arise: Why does Spinoza say that he keeps the right of nature intact? Why does Spinoza write, “contrary to Hobbes, reason urges peace in all circumstances”? Why does Spinoza write, on the one hand, that violating a promise is sometimes permissible, and yet on the other that if all human beings were solely guided by reason, they would stand by their contracts completely? And why does Spinoza disagree with Hobbes, that one is obligated to keep a promise made with a robber? After having carefully discussed how the two philosophers each define related pairs of key philosophical terms – good and evil, reason and passion, faith and deception – Garrett explains the solution to the problems. Although it may seem that once Spinoza has identified natural right with power he has adopted a kind of “moral nihilism,” Garrett points out that Spinoza has only rejected “the framework of *obligations and permissions* as a basis for drawing absolute moral distinctions.” Spinoza can still make moral distinctions that are meaningful relative to a particular set of circumstances and laws. The same is true for politics as well. The result is that Garrett, just as he has done with Spinoza’s moral philosophy, provides a nuanced philosophical account of the central concepts in the political philosophy.

Although Spinoza made it clear in the subtitle of the work that he would show that the state should allow freedom of philosophizing, the concluding chapters of the *TTP*, in which he ostensibly justifies this claim, have not always been carefully examined. They are sometimes praised as an early example of liberal toleration, or sometimes condemned for not offering enough of a principled argument, or they have simply been ignored. In “Spinoza’s curious defense of toleration,” **Justin Steinberg** goes a long way to redress these issues. His first step is to indicate what kind of argument Spinoza is not making. According to Steinberg, since Spinoza thinks that there is a *summum bonum* and a rational person can in principle know what it is, he is not offering an argument based on epistemic humility, in which these goods are not known. Steinberg also casts doubt on the claims of some scholars that Spinoza is making an argument based on pluralism. There are not a variety of central ways in which an individual life can flourish but a single model of the good. Finally, he also rejects the idea that Spinoza’s defense of toleration is based on the notion of an inviolable individual right. Instead, Steinberg claims that Spinoza offers a two-pronged argument for toleration: while he gives a prudential argument – one in which attempts to legislate morality are shown to undermine their own goals – his account ultimately depends on a defense of a positive conception of freedom.



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The final two essays demonstrate the inescapable relation between the political aspects of the *TTP* and its discussion of religion. Many readers of the *TTP* have assumed that Spinoza's thorough critique of religion led him to advocate a secular politics. In "Miracles, wonder, and the state in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*," **Michael A. Rosenthal** maintains that this view is mistaken and that religion still plays a role in Spinoza's political theory. He argues that Spinoza uses religion to solve some difficult collective action problems in his social contract theory. Of course religion must be stripped of its metaphysical pretensions. Once that has been done, religion is useful for the passions it produces, in particular those which evoke fear and awe. It may even be the case that, despite Spinoza's critique of them, miracles may still have some political function, precisely because they are a tried and true device to produce fear and awe. Rosenthal suggests that even if there is no explicit appeal to miracles and their attendant wonder, there is another way in which the structure of the miracle has been imported into Spinoza's political thinking at a key point. In other words, Rosenthal claims that Spinoza reestablishes the structure of the miracle in his account of the lawmaker's will. If this is true, then this point has interesting implications for modern social contract theory, in which the sovereign is authorized through the act of will of each citizen.

**Susan James**, in her essay, "Narrative as the means to freedom: Spinoza on the uses of imagination," investigates Spinoza's answer to the profound question of how individuals with their divergent interests can nonetheless be motivated to share in a meaningful collective life. She refers to two general ways in which this question has been answered in the history of ethics: one, the "universalist" approach, looks for general laws or principles that individuals can apply to their own situation; the other, the "particularist" approach, claims that we require a specific interpretation of ourselves, more often than not a thick description or narrative, that motivates us to act. In Spinoza's system, the universalist view of ethical and political self-understanding is expressed through "adequate ideas" or reason, while the particularist view is expressed through "inadequate ideas" or the imagination. James argues that Spinoza offers a distinct way to reconcile these two opposing views. On the one hand, narratives make it possible for us to become motivated by general principles. On the other, we can only apply the general principles if we embed them in a narrative related to our particular circumstances. James focuses on the first part of the reconciliation and convincingly shows us how the imagination can lead us to reason. She gives a reading of the *TTP* in which the useful, but flawed Mosaic narrative, based on the imagined laws of a retributive God, ought ultimately to be

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replaced by the rational precepts of Christ's moral teaching, in which we legislate for ourselves. The twist, of course, is that, given the fact that most men are not yet led by reason, Spinoza must use the particular to motivate the individual to search for the universal. James's paper is a fitting conclusion to the volume, for it is an example of how, through careful scholarship, Spinoza's views, both in the *Ethics* and in the *TTP*, can be brought into a productive dialogue with contemporary philosophical debates.