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Introduction

The focus of this study is Spinoza's revelation, a term that is meant in both its principal senses. In the first place, it refers to what Spinoza incisively reveals, which is the connection of religion, democracy, and reason. What he reveals is that rationality (reason, truth) and religion (morality, piety) depend upon democracy (independence, freedom) – that each depends upon the others, without which "the peace of the commonwealth," as Spinoza puts it, cannot be secure (TTP, 3). To follow out this connection between philosophy, theology, and politics – reason, religion, and democracy – is to trace the effort in Spinoza to secure this peace. In the second place, revelation – equally covenant, pact, prophecy – refers to the substance of this connection between religion, democracy, and reason, and between the divine and the human as Spinoza understands them. What revelation means in this second sense is literally that which is revealed; that which has an origin, originates, is original; that which comes into existence, creates existence; that which causes itself (*causa sui*). God, or Nature.

The contrast is with what perpetually endures, what has always been, what will always be. In this contrast, Spinoza has several complex distinctions at play: between the eternal as something that is uncaused and the eternal as something that causes itself; between nature as something that endures and nature as something that originates; between reason as something that is universal because it has always been in the world and reason as something that is universal because it has a beginning; between creation as something an eternal God does and creation as something God does for eternity. God, or Nature. We keep both, for Spinoza, because of something we are habitually blind to in each taken on its own, namely that God, or Nature, is rational, faithful, and free – human – only insofar as the human, as rational, faithful, free, is divine. As Spinoza always insists, God, or Nature, "exists for the sake of no end" and "acts for the sake of no end." It is human beings, "human appetite," which give God, or Nature, ends and it is these ends that we put before ourselves in striving to be like God, or Nature (E IV pref).

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More information

Revelation is ordinarily held to occur at the limits of universal reason. Where reason applies in all times and all places, revelation is specific, community-bound, theologico-political. Revelation (religion, piety, God) is about the particular (*this* people, *this* nation); reason (nature, truth) about the universal (humankind). A religious standpoint would be one that sought to hold together both imperatives. A nonreligious standpoint would be one that simply got rid of revelation – that found its particularity in a political realm without theology. Spinoza sets up the contrast differently. God and nature are on the same side, the side of the universal, the "natural divine law" that rationally holds in all times and all places. Religion and reason are thus both on the side of God or nature. But so is revelation: "we must concede without qualification that the [universal] divine law began from the time when men by express covenant promised to obey God in all things, thereby surrendering, as it were, their natural freedom and transferring their right to God" (TTP, 188). For this reason, perhaps, Spinoza tells us in the early pages of the TTP that "the nature of the mind . . . is the primary cause of divine revelation" (TTP, 10).

This is a striking claim. What is universally true is enacted in a covenant, in a certain time and place, with a finite group of people. Who are these "men"? *All* men? *All* people? Why covenant, then? What is the nature of this transfer to God? What existed before it? These questions will be pursued in due course. What is important to note at this stage is that there no longer seem to be two sides in Spinoza. There is no longer the difference of what endures and what begins, what holds for everyone and what only holds for some. The universal divine law, "man's highest happiness and blessedness" belonging to and deduced from "human nature as such" and thus "of universal application" (TTP, 51–52) – this began from the time when human beings covenanted. The covenant began when human beings universalized, when the divine became human and the human divine. But what is the meaning of this elision? What difference does God, or Nature, make – what is the difference between them and what is the meaning of their connection? What of the difference between the realm of the divine and the realm of the human? Between religion and politics? What can now count as the difference between a religious and a nonreligious standpoint?

It is Spinoza's abiding claim that no standpoint is free of revelation. This is not because religion is true (it is just as often false); nor is it because one must believe in God (one is free not to); nor miracles (one must not); nor the churches and synagogues (one might prefer not to). Spinoza thinks that the narrow notion of revelation as the divine gift to a particular community of law or sacrality has the same significance as a

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humanly given law. But there is a wider notion of revelation in Spinoza's thought which can be seen throughout his work. This is the notion that even the most universal, the most eternal, the most natural things – peace, rationality, freedom, morality (God, or Nature) – originate from nothing. That is, peace, rationality, freedom, and morality (God, or Nature) have not always been in the world, are not rights or faculties or insights or endowments or possibilities human beings possess by nature. Or rather, they *are* possessed by nature, Nature or God. Like God (or Nature, for now we see what this might mean), they come into existence – their creation, creativity, making, origination is the ground of, the essence of, existence itself. Like Nature (or God, for now we see what this might mean), they are eternal. Both religion (God) and reason (Nature) are revealed, created, made; both reason (Nature) and religion (God) are sovereign, eternal, true. From a religious standpoint, God is eternal and nature is made; from a nonreligious standpoint, God is made and nature is eternal. Both, to Spinoza, are right.

At the center of Spinoza's metaphysics are two orienting concepts. The first is *causa sui* – that which causes itself, creates itself, brings itself about; that which is thus free, independent, undetermined, eternal: "that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing" (E I d1). The second is *conatus* – what strives, labors, endeavors, perseveres, empowers. Spinoza employs the language of God to describe the first. God is "absolutely infinite" (E I d6), "free" (E I d7), and "eternal," a being who "cannot be explained by duration or time even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end" (E I d8Exp). For the second, *conatus*, he employs the language of nature: "each thing [*res*], as far as it can by its own power, strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its being" (E III p6). *Conatus* refers to a capacity or power to act, something that is shared among all natural beings, human and nonhuman. Spinoza continually stresses this continuity between human and other beings – the manifold ways in which human beings are not a "dominion within a dominion" (*imperium in imperio*), a separate category within natural species. Not only do human beings not form a separate *imperium* unto themselves; they do not even command the *imperium*, nature, of which they are a part, for "insofar as [man] is a part of nature, whose laws human nature is compelled to obey . . . [he is] forced to accommodate [himself] in ways nearly infinite" (E IV appVI).

Yet nature is also the principal thing human beings must strive to know, for "our supreme good and perfection depends solely on the knowledge of God," and "since nothing can be or be conceived without God, it is clear that everything in Nature involves and expresses the conception of God in proportion to its essence and perfection; and therefore we

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More information

acquire a greater and more perfect knowledge of God as we gain more knowledge of natural phenomena" (TTP, 51). Since the knowledge of nature and the knowledge of God are connected, one might assume that the natural sciences are the path of wisdom here. But Spinoza's "Nature" is "infinite": it includes not only what we think of as the natural order (in its parts, principles, or taken together as one thing) but "everything that is conceived even by the divine intellect" (TTP, 74).[1] This clearly qualifies what can be meant by "knowledge of natural phenomena." In calling human beings "natural," Spinoza doesn't just mean that their bodies act like other natural bodies – like trees and rocks and cows. He means the human mind is natural, too, and he therefore means to subject to science (or, if one prefers, to widen science to include) what a human being does and makes over time, human social and political life: "since all men, savage and civilized alike, everywhere enter into social relations and form some sort of civil order, the causes and natural foundations of the state are not to be sought in the precepts of reason, but must be deduced from the common nature of the constitution of men" (TP I: 7).

Given these different standpoints, nature is both an unattainable ideal (considered in itself) and, as united to the mind, all that human beings can, in fact, know. Nature is at once transcendent and immanent, infinite and finite, extraordinary and ordinary. As Spinoza relates in the TdIE, it is the highest good to acquire a nature (and strive that others acquire it) that knows "the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature." But to achieve this knowledge, he continues, it is necessary only to "understand as much of Nature as suffices for acquiring such a nature" (§§13–14).

What is at work here is the concept with which Spinoza begins (and ends) the *Ethics*, the *causa sui*. This concept is not only an account of the origin of God, or Nature. It is an account of human origins, an account of freedom – a freedom that comes into existence as the standard of human power and disempowerment. In the beginning, it is only God who is self-caused, self-created, free, eternal; humans are caused by another, in bondage, singular. But the *causa sui* reveals to human beings what are their origins, and ultimately, with effort, their ends. It is not that human beings ever escape the bondage of limitation. It is that they can, also, be free. The difference is one of *conatus*, creation, power, making. What is revealed from the beginning of Spinoza's works to the end is what it means *to human beings* to assert something like the revelation, the *causa*

[1] See also E I p16: "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)."

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sui, of *God*. What Spinoza shows is that *if* we assert this power of God, we must be prepared to assert something *like* this of human beings, too, for nothing is given in the beginning, including God, especially God. The *causa sui* is only possible because of *conatus*. God is Nature in Spinoza because God possesses the most *conatus*, the most ability, the most power; Nature is God in Spinoza because nature is caused by nothing but itself; nature comes into existence; nature originates. There is no nature that has not been inflected by creation, creativity, making, culture, society, politics, particularity; there is no creation, culture, making that is not part of nature.

This dynamic of nature and culture, divine and human, can readily be seen, first, in Spinoza's claim that the Bible is both natural – a book like other books, written by human beings for a particular audience in a certain time and place; and sacred – a book that contains the word of God, the divine law that commands justice and charity. What the Bible reveals, Spinoza shows, is that human beings don't need the Bible, since the word of God is written preeminently in the book of the human heart and must be expressed in the work of living justly. What the word of God reveals, Spinoza equally shows, is that human beings, at a loss as to how to interpret the book of the heart, at a loss as to the nature of justice, can find no better teacher than the Bible, which grounds both justice and interpretation in faith, obedience, love. What Spinoza shows is that faith and reason – books and minds – are both sovereign. To be sure, each will seek to make itself the standard for the other, to subordinate and disempower the other, to transcend the other; each will claim to be universal over against the particularity of the other. This is only possible, Spinoza reveals, because they have come into existence – they have been revealed, created, made – together. As he says of prophecy, it is a form of natural knowledge (natural knowledge is not inferior to it; it does not add to natural knowledge). Yet natural knowledge, too, is revealed – for, as above, the mind "contains the nature of God within itself in concept" and therefore we may regard "the nature of the mind" itself as "the primary cause of divine revelation" (TTP, 10).

Second, this dynamic of nature and culture, divine and human can be seen in Spinoza's discussion of law in the TTP, in which, unlike natural law, both the *lex divina* and the *lex humana* – divine as well as human laws – are conceived as "manmade." Although the divine law, once made, binds human beings universally and without exception, although this making is such that the divine law must be considered "innate in the human mind and inscribed therein, as it were," it is not a law of nature. What this means is that if we follow Spinoza in understanding politics or human social existence to be original, natural, inevitable – that is, that there is no

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Excerpt
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human nature that preexists some kind of primitive sociality, there is no sociality that is not natural – we must paradoxically see that each has an origin: that nature and politics come into existence together, and thus are always disrupting and complicating each other. For God (or Nature), too, makes a pact with humankind, in "the manner we described in speaking of the civil state" (TTP, 188). God, or Nature, is theologico-political – always someone's and some society's God; theology and politics are natural, eternal – founded on universal principles of self-interest and justice. There can be a natural history of politics just as there can be a political history of nature, since neither exists separate from the other. It does not add anything to this notion to say that politics and nature only exist inseparably *for us* (human creators) while eternal nature (as that which we did not create) extends far beyond us. For insofar as nature is not for us it does not exist (for us); existence is for us; eternity is ontological: "by eternity I understand existence itself" (E I d8).

Third and finally, the dynamic can be seen in Spinoza's discussion of the Hebrew commonwealth and the election of the Hebrews. Spinoza is notorious among Jewish readers for his claim that the election of the Hebrews, and by extension, their covenantal law, *only* refers to "the temporal prosperity of the state" and "therefore could have been of practical value only while their state existed" (TTP, 60–61). As he says of Christian ceremonies as well, although they existed outside of a sovereign state per se, "their only purpose was the unification of a particular society" (TTP, 67). Blessedness is for individuals in pursuit of God or Nature (philosophy); security and health is for communities and nations (theologico-politics); blessedness is universal and rational; security and health are particular and revealed. Therefore, Spinoza notes, "he who lives in solitude is by no means bound by [these ceremonial observances]"; by no means bound by chosenness, by revelation. Yet for Spinoza no one actually *does* live in solitude. Every striving individual must be concerned with security, polity, solidarity. The formation of societies is not only "advantageous," it is "essential" (TTP, 64). And every society must become rational, that is, free, sovereign, *causa sui*. What the Hebrews precisely inaugurate is the connection between the divine and human laws, the connection, namely, between blessedness and security, rationality and the theologico-political, *causa sui* and *conatus*.[2] What they inaugurate, for Spinoza, is democracy as that which itself is both natural (or godly) ("the most natural form of state, approaching most closely to that freedom which nature grants to

[2] For the opposite view, that blessedness and human law have nothing whatsoever to do with each other, see Douglas Den Uyl, "Power, Politics, and Religion in Spinoza's Political Thought," in *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize*, ed. Paul Bagley (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 133–158, esp. 140.

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Excerpt
More information

every man" [TTP, 185]) and social (originating from when human beings gave up the "unrestricted right naturally possessed by each individual" and put it "into common ownership" [TTP, 181]). Like the Bible, then, the Hebrews are both unique and ordinary. They are like all other nations in insisting that they are chosen. This, Spinoza knows, is what a nation (like a book considered sacred) does. They are unlike all other nations in showing that chosenness is original – that nations, including the nation that is humankind, originate, come into existence, are revealed. The Hebrews are chosen in showing what chosenness can only ever mean: that a society "freely" and "equally" pledges to live according to the divine law of justice, the law, namely, of democracy (TTP, 195).

For Spinoza, then, the task of every particular polity, every human law, is to strive as much as possible to conform to the divine law ("charity and love towards one's fellow-citizen"), something that depends on ensuring that access to religious and political knowledge – to law – is public, communal, accessible (TTP, 206). As Spinoza observes of the ancient Hebrew commonwealth, although in his day it can no longer be imitated "in all respects" (TTP, 212), it has one distinctive feature from which we might learn: "as in a democracy," the Hebrews transferred their natural rights "on equal terms," not "to any other man," who might very well take power for himself, but to God. "It follows," Spinoza says, "that this covenant left them all completely equal, and they all had equal right to consult God, to receive and interpret his laws; in short, they all shared equally in the government of the state" (TTP, 196). Of course, this is as unlike a democracy as it is like one, since God is not ordinarily understood as playing any role in a democratic government. Yet the case of the Hebrews teaches us precisely why the dissimilarity is as relevant as the similarity, and by extension the complexity of religion and politics as they play out in any given regime.

By the same logic, it is the task of every reader (of the Bible) to strive to be holy as the text is holy – to secure the holiness of the text by becoming holy oneself, or as Spinoza puts it, to lead a "better life" in light of what one reads (TTP, 70). This is something that also depends on ensuring clarity and accessibility – in this case of a particular text. For "Scripture was written and disseminated not just for the learned but for all men of every time and race" (TTP, 164), and since "obedience to God consists solely in loving one's neighbor . . . it follows that Scripture commands no other kind of knowledge than that which is necessary for all men" (TTP, 158).

In both cases, Spinoza considers the human labor involved to have been misplaced. In the political realm, immense efforts have been expended to control and manipulate the multitude, "and with the specious title of

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religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check" (TTP, 3). In the hermeneutical realm, it is "imagine[d] that the most profound mysteries [whether philosophical or theological] lie hidden in the Bible, and [interpreters] exhaust themselves in unraveling these absurdities while ignoring other things of value" (TTP, 89). Spinoza's claim is that these activities not only obscure the real work of political justice – the "set disposition to render to every man what is his by civil right" (TTP, 186) – and the real work of transforming oneself and others into persons of *pietas*. They intentionally obstruct these goals. Thus, given the manipulation of religion in the public sphere, defending *vera religio*, true religion, is a profoundly hermeneutic act. Given the weight of the Bible, reading it anew is a profoundly political act. As he puts it, since the approach to Scripture that finds in it "mysteries of the deepest kind" has led "to gross superstition and other pernicious ills . . . I feel I must not abandon my task, and all the more so because religion stands in no need of the trappings of superstition. On the contrary, its glory is diminished when it is embellished with such fancies" (TTP, 149).

What connects religion and politics in Spinoza's work is thus a third way of construing revelation: as a defense of the accessible, the clear, the plain, the ordinary – a critique, in other words, of the tyranny of legal, theological, metaphysical, and hermeneutic esotericism. The work – the labor, the effort of interpretation and lawmaking – is something common to the social order as a whole – it is something that individuals have in common with one another and it is, or should be, something that is common knowledge.

This notion of revelation as the expression of the common and the ordinary, then, has two sides. On the one side, it defends against the claims of elites that religious truth is something mysterious, supernatural, or esoteric, requiring "ecclesiastical authority" for its interpretation and dissemination, whether philosophical or theological. As Spinoza says of prophecy, what is distinctive about it does *not* rest on its exclusion of what is "common to all men," for what is common may properly be termed divine.[3] On the other side, it directs the attention of individuals to a conception of lawfulness as justice and charity that, while perfectly ordinary to understand, is nevertheless very difficult to achieve. What Spinoza is suggesting is that all of the zeal expended on the quest for vaporous and "extraordinary" religious and philosophical ideals has precisely distracted and subverted what actually does require enormous

[3] "Cognitio naturalis omnibus hominibus communibus est, dependet enim a fundamentis omnibus hominibus communibus . . . aequali jure, ac alia, quaecunque illa sit, divina vocari potest" (G III: 15).

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effort, namely the struggle to bring about a political order that is truly democratic and truly just, an order that he thinks would be truly and rightly extraordinary.

What is at stake in Spinoza's revelation, therefore, is the dialectical relationship between the human and the divine. What the term *dialectic* captures is a relationship of identity and difference, continuity and separation, between terms that are in tension with one another, and whose tension is part of their richness. Spinoza's tendency is to dwell on the negative consequences of subordinating one side of an opposition to the other, for example by allowing a desire for the divine as extraordinary (God as a miracle worker, God as that which utterly transcends what we know) to subordinate what we know to be naturally or ordinarily the case. Spinoza calls this alternately superstition and anthropomorphism, for it involves both spurning the natural for the supernatural (as the "masses" do), and taking the familiar and the ordinary and making it all-powerful, extraordinary (as despotic leaders do). Superstition and despotism are two sides of the same coin for Spinoza, for, as he observes, power-hungry political leaders often seek to advance themselves by virtue of the credulity of the masses; but this very credulity guarantees that such advancement will be temporary, for it will precisely exacerbate the volatility (caused by superstition) that is difficult to control.

The key to understanding Spinoza's critique in the broadest sense – his critique of both philosophy and theology and his critique of the social and political status quo – is that it is focused on the ability to see oppositions like those between reason and revelation, freedom and obedience, and independence and dependence as part of the same project of *libertas humana*, human freedom. That is, freedom is impossible, illusory, or tyrannical unless it is also understood to be about obedience to laws (both human and divine), and vice versa: obedience, or dependence on others, is simply *summum arcanum*, superstition and ignorance, without the achievement, however hard won, of freedom, of acting independently.

The dialectic of the human and the divine is repeated at every level and in various ways throughout the *Ethics* and the TTP: if one aims for God (as opposed to Nature) one will find neither; if one seeks to live according to the divine law (with no appreciation of how it is instantiated in particular human laws), one will achieve nothing but religio-political disaster; if one strives to understand the terms of theology (in opposition to those of reason and logic), one will have debased both discourses; if one seeks the truth of a text without regard to its multiple meanings and contexts of authorship, one will grasp neither. The priority of terms in these formulations can also be reversed (if one aims for Nature as opposed to God,

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human law as opposed to divine law, philosophy as opposed to theology, contexts as opposed to truths), and more importantly, the error can be cast through the mode of conflation as well (if one simply identifies these terms, one will understand neither). As he says of the proper relationship between theology and philosophy, we must discern "what is the essential nature of each, and [show that] neither of them is subordinate to the other, each of them holding its own domain without contradicting the other." The problem, he says, is not only making one the standard of the other (subordination), but "the absurdities, the damage and the harm that have resulted from the fact that men have thoroughly confused these two faculties, failing to make an accurate distinction between them and to separate one from the other" (TTP, 177).

Spinoza's revelation of the connection between reason, religion, and democracy has not been sufficiently unraveled. This is partly due to the absorption of so many readers in the critical posture Spinoza takes toward religion and the popular mentality to which it gives rise, and partly due to Spinoza's own rhetorical context in the TTP especially – his need, socially and politically, to separate (theology and philosophy) rather than connect (God and nature). To see that Spinoza makes his argument for democracy on the grounds that it most fully expresses both the theologico-political and the philosophical is to confront one of the dominant stereotypes that have been promulgated about Spinoza over the last fifty years or so: that while his political project is overtly democratic, his philosophical project, and indeed his ultimate aim, is an elitist or undemocratic one. That is, Spinoza is a democrat in his politics and an elitist in his philosophy, and thus in some sense, even Spinoza's political thought is ultimately undemocratic. Founded on principles that divide societies between elites and masses, its democratic character is ultimately the exoteric dimension of a fundamentally hierarchical world view, one that is contemptuous of the majority, and politically interested only in securing enough stability so that philosophy can, esoterically, go on unmolested. Spinoza's democracy, on this reading, however radical and important for its time, is ultimately only a necessary means to enable the philosophical enlightenment of a privileged few.

This portrait, most sharply articulated by Leo Strauss, significantly distorts Spinoza's project by forcing him into the medieval rubric of a "persecuted" author (a complex Strauss first develops in reading Maimonides and Halevi).[4] As a work avowedly addressed to the

[4] Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

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