

The Common Structure of Religion, Philosophy and Politics in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

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Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*) is one of the first and most important theoretical justifications of the separation of religion from philosophy and from politics. The separation of church and state and the separation of theology from other scientific disciplines are of course defining moments of contemporary secularity. While it can easily appear from certain religiously conservative or atheistic viewpoints that religion and secularity are simply antagonistic forces in modern life, understanding the ways in which this independent secularity is originally explained and justified on a theological basis can offer a more historically comprehensive grasp of this opposition. For this reason it is worthwhile to revisit Spinoza's *TTP* with a view to understanding this foundational and highly contentious justification for the limitation of religion's influence in politics and philosophy. In this paper I hope to show that fully understanding Spinoza's arguments in the *TTP* concerning religion, philosophy and politics requires a recognition of the common logical structure these arguments share with his metaphysical theology. Thus even Spinoza's revolutionary argument for a radically independent secularity is grounded in and inseparable from a certain conception of the relation between God and nature.

The *TTP* has two distinct but related tasks: in the first fifteen chapters of the treatise he strives to distinguish properly between philosophy and religion; in the last five chapters, to outline the scope of the Sovereign's power and the individual's freedom.¹ In this essay, I will attempt to clarify the precise relation of religion, philosophy, and politics in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.² I argue that there is a close

¹ Spinoza designates these two points as the *praepicuum* of his treatise at several points of the work. See Preface, 3r, 24-25 (3); II, 30, 8-15 (34); XIV, 160, 18-20 (158-9); XIV, 166, 21-27 (164). All references to the *TTP* refer to the chapter number and page number in the original Latin edition. Line numbers are in square brackets, followed by the page number in Samuel Shirley's English translation in regular parentheses. I use the Latin text found in *Oeuvres III: Tractatus Theologico-Politicus/Traité Théologico-Politique*, text established by Fokke Akkerman, translation and notes by Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999). The English translations, which I have occasionally amended, are from *Theological-Political Treatise*, 2nd Edition, trans. Samuel Shirley, introduction Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001).

² Not much attention has been paid to the common ground underlying these aspects of Spinoza's argument, but certain recent studies have explored this connection. Wolfgang Bartuschat shows how Spinoza's ontology of power is the common basis for the philosophical perspective of the *Ethics* and the theological and political investigation of the *TTP*. See Wolfgang Bartuschat, "The Ontological Basis of Spinoza's Theory of Politics," in *Spinoza's Political and Theological Thought*, ed. C. De Deugd. (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1984) 30-36. Nancy Levene connects the theologico-political and philosophical projects through their common ethical concern. See Nancy Levene, "Ethics and Interpretation, or How to Study Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Without Strauss," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, Vol. 10 (2000) 57-110. Edwin Curley argues for the compatibility of the *TTP* and the *Ethics*.

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correspondence between Spinoza's understanding of God (Substance) and its finite modes, necessity and contingency, reason and faith, and the Sovereign and its citizens. The argument has three parts. First, I examine the common structure of the relationships between necessity and contingency, philosophy and religion, the sovereign and the freedom of the individual. Second, I look at the analogous structure of, on the one hand, the movement from true ideas about the laws of nature to certain knowledge of the existence of God (and the consequent impossibility involved in negating the laws of nature while retaining the certain knowledge of God), and, on the other hand, the movement from the natural right of the individual to the Sovereign's right to rule, (and the consequent impossibility of wholly negating the fundamental right of the individual while retaining the power of the Sovereign).³ Finally, I consider how democracy, on Spinoza's account of it, is the political manifestation of his conception of God and of God's relation to both humanity and the common order of nature. It seems to me difficult to decide whether Spinoza is grounding these various spheres upon his metaphysical conception of God, or whether he is rather identifying a more basic logical structure underlying all reality. Whatever the case may be, these parallels suggest a fundamental unity of the metaphysical and political aspects of Spinoza's thought, and of the two sections of the *TTP*.⁴

They also suggest an important continuity between Spinoza's early modern theological-political stance and medieval political theology. In medieval political theology, the structure of the state and its division and relation between religious and secular aspects is consciously designed according to the structure of the divine principle, imitating God's relation to nature and humanity.⁵ Instead of understanding Spinoza's position as a dramatic break from the medieval and its close interdependence between first principle and political principle, I suggest that the significant differences between the medieval and Spinozan relation of faith and philosophy, and of religious and secular

See Edwin Curley, "Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece, II: The Theologico-Political *Tractatus* as a Prolegomenon to the *Ethics*," in *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy*, eds. J.A. Cover and Mark Kulstad (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990) 109-59.

³ The connection here with Hobbes' argument in *Leviathan* is obvious. Though it would be illuminating to compare the arguments on the origin of the state in Hobbes and Spinoza in order to more clearly discern how the differences between the thinkers may be to some extent explained by the underlying metaphysical frameworks of their political theories, such a comparison is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁴ An indirect consequence of my argument is that the grounds for Straussian readings of the *TTP*, which stress the distinction between its exoteric and esoteric meanings, will be undermined. Rather than seeing the book as hiding some philosophical truth behind the false veil of the outward meaning, my argument points to a deep structural consistency between a literal reading of Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture and his own philosophical position. Thus, following Levene, I attempt to give a further reason for "why the *Tractatus* is not written in code" (Levene, "Ethics and Interpretation, or How to Study Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Without Strauss," 90).

⁵ For example, Monophysite theological positions, which deny the distinction between the divinity and the humanity in Christ's nature, tend towards the assimilation of religious and secular powers, whereas the Chalcedonian orthodoxy, with its insistence upon the abiding distinction between Christ's divinity and his humanity, tend towards a political theory which preserves the distinct integrity of religious from secular power. See R.D. Crouse's very helpful article on Medieval Political Theology, "Political Theology from Eusebius to Dante," in *No Power but of God: Political Theology and the Christian's Relation to the State*, ed. Susan Harris. Proceedings of the 18th Atlantic Theological Conference. Charlottetown: St. Peter's Publications, 1998, 24-33 (esp. 26-7).

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authority, are to be better explained through Spinoza's novel conception of God and its relation to nature and humanity. The interdependence between theology (philosophy) and politics is as present in Spinoza's thought as in the thought of his medieval predecessors.

I. Necessity and Contingency, Philosophy and Faith, Secular and Religious Authority

The relationship between philosophy and faith outlined in the first part of the *TTP* mirrors the relationship between secular and religious authority in the second part. The key to this mirroring is the following: in each case, the two sides are united from an absolute, objective perspective, while some practical interest dictates that the sides must also be clearly distinguished. At each point in the argument when he must show the necessity of a separate existence for contingency, freedom of thought, and revealed religion, Spinoza must appeal to the practical consequences of holding to their undifferentiated unification, as opposed to showing some logical necessity for their distinction. This is largely due to the principal metaphysical problem inherent in Spinoza's system: that one cannot logically demonstrate the real existence of anything other than God from within the Spinozan logic.⁶ This is seen primarily through the fact that whatever follows from something infinite (God and his attributes) is infinite (immediate and mediate infinite modes),⁷ whereas singular, finite things can be caused only by other finite things.⁸ There are thus two distinct chains of causality, one of which Spinoza can deduce (the infinite chain), but the second of which must be merely assumed (the finite chain of causality).⁹ Schelling writes that in response to the question of how the affections of substance arise, Spinoza "only knows there are things from

⁶ Demonstrating this point would require a careful reading of his *Ethics*, and so for our present purposes I refer the reader to Schelling's analysis of Spinoza's metaphysical position: "But whence now do – not this or that thing, this or that affection, but any affections at all of the divine substance come from? Spinoza gives no answer for this, because he cannot give an answer. Determination, limit, etc., can only be thought where there is a reflection, but the being of the substance is a being completely devoid of reflection or limits, namely being which does even not limit or reflect itself...*he only knows that there are things from experience*; it would, so to speak, never occur to him to posit affections in the infinite substance *if he had not discovered any things in experience*, thus it is evident that he admittedly maintains an objective connection between God and things, but never really demonstrates it; the things are certain to him, *not from his principle but from elsewhere*." F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 71-2. This is why Hegel famously characterizes Spinoza's philosophy as an *acosmism* in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. On my account, this metaphysical difficulty is manifested practically by the fact that Spinoza must appeal to what is required practically in order to establish the substantial and necessary existence of contingency, religion, and individual freedom.

⁷ See especially *Ethics* I Pr21-22.

⁸ *Ethics* I Pr28.

⁹ For a clear statement of this tension in Spinoza's thought, see Harry Wolfson, *Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning*, (New York: Schocken, 1961), Vol. 1, especially the chapter on "Modes," pp. 370-399. On this subject, Schelling succinctly writes: "Because he absolutely cannot admit any real transition from the infinite to the finite, he does not have any of these finite things arise immediately from the infinite, but only mediately, namely mediated through something else separate and finite, which itself is mediated through another etc., into infinity. Each separate or finite thing is, as Spinoza says, determined in its existence and its effect not absolutely by God, but only by God insofar as He is thought of as affected by another, etc. into infinity" (Schelling, 70).

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experience,”¹⁰ since “nothing finite is immediately explicable.”¹¹ This metaphysical impasse manifests itself in the *TTP* by the fact that the necessary existence of those aspects of reality belonging to humans as finite modes, such as religion and freedom of individual thought and speech, cannot be perceived through the natural light of reason, because there is no objective connection that would both differentiate and preserve the moment of contingency and otherness. The paradigmatic example of this relationship in the *TTP* is the distinction and relation between necessity and contingency.

Necessity and Contingency

Spinoza writes that “in an absolute sense, all things are determined by the universal laws of Nature to exist and to act in a determinate way.”¹² This follows from the philosophical, depersonalized conception of God to which he briefly refers in Chapter 4: “God acts and governs all things solely from the necessity of his own nature and perfection, and his decrees and volitions are eternal truths, always involving necessity.”¹³ This absolute determination includes man as a part of Nature,¹⁴ and thus “whatever follows from the necessity of man’s nature – that is, from Nature as we conceive her to be determinately expressed in man’s nature – follows from human power, *even though it does so necessarily*.”¹⁵ Yet although the actual interconnection of all God’s modes may be thoroughly determined, Spinoza writes that our practical interests demand that we understand there to be contingency in the world.¹⁶ Things should not be explained through remote causes, but through their proximate causes, whereas explanations through fate and the infinite interconnection of natural causes are too remote from particular things to provide certain explanations, especially since the whole interconnection of causes is hidden from our perspective as a part of this nature. Since this perspective of the whole is inaccessible, the interconnection must be understood to be contingent, for although we are ultimately completely determined in our every decision through unseen chains of causation, acting based on this assumption would have a paralyzing effect on our practical activity.¹⁷

¹⁰ Schelling, 72.

¹¹ Schelling, 71.

¹² *TTP* IV, 44 [19-21] (p.48).

¹³ *TTP* IV, 51 [26-29] (p. 55).

¹⁴ Later, Spinoza makes clear that in terms of acting only as they are naturally determined, he does not “acknowledge any distinction between men and other individuals of Nature, nor between men endowed with reason and others to whom true reason is unknown, nor between fools, madmen and the sane.” *TTP* XVI, 175 [10-13] (174).

¹⁵ *TTP* IV, 44 [2-5] (p. 48). Spinoza expresses this idea most clearly in *Ethics* I. 29: “In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce and affect in a certain way.”

¹⁶ “...for practical purposes it is better, indeed, it is essential, to consider things as contingent (*adeoque ad usum vitae melius, imo necesse est res ut possibiles considerare*)” *TTP* IV, 44 [18-19] (p. 49).

¹⁷ There is clearly a tension here in Spinoza’s claim as I have formulated it. As one of my students Zac Delong put the question to me: what does it matter whether or not we falsely imagine contingency in the world from the perspective of wholly necessary causal connections that are absolutely binding on us regardless of how we view them?

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There are thus two perspectives: the perfect, objective perspective of God, or Substance, and the limited, subjective perspective of the particular manifestation of substance. While the two are, from an absolute perspective, objectively united in the former, they must also be conceived as wholly separate, and the second, lower perspective must be preserved in its integrity in order to fulfill practical concerns. This relationship between God and its modes, or necessity and contingency, provides the blueprint for the relationship both between philosophy and faith, and between the rule of the sovereign and the freedom of the individual (at the level of imagination).

Philosophy and Religion

Spinoza understands philosophy and religion¹⁸ to be completely separate and autonomous domains, though when each is properly understood, they are seen to have completely compatible content. Spinoza seeks to address three points:

...for what reason philosophy must be distinguished from theology, what is the essential nature of each, and that neither of them is subordinate to the other, each of them holding its own domain without contradicting the other.¹⁹

A philosophical knowledge has its basis in the conceptual clarity of self-evident intellectual axioms, comprehended in a series of connected propositions. These connections take the form of proofs, for “in the case of things invisible which are objects only of the mind, proofs are the only eyes by which they are seen.”²⁰ Philosophy is primarily distinguished by the clarity and distinctness of its objects, which are eternal: substance, its attributes, and its infinite modes, all of which exist outside of time's flux. This knowledge, at the level of *ratio* or *scientia intuitiva*, is not directed towards the lower domains of sense perception (*imaginatio*) or hearsay, but involves the immediate grasp of unchanging ideas. Mere belief has nothing to do with philosophy, as “those who do not have proofs see nothing at all of these things.”²¹

By contrast, for Spinoza religion is concerned only with understanding the meaning of revelation in Scripture. Against certain interpreters of Scripture who assume the complete truth of Scripture as the beginning point of their interpretation,²² Spinoza argues that religion does not seek the truth, but only the meaning (*sensum*)²³ of the historical narratives contained in Scripture. The objects of religious study are not the eternal truths of nature, but the contingent, historical writings of Scripture.

¹⁸ Following Spinoza I use ‘religion’ and ‘theology’ interchangeably in what follows.

¹⁹ *TTP*, XV, 174, [2-6] (172).

²⁰ *TTP*, XIII, 156 [3-5] (155).

²¹ *TTP*, XIII.

²² “...they lay down at the outset a principle of interpretation that would be far more appropriately derived from Scripture itself” (Preface, 4r, [23-25] (5)).

²³ Spinoza defines the meaning of a text as “what the author could have had in mind, or what the time and the occasion demanded,” VII, 96, [4-6] (97).

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This difference constitutes the autonomous realms of religion and philosophy. Religion seeks to uncover what is true only as it is mediated imperfectly through prophecy and Scripture, working to explain why each statement of Scripture states what it does through reference to its historical context. Philosophy moves beyond this imperfect perspective of *imaginatio* towards immediate and adequate apprehension of things through Substance and its attributes at the higher levels of *ratio* and *scientia intuitiva*, a knowledge which is eternal and ahistorical. Spinoza contrasts this separation of philosophy and religion with two hermeneutic approaches that, in opposite ways, collapse this necessary separation and autonomy. In opposite ways, both sceptics (e.g., Jehuda Alpakhan) and dogmatists (e.g., Maimonides) take everything in Scripture to be absolute truth. The sceptic, conforming reason to Scripture, takes the meaning of Scripture to be the authoritative source of truth, while the dogmatist, conforming Scripture to reason, demonstrates that everything in Scripture is true by showing through allegorical interpretation that all revelation corresponds with the truth of reason.²⁴ Against both these positions, Spinoza asserts the necessity of the separation between religion and philosophy, affording independence to each realm (and hence social peace). Spinoza reinterprets the meaning of God's revelation. Instead of God choosing to reveal a certain truth to a merely receptive prophet who then communicates this revealed knowledge in an uncorrupted fashion to his people, Spinoza understands revelation to be adapted at two different stages: first, to the limited capacities of the prophet, then to the limited capacities of his people.²⁵ A revelation is the imperfect perception of what is, in itself and apart from the subjective distortion of the prophet, an eternally self-same truth.²⁶ This revelation takes the form of words or appearances (*verbis vel figuris*), not essences and axioms.²⁷ What is perceived by the prophet is determined by his imagination, temperament, prior beliefs and education, intellectual capacity, all of which are wholly individual to each prophet. Scripture does not contain historically transcendent eternal truths, identical to the axioms discovered by the natural light of reason, but particular, contingent apprehensions of these truths clouded by the imperfect understanding of the prophets and their people. Scripture cannot, for this reason, "be upheld as divine doctrine without great prejudice to philosophy."²⁸

Spinoza's explanation of falsity in book II of the *Ethics* provides a helpful analogy for understanding how his historicized version of theology works. Spinoza uses the example of the sun, which appears to our sense perception, or *imaginatio*, as deceptively close to us. This apprehension is not false, and our body remains affected in this particular way even in higher levels of knowing. We must, however, come to understand the whole interconnected system of causal necessity that contributes to making the sun appear as it does. Once we understand our perception within the explanatory web of causes (the perception as it is related to God), we understand the

²⁴ See Chapter XV.

²⁵ "...Scripture is adapted to the intellectual level not only of the prophets but of the unstable and fickle Jewish multitude." *TTP* XIV, 159 [1-4] (158).

²⁶ Spinoza writes that "it is the nature of the mind...that is the primary cause of divine revelation." *TTP* I, 2 [24-26] (10) – cf. also I, 13 [28-30] (19).

²⁷ See *TTP* I, 3 [30-33] (10-11). These correspond to the two lowest forms of knowing in Spinoza's fourfold hierarchy, as elaborated in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, sections 18-29.

²⁸ *TTP* II, 30 [4-6] (34).

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perception in its truth (see *Ethics* IIP35). It is this kind of truth Spinoza's theologian would seek in Scripture: through historical study of the Bible we can determine, though unclearly, what caused various prophets to apprehend the world as they did (what it was they did and did not know), and then within this explanatory framework, understand the truth underlying their perception, once it has been sufficiently demystified.

Yet although each belongs to its own separate domain, Spinoza denies the claim that religion demands a supernatural order of reason, beyond the natural light of reason employed by philosophy: "since the supreme authority for the interpretation of Scripture is vested in each individual, the rule that governs interpretation must be nothing other than the light of natural reason that is common to all, and not any supernatural light, nor any eternal authority."²⁹ Importantly, while religion and philosophy have different objects of study, it is crucial to note that their ultimate authority lies in one source,³⁰ the natural light of reason itself.³¹

From this historical interpretation of Scripture through Scripture alone, emerges a core, eternal meaning to Scripture, which constitutes what Spinoza calls "the divine nature of Scripture."³² This meaning has to do only with a moral doctrine easily accessible to all,³³ and not with natural and spiritual truths of philosophy.³⁴ It is the "religion universal to the entire human race...consisting not in ceremonial observance but in charity and sincerity of heart." Further, he writes that this distilled message of Scripture, "is in essence this, to love God above all, and one's neighbour as oneself," and this is "the basis of the whole structure of religion."³⁵

Spinoza recognizes that, since he takes the true doctrine of religion to be equally derivable from the natural light of reason, there is the danger that religion may be wholly comprehended by rational thought. Referring to the kernel of moral truth contained in Scripture, Spinoza writes "if...we assert that this fundamental principle can be proved by reason, then theology becomes a part of philosophy, and inseparable from it."³⁶ But this is not the case, for there is one important truth of religion that reason appears unable to grasp: that there can be salvation through obedience to Law without adequate knowledge. At the end of the *Ethics*, there is no salvation apart from one's adequate knowledge of the

²⁹ *TTP* VII, 103 [22-26] (103-4).

³⁰ This undermines Steven Smith's view that "[n]ot only are reason and theology two different modes of knowledge, but they operate on two different objects." See Steven Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 82. For a thoughtful correction of this view, see Levene, "Ethics and Interpretation," pp. 83 ff.

³¹ As with philosophical inquiry, Spinoza writes about religion that "this method demands no other light than the natural light of reason." *TTP* VII, 98 [16-17] (99). This point is crucial for an understanding of the correspondence between this issue of faith vs. philosophy and its analogy with the issue of religious and secular authority.

³² *TTP* Preface, 4r [19] (5).

³³ "As for the moral doctrines that are also contained in the Bible, although these themselves can be demonstrated from accepted axioms..." *TTP* VII, 85 [27-29] (87).

³⁴ "...it is not part of Scripture...to teach things through their natural causes or to engage in pure philosophy." *TTP* VI, 75 [4-7] (78).

³⁵ *TTP* XII, 151 [7-13] (151).

³⁶ *TTP* XV, 171 [24-27] (169). Spinoza then goes on to list the fundamental principles of all religion.

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eternal causes of things. Yet “intellectual or exact knowledge of God is not a gift shared by all the faithful, as is obedience.”³⁷ In order for salvation to be universally accessible, the unphilosophical require what is professed by the core of religious truth: that one can obtain salvation through obedience. The importance of justice and charity can be deduced from Substance and its eternal axioms, as it is in the *Ethics*, but “it matters not how the practice of these virtues is revealed to us as long as it holds the place of supreme authority and is the supreme law for man.”³⁸ Just as contingency cannot be logically determined to have any real existence as against necessity and is only given discrete existence through appeal to some practical concern, religion cannot be logically distinguished from philosophy through having some distinct content, but is only preserved in its separation through appeal to a practical concern about universal salvation.³⁹

Secular and Religious Authority, Sovereign and Individual Right

In the later chapters of the *TTP*, Spinoza addresses the relation between secular and religious authority, and the domain of the Sovereign as against the domain of the individual citizen, setting out to determine “what are the limits of this freedom of thought, and of saying what one thinks, in a well-conducted state.”⁴⁰ The structure of these relationships is identical to the relationships between necessity and contingency, and philosophy and religion. Namely, the all-comprehensive power of the sovereign theoretically unites secular authority with the religious authority from an absolute, objective perspective, while some practical, subjective interest dictates that a realm of religious authority for individuals must be clearly distinguished.

Having absolutely distinguished religion from philosophy, one might expect Spinoza to identify two distinct sources of authority, one secular and the other religious. Yet Spinoza locates all civil and religious authority in the undivided will of the Sovereign. In terms of an individual's *actions* (hence objectively), all authority, both civil and religious, is vested in the sovereign alone. By contrast with the Medieval balance between Church and Empire, the authority of religious institutions is generally dissolved in Spinoza's thought.⁴¹ Yet from the subjective perspective of the individual's beliefs,

³⁷ *TTP* XIII, 154 [14-17] (154). Spinoza writes further that “men are not bound as a command to know God's attributes; this is a special gift granted only to certain of the faithful.”

³⁸ *TTP* XIX, 215 [17-22] (212-213).

³⁹ As a consequence of my conclusion here, one should be suspicious of Strauss' dismissal of this core truth of religion as a device for hiding his genuine view of the Bible and theology as containing no truth of their own. Spinoza's view is in fact grounded in the deeper structure of his thought. See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988) 170 ff.).

⁴⁰ *TTP* XVI, 175 [3-5] (173).

⁴¹ As opposed to ancient times, the modern world is distinguished by the fact that “every man has now the duty to adapt (religious dogmas) to his own beliefs, so as thus to accept it without any misgivings or doubts...in whatever way makes him feel that he can more readily accept them with full confidence and conviction.” *TTP* XIV, 165 [11-14] (163). This sentiment wholly subverts any meaningfully authoritative religious institution above and beyond the will of individuals. See also Preface 4v (6); VII, 103 [22-26] (103). The only passage in the *TTP* that contradicts this undermining of religious institutions can be found in Chapter 5: “the common people are not themselves qualified to judge of these narratives, being more disposed to take pleasure in the stories and in strange and unexpected happenings than in doctrine implicit

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religious authority must be vested in the individual, since “nobody can be wise by command.”⁴²

Against the great medieval syntheses of secular (temporal) and ecclesiastical (spiritual) authority in Aquinas and Dante, which see the relation as a free reciprocity between two separate domains,⁴³ Spinoza locates the origin of both civil and religious laws in the undivided power of the secular Sovereign: “it belongs completely to the sovereign power, on whom alone both divine and natural right impose the duty of preserving and safeguarding the laws of the state, to make what decisions it thinks fit concerning religion, and all are bound by their pledged word, which God bids them to keep inviolate, to obey the sovereign power’s decrees and commands in this matter.”⁴⁴ This follows from the fact that, in contrast to the medieval view that attempts to reconcile the sphere of reason-transcendent religion with philosophy and secular reason, for Spinoza, the natural light of reason guides both the historical study of Scripture and philosophical investigation,⁴⁵ without appeal to a supra-rational faculty. Just as reason is authoritative for the distinct methods of philosophy and religion, the Sovereign, who represents reason, rules over anything pertaining to actions in the state.⁴⁶ The secular rule of the Sovereign is therefore set up as both interpreter and guardian of the religious law,

in the narratives...they also stand in need of pastors and ministers of the Church to instruct them in a way suited to their limited intelligence.” *TTP* V, 65 [3-10] (68).

⁴² *TTP* XIII, 155.

⁴³ See, for example, Dante’s *De Monarchia* III, 16: “let Caesar exercise towards Peter that reverence which a first-born son owes to his father, so that, illumined by the light of paternal grace, he may the more effectively illuminate the world, over which he has been placed by Him alone, who is governor of all things spiritual and temporal.”

⁴⁴ *TTP* XVI, 185-186 [25-28] (183). This abrogation of the separation between religious and secular authority differs markedly from the undivided union of these authorities that existed prior to the medieval separation, and in particular the radical unification of state and religion in the original theocratic Hebrew state, in which “state civil law and religion – which we have shown to consist only in obedience to God – were one and the same thing; the tenets of religion were not just teachings but laws and commands...there was considered to be no difference whatsoever between civil law and religion.” *TTP* XVII, 192 [21-28] (189). The unification of both powers into one for Spinoza is completely different, both through the fact that the unification occurs only with Spinoza’s having carefully argued for the distinction between the religious and the secular, and that the human rule of the sovereign draws into itself religious authority, rather than the divine rule of God drawing into itself all human rule. Yet Spinoza argues that even this direct theocracy actually invested all power in the human ruler, and the transference of the power beyond human sovereignty directly to God “was notional rather than practical (*hoc magis mente quam opera facere potuerunt*); for in reality they retained their sovereignty absolutely until they transferred it to Moses, who from then on remained an absolute ruler, and through him alone did God reign over the Hebrews.” *TTP* XIX, 216 [2-5] (214).

⁴⁵ See n. 32 above.

⁴⁶ Spinoza also gives a practical justification for civil authority over religion. He writes: “It is therefore quite clear that, if nobody were bound by right to obey the sovereign power in those matters which he thinks to pertain to religion, the state’s right would then inevitably depend on judgments and feeling that vary with each individual. For nobody would be bound by it if he considered to be contrary to his own faith and superstitious belief, and so on this pretext everyone could assume unrestricted freedom to do as he pleases.” *TTP* XVI, 185 [18-21] (183).

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to ensure that religion accords “with the peace and welfare of the commonwealth (*reipublicae*).”⁴⁷

Spinoza once again makes the distinction between what is true in theory, and what the limits of practice dictate: the absolute comprehensive sovereignty “must nevertheless remain in many respects no more than theory. Nobody can so completely transfer to another all his right, and consequently his power, as to cease to be a human being, nor will there ever be a sovereign that can do all it pleases.”⁴⁸ The unlimited scope of the sovereign's unconditional power holds on the theoretical level, but for practical reasons he states that the sovereign would not want to assert this theoretical right, for fear of compromising this sovereignty: “It is true that sovereigns can by their right treat as enemies all who do not absolutely agree with them on all matters, but the point at issue is not what is right, but what is to their *interest*.”⁴⁹ The sovereign's power cannot be unlimited, and Spinoza distinguishes a subjective realm of belief and speech, identified with religion,⁵⁰ which is to remain untouched by the Sovereign's authority: “the right of the sovereign, both in religious and in secular spheres, should be restricted to men's actions, with everyone being allowed to think what he will and say what he thinks.”⁵¹ Just as Spinoza permitted the perspective of contingency *subjectively* but not *objectively*, the sovereign must permit dissent and free thought and speech (subjective, potential), but must absolutely control actions (objective, actual).⁵² I will further develop the reasons behind the impossibility and undesirability of absolute rule without respect for the individual right to free belief and speech in what follows.

II. The Impossibility of Miracles and the Undesirability of Absolute Rule

The analogous structure between Spinoza's ontological and political thought is also evident in his proofs for the impossibility of miracles and the impossibility of the sovereign ruling tyrannically.

Laws of Nature, Miracles and God's Existence

Spinoza seeks to refute the idea that miracles can demonstrate the existence and power of God, and to show that undermining the fixed and immutable order of Nature

⁴⁷ *TTP* XIX, 215 [1] (212). Spinoza writes that “the salvation (*salutem*) of the people is the highest law, to which all other laws, both human and divine, must be made to conform” *TTP* XIX, 218 [17-19] (215).

⁴⁸ *TTP* XVII, 187 [4-8] (185).

⁴⁹ *TTP* XX, 226 [17-20] (223) [italics mine]. This is principally because “men in general are so constituted that their resentment is most aroused when beliefs they think are true are treated as criminal, and when that which motivates their pious conduct to God and man is accounted as wickedness.” *TTP* XX, 230 [9-13] (226).

⁵⁰ “...for inward worship of God and piety itself belong to the sphere of individual right...” *TTP* XIX, 215 [7-8] (212).

⁵¹ *TTP* XX, 233 [20-23] (229).

⁵² The *necessity* of religious belief as distinct from other incidental beliefs seems to dissolve for Spinoza at certain points: “As for religion or sect, that is of no account, because such considerations are regarded as irrelevant in a court of law...provided that they injure no one, render to each his own, and live upright lives.” *TTP* XX, 232 [30-3] (228).

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through these supposed exceptions undermines our understanding of God's existence and power, despite its intentions to the contrary. Spinoza begins by pointing out that God's existence is not self-evident.⁵³ In order to arrive at the certain knowledge of substance, what God truly is, we must move up to this principle through a logical chain of reasoning of axiomatic truths: as Vance Maxwell writes, "substance is itself deduced in a reduction of true ideas to unity."⁵⁴ The only reason that we can attain a true idea of God is that these laws of Nature have provided the ladder up to this principle. This movement from true, eternal ideas to their reduction to the unity of God or Substance, is described by Spinoza in the *Ethics* as the second order of knowing, *ratio*.⁵⁵

Now in order that we may conceive God's nature clearly and distinctly, we have to fix our attention on certain very simple axioms called universal axioms, and connect to them those divine attributes that belong to the divine nature. Only then does it become clear to us that God necessarily exists and is omnipresent, and only then do we see that all our conceptions involve God's nature and are conceived through God's nature, and finally, that everything that we adequately conceive is true.⁵⁶

When one arrives at the certain idea of God, the laws that led to this conclusion are placed on an even higher foundation, as they are now known in their interconnection through God.⁵⁷ As Maxwell writes, the philosophical method "develops teleologically as an order of adequate ideas *completing* and perfecting itself within the idea of 'the origin and source of the whole of nature.'"⁵⁸ This is the transition in Spinoza from good method to perfect method (in the language of the *TdIE*), or from *ratio* to *scientia intuitiva* (in the language of the *Ethics*), achieving "the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of nature."⁵⁹ Spinoza writes that "this kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things."⁶⁰ In other words, having attained the true idea of the perfect existence which is the source of all existence and essence, one understands more clearly than before the existence of the essence of things as they follow in systematic interconnection from this principle.

⁵³ *TTP* VI, 70 [24-25] (74).

⁵⁴ See Vance Maxwell, "The Philosophical Method of Spinoza," *Dialogue* XXVII (1988) 89-110 (90). In this article, Maxwell argues persuasively against a dominant trend in Spinoza scholarship that he calls the "formalist or hypothetico-deductivist approach" (89), which claims that substance is an arbitrary hypothesis from which a system is deduced which remains hypothetical and contingent due to the character of its foundation.

⁵⁵ *Ratio* is defined in the *Ethics* as perception "from the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things." These 'common notions' are the infinite modes of God, which are eternal. They are the fixed and eternal objects of the *Treatise on the Emendation of Intellect*, which are the objects of 'good' method. In *TTP* these are the "axiomatic truths."

⁵⁶ Spinoza writes this in supplementary note 6 to Chapter 6 of the *TTP*.

⁵⁷ "...we must unreservedly conclude that we get to know God and God's will all the better as we gain better knowledge of natural phenomena and understand more clearly how they depend on their first cause, and how they operate with Nature's eternal laws." *TTP* VI, 71 [4-8] (75).

⁵⁸ Maxwell, 96 (my emphasis).

⁵⁹ *TdIE* 13.

⁶⁰ *Ethics* IIPr40Sch2.

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Consequently, for Spinoza, belief in miracles subverts knowledge. Miracles do not merely make Nature itself unknowable. Asserting the objective existence of miracles makes both the fixed order of Nature and *God's* existence unknowable:

For if we could conceive that these axiomatic truths themselves can be impugned by any power, of whatever kind it be, then we should doubt their truth and consequently the conclusion following therefrom, namely God's existence; nor could we ever be certain of everything.⁶¹

Denying the fixed order of nature, through which we ascended to the certainty of God's necessary existence, is wholly counterproductive. While certain religious thinkers look to miracles as proof of God's unlimited power, they in fact undermine the knowledge of both the laws themselves, and the very existence which the miracle is intended to confirm: God, or the initial result of the deduction from the axioms. Miracles, therefore, cannot be an objective fact. This is because the very concept of miracles is utterly self-defeating since belief in them "would cast doubt on everything, and would lead to atheism."⁶² By denying the eternal existence of the universal axioms used as stepping stones to the proof of God's existence, the absolute power of God as origin and source of all is itself compromised. Miracles thus refer only to men's beliefs and are merely subjective misperceptions and inadequate comprehension of fixed natural laws.⁶³

Thus, miracles exist in Scripture as a mistake in the perceiving subject. Yet Spinoza adds to his refutation of the possibility of miracles from the natural light of reason and from Scriptural authority a qualification. Recognizing the untruth of miracles is not required for salvation. Although based in falsity, belief in miracles is permitted if it makes believers without knowledge more obedient: "on these matters everyone is entitled to hold whatever view he feels will better bring him with sincere heart to the worship of God and religion."⁶⁴

Individual Rights, Absolute Power, and the Stability of the Sovereign's Rule

In the second, 'political' half of his treatise, Spinoza argues for the necessity of preserving individuals' rights to freedom of thought and speech of according to the same logic as his defence of the integrity of the fixed laws of nature,⁶⁵ stating that

⁶¹ *TTP* VI, 71 [29-4] (74).

⁶² *TTP* VI, 73 [22-24] (76)

⁶³ "As to the many passages in Scripture to the effect that God wrought wonders so as to make himself known to men...it does not follow therefrom that miracles really conveyed this; it only follows that the beliefs of the Jews were such that they could be readily convinced by these miracles...deliverances of a prophetic nature – i.e. those that are inspired by revelation – are not derived from universal and fundamental axioms, but from the prior assumptions and beliefs, however absurd, of those to whom the revelation is made, or those whom the Holy Spirit seeks to convince." *TTP* VI, 74 [9-13] (77-8). As opposed to these misperceptions, "what truly happened, happened naturally." *TTP* VI, 76 [12-13] (79).

⁶⁴ *TTP* VI, 82 [20-22] (85).

⁶⁵ The analogy is, of course, imperfect, due to the difference, outlined by Spinoza in Chapter 4, between a natural law and a human, conventional law: "A law which depends on nature's necessity is one which necessarily follows from the very nature of the thing, that is, a definition; a law which depends on human decision, and which could more properly be termed a statute, is one which men ordain for themselves and

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nobody can be absolutely deprived of his natural rights, and that by a quasi-natural right subjects do retain some rights which cannot be taken from them without imperiling the state, and which therefore are either tacitly conceded or explicitly agreed by the rulers.⁶⁶

Spinoza offers a deductive ascent from the natural right of individuals to the sovereign which 'completes and perfects' this right. The analogy between the laws of nature and the natural rights of individuals is clear.⁶⁷ Like the laws of nature that lead toward the certain knowledge of God, this natural right is one of "the rules governing the nature of every individual thing," dictating that, like Nature as a whole, "each individual thing has the right to do all that it can do." The right of each individual thing's natural pursuit of self-interested self-preservation Spinoza understands to be "the supreme law of Nature."⁶⁸ Yet this initial state of naturally existing individuals best fulfills neither each person's advantage nor the universal human "desire to live in safety free from fear."⁶⁹ The multiplicity and conflict of these natural rights in the state of nature prevents them from realizing their power of self-preservation, without the reduction of this plurality of rights to the unified right of a sovereign power.

Because of the hardships humans inevitably experience by living merely according to the law of Nature, it becomes clear to us that "men had necessarily to harmonize as one."⁷⁰ Spinoza describes this movement towards the development of a common perspective and will as follows:

for others with a view to making life more secure and more convenient, or for other reasons." *TTP* IV, 43 [5-9] (48). This difference lies in the fact that "the human mind...can be quite clearly conceived without these man-made laws, whereas it cannot be conceived without Nature's necessary law." *TTP* IV, 44 [8-10] (48). In other words, the human can exist with or without conventional laws (one is human both before and after entering into the political covenant), but he cannot exist apart from the natural laws. Spinoza's discussion of Adam's disobedience of the law is also relevant here. See *TTP* IV, 49 [30ff.] (53).

⁶⁶ *TTP* Preface, 72 [29-33] (7).

⁶⁷ That there is a correspondence between reduction of everything into the unity of God's power and the reduction of all individual right into the unity of the State's sovereign power is also demonstrated by the fact that Spinoza explicitly argues that the precursors of the state were the first covenants between man and God in which men surrendered their natural freedom and right to the divine. See *TTP* XVI, 184 [7-12] (182).

⁶⁸ *TTP* XVI, 175 [5] (173).

⁶⁹ *TTP* XVI, 177 [1] (175). Just as both religious and philosophical activity are united through the very same rational capacity, both the state of nature and the civil society are governed by one and the same principle: *utilitatis*. *TTP* XVI, 178 [23] (176). Spinoza writes: "I assert that in a state of nature everyone is bound to live by the revealed law from the same motive as he is bound to live according to the dictates of sound reason, namely, that to do so is to his greater advantage and necessary for his salvation." *TTP* XVI, 198 [16-20] (182).

⁷⁰ *TTP*, XVI, 177 [9-10] (175). Shirley's translation, that "men had necessarily to unite in one body," is very loose and interpretative. For Spinoza, the unity of a body, or "a mode that in a certain determinate way expresses God's essence insofar as he is considered as an extended thing," has a very distinctive sense. In the first definition of Proposition 13, he discusses how multiple bodies are coordinated so as to preserve the same ratio of rest and motion over time: "When a number of bodies, whether the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or with different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they altogether

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They therefore arranged that the unrestricted right naturally possessed by each individual should be put into common ownership, and that this right should no longer be determined by the strength and appetite of the individual, but by the power and will altogether...they had to bind themselves by the most stringent pledges to be guided in all matters by the dictates of reason...and to keep appetite in check insofar as it tends to another's hurt, to do to no one what they would not want done to themselves, and to uphold another's right as they would their own.⁷¹

It is important to understand to what extent Spinoza sees the individual will as wholly absorbed into an undifferentiated unity of all wills expressed through the sovereign power. Citizens recognize the futility of independent natural ends, and see that these ends can be satisfied only within the rational order of the state, borne by the unified will of the sovereign beyond and prior to all particular ends, a source of absolute power outside of which no one has any rights: "whoever transfers to another his power of self-defence, whether voluntarily or under compulsion, has fully ceded his natural right and has consequently resolved to obey the other in all matters."⁷² This is so much the case that when defining the citizen's civil right, Spinoza makes clear that this right no longer exists except through the sovereign power, in which it has been given a new standing and meaning: "by a citizen's civil right we only mean the freedom of every man to preserve himself in his present condition, a freedom determined by the edicts of the sovereign power and upheld by its authority alone."⁷³ As a result, violations of citizens' rights are wrong only insofar as they are "contrary to the edict of the sovereign power,"⁷⁴ and "a wrong cannot be done to subjects by sovereign powers, whose right is not limited."⁷⁵ Natural rights no longer have any independent existence as against the Sovereign such that they could claim a right against this all-encompassing power.

Yet Spinoza's democratic version of absolute sovereignty means that even in the total reduction of multiplicity to unity, the individual's power is not completely dissolved, "for in a democratic state nobody transfers his natural right to another so completely that thereafter he is not to be consulted; he transfers it to the majority of the entire community of which he is a part. In this way all men remain equal, as they were before in a state of nature."⁷⁶ Like the universal laws of nature which are preserved and re-founded in their reduction to the unified power of Substance, individual rights are in some sense retained in the unified power of the Sovereign as they were prior to the reduction, if only in the mere fact of their continued existence – the equality of individuals in the state of nature. Just as individual axioms no longer have the same

compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies" (IIPr13Def). While this description might aptly describe the coming together of citizens in the state, there is nothing in the Latin: "*necessario in unum conspirare debuisse*" that suggests Shirley's reading.

⁷¹ *TTP XVI*, 177 [10-21] (175).

⁷² *TTP XVI*.

⁷³ *TTP XVI*, 181 [10-13] (179).

⁷⁴ *TTP XVI*, 178 [15-16] (170).

⁷⁵ *TTP XVI*, 182 [11-13] (179-180).

⁷⁶ *TTP XVI*, 181 [10-13] (179).

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meaning in their newly founded systematic interrelation within God or Substance, individual rights no longer have the force they did as independent in the state of nature, yet they continue to exist as an interrelated inseparable totality within the newly founded universal power of the sovereign will. Like the laws of nature grounded in God, the individuals now exist more securely within the rational state.

Spinoza then considers how it is both undesirable and impossible for the absolute sovereignty to exercise its power through simply negating all individual rights, because this leads to the dissolution of the sovereign will as first principle of political life and absolute power over every citizen. As we saw above, the reduction of individual natural wills to a unified sovereign will is not able to dissolve the bare existence of individual wills: "it is impossible for the mind to be completely under another's control; for no one is able to transfer to another his natural right or faculty to reason freely and to form his own judgment on any matters whatsoever, nor can he be compelled to do so."⁷⁷ This individual consciousness simply cannot be immediately dissolved into the universal will, as its tendency to think and believe things independently "are matters belonging to individual right, which no man can surrender even if he should so wish."⁷⁸ Just as the universal laws exist even after their unified relation in God has been grasped such that they cannot be negated through the existence of miracles, individual consciousnesses continue to exist even once their rights have been drawn into the comprehensive right of the sovereign, and cannot be negated through tyrannical rule (analogously, the impossible God of miracles could be seen as a tyrant of Nature, revoking the independence of universal axioms as the tyrannical sovereign revokes the natural capacity of individual subjects to think and reason).

Given that individual consciousness exists alongside the power of the Sovereign, Spinoza explains how it is not in the interest of the Sovereign to deny this fact in order to assert its absolute power, thereby "endangering the whole fabric of the state."⁷⁹ The atheism that results from asserting that miracles exist (which subverts the order of Nature) is equivalent to the anarchy which results from tyrannical rule (which negates the individual's natural right to free thought and speech). The resulting revolt and refusal to acknowledge the Sovereign's absolute power signifies the total breakdown of the state and the revoking of the very purpose for which the state was constructed.⁸⁰ For "the purpose of the state is, in reality, freedom," and a citizen relinquishes his natural right in the first place for the sake of personal security, "so that he may best preserve his own

⁷⁷ *TTP XX*, 225 [6-9] (222).

⁷⁸ *TTP XX*, 225 [15-16] (222).

⁷⁹ *TTP*, XVI.

⁸⁰ Without the sovereign power, the peace and harmony afforded through the community is dissolved: "If this basic principle is removed, the whole fabric collapses. It is for the sovereign power alone, then, to have regard to these considerations, while it is for the subjects, as I have said, to carry out its orders and to acknowledge no right but that which the sovereign power declares to be right." *TTP XVI*, 180 [4-8] (178). Hence, by over-asserting itself, the sovereign loses its own power to the individuals who naturally (if illegitimately) reject the repression of their individual freedom. Yet in circular fashion, their rebellion in turn negates the very freedom which they assert, as this freedom cannot exist in the state of nature outside the rational power of the sovereign will.

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natural right to act.”⁸¹ Beyond merely contradicting the reason for forming the sovereignty, all sincerity and truthfulness, which forms the very basis of the state, would be replaced with deception and hypocrisy, as people would be forced to feign various beliefs they did not hold. This privileges the worse citizens over the better, creating criminals of the virtuous, and this encouragement of obsequious behaviour plants the seed of the state's destruction. Finally, the resentment inspired in citizens by attempting to quell what simply cannot be repressed inevitably causes civil unrest.⁸² Atheism results from asserting the blind and arbitrary will of God through miracles without respect for the existence of natural laws, just as anarchy results from asserting the blind and arbitrary power of the sovereign without respect for the freedom of individual thought and action.

III. Spinoza's God and The Principle Of Democracy

Spinoza's argument could be understood as a break from the medieval tradition of conforming politics to a theological stance. Yet the above argument has served to indicate certain ways in which Spinoza's conception of God and Nature, and his metaphysics in general, thoroughly determine the structure of his political views. This indicates a certain continuity between Spinoza and the medieval tradition, as well as a closer interconnection between his theological and political principles. Thus Spinoza's revision of medieval political theology is a result of an altered conception of divinity and its relation with nature and humanity which in turn entails a revised conception of politics and the relation between religious and secular rule. A conception of God is not irrelevant to Spinoza's conception of politics, as though this were what distinguished his political thought from medieval theological politics. Rather, the difference between the politics of Spinoza and his medieval and renaissance predecessors lies in a difference in the way he understands God and His relation to Nature. In conclusion, I will look briefly at some ways in which Spinoza's concept of democracy is determined by his understanding of God.

Medieval political theologies generally understood the relation of divinity with nature⁸³ to be structural to the relation between religious and secular authority, and the relation between ruler and ruled. Within the Christian West, as we have indicated, this took the form of manifesting politically the theological stance on the relation between divinity and humanity as they are united in the person of Christ.⁸⁴ For Spinoza, the

⁸¹ *TTP*, XX.

⁸² Spinoza writes that “the greater the effort to deprive them of freedom of speech, the more obstinately do they resist...Men are in general so constituted that their resentment is most aroused when beliefs that they think to be true are treated as criminal, and when that which motivates their pious conduct to God and man is accounted as wickedness.” *TTP* XX, 230 [9-15] (226). The sovereign must use and appropriate whatever subjective force binds individuals to the state, rather than repressing or destroying it.

⁸³ Other analogous oppositions are just as crucial: soul and body, eternal and temporal, incorruptible and corruptible.

⁸⁴ Spinoza's “Christological” position also corresponds to his political theory in an analogous way to the medieval thinkers. Spinoza ignores Christian theological conceptions of Incarnation and Trinity on account of what he takes to be philosophical obscurity: “...I am certainly not alluding to the doctrines held by some Churches about Christ, nor am I denying them; for I freely confess that I do not understand them.” See *TTP* I, 7 [22-24] (14). For Spinoza, Christ is fully human, and has absolute clear possession of the philosophical truth, through direct and uncorrupted, mind to mind encounter with all of God's ordinances: “Christ

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infinite and finite are rather formulated in terms of the relation between God as infinite, indivisible creative power, and God as finite, divided, derivative and created.

While his philosophy is often interpreted as pantheistic, Spinoza does not merely identify God and Nature, but understands the relation to be an identity of two distinct sides: *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.⁸⁵ For Spinoza there is nothing other than God, but God must be understood in two ways: as cause of everything, the absolutely infinite, indivisible being existing necessarily, wholly in itself and conceived only through itself (*natura naturans*, or Substance and its attributes); and as caused, existing only in another and being conceived through another (*natura naturata*, or the modes of Substance).⁸⁶ The political manifestation of this relation between principle and principled, unified power and its multiple manifestations, is democracy. This form of government is “a united body of men which corporately possesses sovereign right over everything in its power.”⁸⁷ Here the ruling principle (*naturans*) and the principled (*naturata*) are not separate and externally related, but rather the same things, namely, every person, only viewed from two different perspectives. In democracy, the power of the sovereign is wholly separated from individuals in their natural ends and desires. The power of natural individuals is relinquished and concentrated in the absolute power of the sovereign. This will is identical to the will of all individuals, yet in their rational unification and interrelation rather than in their natural immediacy: “all by common consent live by the dictates of reason.”⁸⁸ The citizens as the sovereign, united in their rational interconnection, correspond to God as *natura naturans*. The citizens in their finitude and separation from one another correspond to God as *natura naturata*.

perceived truly, or understood, what was revealed. For it is when a thing is perceived by pure thought, without words or images, that it is understood.” See *TTP* IV, 50-51 [5-35] (54-55). Through Christ it is revealed that humanity can have a direct apprehension of truth through the natural light of reason, and is thus no longer dependent on the mere command of the law: “...it was for all nations that God sent his Christ to free all men alike from the bondage of the law, so that no longer would they act righteously from the law’s command but from the unwavering resolution of the heart.” *TTP* III, 40 [2-7] (44). Christ is not God, but has total access to God’s thoughts as fully human. Accordingly, religion has no autonomous source of authority, but is completely ruled by secular sovereignty.

⁸⁵ In defense of this interpretation, I cite Schelling’s excellent analysis of Spinoza’s philosophy and the relation therein between God and Nature: “Although nothing singular can be called God, the world, thought as unity or as *universe*, is the same as God, or, as is usually said, not different from God. But by this universe is really only understood the collectivity of finite things, so it is not true that Spinoza does not distinguish them from God. For he teaches continually from beginning to end that God is that which is grasped by itself, which does not presuppose any other concept; the world, however, is that which is only *after* God, and can only be grasped as a consequence of God (*Substantia divina natura prior suis affectionibus*). This doctrine, which maintains the absolute independence of God and the absolute dependence of things, posits a difference between the two, which is truly *differentia totius generis*, and just as little as the single thing can be called God, can the world as well, as the mere complex of single things, be called God according to Spinoza. To crown it all, Spinoza also says: only *Substantia infinita in se considerata et sepositis suis affectionibus* is God. It only remains to be said that according to Spinoza the world is indeed not God, but conversely God is the world, or is the world in general, i.e. with His being a totality of determinations of His being is posited. But it does not follow from this that everything is God, as one expresses it by the word Pantheism, but instead that God is everything.” See Schelling’s *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 73.

⁸⁶ See *Ethics* IPr29Schol. for this distinction.

⁸⁷ *TTP* XVI, 179 [1-3] (177).

⁸⁸ *TTP* XIX, 216 [28-30] (213).

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For Spinoza, many previous philosophers problematically viewed the relation between God and Nature as two distinct powers:

Thus they imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature, though the latter is determined in a definite way by God, or – as is the prevailing opinion nowadays – created by God. What they mean by the two powers, and what by God and Nature, they have no idea, except that they imagine God's power to be like the rule of some royal potentate, and Nature's power to be a kind of force and energy.⁸⁹

For the thinkers that Spinoza here criticizes, the distinction between the divine and natural powers constitutes the distinction between two sources of authority, an ecclesiastical power and a secular power. This division occurs because the reason that apprehends Nature is other than the reason that apprehends divine matters. Because “it is when they imagine Nature's power subdued, as it were, by God that they most admire God's power,” there is an autonomy and superceding power given to religious authority over secular authority. Yet Spinoza denies this very distinction of powers. *Natura naturans* and *natura naturata* belong to one totality, apprehensible through one and the same reason. This determines Spinoza's views on both secular and religious authority, and the proper relation between ruler and ruled. With respect to the first point, everything is therefore united under secular rule, which has access to the truth of both infinite and finite reality. With respect to the second, concerning the question of the relationship between ruler and ruled, this means that while there is a distinction between the self-grounding, independently self-determining sovereignty that exists in and through itself, and the incomplete and dependent individual wills which are nothing apart from their interrelation, the fact remains that there is no qualitative distinction between the subject of these two positions. Individual citizens are both ruling and ruled. In Spinoza's democracy, it is the people who fulfill both roles, though taken in different senses, just as God is both *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, the principle and principled.

In his own time Spinoza was often taken to be an atheist. This interpretation still persists today. In a more nuanced form, certain interpreters of Spinoza see his philosophy as so naturalistic that God could be just as well identified with the laws of Nature, and claim that Spinoza's theological vocabulary is chiefly meant to disguise the revolutionary character of his viewpoint. Readers of the *TTP* often argue that Spinoza destroys religion from the radically rationalist and secular standpoint of that treatise. Through the preceding argument I hope to have undermined any portrayal of Spinoza's philosophy as an atheistic humanism, by revealing how Spinoza's politics is so firmly rooted in his theological position. While there certainly may be problems with both Spinoza's political and theological positions, it would be wrong to state,

⁸⁹ *TTP* VI, 67 [15-19] (71).

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against his own self-understanding, that his defence of the autonomy of secular reason and politics is a move towards a political philosophy independent of metaphysical or theological concerns. Instead, Spinoza completely thinks through what are the practical consequences of his new conception of the divine. The relation between philosophy and religion, secular and ecclesiastical authority, sovereign and individual right, are all determined by the relation between necessity and contingency in Spinoza's thought, and more fundamentally by the relation between God as infinite and as finite. The relation between God and the laws of Nature shares a common structure with the relation between the Sovereign and individual rights. When given political expression, Spinoza's conception of God as the whole, both *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, takes the form of democracy, in which the people are both rulers and ruled. Because of this careful correspondence between ontology and politics, tensions in Spinoza's metaphysics manifest themselves in his political thought. This deep consistency in Spinoza's thought must be grasped before any critique of either his conception of God or politics can be made.⁹⁰

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