SPINOZA’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: AN UNRECOGNIZED

CONSEQUENTIALISM

A Report of a Senior Study

by

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Editor
ABSTRACT

After suffering through years of neglect, the political philosophy of Baruch Spinoza has drawn a large amount of scholarly attention in the last several decades. While much of this new literature has been of high quality, it has almost uniformly neglected to focus attention on the strain of pragmatic consequentialism that runs throughout Spinoza’s political thought. This paper corrects this deficiency in the literature by beginning its interpretation of Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise and Political Treatise with a broad portrait of his intellectual influences and background before examining his naturalistic metaphysical theory and conception of human nature as they are presented in the Ethics. By doing so, the pragmatic consequentialism prevalent in Spinoza’s politics is revealed and Spinoza is redefined as a philosopher whose actual political thought is quite distinct from its depiction in much of the recent literature as a principles-based championing of liberal democracy.
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INTRODUCTION

A NEW INTERPRETATION

Long acclaimed in the academy as a metaphysician and ethicist, it is only in recent years that Baruch Spinoza has begun to be recognized for his political thought.\(^1\) This new attention has succeeded in bringing to light previously unexplored nuances in his politics while also allowing even its well-trod elements to break free of the Straussian molds that previously constrained it.

These new developments are wholly positive as Spinoza’s political philosophy as presented in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (hereafter *TPT*) and unfinished *Political Treatise* (*PT*) is far more than the reformed Hobbesianism that much of history has viewed it as. Startlingly bold, it is a well developed and fully beautifully articulated conception of how humans can leave the ravages of anarchy as well as what sort of state they should form when they do. The natural rights and powers of individuals, the relationship between church and state, and the importance of social stability, few stones are left unturned, little is left to chance.

\(^1\) Depending on how it is transliterated as well as what language it is transliterated from, there are a variety of spellings of Spinoza’s given name. Although none of these variants is any more intrinsically superior or correct than any of the others, this essay uses Baruch, the Dutch version of Spinoza’s given name, as it appears to be more commonly used than the others in academic work on Spinoza.
Certainly Spinoza himself keenly appreciated his work, seeing it as the definitive statement on
government while also rejecting the work of all political philosophers who came before.
Confident that he had avoided the mistakes made by so many others, he writes that “against error I have taken scrupulous care.”\(^2\) Despite these precautions there are inconsistencies in the *TPT and TP*. This however, does not mean that the power Spinoza’s political philosophy does not both deserve and demand our attention even now, well over three hundred years after Spinoza’s death.

The purpose of this work is to interpret Spinoza’s political thought, to offer an analysis of his politics that, while agreeing in most aspects with the currently predominant interpretations, offers a new conception of it as being fundamentally driven by a concern with pragmatic consequentialism instead of principle. Previous interpretations have ignored this consistent strain in his politics at their peril, as by doing so they have at least partially missed something vital, the means by which Spinoza justifies the bulk of both his theory and policy recommendations.

This work is organized into three chapters. The first two chapters provide historical background and intellectual context so that Spinoza’s thought can be understood within its historical situation instead of outside of or detached from it. They thus enable a truly organic understanding of his politics and serve to provide a historical canvas on which can be painted the proper interpretation of Spinoza’s political philosophy that appears in the third and final chapter.

\(^2\) Baruch Spinoza, Rene Descartes, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Rationalists* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1979 (1960)), 266. From this point on this text will be cited as Spinoza, *TPT and TP*. 
CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND TO A PHILOSOPHY – ORIGINS TO CHEREM

In order to understand Spinoza’s political philosophy it is first necessary to understand the intellectual and personal background from which he was writing. Philosophers, after all, are not tabula rasa who develop their ideas in an intellectual vacuum. They are human and, like all humans, are shaped by the societies they are born into, the people they meet, and the ideas that they come into contact with. This said, with Spinoza it is necessary to begin at the very beginning.

The beginning for Spinoza dates back far before the start of his short life. In 1391 the implicit agreement between the Catholic authorities and Jews in Spain – that the Jews would be tolerated in return for the economic benefits they conferred – came to an end as mobs “began burning synagogues or converting them into churches.”³ Far from being ordered by Spain’s secular rulers, these mob actions began as spontaneous conflagrations of peasant frustration and Catholic demagoguery. Soon though, these uncoordinated mobs had given way to something systematic

³ Steven Nadler, Spinoza: A Life (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.
and state-sponsored, an attempt to “compel the Jews to admit the truth of the Christian faith” by forcibly converting them to Catholicism. In 1478 the Spanish Inquisition was founded and charged with ensuring that recent “conversos” would not continue to secretly practice Judaism. These efforts at religious uniformity culminated in 1492 when, with the defeat by the Catholic monarchy of the final Muslim stronghold in Granada, King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella felt confident enough to sign an order expelling all Jews from Spain. This left Spanish Jews with a clear choice: conversion or exile.

Most chose exile, immigrating to Portugal. They were to find little respite there for in 1497 King Manuel I of Portugal “ordered all Jewish children to be presented for Baptism.” At first this was not the death knell of Judaism on the Iberian Peninsula that it would appear to be, as many Jews only ostensibly converted and were “able to Judaize in secret with minimal difficulty.” It was only the establishment of the Portuguese Inquisition in 1547 combined with the union of Spain and Portugal in 1580 that signaled the end of any possible Jewish community in Iberia.

Even before the advent of the Portuguese Inquisition, Portuguese Jews had begun fleeing to the Low Countries. Antwerp was a popular first destination, but it was in Amsterdam that Spinoza’s Jews found their new home. It is not entirely clear when the first Portuguese Jews arrived as permanent residents in Amsterdam. The first record of their presence is a 1606 request

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4 Ibid., 2.
6 Nadler, Spinoza, 2.
7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
to city authorities to purchase a communal burial ground.\textsuperscript{10} Regardless, the Jewish community in Amsterdam grew rapidly, swelling to over a thousand members by 1639.\textsuperscript{11}

Amsterdam itself was part of the Dutch Republic, a “highly decentralized federation of [eight] provinces, ministates that were themselves decentralized federations of cities and towns.”\textsuperscript{12} At least nominally ruled by the States-General, a legislative body located at The Hague, the Republic can perhaps be best described as a loosely united and factionalized aristocracy with “the Dutch themselves [being] quite clear that [their] government was not democratic.”\textsuperscript{13} The two main factions in the country were the Royalists/Orangists (\textit{Prinsgezinden}) and the Republicans (\textit{Staatsgezinden}).\textsuperscript{14} The Orangists were supporters of the House of Orange, a royal dynasty of German origin that, under William of Orange and his son Maurits (sometimes transliterated as 'Maurice'), had played a large role in gaining the Republic its independence via brute military force.\textsuperscript{15} The Republicans were a looser confederation of wealthy burgher aristocracy that derived their power from commercial connections and supported more liberal policies as well as increased provincial autonomy. The highest executive office in the Republic was the Grand Pensionary (\textit{Raadpensionaris}), a position that was synonymous with the governorship of Holland, the largest and most powerful single province.\textsuperscript{16}

Only in 1609, after a long and bloody war with Spain for independence, had the Republic gained lasting autonomy.\textsuperscript{17} Fragile and newly brought into the world as it was, in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Nadler, \textit{Rembrandt's Jews}, 18.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ogg, \textit{Europe in the Seventeenth}, 411.
\textsuperscript{17} Wilson, \textit{The Dutch Republic}, 19.
the Dutch Republic “attained the highest point in [its] civilization and political power.”
Freed from the detested Spanish yoke, the Dutch entered what is still referred to today in the Netherlands as the ‘Golden Age,’ a time of unparalleled commercial power and maritime strength relative to other European nations. Controlling “the greater part of the world’s carrying trade,” the Dutch Republic predated the English in building the world’s first middle class commercial empire, an empire built not upon the swords of kings, but instead on the shrewdness and trading of the burgher. This, however, is not to say that this period (which ran from 1609 to the gradual decline of the Dutch Republic that began in the last two decades of the 17th century) was entirely free of strife and conflict. Quite the contrary, conflicts with Spain via its hold on the Southern Netherlands continued until the 1648 Treaty of Münster.

Amsterdam itself was tremendously prosperous during this period, far outpacing other European cities in banking and trade. As the “center of [the] financial and commercial organizations that enabled [the Dutch Republic] to draw…traders from everywhere,” large amounts of wealth routinely changed hands within the city limits, enriching both the city’s inhabitants in general and the merchant class in particular. With a population of approximately 125,000, Amsterdam was also one of the largest European cities of the time. Like the Dutch Republic as a whole, Amsterdam was governed by a merchant oligarchy that strove to balance the competing demands of Dutch businessmen, hard-line Calvinists, and Orangists. In practice, this often meant that the city’s oligarchs were forced to acquiesce to the demands of politically

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18 Ogg, *Europe in the Seventeenth*, 408.
19 Frederick Nussbaum, *The Triumph of Science and Reason* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 153. The bustling capitalism of Amsterdam and the Dutch Republic was occasionally too bustling for its own good. The most famous example of this is the ‘tulip mania’ incident, a rapid increase and even more rapid decline in the price of tulip bulbs that is regarded as history’s first recorded speculative bubble.
20 Ibid.
and socially conservative Calvinist preachers for the censorship of written material and/or religious teachings that they deemed to be blasphemous.

While Amsterdam, though a “relatively liberal city” by 17th century European standards, did not welcome the Jews with entirely open arms (their request for permission to purchase the burial grounds was denied), it did facilitate their commercial ambitions while also “provid[ing] the conditions for their reconnecti[on] to a Judaism that most of them barely knew.”21 The Jews were successful in the former regard, accounting for perhaps as much as 15 - 20% of Amsterdam’s total trade by the 1630s.22 Connecting with the essence and traditions of their religion was more difficult however, as the long-suppressed Iberian Jewish community had lost touch with such critical practices as “circumcision, kosher ritual butchery, and funerary customs.”23 In order to regain these and other religious rituals, the Jewish community in Amsterdam brought in rabbis from more established Jewish settlements all around Europe. Before long, three distinct but intertwined congregations had emerged in the city.

The bustling commercial and religious activity of this new Jewish community soon drew the unwanted attention of both Amsterdam’s municipal authorities as well as some of the more conservative of the Republic’s multitude of Christian sects. Recognizing this, the government of the States of Holland “set up a commission to advise [it] on the problem of the legal status of the Jews.”24 In 1619 the recommendations of this commission (which was led by famed jurist Hugo Grotius) were rejected by the States of Holland in favor of simply allowing each city and town in the province to decide on its own whether or not to allow Jews to reside there. Later the same year, Amsterdam granted its Jews “the right to practice their religion, with some restrictions on

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21 Goldstein, Betraying Spinoza, 4.
22 Nadler, Spinoza, 22.
23 Ibid., 15.
24 Ibid., 10.
their economic and political rights and various rules against intermarriage [between Jews and Christians].”

These developments made Amsterdam’s Jews realize that their situation in the city, while temporarily secure, remained precarious.

It was into this energetic and prosperous but still unsettled Jewish community that Michael (sometimes transliterated from Portuguese as ‘Miguel’) Spinoza arrived in 1623. Born in Portugal in 1587 or 1588, Michael’s life before his arrival in Amsterdam had been uncomfortably cosmopolitan, with his family moving first to France and then to Rotterdam in attempts to find both business success and religious toleration. Michael’s personal situation in his new Dutch home soon grew precarious when his wife Rachel died in 1627 before the marriage had produced any children. His financial circumstances fared somewhat better as he was able to establish a modestly successful import business with the aid of his father-in-law, Abraham Spinoza. Perhaps sensing that his opportunity to have a family was slowly slipping away due to age, Michael remarried in 1628.

Little is known about his new wife Hannah Deborah Senior except that she managed to bear Michael several children including, in November of 1632, Baruch himself.

Baruch Spinoza’s early life is veiled in obscurity. He was the middle of three brothers and his mother had at least one daughter from a previous marriage that lived with the family. Baruch’s mother Hannah died in 1638, probably from some type of respiratory illness similar to that which struck Baruch himself down nearly forty years later. He and the other children were

25 Ibid., 11.
26 Ibid., 31.
27 Ibid., 31-32.
28 Adding complexity to this story is the fact that Abraham was the full brother of Michael’s father Isaac. Thus Rachel was both Michael’s wife and first cousin.
29 Nadler, Spinoza, 36.
30 Goldstein, Betraying Spinoza, 268.
not ill-cared for though, as his father again quickly remarried, this time to a recent émigré from Portugal, Esther Fernand.\textsuperscript{31} Michael also took great pains to ensure that Baruch gained a proper education, paying an entrance fee so that he could attend Amsterdam’s largely Rabbi-controlled Jewish school. It seems that Michael was convinced that, while religious persecution in Portugal and France had deprived him of a true Jewish education, his sons would not suffer the same fate. Through this education, young Baruch acquired a thorough “command of the Hebrew language…and a deep knowledge of the Bible and of important rabbinical sources.”\textsuperscript{32} He later drew upon this knowledge in writing his \textit{TPT}, a work of both biblical criticism and political philosophy.

Even as young Baruch immersed himself in his studies, several incidents occurred within the Jewish community which must have drawn his attention while also foreshadowing events that were to play out later in his own life. The first of these was the strange episode that developed out of the 1639 union of the three Jewish congregations in Amsterdam. The controversy that soon arose had little to do with the union itself, as opinion in the Jewish community was nearly unanimous that they should be merged. Rather, it was focused on the relative rankings of the respective \textit{chachamim}, or Torah scholars, after the congregations were combined.\textsuperscript{33} The controversy manifested itself most strongly in the actions and subsequent punishment of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, who “took it as a great insult” when “he was given the third rank behind [rabbis Saul Levi] Mortera and [Isaac] Aboab [da Fonseca].”\textsuperscript{34} Menasseh felt slighted enough to become a malcontent and troublemaker of sorts, behavior that resulted in the congregation’s \textit{ma’amad} (a Jewish administrative body composed of laymen) imposing a one

\textsuperscript{31} Nadler, \textit{Spinoza}, 73.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
day cherem or shunning on him.\footnote{Ibid., 94-95. The idea of cherem in Judaism is very similar to that of excommunication in Catholicism. In effect, it is the total exclusion of a person from the Jewish community. Even immediate family members are not allowed contact with someone ostracized in this way.} While seemingly minor, the Menasseh cherem incident shows just how fragile the Jewish community in Amsterdam really was. Wary of losing their precarious place in Dutch society, the community could brook no dissent – not even from one of their own rabbis.

A similar and more consequential incident further illustrates just how vulnerable Amsterdam’s Jews felt. Uriel da Costa was a member of the Jewish community who, while “yearn[ing] for a pure devotion to the Law of Moses,” felt that Amsterdam’s Jews were no more than “a sect of latter-day Pharisees who practiced a degenerate religion of meaningless and superfluous rituals.”\footnote{Nadler, Rembrandt’s Jews, 193.} While briefly visiting Hamburg in 1616, da Costa published a tract entitled Proposals Against the Tradition that criticized many of the doctrines (such as the immortality of the soul) held dear by Europe’s Jews.\footnote{Ibid.} When knowledge of both this tract and a later work in the same vein reached Amsterdam’s Jewish community, Jewish elders went to the city’s magistrates and da Costa served a short stint in jail.\footnote{Ibid., 195.} Da Costa continued his combative relationship with his fellow Jews in Amsterdam for years after his release until finally, in 1640, he agreed to undergo a punishment that consisted of “being stripped to the waist, publicly whipped, and forced to lie prostrate at the synagogue’s doorway while the…congregation walked over his body.”\footnote{Ibid., 195-196.} In exchange for undergoing this brutal and demeaning ordeal, the cherem against da Costa was called off. However, unable to deal with the physical pain and embarrassment that had been inflicted upon him, he committed suicide. The entire decades-spanning da Costa incident deeply unsettled Amsterdam’s Jewish community while also making
it even more determined to deal with its malcontents internally, without the aid of the municipal authorities. And while it is unclear precisely what effect the incident had on young Baruch Spinoza, the “memory of [da Costa’s] torment of marginality must have made an impression on [him].”

The deaths of Spinoza’s older brother Isaac and stepmother Esther in 1649 and 1653 respectively, were quickly followed by the death of his father in 1654. This left Spinoza fatherless and, with the aid of his younger brother Gabriel, in charge of the family import business at the tender age of twenty-one. Compounding these difficulties was the fact that the business itself was struggling, largely due to the outbreak of the first Anglo-Dutch War in 1652, with its attendant decimation of the Dutch merchant fleet by English ships. Spinoza had left the formal Jewish education system after Isaac’s death when he was first needed to help with the family business, but he remained in reasonably close contact with Amsterdam’s rabbis even after his father’s death.

By this time though, Spinoza had begun to harbor “some rather serious doubts about Judaism, both its dogma and its practices, [and] was ready to seek enlightenment elsewhere.” It seems that as Spinoza’s mind matured, even the learned rabbis could not always produce sufficiently strong answers to his probing questions about religion and the nature of God. The impact of his worldlier lifestyle after taking over the family business also seems relevant in this regard; certainly his frequent commercial transactions brought Spinoza into contact with “a

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40 Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza*, 142.
41 Nadler, *Spinoza*, 86.
42 Ibid., 101.
variety of liberal theological opinions and...much talk of new developments in philosophy and science, such as Descartes’ recent innovations in math and physics.”

Wishing to know more about the intellectual world outside of Judaism, but realizing that his ignorance of Latin (the predominant academic language in Europe at the time) meant that he was cut off from the main currents of thought, Spinoza began studying the language at the home of Franciscus van den Enden. Truly one of the fascinating figures of European history, Van den Enden was a freethinker and democrat well before such things became fashionable - or even accepted. In addition to instructing Spinoza in the basics of Latin, van den Enden also taught him “mathematics, Cartesian philosophy, and a little Greek.” More importantly for the purposes of this study though, van den Enden is very likely the first person to prompt Spinoza to begin thinking seriously about questions of political philosophy. After meeting van den Enden, Spinoza “never stopped studying the important political thinkers of the 16th and early 17th centuries.” Furthermore due to a shared advocacy in Spinoza’s and van den Enden’s political works for “a radically democratic state, one that respects the boundary between political authority and theological belief,” some have argued that van den Enden is the original source of much of Spinoza’s political thought. This claim seems unlikely though, since Spinoza had left Amsterdam and van den Enden’s Latin tutoring behind before van den Enden himself had begun writing political theory. Regardless, “Spinoza’s matriculation at van den Enden’s school...was

43 Ibid. Much more will be said on the topic of Spinoza’s intellectual influences in the next chapter.
45 Ibid. Oddly enough, in 1656 just as Spinoza was gaining a firm understanding of Cartesian philosophy, the Dutch Republic banned its teaching. This, of course, did not stop intellectuals as cavalier as van den Enden from continuing to instruct their students on Descartes’ thought.
46 Nadler, *Spinoza*, 270.
47 Ibid., 104.
of crucial importance to his intellectual and personal development” in general – as well as to the development of his political theory in particular.49

One of the ways in which Spinoza’s time at van den Enden’s school was important for the formulation of his political philosophy was its role in introducing him to Niccolo Machiavelli’s *The Prince.*50 Certainly this was a work that Spinoza, in his rather cloistered upbringing in the Jewish community, had never before encountered. At van den Enden’s however, no work was so radical that it could not be engaged. *The Prince* was to have a lasting impression on Spinoza’s thought, for, in some sense, his political philosophy can be seen as carrying on “the initial attempt by Machiavelli to free reason from traditional religion in the sphere of politics.”51 Even further, Leo Strauss has asserted that “Machiavelli would seem to have inferred from the human, not heavenly, origin of Biblical religion…that the dogmatic teaching of the Bible has the cognitive status of poetic fables.”52 This conclusion is not all that far from Spinoza’s own characterization of Biblical truth in his *TPT.*53 Strangely, considering how seriously he apparently took some of its key arguments, Spinoza felt that *The Prince* was actually “a satire on princes,” a work meant only to belittle the often callous decisions made by hereditary political leaders.54

Spinoza’s gradual drifting away from the religious norms of the Jewish community was bound to eventually be noticed by some of its influential members. It is often speculated that Spinoza, like Uriel da Costa before him, began to publicly “deny the immortality of the

50 Ibid., 113.
53 As we will see later, Spinoza’s position on Biblical truth is pivotal for the development of his argument for a particular type of governmental structure.
soul…and the divine origins of the Torah.”

Apparently it was for propagating beliefs such as these that on July 27, 1656, a uniquely stringent *cherem* was issued against Spinoza, one that permanently banned him from the Jewish community. Whereas most *cherem* were only temporary, with even open heretics like da Costa given the opportunity of eventually returning to the community, Spinoza’s seems from the start to have been intended to be permanent. As Steven Nadler puts it, “there is no other excommunication document of this period issued by [the Amsterdam Jewish] community that attains the wrath directed at Spinoza when he was expelled from the congregation.”

What makes this uniquely damning *cherem* puzzling is that, while the ultimate cause of Spinoza’s excommunication (his growing disagreements with Jewish doctrine) is clear, the proximate cause is largely unknown. While it is speculated that Spinoza’s *cherem* was a result of him publicly speaking out against Jewish doctrine, there is very little direct evidence of Spinoza ever doing so. Certainly Spinoza had not published any works at this point and was, after all, only twenty-three years old at the time of his excommunication. The *cherem* itself says nothing about Spinoza’s exact transgressions except for a few vague statements regarding “evil opinions and acts” and “abominable heresies.”

Regardless of what his transgression was, the fact of the matter is that in 1656 Spinoza was thrown out of the only community he had ever known and isolated from the only family he possessed. By all accounts, he took this blow stoically, commenting “All the better; they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal;

55 Nadler, *Spinoza*, 137.
56 Ibid., 120.
57 Ibid., 127.
58 Ibid., 120.
but, since they want it that way, I enter gladly on the path that is opened to me.”\textsuperscript{59} As we will see in the next chapter, the path Spinoza walked after this pivotal event was enormously fruitful.

\textsuperscript{59} Goldstein, \textit{Betraying Spinoza}, 165.
While the first half of Spinoza’s life came to a close with the cherum that set him irrevocably onto his philosophical path, the second half of his short life featured the development of his mature political philosophy. As such, this chapter, while striving to avoid unduly neglecting any aspect of the latter half of Spinoza’s life, focuses primarily on the influences which served to shape the contours of that philosophy. In doing so it will show that far from the popular myth of Spinoza as a “lonely” philosopher “surrounded by people who…could not possibly understand the majesty of his thought,” Spinoza had an extremely active social life, communing with a wide variety of freethinking intellectuals who influenced his thinking in important ways.

The Spinoza of 1656 must have seemed a tragic figure. Exiled from the Jewish community and deprived of any sort of contact with his family, Spinoza was a man literally without state, religious, or familial affiliations. One biographer even suggests that the

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60 It is not my intent here to disconnect the various parts of Spinoza’s philosophical project (ethical, metaphysical, political, etc.) from each other. As I will expand upon in Chapter III, Spinoza saw his mature body of work as forming a fully compatible and mutually reinforcing philosophical system. See Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008), and the forthcoming Karolina Huebner, “The Metaphysical Foundations of Spinoza’s Moral Philosophy” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2009), for especially ardent arguments to this effect.


62 I include state in this list because of the nature of the Jews’ rather precarious position in the Dutch Republic. Jews living in the Republic were not even considered citizens until 1657, the year after Spinoza’s cherem. See Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza*, 270. Lewis Feuer describes the Jewish community in Amsterdam as “a virtually autonomous socio-economic entity.” See Feuer, Lewis, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 5.
Amsterdam rabbis actively lobbied the municipal authorities to expel Spinoza from the city. Yet this claim seems unlikely since no record of any such attempt (from either the Jewish community or city authorities) has been uncovered; moreover, the rabbis themselves lacked the authority to unilaterally approach any secular authority on behalf of the Jewish community as a whole. Indeed the evidence suggests that Spinoza continued to openly reside in Amsterdam at the house of his iconoclastic tutor Franciscus van den Enden until well after his excommunication.

The next several years of Spinoza’s life after his cherem are shrouded in mystery. Even the length of time that Spinoza spent in the van den Enden household is unknown. The lack of reliable information regarding this period of Spinoza’s life has led Spinoza scholars to speculate widely on contacts he may have had with the heterodox religious and philosophical groups that abounded in Amsterdam at this time. While much of this speculation is based on little beyond unsupported conjecture, some of the more plausible theories do much to explain similarities between the beliefs of some of these groups and the ideas presented in Spinoza’s own mature work on political philosophy and biblical exegesis.

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63 Jean Lucas, *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza*, trans. and ed. A. Wolf (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2003), 55. This source has been repeatedly demonstrated by various scholars to be inaccurate in regards to many of the details of Spinoza’s life.  
66 One of Spinoza’s early biographers suggests that during the period the philosopher resided in the van den Enden household he fell passionately in love with van den Enden’s daughter Clara, only to have her heart and hand snatched away by Dirk Kerkrirck, a physician and fellow student of van den Enden. Nadler finds this story “highly implausible” as – even by the standards of the day – Clara was almost certainly too young for Spinoza to have pursued her. For this story see Johan Colerus’ out of print *The Life of Benedict de Spinosa* as cited in Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy* (Boston: Adamant Media, 2005), 43-44. Even further, despite much speculation on the issue of Spinoza’s love life, the truth of the matter is that there is currently no evidence that Spinoza ever engaged in anything even remotely resembling a romantic relationship.  
67 The sheer number of intellectual and religious groups outside of the mainstream in Amsterdam at this time is bewildering. Various Spinoza scholars have, at one time or another, connected Spinoza with nearly all of them.
Before examining these theories though, a few facts about Spinoza’s life in the years immediately following his excommunication can be known with a reasonable degree of certainty: Spinoza continued to reside in or around Amsterdam, somehow acquired a skill at lens grinding, and continued his education at the University of Leiden. While the latter two of these three facts merit little discussion, Spinoza’s time at Leiden is pivotal in the development of his philosophical method of *a priori* reason as well as his desire to build an overarching philosophical framework that could support all human knowledge and action.\(^{68}\)

In the mid-1600s the University of Leiden was widely regarded as the best university in the Dutch Republic and, while there may have been some dispute on this qualitative matter, there was no doubt that it was the oldest and most well-established.\(^{69}\) More importantly for Spinoza though, was the fact that the university was a hotbed of Cartesian philosophy.\(^{70}\) Disregarding university and government decrees, professors at Leiden continued to openly teach Cartesian philosophy while also expanding its reach by applying it to almost every field of study conceivable in the 17\(^{th}\) century. Many of these elaborations of René Descartes’ original philosophy probably would have horrified Descartes himself as they – while beginning from Descartes’ original *cogito ergo sum* starting position – often reached very different (and sometimes more radically divergent from the Aristotelian orthodoxy) conclusions.\(^{71}\) In sum, the University of Leiden was a bulwark of the philosophical radicalism of the *scientia nova* (“new science”). It thus existed somewhat uncomfortably with the Dutch society around it which –

\(^{68}\) The fact that Spinoza continued to reside in or around Amsterdam during this period needs no discussion because it is a point both mundane and undisputed. The more interesting story of how Spinoza acquired his considerable skill at lens grinding would certainly merit discussion if anything at all were known about it. Unfortunately, the details of how and from whom Spinoza acquired this skill appear to be lost to history.

\(^{69}\) Nadler, *Spinoza*, 163.

\(^{70}\) Ibid. Descartes himself had studied mathematics briefly at Leiden in 1630.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 164-166.
while more liberal than almost any other in Europe at the time – was still solidly entrenched in the traditional ideas and Aristotelian philosophy of the Calvinist Church.

While there is no proof that Spinoza ever formally matriculated at Leiden, there is ample historical testimony from a variety of sources to establish that he did attend classes at the university.\textsuperscript{72} Here, approximately twenty-two miles outside of Amsterdam, Spinoza had his first exposure to serious philosophy in an academic setting; philosophy detached from the idiosyncratic ramblings of van den Enden and the at least nominally Protestant religious presuppositions of his Christian acquaintances.\textsuperscript{73} Judging by his later writings and reputation as an expert in the principles of Cartesian philosophy, Spinoza must have gained a thorough understanding of Descartes’ mechanistic philosophy at Leiden. Disregarding the well-known and obvious Cartesian influence on his metaphysics seen in his *Ethics*, Spinoza can be seen, in his *TPT*, as adopting both Descartes’ rigorous method of *a priori* reasoning and his quest for certainty.\textsuperscript{74}

Spinoza though, “was too original and independent [of a] thinker, and possessed too analytically acute a mind, to be an uncritical follower” of Descartes.\textsuperscript{75} Cartesian philosophy, while pivotal in his intellectual development, was only one aspect or contributing factor towards shaping his thought. After all, while history has all but forgotten innumerable Cartesian thinkers, there is only one Spinoza.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{73} Much more will be said on the issue of Spinoza’s possible contacts with heterodox Christian groups slightly later.
\textsuperscript{74} Descartes is widely (and rightly) widely regarded as the largest single philosophical influence on Spinoza. However, while a project more concerned with Spinoza’s *Ethics* would lavish more attention on the parallels between Cartesian philosophy and Spinoza’s own metaphysical arguments, our focus here is on the hows and whens of Spinoza’s exposure to the people and ideas that shaped his political philosophy.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 167.
The most robust speculative theory as to what events transpired in Spinoza’s life in the years immediately following his excommunication is that he had contact with the Collegiants, a loose-knit group of “disaffected Mennonites, Remonstrants, and members of other dissenting Reformed sects who sought a less dogmatic and nonhierarchical form of worship.”76 Composed of Christians who were too freethinking for the Dutch Republic’s more traditional non-Calvinist religious sects, the Collegiants were the most “liberal minded” of all the Christian groups in the country and, as such, it was unlikely that they would have been tolerated anywhere else in Europe.77 Dispensing with all formal church structures and hierarchies, the Collegiants were united only by informal bi-weekly meetings that were often held in the houses of various members of local congregations. With little tradition to constrict them, these meetings were themselves rather loose affairs. Eschewing formal leadership and pastors, the Collegiants were primarily interested in engaging in “free discussion of their faith” with a particular emphasis on their own conception of “true Christianity;” a Christianity grounded in the direct interpretation of the Bible with an emphasis on the moral teachings of Jesus Christ.78 There was significant leeway given for disagreement regarding biblical exegesis and theology among the Collegiants, for what bound them together was more a dislike of hierarchy and strict dogma than any particular view of how to best live a Christian life. In sum then, the Collegiants can be seen as a sect more united by shared values and methodologies than by precisely articulated articles of faith.

76 Ibid., 139. Contrary to the statements found in several works on the life of Spinoza, the Collegiants were a Christian sect that was distinct and separate from the Mennonites. In fact, many Collegiants groups boasted ex-Mennonites as members. For an example of a (otherwise accurate) Spinoza scholar who makes the mistake of conflating the two see Feuer, Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism, 41.
77 Wolfson, Spinoza: A Life of Reason, 51.
78 Nadler, Spinoza, 139.
The Collegiants were a fairly new group when Spinoza probably first encountered them. First arising in 1619 after a schism in the Reformed Church, a small Collegiant group appeared in Amsterdam soon afterwards. Often they met in the “Book of Martyrs,” a bookstore owned by the publisher Jan Rieuwertsz, a figure who was to play a vital role in the story of Spinoza both before and after the death of the great philosopher. The founder of the Amsterdam Collegiant group was Adam Boreel, a freethinking Christian who had managed to befriend Menasseh ben Israel.\textsuperscript{79} The pair’s friendship must have been a rather covert one as the bulk of the Jewish community and orthodox Calvinist authorities would not have looked fondly upon any close relationship between a near-heretic like Boreel and a rabbi.

It is often speculated that Boreel was first introduced to Spinoza by ben Israel himself, well-known as the most liberal and (as we saw in the previous chapter) dissent-inclined of Amsterdam’s three rabbis.\textsuperscript{80} This, however, is not to say that ben Israel desired in any way for Spinoza to move away from orthodox Jewish teachings towards Boreel’s own view that “the only recognized authority on spiritual matters was the direct word of the Bible, open to all to read and interpret for themselves.”\textsuperscript{81} Regardless of ben Israel’s own motivation for introducing the two, it is possible that Spinoza began to attend meetings of the Amsterdam Collegients before his excommunication and continued doing so for several years after his cherem. With his intimate knowledge of the Torah and Hebrew language, Spinoza would have been a welcome addition to their attempts to decipher the true moral significance of various biblical passages. If indeed Spinoza was regularly attending these gatherings, it would do much to explain how he

\textsuperscript{79} Boreel and ben Isreal’s friendship was undoubtedly furthered along by Boreel’s fluency in both Spanish and Portuguese.
\textsuperscript{80} Nadler, \textit{Spinoza}, 140.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
became “acquainted with a good number of Collegiants.” Many of these Collegiants like Pieter Balling, Jarig Jellesz, and the before-mentioned Jan Rieuwertsz became life-long friends of Spinoza’s, forming integral parts of the intellectual circle that came to center on the philosopher himself.

Little can be said on the issue of the influence that the Collegiants and their peculiarly unorthodox version of Christianity had on Spinoza’s thought. Interacting with the Collegiants would have introduced Spinoza to a less tradition-bound method of studying and interpreting the Bible than that of the Judaism he grew up with. It also would have allowed him to discuss the heretical views on traditional religion he was developing in an atmosphere where he would not have been unduly judged or ostracized. The views Spinoza espouses in his mature philosophical works, however, are much more radical than the doctrines that were advocated by the majority of Collegiants. For example, while they were in favor of free and open interpretation of the Bible by lay individuals, the Collegiants did not generally “deny the divine origin of [biblical texts]” and they certainly did not “question the immortality of the soul or assert that god exists in merely a philosophical sense” as Spinoza was later to do. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that in general it was Spinoza, the radical (perhaps soon to be when he first began attending their meetings) excommunicated Jew, who pushed the interpretive envelope with the Collegiants rather than the other way around. Regardless, positing that Spinoza spent a significant amount of time at Collegiant gatherings where little was off-limits does much to explain the development of his beliefs on biblical exegesis and traditional religious faith. Otherwise, one would have to implausibly argue that Spinoza developed many of his most important ideas ex nihilo, working

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 146.
as an isolated scholar using sheer force of thought to gain knowledge of the ultimate political, religious, and metaphysical truths.

The Collegiants were not the only non-mainstream religious group that Spinoza may have had contact with during the period after his excommunication. There is also some evidence that he interacted with a group of Quakers living in Amsterdam from roughly the time of his excommunication until he ceased to reside in the city in 1661. The Quakers (also known as the Religious Society of Friends) were a Christian religious group founded in England in 1648 that was similar to the Collegiants in its “antiauthoritarian approaches to worship.” Holding the millenarian belief that the Second Coming of Christ was near at hand, the Quakers were convinced that 1656 (the year of Spinoza’s cherem) was the year in which all Jews would convert to Christianity. In fact, the primary reason that there were any Quakers in Amsterdam at all is that they were attempting to convert the Jewish community. This task they took to with great relish, taking every possible opportunity to fervently address Amsterdam’s Jews on the errors of their ways and even composing a pamphlet addressed to rabbi Menasseh ben Israel entitled “For Menasseh ben Israel: The Call of the Jews out of Babylon, which is Good Tidings to the Meek, Liberty to the Captives, and of Opening of the Prison Doors.” Predictably, the Jewish community in Amsterdam that had struggled so long and hard for the ability to practice its religion free from persecution was quite immune to the Quakers’ impassioned pleas for conversion.

84 Ibid., 159.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
Nadler speculates that Spinoza could have first been introduced to the Quaker community in Amsterdam by members of the Collegiant circle he was already frequenting. 88 Spinoza must have been seen as a potentially very useful ally by the Quakers since, with his knowledge of Hebrew, he could translate more pamphlets from Dutch into the language the Jews were most familiar with. 89 Of course, this would require that the Quakers themselves first translate their pamphlets from the original English (a language that Spinoza had no competence in) into Dutch. Surviving letters from this period sent between Quakers in the Netherlands and England indicate that “one who hath been a Jew” was enlisted to translate several tracts from Dutch into Hebrew. It seems likely that this excommunicated Jew was none other than Spinoza himself as he probably was the only person in the city at this time that fit this description.

Spinoza probably had very little actual interest in assisting the Quakers in their attempts to convert Amsterdam’s Jews to Christianity. Considering his almost certain poverty at this point in his life, it is much more likely that he agreed to help them only in exchange for monetary payment. After all, as Spinoza had been forced to give up his stake in the family business upon his excommunication, he had no immediate source of income. 90 Similarly, it must have taken him some time to learn the lens grinding trade well enough to support himself from its fruits. All questions of material self-interest aside, Spinoza had little in common with the Quakers’ millenarian beliefs and communal mysticism with the exception of a certain affinity for the egalitarianism inherent in their worship structure. Surely his beliefs must have already been

88 Ibid.
89 Many of the Jews in Amsterdam during this period spoke Dutch only with difficulty. They were however, all but universally fluent in Hebrew.
90 There was no question of Spinoza continuing to run the family business after his excommunication. Contemplation of the impossibility of his managing a business based on international Jewish business contacts when he could no longer transact with these contacts makes this clear. Also, as related in the previous chapter, the profits from the Spinoza family merchant business were, due to a combination of misfortune and the deteriorating relations between the Dutch Republic and England, relatively insignificant at the time of Spinoza’s excommunication. Keeping this in mind, it would be a mistake to view the loss of the family business as any great loss to Spinoza.
trending much more towards the rationalistic and individualistic than the Quakers’ own. Any relationship between Spinoza and the Quakers was probably ended forever around the time of the chaotic split that occurred in the Quaker community in Amsterdam in 1658 at the emergence of James Naylor, an English Quaker that claimed to be the Messiah.91

Even though Spinoza’s relationship with the Amsterdam Quakers was brief, it still may have been influential in the development of his views of scripture via the influence of Samuel Fisher.92 Fisher was a Quaker who wrote several tracts arguing that it did not “seem possible that Moses is the author of all of the Pentateuch.”93 Instead, Fisher felt that the five books of the Torah had been distorted by the influence of innumerable human translations and distortions since the time of the original revelation from God. Spinoza was likely introduced to Fisher’s religious thought when he was asked to translate one of his pamphlets into Hebrew. Certainly Fisher’s arguments on the authorship of the original books of the Bible tend in the same direction as Spinoza’s own position in the TPT that Moses did not personally author any of the Torah.

By the middle of 1661 Spinoza was living in Rijnsburg, an idyllic Dutch village approximately twenty-three miles outside of Amsterdam and only a handful of miles away from Leiden.94 He had already begun his first work, the Tractatus de intellectus emendation (Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect). This work, never to be finished, foreshadowed many of the arguments Spinoza was to make more cogently in his Ethics and TPT. He soon abandoned this project in favor of the Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being, a similar work which again, was never brought to full fruition. Probably begun at the urging of friends impressed with

91 Nadler, Spinoza, 162.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Matthew Stewart, The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 58. To this day the house Spinoza resided in during the short time he was in Rijnsburg is preserved as a museum.
his comprehensive knowledge of the power and limits of Cartesian metaphysics, Spinoza’s Short Treatise was a relatively crude expression of his naturalistic ideas on religion and God. Little needs to be said regarding the exact contents of either of these works except that they demonstrate that by the early 1660s at the latest, Spinoza had come to possess the rough outlines of the ideas that were later to make him (in)famous throughout Europe.95

Spinoza had come to Rijnsburg with little in the way of material possessions.96 Still only in his late twenties, Israel states that he “settled in Rijnsburg in quest of the tranquility he needed to develop his philosophy.”97 A more likely (if less romantic) rationale for Spinoza’s leaving the only city he had ever known was that, as the center of a slowly solidifying circle of university and Collegiant friends interested in unorthodox religious and political ideas, Spinoza felt that Rijnsburg was perfectly located between Leiden and Amsterdam, as residing there would allow him to easily travel between the two cities. He would have had no choice but to seek intellectual companions outside of the hamlet itself for, while Rijnsburg did have a small Collegiant group, by the early 1660s “it met only twice a year.”98

Intellectual companions and stimulation, though, were things which Spinoza never lacked throughout the course of his adult life. Quite the contrary, “he had several close and devoted friends whose company he enjoyed and valued, and many acquaintances with whom he kept up a lively and philosophically fruitful correspondence.”99 Some of these correspondence partners were among Europe’s most distinguished and enlightened intellectuals. One of the longest of

95 Both works remained unpublished during Spinoza’s lifetime.
96 Judging by the paucity of his possessions, Spinoza cared little for material luxury. At the time of his death for example, he only owned three pairs of pants. Two objects that he did have some attachment to were his writing desk (which contained his unpublished papers) and bed. Spinoza apparently favored the bed especially as he brought it along on all of his housing moves from the time of his excommunication on. For more on Spinoza’s cherished bed see Goldstein, Betraying Spinoza, 280.
97 Israel, Radical Enlightenment, 163.
98 Nadler, Spinoza, 181.
99 Ibid., 194.
Spinoza’s correspondences, for example, was with Heinrich (usually Anglicized as Henry) Oldenburg, who first sought Spinoza out in person in Rijnsburg after hearing of a particularly philosophically-minded excommunicated Jew residing there. At the time the German-born Oldenburg was serving as the Secretary of the newly-formed Royal Society, an English organization founded in 1660 to advance scientific inquiry.\(^\text{100}\) Despite the fact that Oldenburg “was quite conventional in his religious views” and was not an original thinker in his own right, he and Spinoza enjoyed each other’s company enough that when Oldenburg returned to his official duties in England they began a long correspondence.\(^\text{101}\) Often during this correspondence Oldenburg was shocked by Spinoza’s impudent and heretical assertions on religion, but neither appears to have had any great degree of influence upon the ideas or beliefs of the other.\(^\text{102}\)

In 1663, after residing in Rijnsburg for only two years, Spinoza moved to the Dutch town of Voorburg. In Voorburg he lived with the master painter and sometime soldier Daniel Tydeman. A larger community than Rijnsburg, Voorburg also had the advantage of being situated adjacent to The Hague, one of the largest cities in the Republic and home to several of Spinoza’s close friends. In Voorburg itself lay the estate of the prominent poet Constantijn

\(^{100}\) Ibid., 184-185.

\(^{101}\) One of the most interesting aspects of this correspondence is the debate that occurred between Spinoza and the prominent English physicist and chemist Robert Boyle over a series of experiments Boyle had conducted on saltpeter (potassium nitrate). While Boyle and Spinoza communicated only through Oldenburg, it soon became clear that at root their disagreement was over how legitimate knowledge could be acquired. Boyle argued that empirical experiment was essential, while Spinoza held so strongly to a position on epistemology that favored \textit{a priori} reasoning becomes understandable when one thinks of the radically rationalistic nature of his philosophy as a whole (especially the geometrical structured \textit{Ethics}). For more on Boyle and Spinoza’s approaches to science see Baruch Spinoza, \textit{The Letters}, Trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), 96-100, 110-120, and 173-176.

\(^{102}\) An excellent example of the odd dynamic inherent in their correspondence is Spinoza’s 1676 letter to Oldenburg in which he writes: “The passion, death, and burial of Christ I accept literally, but his resurrection I understand in an allegorical sense.” Oldenburg’s response is representative of his reactions to Spinoza’s original ideas: “Finally, your assertion that Christ’s passion, death, and burial is to be taken literally, but his resurrection allegorically, is not supported by any argument that I can see. In the gospels, Christ’s resurrection seems to be narrated as literally as the rest.” See Baruch Spinoza, \textit{The Letters}, Trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), 348 and 350.
Huygens and his adult son Christiaan. Spinoza, who was apparently capable of mustering a certain quiet charisma when necessary, quickly befriended Christiaan who, at the time, had already made significant strides in the fields of optics and astronomy and would later go on to become a giant in the history of modern science. While they remained friends for the rest of Spinoza’s life, Christiaan and the philosopher never became especially close as Spinoza lived in constant fear that the religiously conservative Huygens would discover the true implications of his philosophical ideas for traditional Christianity.

Once established in Voorburg, Spinoza began preparing notes he had produced when tutoring Johannes Casear (sometimes seen as Casearius) on Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*. He appears to have begun this project at the urging of some of his friends back in Amsterdam who were now too distant to benefit personally from Spinoza’s mastery of Cartesian philosophy. Aiding him in this project by writing a preface and polishing his Latin was Lodewijk Meyer, “Spinoza’s close personal friend and physician.” Meyer was an ardent supporter of Spinoza, being “more than anyone else…responsible for bringing Spinoza’s writings to publication, both while Spinoza lived and after his death.” In *Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy*, the work that resulted from Meyer’s encouragement and his tutoring of Casear, Spinoza demonstrated the basics of Cartesian philosophy in geometrical fashion while also

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103 Before Descartes passed away in 1650, he and Constantijn were close friends. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 203.
104 Spinoza and Christiaan Huygens’ shared knowledge of optics must have greatly facilitated their friendship. Huygens admired Spinoza’s skill at lens grinding, commenting that “The [lenses] that the Jew of Voorburg has in his microscopes have an admirable polish.” Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza*, 5.
105 See Nadler (*Spinoza*, 222) for a recounting of how Spinoza and the mathematician Walther Ehrenfried von Tschirnhaus successfully hoodwinked Huygens as to the nature of Spinoza’s true philosophic ideas.
106 Nadler, *Spinoza*, 196-197 and 204.
107 Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 118. Spinoza never became as comfortable with Latin as he was with Dutch and Hebrew. This caused considerable difficulties after his death when his literary executors (including Lodewijk Meyer) had to expend much time and energy polishing the Latin prose of his unpublished works.
showing that he was “by no means an uncritical disciple of Descartes.”\textsuperscript{109} To use just one of many possible examples, Spinoza inserted his doctrine of natura naturata (“nature already created”) into an appendix, writing “the whole of natura naturata is only one being. From this it follows that man is part of nature.”\textsuperscript{110}

As a longtime follower of Spinoza and a freethinker, the bookseller Jan Rieuwertsz was the natural choice to publish this work. \textit{Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy} was the only work Spinoza would publish under his own name during his lifetime and it established his international reputation as both an expert on Cartesian philosophy and (among those well-versed enough to distinguish between Spinoza’s ideas and Descartes’ own) a powerful thinker in his own right.

In 1663 a plague broke out throughout northern Europe. This contagion took the life of Spinoza’s close friend Pieter Balling, an associate who most likely dated back to Spinoza’s time among the Amsterdam Collegiants.\textsuperscript{111} Acutely aware of the proximity of Voorburg to The Hague, Spinoza himself fled to the village of Schiedam where he continued his lens grinding and philosophical contemplation for several years while the plague sowed its deadly seeds. Adding to the misery of the plague was the war which broke out between England and the Dutch Republic in early 1665.\textsuperscript{112}

Also in 1665, the entire European Jewish community was caught up in a great “fever of messianism” at the prospect that Sabbatai Zevi of Turkey was the Messiah.\textsuperscript{113} Many members of the Jewish community in Amsterdam were so convinced of the truth of this claim that they began

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 207.
  \item \textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 211.
  \item \textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 213.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Wilson, \textit{The Dutch Republic}, 198-200.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} Goldstein, \textit{Betraying Spinoza}, 224.
\end{itemize}
offering their fortunes to Zevi while also preparing to dig up corpses from the communal
cemetery so that they could be taken to Jerusalem to be resurrected.\footnote{Ibid., 227.} Characteristically stoic
about this turn of events, Spinoza commented that “[the idea that God has selected or chosen a
certain group of people as his own] has found such favor with mankind that they have not ceased
to this day to invent miracles with a view to convincing people that they are more beloved of
God than others, and are the final causes of God’s creation and continuous directions of the
world.”\footnote{Ibid., 229.} Spinoza must have felt his distrust of religious authorities and miracles to have been confirmed when, in September of 1666, Zevi converted to Islam after being threatened with death by Mehmed IV, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.\footnote{Nadler, \textit{Spinoza}, 253.}

Disregarding these distractions, Spinoza forged ahead with original philosophical work
upon his returned to Voorburg. By June of 1665 he had completed a rough draft of his \textit{Ethics}, the supremely ambitious work upon which the majority of his reputation as a philosopher now rests. By any standard a masterpiece, the \textit{Ethics} was Spinoza’s attempt to radically reshape and redefine his contemporaries’ conceptions of God, the world, and humanity using an epistemology of \textit{a priori} reasoning combined with a rigidly geometric structure. His conclusions were just as radically unorthodox as was his approach in the \textit{Ethics}. Instead of arguing for the God of classical theism, separated from a world utterly dependent upon him, Spinoza presented a volitionless God that was coextensive with nature. As opposed to a world populated with humans possessing free will, Spinoza’s world was a mechanistic one filled with beings whose fates were as determined as the arrangement of the individual patterns upon the rolling out of a Persian rug. For Spinoza, there was no room for the supernatural or space for the miracles that gave solace to
so many of his fellow Europeans. In short, with definitions, propositions, and axioms as his weapons, Spinoza attempted to do much more than just dispose of the traditional Aristotelian Weltanschauung. He also sought to discard the Cartesian doctrines that most of his contemporaries already found so radical in favor of a more naturalistic and deterministic conception of reality in which humans, not being able to choose their own actions, had only the freedom to determine their attitudes towards their fate. At the core of Spinoza’s argument was the prescriptive principle that in order to achieve eudaimonia (“flourishing” or “happiness”) one must “bear the gifts and losses of fortune with equanimity.”

Despite the obvious brilliance of his Ethics, Spinoza recognized that it was much too radical to publish in the near future. Instead, he continued to polish and refine it until 1775, while also moving on to work on other projects. Spinoza apparently hoped that by publishing other works anonymously he could pave the way for an eventual acceptance of the Ethics. This, however, was not to be, for his growing fame as a philosopher most often took the form of infamy in the eyes of those who, based on his radically unorthodox conception of a God coextensive with nature, accused him of atheism. Though Spinoza himself was “always deeply offended by the accusation that he was an atheist,” he was never able to mount an effective defense against these attacks. Between these accusations of atheistic heresy and the public

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117 This is not to mention magic, the existence of which a (declining) majority of Europeans of Spinoza’s time accepted as a matter of fact. See Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), 587-589.
118 Those readers familiar with ancient philosophy may recognize this argument of Spinoza’s as being quite similar to that of the Stoics. While much has been made of this similarity, Spinoza himself never acknowledged the Stoics as an influence and mentions them only sparingly in his major writings.
119 Nadler, Spinoza, 242.
120 Goldstein, Betraying Spinoza, 272.
121 Ibid., 246. It is very possible that Spinoza was unable to escape the frequent charge that he was an atheist because it contained some element of truth. Nadler for one, although he avoids the issue in his comprehensive biography of Spinoza, believes that Spinoza is most accurately categorized as an atheist. The issue mainly hinges upon where one draws the line between pantheism and atheism, an issue on which there is unfortunately little consensus among Spinoza scholars. Whatever the truth of the matter, the fact that Spinoza’s beliefs were so far outside the mainstream
scrutiny that increased as his life went on, Spinoza was never to have an opportunity to publish his *Ethics* in his lifetime.\textsuperscript{122}

It must have been with some anger at the ignorance and reactionary intolerance of the society around him that Spinoza began on his next great intellectual project. Begun late in 1665, the work that eventually became the *TPT* can in many ways be seen as the culmination of the heretical religious ideas that were likely responsible for Spinoza’s excommunication from Judaism. The final work, however, ventures far beyond the rudimentary positions Spinoza must have held on these subjects in 1656, including as it does well-developed arguments on “the status and interpretation of Scripture, the election of the Jewish people; the origins of the state; the nature, legitimacy, and bounds of political and religious authority, and the imperative of toleration.”\textsuperscript{123} As it was not to appear in print until 1670 though, there was much that occurred in Spinoza’s life between his initial work on it and its publication. Namely, these events took the form of the deaths of two individuals that Spinoza cared deeply about and, most importantly, his reading of Hobbes, an undertaking that is pivotal for understanding his political philosophy.

In 1667 Simon Joosten de Vries passed away. Both a wealthy man and one of Spinoza’s faithful confidants, de Vries had made several attempts during his life to support the philosopher financially, but was always rebuffed by the near-ascetic.\textsuperscript{124} De Vries’ will granted Spinoza the sum of 500 guilders, a not-inconsiderable sum of money by the standards of the day. True to

\textsuperscript{122} More on the public scrutiny that focused on Spinoza is forthcoming slightly later in the chapter.

\textsuperscript{123} Nadler, *Spinoza*, 248.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 261. The only indulgence Spinoza regularly granted himself was pipe smoking. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 263.
form however, Spinoza agreed to accept only 300 guilders, feeling that taking any more would distract him from his philosophical work.  

In February of 1668 Adriaan Koerbagh, another of Spinoza’s friends, published a work under his own name that sharply criticized and ridiculed all organized religion. Entitled Een Bloemhof van allerley lieflijkheyd (“A flower garden composed of all kinds of loveliness”), the work argued for broadly Spinozistic doctrines. Koerbagh soon found himself arrested in Leiden along with his brother Jan and questioned on where he had encountered the ideas contained in the book. While it is probably that the authorities were hoping that he would admit Spinoza’s influence, Koerbagh took full responsibility for all of the contents of his work. As a result, in 1668 he was (along with a heavy fine) sentenced to ten years in prison. Less than a year later he was dead, his constitution apparently lacking the strength to withstand the cold and damp conditions inherent in 17th century Dutch prisons. 

Thomas Hobbes’ political theory was the largest single influence on Spinoza’s political philosophy. Calling Hobbes one of the modern era’s most important political philosophers is a claim that is simultaneously accurate and trite, both factual and banal. As the founder of modern social contract theory, Hobbes is in many ways the political philosopher of the modern era, a fact that paradoxically is often submerged amid our current “familiarity” with the Hobbesian framework of atomistic, self interested individuals struggling to better their material conditions in an uncaring and naturalistic world.

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125 Ibid.
126 Ibid., 265.
127 Ibid., 268.
128 Ibid., 269.
Thomas Hobbes lived from 1588 to 1679.\textsuperscript{130} A native Englishman who wrote in both Latin and English, Hobbes spent large portions of his life in France serving as a private instructor to several generations of the noble Cavendish family. His first major work was \textit{De Cive} (‘On the Citizen’) a work which anticipated many of the themes that were later to appear in his 1651 classic \textit{Leviathan}.\textsuperscript{131} At its most foundational, Hobbes’ basic argument in \textit{Leviathan} is that humanity’s default position is the “state of nature,” a condition characterized by anarchy, chaos, and “a condition of War [sic] of every one against every one.”\textsuperscript{132} In such a lawless situation “the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” as every individual has the right to do whatever they judge to be necessary to ensure their own prosperity and security.\textsuperscript{133} Rightly detesting such a situation, people choose to band together in order to form a “social contract,” an agreement (in Hobbes’ conception) by which they mutually bind themselves so as to give over all of their rights to a sovereign authority or government. While Hobbes’ argues in \textit{Leviathan} that the sovereign authority should be a monarch, he leaves open the possibility that a social contract could be formed that would establish an assembly of men as the ultimate political authority. For Hobbes the precise type of government instituted by the social contract was not nearly as important as the nature and extent of that government’s power. Regardless of its form, the power of the sovereign authority should be absolute over its subjects, separation of powers and divided government were concepts that Hobbes considered and rejected as leaving society open to chaos when the different authorities disagree.

\textsuperscript{130} Hobbes himself would have undoubtedly credited his impressive longevity to the vigorous walking up and down hills that he undertook as a form of exercise. See Kenneth Minogue’s Introduction to Thomas Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan} (London: Everyman’s Library, 1987), iv.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
While Spinoza was probably first exposed to the thought of Hobbes during his time as a tutee of van den Enden’s, he appears to have only read Hobbes directly in the mid- to late 1660s. Undoubtedly his reading of Hobbes had a profound influence on him, for in many ways, Spinoza’s formulations of his arguments for a particular conception of the state are derived from Hobbes’ own. Spinoza accepts that the state of nature is the original condition of humankind just as Hobbes does. Spinoza also accepts that this state of nature will be an unpleasant affair, full of wanton killing and human suffering. As “every individual has sovereign right to do all that he can,” Spinoza, like Hobbes, thought that no normative conclusions could be drawn from actions in a state of nature.¹³⁴ This notion is a fundamental break by both Hobbes and Spinoza from the then-predominant natural law theory, which claimed to judge human behavior by a higher standard than merely manmade or positive law.

However, Spinoza differs from Hobbes in many ways in his conception of and arguments for the ideal state. Namely, Spinoza feels that Hobbes was incorrect in his belief that the social contract necessarily entailed the complete transference of all of the natural rights and powers of the signees.¹³⁵ Following from this, Spinoza argues that some rights – such as freedom of thought and speech – should be reserved for the citizens of the state.¹³⁶ Also unlike Hobbes, Spinoza does not hold that the social contract was binding in perpetuity, as he felt that no contract or agreement can tie one to a situation which is clearly not in accordance with one’s

¹³⁴ Baruch Spinoza, A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise (New York: Dover, 1951), 200.
¹³⁵ Spinoza’s argument to this effect is complex. It will be explored in detail in the next chapter.
¹³⁶ It is possible to question whether the manner in which Spinoza attempts to differentiate between his own position and Hobbes’ is truly successful. Like Hobbes, Spinoza seems to imply at times that the sovereign authority has absolute power over its subjects. However, in other places in TPT he remarks that it would not be in that authority’s best interest to sharply restrict the freedom of thought and speech. Thus, as he has given the authority the right already, he is left in a position where he can really only dispense advice to the sovereign state authority on why it would be impudent for it to restrict intellectual freedom based on its own self-interest.
perceived self-interest.\textsuperscript{137} Finally, although he shares Hobbes’ suspicion towards the separation of governmental powers, Spinoza argues that democracy is the superior form of governmental structure.\textsuperscript{138}

Armed with this newly-gained firsthand knowledge of Hobbes’ political thought and an unmistakable certainty (especially after the arrest and subsequent death of Adriaan Koerbagh) regarding the seriousness of his cause, Spinoza worked feverishly throughout the late 1660s to complete his TPT. Out of concern for the safety of both Spinoza and his publisher Jan Rieuwertsz, when the work was released “in late 1669 or early 1670,” it “bore on its title page a false publisher and place of publication” and entirely lacked any indication as to its author’s identity.\textsuperscript{139} As touched upon earlier, the TPT focused primarily on questions of Biblical interpretation and political organization, building a sweeping theological and political edifice of thought on the implicit metaphysical foundations laid down earlier in his Ethics.\textsuperscript{140} Ultimately in the TPT, Spinoza argues for a state based upon a social contract in which the sovereign authority would have power only over the actions (including religious worship) of its citizens, while granting them freedom of thought and speech.\textsuperscript{141}

Soon after the publication of the TPT, Spinoza moved to The Hague, taking up residence in May of 1671 at the house of Hendrik van der Spyck.\textsuperscript{142} Van der Spyck was married with three

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{137} Much more on this in the next chapter.
  \item \textsuperscript{138} Spinoza, \textit{A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise}, 207.
  \item \textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 269.
  \item \textsuperscript{140} The \textit{Treatise} did not explicitly reference the \textit{Ethics} of course, as it remained unpublished, locked away in the confines of Spinoza’s writing desk.
  \item \textsuperscript{141} The discussion of the Treatise here is radically abbreviated as a close examination of its contents is one of the main foci of the next chapter.
  \item \textsuperscript{142} Nadler, \textit{Spinoza}, 288.
\end{itemize}
children at the time of Spinoza’s arrival and, by the time of the philosopher’s death approximately six years later, another four would be brought into the world.\textsuperscript{143}

Despite the precautions Spinoza and his publisher took to conceal his identity when the \textit{TPT} was published, few interested parties in the Dutch Republic were under any illusions as to the real author of the blasphemous work and, soon after his move to The Hague, “signs that Spinoza was being watched were…evident.”\textsuperscript{144} No doubt both the Republic’s secular and religious authorities were growing concerned that the philosopher’s ideas (which were already well known in Dutch intellectual circles at this point) “were beginning to penetrate society more widely.”\textsuperscript{145} Nadler writes that by this time Spinoza was considered “\textit{the} enemy of piety and religion” by much of Dutch society.\textsuperscript{146} While much more tolerant than other Western European regimes at the time, the Dutch authorities were unwilling to brook even the appearance of open intellectual dissent against the dominant governing and religious institutions. Regardless of these threats, Spinoza continued to actively entertain – and engage in subversive discussions with – a variety of visitors during his years in The Hague. Before long however, a deteriorating political situation resulted in the death of one of the few public figures that Spinoza both respected and supported.

Johan (sometimes transliterated as ‘Jan’) de Witt was “the Grand Pensionary of Holland and therefore the most powerful figure in” the Dutch Republic.\textsuperscript{147} Perhaps “the greatest statesmen…in all of Dutch history,” De Witt was a “true Republican,” consistently “devoted to

\begin{description}
\item[143] Ibid., 289.
\item[144] Israel, \textit{Radical Enlightenment}, 286.
\item[145] Ibid. One issue that kept Spinoza’s works from penetrating deeply into Dutch society at-large sooner was the fact that they were all written in Latin, the scholarly language of the time, instead of the Dutch vernacular.
\item[146] Nadler, \textit{Spinoza}, 295.
\end{description}
the Netherlands as a constitutional state without any quasi-monarchical offices.”148 He was also “an advocate of toleration, although not of the absolute variety.”149 As such, he was constantly at odds with the monarchists of the House of Orange, who wanted to transfer much of the power of his position to a hereditary Stadtholder.150

While certainly not nearly as radical in his belief structure as Spinoza, de Witt must have seemed to the philosopher to be the embodiment of all of the best aspects of the Dutch Republic: toleration, the rejection of hereditary monarchy, individual rights. Perhaps if nothing else, the fact that de Witt’s bastion of popular support was the only thing keeping the Dutch nation from crossing the thin line between republic and monarchy was probably more than enough to attract Spinoza’s whole-hearted support. The thought of the House of Orange and their religiously reactionary Calvinist allies taking power must have horrified Spinoza as it would have made the situations of both he and many of his more religiously-liberal confidants quite precarious. Despite these shared interests though, De Witt and Spinoza never met personally. For his part De Witt probably had no interest in meeting the philosopher as he was already regularly accused by his critics of being a closet Spinozist.151

In the summer of 1672 the armies of the French King Louis XIV invaded the Dutch Republic. A blatant power grab by the so-called “Sun King,” the invasion forced the Dutch to resort to the desperate measure of opening dikes in an attempt to slow the French advance.152 The opening of the dikes, in conjunction with the capture of several Dutch cities by French forces, resulted in a widespread public loss of confidence in De Witt throughout the Republic.

149 Ibid., 256.
150 Once established as Grand Pensionary, De Witt prevented William III from being appointed Stadtholder after the death of William II. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 255-257.
151 Ibid., 259.
This culminated in the imprisonment of De Witt and his brother Cornelis on the baseless charge of “conspiring with the French in the plunder of [Dutch] land.”\textsuperscript{153} In August of 1672 a mob broke into the prison where the De Witts were being held and, after dragging them into the street, “stripped them naked, clubbed, stabbed, and bit them, hung their bodies upside down, and hacked them into ‘two-penny pieces.’”\textsuperscript{154} Thus did the Dutch Republic come to an end and the House of Orange return to power.

After hearing of the De Witts’ demise, Spinoza, thrusting aside his usual caution, constructed a sign reading “ultimi barbarorum” [the last of the barbarians].\textsuperscript{155} He planned to travel to the site where the De Witts’ had been lynched and place the sign there, but his landlord Tydeman locked him in his chambers in order to prevent his almost certain death from such an action.\textsuperscript{156} Undoubtedly Spinoza was greatly disheartened by this entire chain of events; for, outside of any personal affection he may have felt for De Witt, his death moved the Netherlands much farther away from Spinoza’s conception of an ideal state.

Soon after this grave disappointment, Spinoza was offered an opportunity that must have, if nothing else, made him feel that his philosophical talents were appreciated outside of his own circle of friends and admirers. Early in 1773 he received a letter from Johann Ludwig Fabricius, a professor at the University of Heidelberg and advisor to Karl Ludwig, the Elector of the German state of Palatine.\textsuperscript{157} The letter offered Spinoza a chair in philosophy at the university on the condition that he not “misuse [his position] to disturb the publicly established religion.”\textsuperscript{158} Spinoza realized, of course, that if he accepted this offer, he would have to sacrifice his

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 122-123.
\textsuperscript{157} Nadler, \textit{Spinoza}, 311.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
intellectual freedom and integrity in exchange for professional status and security. Unsurprisingly, he declined the position, reasoning that to accept it would be to give up his life’s work (most all of which undercut the traditional “publicly established religion” extant almost everywhere in Europe at the time).

Continuing Spinoza’s run of bad fortune that the offer of the chair had softened but not broken, 1674 began poorly for him with the execution of his old friend Franciscus van den Enden in France.\textsuperscript{159} Van den Enden had been actively engaged in a plot to overthrow King Louis XIV in the hopes of establishing a democratic republic in the northern regions of the country.\textsuperscript{160} Similarly unfortunate was the banning of the \textit{TPT} in the same year.\textsuperscript{161} Labeled alongside Hobbes’ \textit{Leviathan} and Lodewijk Meyer’s \textit{Philosophia Sacrae Scripturae Interpres} as blasphemous, Spinoza’s great work of biblical criticism and political philosophy was “banned by the secular authorities in the province of Holland.”\textsuperscript{162}

Despite the banning of his only published work devoted exclusively to his own philosophical views, Spinoza was far from isolated. Quite the contrary, the correspondences and intellectual discussions with friends that he seemed to have cherished so much continued unabated throughout the 1670s. Spinoza was also optimistic enough to commence work on a new project, a book of Hebrew grammar that would be published after his death.\textsuperscript{163}

More importantly, Spinoza received the most intellectually distinguished visitor of his life in 1676 when the German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz visited him at his quarters in

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{159} Stewart, \textit{The Courtier and the Heretic}, 124.
\item\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{161} Nadler, \textit{Spinoza}, 322.
\item\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 322.
\item\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 324-326. This work, entitled simply \textit{Compendium of Hebrew Grammar}, is almost certainly the least important of all of Spinoza’s works. Its only exceptional feature is the identity of its author.
\end{itemize}
The Hague.\textsuperscript{164} Truly one of history’s great intellects, Leibniz had been in correspondence with Spinoza since 1771, but the two had not previously met.\textsuperscript{165} Despite seemingly insurmountable differences in background and life experiences, the two philosophers apparently got along quite well with each other, conversing in Latin many times in the few weeks Leibniz remained in the area before moving on to pursue his varied interests elsewhere.\textsuperscript{166} While Spinoza and Leibniz conversed at length on both metaphysical and worldly topics, it is highly unlikely that even Leibniz’s genius could sway Spinoza from his opinions. At this late point in his short life, it was almost certainly too late for Spinoza to make more than minor adjustments to his doctrines, especially considering how astoundingly consistent his intellectual opinions had remained over the course of his life up to his encounter with Leibniz.\textsuperscript{167}

Spinoza began his \textit{Political Treatise (PT)} sometime during 1676.\textsuperscript{168} It was to be the last intellectual project he would embark on during his short life, and his untimely death left it as little more than a fascinating fragment that leaves the reader yearning for more than the few tens of pages that he managed to complete. The \textit{PT} begins with Spinoza criticizing the utopian political visions of earlier thinkers before moving on to discuss the structure of an ideal democratic political system. In order to fully demonstrate that his particular conception of liberal democracy is the form of government that “best agree[s] with practice,” Spinoza treats each of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{164}] Stewart, \textit{The Courtier and the Heretic}, 196. Leibniz is best known today for developing calculus independently of Isaac Newton and for his philosophical theories. His writings, however, spanned nearly every conceivable subject and were so voluminous that to this day no complete edition of his writings is available.
\item[\textsuperscript{165}] Goldstein, \textit{Betraying Spinoza}, 271.
\item[\textsuperscript{166}] While Leibniz had traveled widely throughout Europe in various official and unofficial capacities, Spinoza had left the Netherlands only for a few brief trips during the course of his life.
\item[\textsuperscript{167}] Stewart speculates that Leibniz, who was very critical of Spinoza in his correspondence with others, was greatly influenced by Spinoza’s metaphysical theories. Stewart, \textit{The Courtier and the Heretic}, 11-12. This, however, is a controversial claim that is outside the scope and boundaries of this study.
\item[\textsuperscript{168}] Nadler, \textit{Spinoza}, 342.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
three distinct types of political systems (monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy) separately, so as to judge them on their own merits.\(^{169}\)

As the year 1677 opened it was clear that Spinoza’s life was winding to a close. In February his friend Georg Hermann Schuller wrote in a letter to Leibniz: “I fear our good friend [Spinoza] is not going to remain much longer among us as the consumption from which he suffers is getting worse from day to day.”\(^{170}\) Spinoza had never been a particularly hardy individual and the inherent weakness of his lungs was “exacerbated by years of inhaling the glass dust produced by his lens grinding.”\(^{171}\) Certainly Spinoza was fully aware of his declining health, but, as was his nature, he “suffered his infirmity with much reserve and little fuss.”\(^{172}\) It is not surprising that Spinoza was not especially perturbed by his impending death, for he had written in the *Ethics* that “a free man thinks of death least of all things.”\(^{173}\) When death, though, finally found Spinoza at his room in The Hague, it struck somewhat suddenly, taking his life on Sunday, February 21, 1677 with only his good friend and doctor Lodewijk Meyer by his side.\(^{174}\)

The great philosopher left few possessions and only one request after his death, that his writing desk be sent to Amsterdam so that its contents could be published. This request was

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\(^{169}\) Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, 288. As with the previous discussion of the *TPT*, the discussion here of Spinoza’s *PT* has been kept brief due to the much more substantial discussion of the work that appears in the next chapter.


\(^{171}\) Nadler, *Spinoza*, 340.

\(^{172}\) Ibid., 349.


\(^{174}\) Nadler, *Spinoza*, 350.
carried out and soon Dutch and Latin editions of the *Ethics*, the unfinished *PT*, and the *Hebrew Grammer* were being closely studied throughout Europe.\(^{175}\)

This chapter has sought to detail the second half of the life of Baruch Spinoza while also arguing that, far from the isolated and reclusive philosopher of legend, Spinoza lived a very social life, corresponding regularly with other prominent intellectuals and forming the center of a close-knit circle of fellow freethinkers. In addition, this chapter has also sought to illustrate and briefly flesh out many of the intellectual catalysts that reacted with Spinoza’s undeniable genius in such a way as to produce his political philosophy. Some of these influences, such as Thomas Hobbes, have long been acknowledge as pivotal in any attempt to understand and interpret Spinoza’s political philosophy, while others like the Collegiants and Quakers are more speculative in that they only indirectly connect to Spinoza’s political philosophy through their influences on his theology and biblical exegesis. It is my hope that my explanations of these influences will provide a useful background of historical context for my interpretation of Spinoza’s political philosophy, which, as I will argue in the next chapter, is fundamentally consequentialist in nature.

\(^{175}\) There is a growing consensus that these works, along with Spinoza’s philosophy as a whole, had a significant impact on the rise of the Enlightenment. This is a new development as older works on the Enlightenment, such as Peter Gay’s work, hardly mention Spinoza at all. Newer volumes on the other hand, especially Jonathan Israel’s, argue that Spinoza was hugely influential among the thinkers and intellectual movements that made up the Enlightenment. See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation Volume I The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966). and Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation Volume II The Science of Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966). along with the previously-cited Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* and Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1650-1752* (London UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).
CHAPTER III

INTEPRETING SPINOZA

After years of relative neglect, the last several decades have seen a great deal of quality English-language scholarship on Spinoza’s political philosophy. Unfortunately, much of this scholarship interprets his political thought as being more concerned with abstract principles and less pragmatic than it actually is. For example, Spinoza is often at least implicitly viewed as arguing for liberal democracy on grounds of principle when, in fact, a close reading of his TPT and TP reveals that, while they certainly advance positions that are related to liberal political theory, they are primarily concerned with enunciating a workable theory of the state instead of principle. This chapter, building upon the historical context provided in the previous two, attempts to right interpretive wrongs by presenting a reading of Spinoza’s political philosophy that, partly by grounding his thought in his metaphysics and view of human nature, shows it to be consistently and pragmatically consequentialist in nature.

Having already covered issues of historical background in previous chapters, the proper starting point for any attempt to interpret Spinoza’s political philosophy is his metaphysics.

While beginning here is counter to the order in which he wrote his major works (as mentioned in

\[176\] The excellent work of Leo Strauss did on Spinoza’s political thought during much of the early to mid-20th century is a conspicuous exception to this rule. One might be excused for thinking that Strauss and his disciples were the only scholars doing work on Spinoza’s political philosophy for an extended period.

\[177\] The term “pragmatic” should be taken in this chapter to mean being concerned with practical considerations. It should not be interpreted as implying any connection to the pragmatist school of philosophy. Also, the question of whether or not it is correct to understand Spinoza as an advocate of liberal democracy is not one that this essay will address. For our purposes it is enough that his political philosophy is commonly interpreted as advocating for such.

\[178\] “Consequentialist” should be understood here as referring to the view that the value or worth of actions derive solely or primarily from their consequences.
the previous chapter, the *Ethics* was written after the *TPT*), it is still correct in that, when formulating his politics, “Spinoza drew on…his own metaphysics.”¹⁷⁹ This is not as counterintuitive as it first appears, for well before he published the *TPT*, Spinoza had already conceived of the bulk of the structure of his metaphysical thought.¹⁸⁰ Beginning an interpretation of Spinoza’s politics with his metaphysics is also proper from the perspective of the logical connections between the two as the non-normative, naturalistic vision of nature that is explicitly presented in the *Ethics* is a necessary starting point for his self-appointed task of devising a successful governing structure for men “as they are” in the *TPT* and *TP*.¹⁸¹ Read as detached from or logically prior to the *Ethics*, then, the *TPT* and *TP* appear incomplete in that they seem to presuppose a particular naturalistic cosmology and view of humanity as within nature without making any attempt to defend either. McShea puts the importance of the connection between Spinoza’s conception of human nature and his political philosophy well when he writes that “it seems abundantly clear that without a definitive conception of the nature of man, Spinoza has neither an ethics nor a political philosophy.”¹⁸²

At least one recent interpreter (the prominent French philosopher Etienne Balibar) has taken a position precisely contrary to the one delineated above: that the best way to “initiate the reader into Spinoza’s philosophy [is] through [italics original] his politics.”¹⁸³ While he correctly recognizes that there is a fundamental “unity” that runs throughout Spinoza’s philosophy, Balibar ignores the fact that just because something is unified does not mean that the ideal way to understand it is backwards. Instead, as I have already argued, the proper way to interpret Spinoza’s political philosophy is to begin with the view of nature he presents in the *Ethics* as this

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¹⁸¹ Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise and Political Treatise*, 287.
¹⁸² McShea, *Political Philosophy of Spinoza*, 201.
is logically foundational to much of his political writings. Balibar presents no argument as to why beginning with Spinoza’s political philosophy is a superior approach for understanding his thought as a whole.

What of this naturalistic view of the world that Spinoza presents in his Ethics though? As related in the previous chapter, the Ethics puts forward a pantheist metaphysical structure that identifies a volitionless God as coextensive with the entire universe. This God is the one substance, the all-encompassing being whose “essence involves existence.” It is important to point out that Spinoza uses the term “God” in his Ethics in a way that is very different than the standard Judeo-Christian understanding of divinity. For Spinoza, “neither intellect nor will appertain to God’s nature.” Indeed Spinoza’s God is nothing else than nature itself, governed by particular natural laws in an infinite system of strict determinism. Thus, “nothing in the universe is contingent” as “things could not have been brought into being by God in any manner or in any order different from what has in fact obtained.” The strict determinism that Spinoza lays out in the first section of his Ethics serves to underpin his argument that “nature has no particular goal in view…final causes are mere human figments.” As everything in nature proceeds from necessity and all free will (divine and/or human) is merely an illusion, there can be no teleology in nature. Spinoza puts this most clearly when he writes that “nature does not work with an end in view. For…God or nature acts by the same necessity as that whereby it exists.” Instead of free will or teleology, then, Spinoza’s metaphysical system asserts that there is only the inexorable unfolding of non-teleological events that were predetermined infinitely in

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184 This is Spinoza’s version of the ontological argument and is in many ways one of the most easily identifiable starting points for his entire philosophical system. See Spinoza’s Ethics, 179.
185 Ibid., 194.
186 Israel, Radical Enlightenment, 231.
187 Spinoza, Ethics, 204.
188 Ibid., 211.
189 Ibid., 322.
advance. In light of this, one might venture to say that Spinoza’s conception of reality reaches much further into the past than it does into the future.

It is not necessary to discuss much of Part II of the *Ethics* outside of Spinoza’s view that the ideas of the human mind are just as strictly determined as the rest of reality, and noting that he favors deductive reasoning over empiricism in his epistemology.\(^{190}\) At the end of Part II though, a key (albeit perplexing) piece to the puzzle of trying to understand the relationship between the *Ethics* and Spinoza’s political writings appears. This is the idea that “we act only from God’s command [in accordance with unbreakable and deterministic natural laws].”\(^{191}\) Somewhat mysteriously, Spinoza feels that this idea has important social and political implications in that it “teaches us to hate no man, neither to despise, to deride, to envy, or to be angry with any,” while also instructing in “how citizens should be governed and led, not so as to become slaves, but so that they may *freely* [my italics] do whatsoever [sic] things are best.”\(^{192}\)

This passage is perhaps the proper juncture to broach a discussion of a curious tension that runs throughout Spinoza’s thought. Specifically, this is the tension between Spinoza’s explicitly deterministic metaphysics and his discussions of freedom. In light of Spinoza’s clearly necessitarian system, what can he mean when he uses the term freedom? The twofold answer to this question, while far from perfect, does make his use of the term more explicable. The first part of our answer is that Spinoza (largely implicitly) recognizes and abides by the oft-made distinction between metaphysical freedom and political freedom. We have already seen that Spinoza rejects metaphysical freedom, the idea that any agents whatsoever can have free will.\(^{193}\)

\(^{190}\) Spinoza feels that empirical experience is never sufficient to gain the absolute certainty that he seeks. Instead, deductive reasoning is necessary. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, 250-256.
\(^{191}\) Israel, Radical Enlightenment, 235.
\(^{192}\) Spinoza, *Ethics*, 261.
\(^{193}\) By “free will” here I mean the ability of agents to choose in such a way that prior causes and effects do not invariably fully predetermine their choices.
As will be more fully revealed later, however, Spinoza does place some weight on freedom in the sense of political liberty, the freedom to believe and (to a much lesser extent in Spinoza’s particular case) act as one wills within fairly broad boundaries. Thus, at times when he uses the word freedom, Spinoza means political freedom instead of free will.

There is however a further and more idiosyncratic wrinkle in the dilemma of Spinoza’s use of the word freedom in an affirmative sense. Contra to his strict necessitarianism, in Part V of the *Ethics*, the book’s final section, Spinoza focuses on “leading the way to freedom” by “showing how far reason can control the emotions, and what is the nature of mental freedom or blessedness.” Similar to the ancient Stoics, here Spinoza uses the word freedom to represent a state of being in which a person has achieved a sort of partial extrication from his or her passions and emotions. Put another way, Spinoza argues that through the rigorous use of reason to expand the understanding, humans can become free in the sense of having the ability to “control and moderate” the pull of passion. Deleuze expresses this third conception of freedom by Spinoza somewhat differently, writing that it comes about when “[a man] comes into possession of his power of acting…when his conatus [instinctive, striving will] is determined by adequate ideas.” Regardless of exactly how it is presented, this position, by asserting that, via the furtherance of the understanding, the mind can become free, is contrary to Spinoza’s thoroughlygoing determinism. If nothing else, in Spinoza’s strictly deterministic system, the ability to try and make oneself more free is absent as even that choice would be entirely predetermined.

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195 Ibid.
197 There have been attempts to solve the freedom-determinism dilemma Spinoza appears to have created in his *Ethics* by arguing that Spinoza should be interpreted as presenting a conception of freedom in Part V which is detached from action altogether. Briefly, this position asserts that he means to say that by extracting ourselves somewhat from our passions we do not gain any control over our actual actions. Instead, we merely become more
an ability to achieve a freedom based on the moderation of the passions is not fully consistent
with the strictly deterministic metaphysical position that he adheres to throughout the rest of the
*Ethics*.

One idea that first appears in Spinoza’s *Ethics* and is imperative for correctly
understanding his political thought is his non-normative conception of nature. For Spinoza, just
as there are no true final causes, likewise there is no transcendent standard of justice with which
to judge the actions of humans in the state of nature. In place of a transcendent standard of
justice, Spinoza conceives of the “the terms good and bad” as “indicat[ing] no positive quality in
things in regards to themselves, but a[s] merely modes of thinking or notions which we form
from the comparison of things one with another.” When it comes to good and bad and right
and wrong then, Spinoza is something of a relativist, defining “good” as “that which we certainly
know to be useful to us” and “evil” as “that which we certainly know to be a hindrance to us in
the attainment of any good.” In his philosophy then, normative or ethical terms have no
ultimate meaning. Rather, their meanings are only relative to the people who utter them based on
whether they will be “useful” or not.

Along with this relativism, comes a unique conception of virtue which Spinoza, in order
to better epistemologically and metaphysically buttress it, strives to connect with reason and
human nature. Spinoza argues that “virtue is to be desired for its own sake, and that there is
nothing more excellent or useful to us.” It is in order to achieve virtue that men should seek to
cognizant of the true motivations behind our actions and are thus free to resign ourselves to them. This argument
fails in that it is unable to overcome the fact that Spinoza’s strict determinism encompasses the motivations and
beliefs of the mind just as fully as it does the external actions of the body. For a version of this argument, see Strauss

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198 Spinoza, *Ethics*, 323.
199 Ibid., 324.
200 Ibid.
201 Ibid., 335. Spinoza’s assertion that virtue is desired for its own sake violates his ethical relativism. What if an
agent is convinced that virtuous behavior will not be useful to him in a given situation or instance? Even further, one
quell or at least control their emotions through reason, for while emotions distract and lead away from virtue, the use of true reason will never lead one astray. Also relevant here is Spinoza’s emphasis on the importance of formulating a proper conception of human nature in order to achieve virtue. He writes: “it is necessary to know the power and the infirmity of our nature before we can determine what reason can do in restraining the emotions, and what is beyond her power.” Without a correct conception of human nature it is impossible to know how to utilize reason in order to rein in the emotions and obtain virtue.

What, though, is virtue for Spinoza? How does he define moral excellence? He writes that “the foundation of virtue is the endeavor to preserve one’s own being, and that happiness consists in man’s power of preserving his own being.” Virtue then, as the goal which true reason sets for all people, is ultimately based in self-preservation. Going even further, self-preservation is far from a merely necessary but not sufficient condition for virtue, Spinoza instead conceives of self-preservation as both necessary and sufficient for virtue, writing “the more every man endeavors…to preserve his own being – the more he is endowed with virtue.” In sum, then, the virtuous person is the one who strives to maintain his own life, while the happy, fulfilled person is one who actually has the power to do so.

could easily question the sensibleness of speaking of virtue at all in the midst of a fully deterministic metaphysical system. Is behavior that appears virtuous really virtuous if the agent that undertakes it had no choice but to act as he did?

Ibid., 334. This quote, with its emphasis on the limitations of reason, is especially interesting in light of Spinoza’s seemingly unlimited faith in deductive reasoning in his philosophy of science and metaphysics. For more on his a priori deductive view of science see footnote 42 of Chapter 2.

Ibid., 335. The concept of power as it relates to Spinoza’s political philosophy will be explored further later in this chapter as it plays an important role in his thought.

The obvious question here is that of suicides. Consistent with his doctrine, Spinoza sees those who commit suicide as lacking in virtue, writing “suicides are weak-minded.” Due to his belief that his conception of virtue as self-preservation is based in human nature, Spinoza views suicides as allowing “external causes” to overwhelm their own natures. Spinoza, Ethics, 335.

Ibid., 337.

Spinoza does conceive of other virtues beyond self-preservation. For example, he finds that “the highest good for those who follow after virtue is to know God.” However, all of these other virtues follow from the foundational
His conception of the fundamental importance of self-preservation to both virtue and human social relations is the beginning of Spinoza’s political philosophy as a coherent structure that can stand alone outside of – but not detached from – his metaphysics as presented in the *Ethics*. For Spinoza it is axiomatic that very nearly all humans will, in accordance with reason, strive to preserve themselves.\(^{207}\) However, with his recognition that people are routinely swayed by their emotions and passions, Spinoza is painfully aware of the fickleness of human nature and behavior when it comes to following the dictates of reason in other respects – writing “men are moved by opinion more readily than by true reason.”\(^{208}\) This is truly unfortunate, as Spinoza believes that “men in so far as they live in obedience to reason, necessarily live always in harmony one with another.”\(^{209}\) Presumably then, if only all people lived always in accord with true reason, social and political philosophy would be mostly unnecessary as it would be universally recognized that the interests of all humans converge instead of diverge.

Unfortunately, this utopia of self-interested individuals is not the natural state of humanity as humans only rarely live according to reason’s dictates. Instead, as previously-mentioned, Spinoza believes that humanity is all too easily swayed by the passions that are by definition opposed to its true interests.

Spinoza’s view that humans will almost invariably act to preserve themselves while simultaneously being swayed by dangerous and irrational passions, leads him to believe that they will often behave recklessly towards their fellows in pursuit of what they (mistakenly) feel to be

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\(^{207}\) Again, he regards attempts at suicide as extremely exceptional in that they literally violate human nature.

\(^{208}\) Spinoza, *Ethics*, 334.

\(^{209}\) Ibid., 344. Here Spinoza is anticipating Adam Smith’s idea of the “invisible hand,” while also going far beyond it. Certainly Smith would have never claimed (as Spinoza does) that a world infused with complete self-interested rationality would run entirely without conflict. Spinoza himself does not elaborate on how exactly this ideal world would work. One can easily question Spinoza here, as, might the interests of even fully rational agents sometimes conflict?
their self-interests. Pivotal, this leads Spinoza to see the natural condition of man as the violent, anarchic chaos that Hobbes famously referred to as the “state of nature.” In this state of nature, defined as a situation in which humans live without civil authority or government, men will do whatever brutal and violent acts they feel acts necessary to preserve their own lives, powers, and property. Moreover, in keeping with Spinoza’s thoroughgoing naturalism and rejection of any transcendent standard of justice, he thinks that they have every right to do so.

This brings us to Spinoza’s view of rights and powers as coextensive. For him “every individual has the sovereign right to do all that he can; in other words, the rights of an individual extend to the utmost limits of his power.” Den Uyl puts this concept of the equivalence of right and power well, writing: “Spinoza’s doctrine of right means that one has the right to do whatever one can do.” The natural rights of an individual, then, are the ability to do whatever is in their power. Further, and consistent with his rejection of a transcendent standard of justice in the Ethics, Spinoza thinks that there is absolutely nothing morally objectionable with men causing untold amounts of “misery” via the exercise of “their natural right[s]…in a state of nature.” Again Den Uyl puts this well: “Spinoza’s doctrine of natural rights is without normative content.” Logically, this means that even if men, in their actions in the state of nature, diverge from the path of self-preservation (by, for example, openly stealing from someone they know to be more powerful and better-armed), they are still not wrong in a moral sense for doing so. Keeping in mind his view that a virtuous person is one who always strives for self-preservation, this radical non-normativity leads to a seemingly contradictory situation in

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210 Hobbes, Leviathan, 63.
211 Spinoza, TPT and TP, 200.
which Spinoza would assert that someone who acts contrary to their own self-preservation is not virtuous but yet is not immoral. Spinoza would presumably answer this charge by asserting (as we have already seen that he does) that, except in very rare circumstances, all humans act only in ways that they at least perceive to be in their best interests in regards to self-preservation.\(^{215}\)

Despite his refusal to term any of the acts committed during it immoral, Spinoza is keen on finding a to extract humanity from his theorized state of nature. He provides two rationales for this, first presenting the straightforward argument that “everyone wishes to live as far as possible securely beyond the reach of fear, and this would be quite impossible as long as everyone did everything he liked.”\(^{216}\) Spinoza’s second rationale for why the human community should abandon the state of nature is similar to the first, while also perhaps being slightly more inventive. This argument asserts that “men must necessarily come to an agreement to live together as securely and well as possible if they are to enjoy as a whole the rights which naturally belong to them as individuals.”\(^{217}\) For Spinoza then, the formation of a voluntary agreement establishing a governing body actually expands the ability of the entire human population party to the agreement to exercise their natural rights/powers. By removing at least a portion of the burden of the constant threat of physical violence, the formation of a sovereign government actually enlarges the powers/natural rights of the new government’s citizens when compared to their powers under the state of nature that formerly predominated.

At the risk of departing slightly from our main narrative, this is the proper time to point out that the pair of arguments Spinoza provides for leaving the state of nature are perhaps the

\(^{215}\) This distinction between perceived and actual self-interest would appear to fit nicely within Spinoza’s political philosophy as we have already seen how his entire political philosophy is predicated on such a distinction in regards to the gap between the ideal of reason-guided self-interested action and the actuality of mistakenly passion-led action. An astute reader might object here that Spinoza is still unable to fully escape the normativity that he seems to be intent upon fleeing from. By preferring one state (reason-guided self-interested action) to another (passion-led action), Spinoza covertly inserts a normative component into his philosophy.

\(^{216}\) Spinoza, \textit{TPT} and \textit{TP}, 202.

\(^{217}\) Ibid.
first hint of a pragmatic consequentialism in his political philosophy, an often ignored undercurrent of thought which runs throughout his political philosophy. Throughout his political philosophy, Spinoza is fundamentally concerned with what works, with the question of which approach will lead to the best of all possible political orders given human nature as it is. This is especially clear in the *PT*, a work that, while unfinished, can be described as a guidebook to the advantages and disadvantages of various types of governmental structures. Taking monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy each in turn, the *PT* reads almost as a technical how-to guide to government (albeit one written in a style that is unmistakably philosophical). Even more, Spinoza begins the *PT* by criticizing earlier political philosophers for “conceiv[ing] of men, not as they are, but as they themselves would like them to be,” finding that this mistake has led to a situation in which social and political thinkers have failed to “conceive a theory of politics, which could be turned to use.”218 Contra the perceived failures of all who came before, Spinoza writes that his goal is to “demonstrate by a certain and undoubted course of argument, or to deduce from the very condition of human nature, not what is new and unheard of, but only such things as best agree with practice.”219 Taking his explicitly-stated concerns in mind, it becomes obvious that Spinoza is extremely concerned with consequences, what would come about if his political philosophy was put into practice. His is no armchair theorizing. This depiction of Spinoza as a pragmatic consequentialist leads to the question of political teleology: if Spinoza was concerned with consequences, then what was his overall aim, what state of affairs did he intend for his political philosophy to bring about in a human society? Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his rejection of all teleology in metaphysics, Spinoza is coy about this issue. Later in this chapter however an attempt will be made to resolve it.

218 Spinoza, *TPT and TP*, 287.
219 Ibid., 288.
Again following Hobbes, Spinoza argues that in order for a human community to escape from the state of nature it must enter into a voluntary “compact” or agreement in which they pool their natural rights and powers in order to transfer the bulk of them “to him who has sovereign power.” In this process of forming a social contract, “each individual hand[s] over the whole of his power to the body politic, the latter [gains the] sole and unquestioned dominion, and everyone will be bound to obey, under pain of the severest punishment;” through this process, Spinoza argues that a government “can be formed without any violation of natural right.” Importantly, he feels that after the formation of a government in this way, “the sovereign power is not restrained by any laws, but everyone is bound to obey it in all things; such is the state of things implied when men either tacitly or expressly handed over to it all their power of self-defense, or in other words, all their right.” Government, then, is treated in Spinoza’s eyes as a giant and all-powerful individual, a behemoth of coercive force with the power (regardless of its exact form) to unreservedly trample over its citizens. Just as individuals humans in the state of nature had right to do anything in their power, so government has the right to do anything in its power, regardless of how terrible. Like much else in his political philosophy, this follows logically from Spinoza’s strictly non-normative conception of the state of nature and rejection of transcendental standards of morality. As there is no right and wrong before the state comes into existence, so the newly-born state immediately becomes the sole arbiter of morality, deciding through its rulemaking process “what is good and what is evil.” To the modern observer, this overarching morality of legalism seems frighteningly reminiscent of the justifications put forth

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220 Ibid., 203, 204.
221 Ibid., 205. Spinoza appears here to overlook the fact that, by arguing that the formation of a social contract requires that all parties to it turn over to the “body politic” as many and as much of their natural rights/powers as possible, he is directly contradicting his earlier argument that the formation of government through a social contract will expand the rights and powers of those same parties.
222 Ibid.
223 Israel, Radical Enlightenment, 239.
by Carl Schmidt and others for totalitarian governments. The individual under such a
government would seem to have no protection from the whims of the rulers, regardless of how
capricious they may be.

Spinoza is well aware of such objections to his conception of the proper formation of a
state. To a certain extent he even appears to emphasize with them.224 However he sees no
workable alternative to making the state the arbiter of morality, writing that if the makers of the
original compact “had wished to retain any right for themselves, they ought to have taken
precautions for its defense and preservation; as they have not done so, and indeed could not have
done so without dividing and consequently ruining the state, they placed themselves absolutely at
the mercy of the sovereign power; and, therefore, having acted (as we have shown) as reason and
necessity demanded, they are obligated to fulfill the commands of the sovereign power however
absurd these may be.”225 For Spinoza then, this harsh doctrine which appears to necessitate that
the state act as an Orwellian leviathan is absolutely necessary in that it is the only way in which
to avoid a descent back into the lawless and anarchic state of nature. In Spinoza’s eyes a brutal
state is far superior to no state at all. In regards to dissent and protest, Spinoza writes that the
only alternative to total submission to the moral and physical will of the state is to remove
oneself from the law, becoming a “public enem[y].”226 This is a path which Spinoza, as a
philosopher who “see[s] lawlessness as utterly destructive of the common good and the interests
of society,” is apt to avoid.227

This brutal and nearly nihilistic doctrine of state formation is made more palatable by
several statements that Spinoza makes that serve to moderate it somewhat. The first of these is

224 Spinoza, *TPT and TP*, 205.
225 Ibid.
226 Ibid.
227 Israel, Radical Enlightenment, 261.
Spinoza’s belief that “everyone has by nature a right to act deceitfully, and to break his compacts, unless he be restrained by the hope of some greater good, or the fear of some greater evil.” At first blush, this sentence appears to contradict Spinoza’s belief that, once constituted, a state has the ultimate say in regards to all moral judgment. However, this doctrine is a return to Spinoza’s rejection of any transcendent morality in favor of moral relativism explored earlier in this chapter. By “good” and “evil” here, then, Spinoza means what is better or worse for the individual in question. Thus, if the code of morality proclaimed or legislated by a state would cause the ruin of an individual, that individual is not obligated to passively submit. Rather he has the ability to become a public enemy to rebel against the government. Interestingly, interpreted strictly, if an individual was actually to take this path he would apparently be morally wrong by definition as (as per the previous discussion) Spinoza is so emphatic that the state, once established, is the legitimate arbiter of morality and justice. Thus Spinoza would seem to be advocating that an individual can legitimately pursue a course of action that his own philosophy asserts is unethical and wrong. Although he does not make this argument, the only way out of this conundrum for Spinoza would appear to be a return to his argument that it is both de facto axiomatic and obvious that individuals will nearly always act in what they perceive to be their own best interests. Thus the individual who feels that he will be gravely injured in property or person by a government law or decree will probably disobey it regardless of any argument as to its morality or lack thereof. Again for Spinoza, the actual trumps the theoretical, brute reality tramples the high-flung.

The second argument that Spinoza advances that mitigates the seeming brutality of his making the state the sole arbiter of morality is an important demonstration of his consequentialism. Sovereign state authorities, being just as self-interested as any individual, are

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228 Spinoza, TPT and TP, 204.
unlikely to “impose thoroughly irrational commands.”

Recognizing that (again like individual humans) their rights are dependent upon their power, states will not fail to be cognizant of the fact that the more citizens they alienate and cause to rebel either openly or covertly, the weaker they become. It is this appeal to the self-interest of governments (whichever form they may take) that Spinoza feels will keep governments acting in the interests of their citizens. He holds that states will avoid acting overly oppressively or coercively towards their own citizens not out of principle or out of respect for individual rights, but instead out of the fear of a backlash. Indeed, Spinoza feels that “men have never so far ceded their power as to cease to be an object of fear to the rulers who received such power and right; and dominions have always been in as much danger from their own subjects as from external enemies.” Rulers, then, should always fear their subjects at least enough to keep them from establishing “the most violent tyranny” over them. If nothing else, this fear should suffice to keep governments somewhat accountable to their citizens.

This brings us to another internal conflict within Spinoza’s political thought. While early in the TPT he asserts that after forming the social compact citizens transfers all of their natural

\[\text{\textit{[229] Ibid., 205.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{[230] Related to this argument about the consequentialist self-limiting behavior of states is Della Rocca’s assertion that the real principle at work is Spinoza’s idea that “the right of the sovereign is what is in its power in the long run [italics original].” Unfortunately, Della Rocca provides no textual support to back up this positing of an implicit principle in Spinoza’s political philosophy. Contra Della Rocca, there is no reason to think that Spinoza though that rulers were only concerned with their self-interest in the long run. Instead, his vision appears to have been that those in control of the state sought to maximize their powers (or, using modern terminology, utilities) absolutely. Thus Spinoza sought them as acting to maximize their power over all time spans (as opposed to simply focusing on the long run). See Della Rocca, \textit{Spinoza}, 207.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{[231] It is all too easy to criticize Spinoza here for appearing, in light of currently-available historical evidence, of being somewhat naive. Certainly history has seen (and continues to see) many, many examples of dictators and kings remaining in power despite subjecting their citizens and subjects to almost unspeakable horrors. In fact, many leaders (Stalin, Fidel Castro, etc.) have even been able to consolidate their power even while violently oppressing their own citizens. In Spinoza’s defense though, he can hardly be blamed for having failed to anticipate the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century. He can, however, be given credit for anticipating public choice theory in recognizing the pivotal role of incentives in political structures.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{[232] Spinoza, \textit{TPT and TP}, 214.}}\]
\[\text{\textit{[233] Ibid., 215.}}\]
rights and powers to the sovereign authority, he now appears to assert that this is impossible as even the most dictatorial and controlling state cannot strip its citizens of these things completely.\textsuperscript{234} In order to establish this new argument Spinoza “appeals to the actual practice of rulers” insofar as “the need for [state] coercion indicates that the transfer of rights is never completely consummated.”\textsuperscript{235} Spinoza unfortunately makes no real attempt to reconcile these diverging statements and thus, a small amount of extrapolation and speculation is again required. Spinoza, as generally favoring political stability and order over individual autonomy, apparently feels that a social compact should be formulated and carried out in such a way that an absolute minimum of rights and powers are left to the individual citizens of a newly formed state, while rightfully recognizing that no social compact or state can remove an individual of all of his natural rights/powers.\textsuperscript{236} Why he chooses to state in one part of the \textit{TPT} that this can be done only to explicitly reject his own argument in a later chapter is somewhat mysterious.

While it may come as something of a surprise in light of his view of natural rights as coextensive with power and government, which has no principled limits on its power over its citizens, Spinoza has generally been interpreted as advocating for a liberal and democratic structure of government that he primarily justifies through abstract principle.\textsuperscript{237} There is almost

\begin{footnotesize}
234 Ibid., 205, 214.
236 An interesting counterfactual is the question: if it were possible for a state to strip an individual of all of his rights and powers, would Spinoza regard this as permissible. Presumably he would for, by failing to postulate any moral authority outside of the state, there would be nothing to object on moral grounds to this occurring. This question will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.
237 While there are prominent examples of scholars who diverge from this dominant interpretation of Spinoza’s political philosophy, this essay, for a number of reasons, deliberately avoids engaging with the work of Antonio Negri and the other radical Marxist philosophers who have done work on Spinoza. Most cogent among them is that much of their work hinges upon the distinction between “power” (\textit{potentia}) and “Power” (\textit{potestas}) that can apparently be parsed out of Spinoza’s work. This distinction is thought by them to relate to the modern conflict between the capitalist and proletarian classes. As this effort to make Spinoza relevant to the contemporary world means that they do not approach Spinoza via his historical context and concerns, it would seem more productive to engage only those Spinoza interpreters who do in fact take heed of these things. For a representative Marxist view of Spinoza’s contemporary relevance, see Antonio Negri, \textit{The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics}, ed. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
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no dissent in regards to the former part of this interpretation, with Strauss’ statement that Spinoza “may be said to be the first philosopher who advocated liberal democracy” being a very representative expression of the consensus.\(^\text{238}\)

However, the latter half of this dominant interpretation, that Spinoza primarily justifies his political philosophy through abstract principle, is not as well-supported in the literature. Most works on Spinoza’s political philosophy take no position either way on the issue of its validity, but enough do to establish a consensus in the literature (especially given the previous lack of a ready alterantive). Feuer, in support of this interpretation, states that Spinoza “worked [for a] free society” and undoubtedly Israel, with his assertion that Spinoza’s political philosophy was a “quest for individual liberty, freedom of thought, and freedom to publish ideas,” would agree.\(^\text{239}\) Likewise, Stewart finds that Spinoza is correctly viewed as an “advocat[e] of democracy on the basis of individual rights [my italics].”\(^\text{240}\)

Contra these claims that Spinoza based his arguments primarily on principle, the pragmatic and consequentialist nature of his political philosophy is readily apparent in his rationale for preferring democracy over all other forms of government.\(^\text{241}\) Defining a democracy as “a society which wields all its power as a whole,” Spinoza views it, like all other types of government, as having absolute authority (up to the limits of its physical power) over its citizens.\(^\text{242}\) The difference in this case is that instead of a hereditary monarch or aristocratic cliché holding the reigns of power, in a democracy every eligible citizen would have “the right to


\(^\text{240}\) Stewart, The Courtier and the Heretic, 102.

\(^\text{241}\) The other forms of government Spinoza has in mind here are aristocracy (i.e. oligarchy) and monarchy. He explores these two at length in his PT, but is consistent in his advocacy for democracy as the best possible form of government given human nature as it is. Given Spinoza’s emphasis on the superiority of democracy, it is unnecessary to explore these two in any detail.

\(^\text{242}\) Spinoza, TPT and TP, 205.
vote [and] fill public office."243 His definition of democracy as a “whole,” however, is somewhat misleading in that he embraces strict limits on suffrage, arguing that only those who are “independent and of respectable life” should have a voice in the political affairs of the state. By this he means that not only criminals and the “infamy[ous],” but also anyone who is in a social position in which they are dominated by another is refused suffrage.244 Slaves, women, and “wards” (those in training under an expert craftsperson), then, are refused suffrage out of a fear that their inferior social positions may cause them to be unduly influenced by their respective “masters.”245 A Spinozistic democracy would thus likely be similar to early colonial America in that only middle and upper class men would be able to have input into the machinery of government decision making. Spinoza recognizes this, commenting that “on this [democratic] system the result might be, that the supreme council (the primary elected governing legislative body of the state) would be composed of fewer citizens than that of [an] aristocracy.”246

In explaining why democracy is the superior form of government, Spinoza states that it is “the most natural and the most consistent with individual liberty.”247 Reading this quote in the context of his overall philosophy, it becomes clear that Spinoza’s uses the phrase “individual liberty” in a way quite different than it is typically used in the contemporary intellectual climate. By individual liberty, Spinoza does not mean any type of constitutional rights or privileges; instead, he is only referring to the ability of eligible citizens to take part in the tyranny of the

243 Ibid., 385.
244 Ibid., 385-387.
245 Ibid., 387. Some may question why women appear on this list. Spinoza took it for granted that women cannot be considered truly independent as “wherever on the earth men are found, there we see that men rule, and women are ruled.” Of course, these opinions were the norm during the time in which Spinoza lived and he thus cannot be faulted for them.
246 Ibid., 385.
247 Ibid., 207.
majority that a Spinozistic democracy would largely consist of. This is clear when Spinoza, in referring to the “individual liberty” of democracy writes “in [a democracy] no one transfers his natural right so absolutely that he has no further voice in affairs, he only hands it over to the majority of society, whereof he is a unit. Thus all men remain, as they were in the state of nature, equals.” Unfortunately for the suffrage-eligible citizens of this democracy, their fates are at the mercy of the good graces of their fellow men as “the possessor of sovereign power, whether he be one, or many, or the whole body politic, has the sovereign right of imposing any commands he pleases.”

There is, however, is another, more-consequentialist rationale for Spinoza’s advocacy of democracy. He is of the opinion that democracies will generally make more reasonable and judicious decisions than other forms of government as “it is almost impossible that the majority of a people, especially if it be a large one, should agree in an irrational design.” While Spinoza does not elaborate on why he feels this way, the reasoning behind it is presumably connected to his belief that democracy does a superior job of weeding out irrational passion and emotion from a society than all other forms of government. Keeping in mind that for Spinoza superior reason equals superior virtue, with all other things being equal, a democracy will (along with making superior decisions) be more virtuous than a society with any other type of political structure. Behind the red herring of his discussion of individual liberty then, the real motivation for Spinoza’s affirmation of democracy as the preeminent form of government is the positive consequences that it generates for decision making, rationality, and virtue.

248 Spinoza himself would agree with the claim that a Spinozistic democracy would be controlled by a tyranny of the majority, writing “in a democracy…the voice of the majority has the force of law.” Ibid., 263.
249 Ibid.
250 Ibid. This is, of course, to leave out all of the citizens of the democracy who are not granted suffrage. Without a voice in the political process, they are at the complete mercy of the majority of the voting population and its elected representatives.
251 Ibid., 206.
252 Ibid.
It is perhaps not surprising that Spinoza, famed for the vicious *cherche*m that expelled him from the Jewish community and thought an atheist by the great majority of his contemporaries, has complex feelings on the subject of the proper relation between religion and the state. Before these are explored in detail however, it will first be necessary to articulate Spinoza’s views on religion and religious history in general.

Spinoza devotes the bulk of the *TPT* to a natural history of religion and religious practice. In doing so he strives to pull back the shroud of mysticism and sacredness that he feels has veiled popular religion for too long, in order to show it for what it really is: a layer of truth engulfed in superstition, “prejudices,” and “respect for ecclesiastics.”

In attempting to accomplish this, Spinoza steels himself to “examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines, which I do not find clearly therein set down.” The results of this undertaking find Spinoza largely demythologizing religion by asserting that everything that is stated in Scripture agrees (on some level) with humanity’s rational understanding, denying miracles, and arguing that “revelation and philosophy stand on totally different footings.”

In regards to the latter point, Spinoza feels that, contra the common belief among his contemporaries that “reason is a mere handmaiden to theology,” *a priori* reason is actually the only pathway humans have to uncover the metaphysical truths of reality. He argues that religion and theology, though based on a Bible and Scripture created by man, contain moral truth which is in itself sacred. The “fundamental dogma” of this moral truth consists in the idea “that love of God and love of one’s neighbor are really one and

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253 Ibid., 6-7.
254 Ibid., 8.
255 Ibid., 9. Spinoza’s denial of miracles follows logically from his naturalism and strict necessitarianism. As he believes that all events are fully determined by their natural causes, there is simply no room in his worldview for miracles.
256 Ibid., 11.
the same.”257 The simplicity of this doctrine leads Spinoza to write that true faith and piety consists in displays of justice, charity, and obedience to God, not complicated theological arguments or regular church attendance.258

In keeping with his doctrine that the state has rights over its citizens that are only limited by its powers, Spinoza argues that “divine precepts…do not receive immediately from God the force of a command, but only from those…who possess the right of ruling and legislating.”259 For him then, there is no separation between religion and the state, the state irrevocably dominates and controls the religious practices of its citizens. It is “the function of the sovereign…to determine how we should obey God” and “no one can obey God rightly if the practices of his piety do not conform to the public welfare; or, consequently, if he does not implicitly obey all the commands of the sovereign.”260 In practice Spinoza thinks that an official state church should be established by every government and that all citizens must be required to join. He rejects out of hand the arguments of those who wish to “separate secular rights from spiritual rights” as he feels that nothing besides “great evil” will come of putting this idea into practice.261

Undoubtedly Spinoza, having witnessed the corrosive effects of the Calvinist church on the Dutch Republic, is keen on avoiding the issues that can be caused by religious authorities involving themselves in political matters. Mostly though, he falls back on the argument that any division of power within the *civitas* (politically organized community) that is not entirely unavoidable (as is the residual powers/rights that the state cannot strip from its citizens) weakens

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257 Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 11. This is of course in keeping with Spinoza’s pantheist metaphysical views which he saw as firmly establishing the truth of God as coextensive with the world.

258 Spinoza, *TPT and TP*, 183. While Spinoza here is (understandably in light of the radical heterodoxy and deep unpopularity of his opinions on metaphysics and theology) vague on precisely what he means by obedience to God, placing this statement into the context of the rest of his metaphysical doctrine would seem to give it no more meaning than simply obeying natural laws.

259 Ibid., 248. In light of his naturalism, Spinoza’s use of the phrase “divine precepts” should not be taken literally.

260 Ibid., 249-250.

261 Ibid., 251, 254.
it in detrimental ways; moreover, since the state has the power to control religion, it also retains the right to do so. Disregarding this latter point for now, it is clear that the main reason Spinoza rejects the separation of church and state is due to the decidedly negative consequences that he believes would ensue if such a strategy were pursued. This is especially clear when he writes: “the kingdom of God can only exist among men through the means of the sovereign powers.” By declaring this, Spinoza implies that a just and pious civitas cannot exist where religion is separated from the state.262

Outside of his preference for a democratic government structure, nothing that has been said up to this point has provided any hint as to why Spinoza’s political philosophy is usually interpreted as advocating liberal democracy. In fact, the picture of this philosophy that has thus far been sketched includes some elements (such as a vision of natural rights as being coextensive with power and the complete rejection of the separation between church and state) that make it appear profoundly illiberal. The following section will bring balance to this portrait by examining how Spinoza’s calling for freedom of thought and a limited freedom of speech can bring many to view him as something of a liberal. It will argue however, that, in keeping with the previously-explored aspects of his political thought, Spinoza’s rationale and justification for these positions is based upon a pragmatic assessment of their likely consequences instead of abstract principle.

The last chapter of the TPT is entitled “That in a Free State Every Man May Think What He Likes, and Say What He Thinks.”263 Spinoza begins the chapter by revisiting the idea that “no man’s mind can possibly lie wholly at the disposal of another, for no one can willingly transfer

262 Ibid., 247.
263 Ibid., 257.
his natural right of free reason and judgment or be compelled to do so."^{264} All Spinoza means by this is something that we have touched on earlier – one cannot give away or be stripped of all of one’s natural rights/powers. The state, although typically possessing sufficient power to influence the hearts and minds of its citizens, cannot literally control their minds and attendant thoughts. Following Spinoza’s view of rights and powers as coextensive then, the state does not have the right to even try and attempt to gain control of its citizens’ thoughts. Any state which ignores this warning and attempts such “is accounted tyrannical.”^{265} Thus, freedoms of thought, conscience, and inner religious faith, as long as they confine themselves to the mind, should be reserved for the individual.\textsuperscript{266}

It is imperative here to keep in mind that Spinoza sees state attempts at mind control as misguided solely due to their impossibility. By equating rights and powers and by conceiving of the state as (in part) the only arbiter of morality, Spinoza allows it to blamelessly do anything that is in its power. Thus, were it possible for the state to control the minds of its citizens, it would be perfectly legitimate as well as morally unobjectionable.

There is an obvious confounding factor in Spinoza’s argument for freedom of thought, which, by pushing the issue into deeper theoretical water, reveals that Spinoza’s true justification for why states should not attempt to dominate the minds of their citizens is more complex than it at first appears. While he is undoubtedly correct that neither the state nor any other entity possesses the power/right to control human minds, states in many cases possess the power (and thus the right) to attempt to control the minds of their citizens. Thus it would seem that Spinoza’s

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{266} The inclusion of inner religious faith in this list is of a special interest in light of Spinoza’s argument that the state should entirely dominate all religious practice through a state-controlled church. He believes that an individual has the power/right to believe whatever they wish about religion. However, as soon as an individual attempts to actually act on these beliefs he comes into the domain of the state’s iron grip on religious practice (and most all other activities of its citizens).
argument that the state should cease from attempts to control the minds of its citizens ultimately fails. Recognizing this, he advances a pragmatic and consequentialist alternative rationale; namely, that attempts at mind control by the state would likely result in “extreme peril to itself.” While Spinoza does not elaborate on the nature of this peril, read in light of his views of the ever-present threat of a government’s own citizens to its existence, it becomes clear that he feels that the popular resentment that could be aroused by such an undertaking could result in an existential threat to the state. States, then, per his view of them as self-interested entities, should refrain from such attempts. As evident by this second argument, Spinoza again falls back upon a consequentialist rationale. For Spinoza, attempts at mind control by states should not be undertaken because the consequences for them will undoubtedly be entirely negative, not because the experiments themselves would be anti-humanist or cruel.

The justification Spinoza’s provides for a limited freedom of speech is, like his ultimate defense of the freedom of thought, pragmatically consequentialist. Starting from his beliefs that “brains are as diverse as palates” and men think in “diverse and contradictory fashions,” Spinoza argues that humans are naturally and irrepressibly inclined to share their unique thoughts with others. Unfortunately for the state, nothing it can do will succeed in fully preventing its more dissent-inclined and disaffected citizens from expressing their opinions to others. If the state does attempt to suppress such talk in the public sphere, it will simply move to the private sphere, sheltered away from prying ears. Even more, heavy-handed crackdowns on speech by the state will have “disastrous results,” for men dislike being “compelled to speak only according to the dictates of the supreme power.” Men no more enjoy having restraints put on their speech than they favor being subjected to attempts at mind control. Such attempts are thus likely to foster

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267 Ibid., 258.
268 Ibid., 257-258.
269 Ibid., 258.
deep resentments toward the state. Spinoza thinks that it is certainly possible that this resentment could eventually lead to open rebellion, an outcome that he is keen to avoid. In sum, due entirely to potential negative consequences, he allows some degree of freedom of speech.\textsuperscript{270}

Despite these arguments, Spinoza is not an advocate of unreserved freedom of speech. Rather, in recognizing that “authority may be as much injured by words as by actions,” he seeks to balance censorship and freedom of speech in order to obtain the best ratio of benefits to costs.\textsuperscript{271} In order to achieve this balance, he argues that the state should restrict only “seditious” speech – speech, which “out of fraud, anger, or hatred…accuses the authorities of injustice, and stirs up the people against them.”\textsuperscript{272} By restraining only seditious speech, the state can, on the one hand, avoid an existential threat to itself and, on the other hand, bypass much of the resentment that would result from total censorship.

Spinoza advocates two positions often associated with liberalism: freedom of thought and a limited freedom of speech. His reasons for doing so, however, have much less to do with the principled defense of the rights of man than they do with a pragmatic assessment of what is necessary for a successful state and society. The determining consideration in Spinoza’s political thought is not a principled humanism. Rather, it is a practical consequentialism, an overarching concern for what will work in a real human society. This is why he is so emphatic in criticizing other philosophers for having failed to “conceive a theory of politics, which could be turned to use.”\textsuperscript{273}

\textsuperscript{270} Surprisingly, mention of rights/powers is absent in Spinoza’s discussion of speech is largely absent. Possibly this is due to a recognition of the thorny theoretical issues that resulted from the application of these concepts to the issue of freedom of thought and conscience.
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid., 259.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., 287.
It is now time to return to the question of teleology in Spinoza’s political philosophy. He clearly rejects the all notions of teleology in metaphysics, but a complete rejection of teleology in a political philosophy is not a coherent position. After all, why would anyone bother formulating a conception of the state at all without seeing it as serving a larger purpose or end? Also, Spinoza’s pragmatic consequentialism must lead to some goal, for a consequentialist theory that wholly lacks one is aimless in that it lacks anything to aim for (there are no standards by which to judge the consequences of the choices made in the theory itself). This leads to the question: what is the ultimate goal for the state in Spinoza’s political philosophy?

Spinoza provides us with an answer in the closing chapter of the TPT. He writes “the ultimate aim of government is not to rule, or restrain, by fear, nor to exact obedience, but contrariwise, to free every man from fear, that he may live in all possible security; in other words, to strengthen his natural right to exist and work without injury to himself and others.” He rephrases and expands upon this slightly later, writing “the object of government is…to enable [men] to develop their minds and bodies in security, and to employ their reason unshackled…in fact, the true aim of government is liberty.” These two quotes make clear that for Spinoza the ultimate goal of government is to provide security from external threats to its citizens so that they may better be able to more fully actualize their reason and potential. By his use of the word “liberty” here, Spinoza, when read in the context of his overall political philosophy, must mean freedom from non-state coercion, the freedom to be free from the

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274 Ibid., 259. As was already pointed out in footnote 46 of this chapter, when Spinoza argues that the state can expand the natural rights/powers of its citizens he apparently does not recognize that, in his discussion of the social contract, he asserted that every individual party to it had to give over as many of his natural rights as possible to the state.

275 Ibid.

276 It is possible here to object that Spinoza, though he posits a final aim for government, still leaves it somewhat headless in that he rejects the idea that reality itself has any teleology. The state then, is an institution that strives to accomplish a purpose within a non-normative reality. The question for Spinoza here is what possible point could the proximate teleology of the state have without an ultimate teleology? If it all (the whole) doesn’t matter in the end, how could a finite part of the whole matter?
unwanted attentions of roving bandits and others private individuals out to harm and destroy.

One meaning that Spinoza’s use of liberty here cannot possess is freedom from oppression or coercion brought upon a person by his own government. Spinoza may think that most such state coercion may be in the interests of neither a state nor its citizens, but he has no principled argument that he can bring to bear against it. All he can do is assert that the state, by turning violence against its own citizens, may be undermining its own self-interest. Spinoza then, while asserting that the ultimate purpose of the state is to protect its citizens from external threats, constructs no principle to defend citizens from their own government. Instead, he can only put forward consequentialist arguments that appeal to the self-interests of the state. This must be as close to a pure domestic Realpolitik as can be conceived.

This chapter has questioned the interpretation of Spinoza’s political philosophy as providing a defense of liberal democracy that is based on abstract principle. In its place it has advanced the argument that a strain of pragmatic consequentialism runs throughout Spinoza’s political philosophy and provides a justification for the majority of his theories and positions. In arguing for this new interpretation, this chapter has relied on both his political thought per se, as represented in the TPT and TP, and his metaphysics and view of human nature, as found in the Ethics.
CONCLUSION

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

This essay has attempted to provide a new interpretation of Baruch Spinoza’s political philosophy. In doing so it has drawn upon established sources while also striving to go beyond them. Starting with a through examination of the historical and intellectual circumstances that influenced Spinoza’s life and work, this essay then turned that examination into a backdrop on which to construct its new interpretation of Spinoza’s politics. Beginning with a close look at his naturalistic metaphysics and portrait of human nature as presented in the *Ethics*, this new interpretation focused primarily on Spinoza’s political philosophy per se as presented in the *TTP* and *TP*. In doing so, it argued that, while much quality literature on the subject has appeared in recent years, this literature uniformly failed to capture a vital aspect of his politics: its pragmatic consequentialism. Rather than the dominant view of Spinoza as a philosopher who advocated liberal democracy on principled grounds, it advanced the new position that Spinoza was fundamentally concerned with presenting a workable conception of the state in as many of its aspects as he could capture. In doing so it demonstrated that Spinoza, far from clinging to bedrock principles of natural rights (in the common contemporary use of the term – not Spinoza’s own rather idiosyncratic use) or liberty, was much more concerned with the judicious distribution and use of power in society. By meticulously designing a democratic structure of
governance that would be ideal in its doling out of power and force, Spinoza felt that he could ensure the stability and prosperity of a society.

In light of this new interpretation, many new paths in the study of Spinoza’s political philosophy remain to be cleared. Lurking beneath the surface of the bulk of this essay has been the question of Spinoza’s relation to liberalism. Currently he is interpreted as (at the very least) a predecessor of modern liberalism, but his rejection of principled arguments for individual rights and freedoms may cast some doubt upon this reading. Also worth exploring in detail is the question of whether there is a prominent place in the contemporary political and philosophical debate for a Spinozistic theory of politics. With the relative decline of (among others) Lockean theories of inviolable natural rights, might there be space for a revived radical consequentialism in the same vein as Spinoza’s own? Hopefully, future work will be able to shed light on both of these questions.
WORKS CITED


