



Spinoza and the Radical Enlightenment

Week 10. 20th November 2017

Religion under Reason

Theological-Political Treatise (1670)

TRACTATUS THEOLOGICO- POLITICUS

Continens

Dissertationes aliquot,

Quibus ostenditur Libertatem Philosophandi non tantum
salva Pietate, & Reipublicæ Pace posse concedi: sed
eandem nisi cum Pace Reipublicæ, ipsaque
Pietate tolli non posse.

Auctore Benedicto de Spinoza.

Johann: Epist: I. Cap: IV. vers: XIII.

*Per hoc cognoscimus quod in Deo manemus, & Deus manet
in nobis, quod de Spiritu suo dedit nobis.*



HAMBURGI,

Apud Henricum Künrath. clc lo clxx.

‘In which the freedom to philosophise may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself’.

– Title-page.





Previous: Salomon van Ruisdael, "View of Deventer Seen from the North-West (1657)

L: Pieter Claesz, "Vanitas" (1630)

R: Abraham van Beyeren, "Ostentatious still life" (1667)



L. Gillis van Tilborgh, "Family Portrait", late 17th century
R. Johannes Vermeer, "Girl with a Pearl Earring", 1665





Jan Brueghel the Younger, "A Satire of Tulip Mania" (1640)



Dutch Golden Age

- The Dutch United Provinces gain effective independence from Spain in 1585, with its 'Golden Age' lasting most of 17th century
- Benefited from inward migration of skilled Protestant merchants and craftsmen from Southern Netherlands and France
- Relative religious toleration attracted persecuted Jews from Portugal, Spain and Eastern Europe
- Founded on maritime trade, shipbuilding and cloth manufacture
- Dutch East India Company founded in 1602, largest commercial enterprise of 17th century, trading tea and spices,
- Monopolises trade with Japan and China, offered 40% dividend on investments in 1669, with 50,000 employees and 10,000 private soldiers
- Dutch West India company dominates slave-trading in early 17th century, and establishes colonies on the American East Coast, Amazon River, Surinam, Brazil, Guyana and elsewhere
- Gradually undermined by wars with England, European competition and loss of access to Asian suppliers

Philosophical toleration

- Liberal, urbanised, international-facing republic is a site of toleration and opportunity in the 'Republic of Letters'
- Patronage of arts and sciences
- University of Leiden pre-eminent
- Relatively free publishing trade
- Descartes lives in Netherlands for most of his adult life; Locke spends 5 years in exile there where his political thought develops; Browne gains his M.D. at Leiden, and Hobbes would have struggled to publish his books elsewhere
- Flourishing of intellectual interest in new sciences and philosophy among circles of radical Protestants – Collegiants and Socinians – which Spinoza frequents
- Friends with freethinkers like Lodewijk Meyer, Adriaen Koerbagh and Abraham van Berckel (*Leviathan* translator)

‘[Descartes] lived in Holland for twenty years (1629-49), except for a few brief visits to France and one to England, all on business. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of Holland in the seventeenth century, as the one country where there was freedom of speculation. Hobbes had to have his books printed there; Locke took refuge there during the five worst years of reaction in England before 1688; Bayle (of the *Dictionary*) found it necessary to live there; and Spinoza would hardly have been allowed to do his work in any other country.’

– Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*



‘[A]nd where, in the midst of the crowd of a great and very busy people who are more concerned with their own affairs than they are curious about those of others, I have been able, without lacking any of the amenities to be found in the most bustling cities, to live as solitary and as withdrawn a life as I could in the remotest deserts.’

– Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part 3.

Dutch republicanism

- United Provinces a federated republic of states and towns
- Effective head of state was the 'stadtholder', dominated by the House of Orange
- Stadtholderless period under Grand Pensionary Johan De Witt sees a flourishing of republican ideals (1653-1672)
- Modelled itself on Hebrew Republic
- Spinoza emerges in a context of strident anti-monarchism and pro-democratic thought
- Key thinkers include Grotius, Pieter and Johan de la Court, and Franciscus van den Enden
- Influenced by Hobbes and Machiavelli
- Suffusion of private self-interest and public harmony via trade and toleration





The abuse of religion

- Spinoza now moves to distinguish his own country, with its precarious freedom of judgement, and attack his enemies
- The freedom to philosophise is not only compatible, but also assists, the peace and flourishing of the state
- It is those who defend religion and piety most loudly that Spinoza is suspicious of
- Turn and take a look at Preface, sections 13-17, and in pairs:
- *Why does Spinoza suspect some Christians of hypocrisy?*
- *Why does this kind of religion pose a danger to society?*

The abuse of religion

- *Sola Scripture* – Luther and his followers called for a return to biblical scripture for the true Word of God, in protest against the corruptions and riches of the Roman Catholic Church
- Spinoza's decision to subject biblical scripture to reasonable first principles, and historical and philological investigation, is therefore strategic and polemical
- It undermines the authority of his Calvinist enemies...
- While providing an opportunity to establish the rule of reason over matters previously beyond its domain – faith, imagination, and everyday political life

- ‘But since I found nothing in what Scripture expressly teaches which did not agree with the intellect, or which would contradict it, and moreover, since I saw that the Prophets taught only very simple things, which everyone could easily perceive, and that they embellished these things in that style, and confirmed them with those reasons, by which they could most readily move the mind of the multitude to devotion toward God, I was fully persuaded that Scripture leaves reason absolutely free, and that it has nothing in common with Philosophy, but that each rests on its own foundation.’
- ‘the revealed Word of God is not some certain number of books, but a simple concept of the divine mind revealed to the Prophets: to obey God wholeheartedly, by practicing justice and loving- kindness’

What is a Prophet?

- *What distinguishes a prophet from an ordinary person?*
- In chapters 1 and 2 of the TTP, Spinoza presents the figure of the prophet as one who is equipped with a superior power of imagination...
- Which is used to compel other members of society to act justly and harmoniously with each other, in a compelling and easy to understand manner
- Max Weber would later distinguish prophets in terms of 'charisma'
- Spinoza's account leaves little truth to the prophet, except for the socially useful function they serve

Religion under Reason

- Let's turn to Chapter 3 of the TTP now, and take a look through sections 6 to 11
- In 5-6, Spinoza reflects on how Moses tried to persuade the Hebrew people by appealing to their 'childish understanding'
- He contrasts this with what would ordinarily seem like religious terms – 'God's guidance', 'aid', 'choice', etc.
- In pairs, think about and discuss:
- *How does Spinoza contrast the presentation of religious belief with its underlying rationality?*

Religion under Reason

[12] Whatever we can honorably desire is related above all to these three things:

[i] understanding things through their first causes;

[ii] gaining control over the passions, *or* acquiring the habit of virtue; and finally,

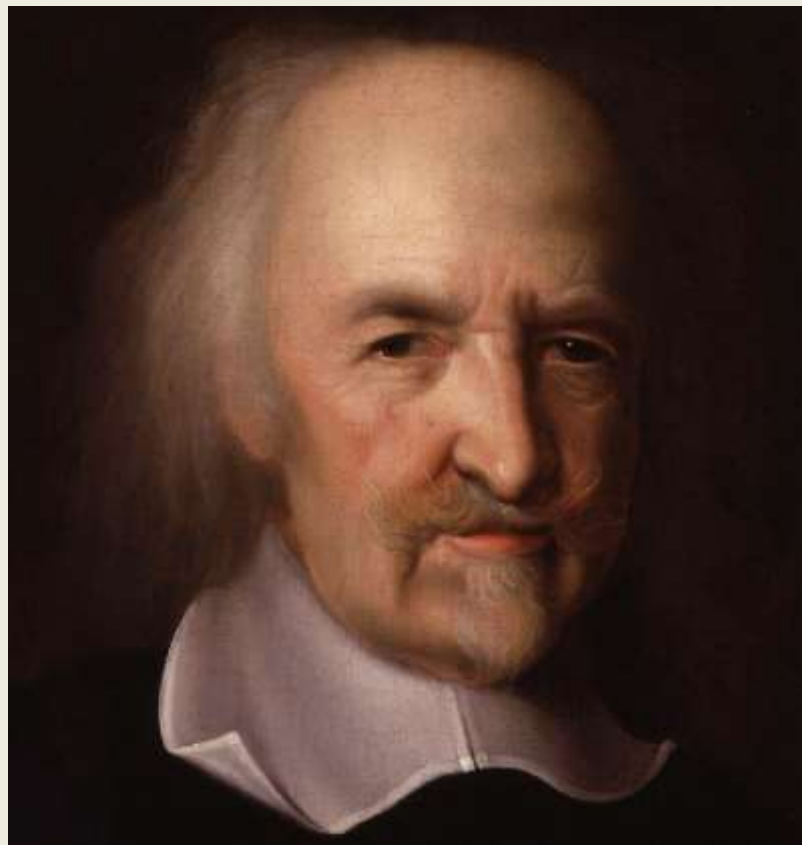
[iii] living securely and healthily. The means which lead directly to the first and second of these, and can be considered their proximate and efficient causes, are contained in human nature itself. So acquiring them depends chiefly on our power alone, *or* on the laws of human nature alone. For this reason we must maintain, without qualification, that these gifts are not peculiar to any nation, but have always been common to the whole human race—unless we want to dream that formerly nature produced different kinds of men.



Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676)

Natural light of reason

- Spinoza's proposal to subject religion to reason is reminiscent of a couple of important influences
- Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*
- Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651, Latin 1668)
- Lodewijk Meyer, *Philosophy, the Interpreter of Holy Scripture* (1666)
- Adriaan Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark Places* (1668)



Natural light of reason

- ‘It seeks to explain certain obscure figures which occur in the Prophets, and are not distinctly characterized as being figures. Ignorant and superficial readers take them in a literal, not in a figurative sense. Even well informed persons are bewildered if they understand these passages in their literal signification, but they are entirely relieved of their perplexity when we explain the figure, or merely suggest that the terms are figurative. For this reason I have called this book *Guide for the Perplexed*’

Natural light of reason

- Turn to sections 21-25 of Chapter 3
- Think about, and then discuss in pairs this question:
- *How does Spinoza go about subjecting the Bible to a rational method?*



'it signifies nothing other than a phenomenon whose natural cause cannot be explained on the pattern of some other familiar thing or at least cannot be so explained by the narrator or reporter of the miracle' (6.5)





‘For the sacred books were not written by one man alone, nor for the common people of a single period, but by a large number of men, of different temperaments and at different times, and if we calculate the period from the earliest to the latest, it will be found to be around two thousand years and possibly much longer.’ (14.1)

Natural light of reason

- Spinoza draws on historical research and philological knowledge, particularly Hebrew, to present and explain contradictions in the Bible
- One of the key arguments he will put across is that the Talmud was not written by Moses (it includes his death!), but were a collection of writings compiled and added to by a later Jewish leader and historian, probably Ezra
- Unlike Maimonides and Meyer though, Spinoza doesn't seek to restrict or debunk prophecy and religion
- Rather, he subjects it to a new standard:
- To what extent does it help human beings lead more peaceful, harmonious lives?

God's Own People

- Turn now to sections 54-57
- Spinoza gives two culturally specific traits to Jewish and Chinese cultures, as then understood
- What is it, ultimately, that distinguishes one people from another?



God's Own People

- Spinoza repeatedly criticizes Judaism for its conviction that the Jews are God's chosen people, and that they should adhere to strict ceremonial customs and self-isolation
- Although he concedes it has probably been decisive in their survival long after their state disappeared...
- But was Spinoza's attack levelled only at his former community?

Next week...

- Next week, we'll discuss how Spinoza's politicization of Moses, and the Hebrew Republic, was charged particularly at Dutch Calvinists...
- We will discuss Chapter 16-19 in detail
- Please, if you have time, aim to read up to Chapter 16, to familiarize yourself with the detail of Spinoza's critique of religion and prophecy, which is far more nuanced and supportive than many give him credit