SPINOZA *on* LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER

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Note about References

All references to, and quotations from, Spinoza's works and correspondence are taken from the two volumes of *The Collected Works of Spinoza* edited and translated by Edwin Curley. In citing passages from individual texts I follow the usual conventions. I refer first to Curley's edition, then to the volume and page number of the Latin *Opera* edited by Carl Gebhardt.

Titles are abbreviated as follows:

Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect	TIE
Short Treatise on God, Man and his Wellbeing	ST
Ethics	E
Theological-Political Treatise	TTP
Political Treatise	TP

Introduction

Philosophy as the Art of Living Together

Human lives can go better or worse. They may be dominated by the miseries and frustrations that Spinoza describes as sadness, or enriched by the satisfactions that he classifies as forms of joy. The emotional tenor of a life may be consistently cheerful or anxious and unsettled. Spinoza's opinion as to which kind of life is preferable never wavers; we all do what we can to live joyfully and avoid sadness. But success does not come easily. To work out what will make us most joyful and put our knowledge into practice we need many skills and insights, and these can only be effectively cultivated in propitious circumstances. Learning how to harness and strengthen our power to live in the ways that are most deeply empowering and satisfying is therefore a ramifying and always unfinished project. Above all, however, it is a collective one. Learning to live joyfully is a matter of learning to live together.

Spinoza's commitment to this view is evident throughout his mature philosophical works. The *Political Treatise* considers how states need to be organized if their members are to live peacefully and securely. Tackling the problem of disagreement within the state, *The Theological-Political Treatise* explains how people with conflicting beliefs and aspirations can nevertheless share mutually empowering and satisfying ways of life. Working on a much larger scale, the *Ethics* situates these insights within a more comprehensive conception of living together that extends beyond our relationships with one another to our relationship with nature as a whole. The more we are able to align our ways of life with the workings of the totality that Spinoza describes as God or nature, the more profoundly and securely joyful we become.

Learning how to make the transition from a way of life narrowly focused on our immediate individual desires to an existence aligned with the whole of nature is, in Spinoza's view, the defining project of philosophy. This is what true philosophers achieve, and the joyfulness that their knowledge engenders is what makes philosophizing supremely valuable. But philosophy also has practical manifestations. Because we get better at living together as our rational understanding grows, our capacity to sustain harmonious ways of life is the surest expression of our philosophical insight. At its fullest, understanding is as motivating as it is illuminating. As well as giving us access to truths about the benefits of cooperative ways of life, it strengthens our commitment to act on them, so that a community

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whose members share an exceptionally high level of understanding will be overwhelmingly motivated to put their knowledge to work. They will appreciate, for instance, that individuals find it easier to cooperate when they are sure they will be treated fairly, and will also act on this insight by giving as much weight to the good of others as to their own.

Realizing this exemplary ideal may be more than we can achieve. Nevertheless, even a comparatively limited philosophical understanding will strengthen our capacity to sustain mutually satisfying social ties, and will enable us to enter into a degree of cooperation with further features of our environment. As we come to understand how we are situated in nature as a whole, we get a clearer view of what we do and do not have the power to bring about, and learn to act accordingly. The project of learning to live together therefore encompasses every aspect of our knowledge and is reflected in every aspect of our lives.

Spinoza's insistence on the simultaneously theoretical and practical quality of our understanding echoes a classical conception of philosophy as the art of living.[1] Seneca, for example, characterizes philosophy as a comprehensive *ars vivendi* that unifies doctrines about life as a whole with precepts about how to act on them. Philosophy, he affirms, 'is both theoretical and practical; it contemplates and at the same time acts'.[2] Sketching the theoretical doctrines on which our knowledge of how to act is grounded, Seneca goes on to claim that if we aspire to practise philosophy 'we must set before our eyes the goal of the supreme good towards which we may strive, and to which all our acts and words may have reference—just as sailors guide their course according to a certain star'.[3] Since the supreme good lies in knowing God, our first task is to understand him so that we can learn how to worship him.[4] Our next problem is to learn to deal with humans, and here we need to recognize that we are part of nature. 'All that you behold, that which comprises both god and man, is one—we are the parts of one great body.'[5] Spinoza is sympathetic to many aspects of this Stoic outlook; for him, too, the philosopher's supreme good lies in understanding a God who is identified with the whole of nature and in which all individual things exist; and for him, too, understanding is both theoretical and practical. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the extent to which philosophizing as Spinoza portrays it is at the same time a collective project—an art of living together.

Spinoza's conviction that we have no real alternative to learning to live together is rooted in a view that runs through every aspect of his philosophy: that individual things are not free-standing or autonomous, but on the contrary are deeply interdependent. This outlook is evident from the very beginning of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza deprives individuals of the independence traditionally

[1] Perhaps the greatest historian and exponent of this tradition is Pierre Hadot. See Hadot 1995.
[2] Seneca 1971, Letter 95.10.
[3] Seneca 1971, Letter 95, 45.
[4] Seneca 1971, Letter 95, 47–8.
[5] Seneca 1971, Letter 95, 51–2.

accorded to substances. A star in the firmament, a worm in the blood or a woman in the street are not substances, he claims, but merely modes of the one all-encompassing substance that he calls God or nature. Explicating this form of ontological dependence, Spinoza goes on to ask what distinguishes one mode from another. The essence of an individual thing, he argues, is its power to persevere in its being. Here we seem to have hit upon a sense in which individuals are independent of other things—each has its own power to persevere in its being. But again, Spinoza is cautious. The power of an individual mode, he argues, is dependent on the all-encompassing power of God or nature, without which the mode could not exist. 'Nothing can be or be conceived without God, but all things are in God.' Individuals therefore depend for their existence and essence on nature as a whole, and their power to persevere in their being is determined by its overall operations.

At a less exalted ontological level, individuals are also dependent on the things around them. As Spinoza often reminds us, they can only survive when conditions are right—a change in temperature may melt a glacier, destroy animal food sources and flood a town. Equally, individuals require certain conditions in order to flourish. Spinoza is adamant, for example, that humans are disempowered by solitude and can only live joyfully in community with other people. In general then, an individual's power to exist and go on existing depends on how external things affect it and how it is able to affect them.

The dependences we have so far traced apply to individuals of all kinds; any individual mode is dependent on substance or nature and on the modes around it. As human modes, however, we strive to persevere in our being by living joyfully, and our experience of affecting and being affected by external things is manifested in joy and sadness. As we have begun to see, it takes many relationships with many kinds of things to sustain our joyfulness; but Spinoza accords a special place to our relationships with other people, or as he prefers to put it, with things that are like us. The crucial sense in which people are alike is that their relationships with external things, and indeed with one another, are coloured by the same joyful and saddening affects. Like us, other people fear danger and are pleased by the happiness of their friends, and commonalities such as these play a part in shaping our mutual relationships.

There is no guarantee that these affective exchanges will make our lives more joyful; they incline us, Spinoza says, to vengefulness as much as to love. But they nevertheless make space for a form of empowerment that only arises from our relationships with other humans. While a mountain, for example, is incapable of responding to the awe it arouses in us, the ways in which we answer one another's affects can increase our joyfulness and change what we are able to do. When two friends consistently and lovingly adapt to one another's desires, they create a cooperative relationship that brings with it novel satisfactions and new ways of opposing sadness. Together, they acquire powers to live joyfully that neither

possesses on their own. One may wonder whether we are also capable of mutual affective exchange with at least some non-human individuals, but Spinoza passes over this line of thought. Learning to live joyfully, as he construes it, is first and foremost a matter of learning to live cooperatively with other people, and our responsiveness to their affects is crucial to this process. By binding ourselves together in mutually satisfying relationships, we make our lives more joyful and establish conditions that are conducive to the growth of understanding.

To make the most of the benefits that flow from cooperation, Spinoza argues that we need to face up to our physical and emotional vulnerability. Instead of ignoring the extent of our dependence on other individuals, the precariousness of our relationship with our natural environment, or the restraints imposed by our place in the overall operation of nature, we need to keep these forms of dependence clearly in view and develop ways of living joyfully within the space they provide. Once we take this stance, Spinoza suggests, various things become clear. First of all, we have no viable alternative to learning to live together—our individual power is just too slight. More than this, learning to live together is a process of finding ways to address the forms of dependence that make us vulnerable to sadness, and transform them as far as we can into elements of progressively more empowering ways of life.

Since we are always striving to persevere in our being, there is a sense in which this process is already underway. In his own fashion, a tyrant who routinely murders his rivals is striving to make himself less vulnerable, and a patriarch who rules his family with a rod of iron may be bent on upholding a harmonious domestic life. What both men fail to understand is that the fears and resentments they arouse in those around them not only sadden particular individuals, but also weaken the forms of life they are trying to sustain. The fact that the patriarch's children hate him, for example, stunts the family's joyfulness and threatens its stability. It makes the family more vulnerable to internal conflict and reduces its resilience in the face of external threats. Although we are always trying to compensate for our individual and collective vulnerability, our efforts often fail or backfire, so that a first condition of making our lives more deeply and securely joyful must be to learn to overcome these limitations. We ourselves are the initial focus of the project of learning to live joyfully, and the satisfactions that most concern us are the ones we derive from our relationships with each other. In the ordinary course of things, experience teaches us quite a bit about the advantages of cooperation and sets us on the path of understanding. But for Spinoza, as for Seneca, it is only as our understanding grows, and we acquire a relatively systematic grasp of how to oppose sadness, that our power to live harmoniously becomes secure. While philosophy grows out of experience, it also introduces us to distinctive forms of joy.

Spinoza's project of learning to live together is nothing if not ambitious and it is not always easy to see what his prescriptions involve. How exactly are we

supposed to counteract the debilitating forms of dependence that he itemizes, and what sort of philosophically informed life are we aiming for? While these questions can fruitfully be raised about every aspect of Spinoza's system, the essays collected in this volume concentrate on three overlapping areas in which they arise—in his epistemology, his political philosophy, and his conception of philosophy itself.

In Part I, I explore the epistemological demands of learning to live together. I consider what kinds of understanding we need to cultivate and how they enhance our power to live cooperatively. Spinoza distinguishes three kinds of knowledge or *cognitio*, imagining, reasoning, and intuition. Each has a role to play in the project of sustaining joyful ways of life, and the contribution of one complements that of the others. Chapters 1 to 5 focus on the relationship between imagining and reasoning, and aim to show how these two forms of *cognitio* support and blend into one another. Imaginative practices, I argue, already embody many of the epistemological skills and norms associated with reasoning. Equally, reasoning relies on our capacity to imagine diverse forms of cooperation and different ways of life. To learn how to live together, we therefore have to work out how to combine our rational and imaginative powers in such a way that each tempers and enhances the other.

Since Spinoza's most detailed illustrations of this mutual dependence concentrate on the relationship between philosophy and revealed religion, the essays in Part I draw on this example. Chapter 2 uncovers continuities between an imaginative religious outlook and a rational philosophical one. Chapter 3 examines the grounds on which Spinoza distinguishes an empowering religious life from a degraded superstitious one, and suggests how even superstitious practices can help us live together. Chapter 4 considers the extent to which our rational understanding of how to live together appeals to imaginative narratives. How far, it asks, does reasoning make use of fictions? The same issue is taken up in Chapter 5, where I appeal to Spinoza to give fictions a place in a rational way of life.

Taken together, the essays in Part I aim to illuminate Spinoza's view that, in order to live as empoweringly and joyfully as we can, we have to learn how to harmonize our imaginative and rational insights. The way we understand our powers of imagining and reasoning affects our ability to use them and has consequences for how we are able to live. We need each of these two loosely distinguishable ways of thinking in order to understand the forms of dependence of which any successful effort to build a cooperative way of life must take account; and each of them helps us to put our understanding to work in the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves. To live as joyfully as we can, we have to resist the temptation to conceive of philosophy as a purely rational practice and take advantage of its imaginative dimensions.

Blending imagination and reason into an empowering philosophical practice, and expressing it in a cooperative way of life, requires a range of skills that can

only be acquired and exercised in certain conditions, many of which are political. In a state of nature where nothing prevents individuals from doing anything in their power, opportunities for cooperation are limited, and it is only within the state that our understanding can get a firm grip on the way we live. Politics is therefore central to Spinoza's project. Taking up a range of familiar issues, he considers, for example, how sovereigns can best maintain peace, what gives them legitimacy, and what forms of government are most conducive to freedom. Underlying these discussions, however, there is a deeper preoccupation. To count as successful, a state must sustain a cooperative ethos that protects its members from the kinds of sadness that come with tyranny, poverty, war, or religious conflict. But states also confront the task of enhancing their own resilience by providing conditions in which understanding can grow. Rather than merely upholding the status quo, states empower themselves by encouraging philosophical understanding and putting it to work, and the nature of this process is examined in Part II.

The essays in this section explore some of the pervasive misunderstandings that habitually obstruct our efforts to create successful political communities. Instead of facing up to our dependence on nature and acknowledging the painful truth that it is indifferent to our desires, we tend to imagine it as more hospitable and controllable than it is and, in doing so, misconstrue the problems that politics has to solve. Indeed, some of our most influential political doctrines exemplify this error. We commonly think of ourselves, for example, as subject to natural laws that guarantee certain moral rights and duties and limit what sovereigns and subjects can rightfully do. According to Spinoza, however, no such laws exist. Positing them may comfort and reassure us; but it gives us a misleading picture of our relationship with nature and distorts our understanding. By setting us on the wrong path, it obstructs our efforts to devise laws of our own that will strengthen our capacity to cooperate and enable us to live more harmoniously.

While I address this theme most explicitly in Chapters 6, 7, and 10, it also runs through the discussion of freedom in Chapters 8 and 9. Freedom, as Spinoza conceives of it, is the antidote to dependence. At one level it is the supreme political value; the very point of the state, Spinoza explains, is to enable us to live freely. If we look through a wider lens, however, political freedom is revealed as one element in a philosophical form of liberty that transforms the kinds of dependence from which we started out. Political freedom is a fine and relatively rare collective achievement; but it also serves as a model for the yet greater freedom that philosophical understanding secures.

Spinoza's discussions of politics focus primarily on states, their institutions and their subjects. Learning to live together, in its political dimension, is a matter of discovering how to create secure and peaceful communities within which people are able to develop and live by their philosophical understanding. The philosophically informed can therefore be expected to set great store by the state's power to protect them and do everything they can to ensure that it is not threatened. They

will be on the lookout for ways of strengthening the state's cohesiveness and ready to adjust their ways of life to their growing knowledge. As they will also appreciate, however, political power has its limits. Like other individual things, states are dependent on the overall workings of nature and are vulnerable to individuals whose power exceeds their own. The project of learning to live joyfully therefore cannot stop at the boundaries of the state, or even at the boundaries of a state system, but must also look outward to the rest of nature.

This further aspect of Spinoza's vision is the subject of Part III. Chapter 11 returns to the topic of Chapter 9 and explores a further aspect of the transition from political to philosophical freedom. The greatest liberation of which we are capable shifts our attention away from specifically human ways of life and in doing so changes our sense of what we are. We come to see ourselves, not so much as one human being among others or as members of one state among others, but as one mode of God or nature. This transformation is, however, hard to imagine, and in my final chapters I begin to explore what it might be like. Chapter 12 is a reflection on Spinoza's claim that, as we learn to live in the light of our understanding, our increasing joy is not diminished by any affective loss. Here I draw on literary sources to question his confidence. I end, in Chapter 13 by offering an interpretation of the virtue of fortitude, one of the constitutive conditions of learning to live together. Without fortitude, Spinoza suggests, we cannot develop our understanding or put it to work. But what exactly is it? What qualities do we most need in order to make philosophical progress?

Spinoza's conception of what philosophy is and what it can do, along with his sense of what an empowering way of life involves, are shaped by his experience. They reflect the philosophical and cultural preoccupations of his era, and are sensitive to the philosophical, religious, and political struggles with which he engaged. No attempt to understand his ideas and aspirations can ignore these contexts, and the essays in this book aim to take them into account. One cannot, for example, weigh Spinoza's view of the relationship between religion and philosophy without acknowledging the fierce struggles between theologians and philosophers by which he was surrounded. Nor can one capture the intended force of his view that philosophy is the key to learning to live together without bearing in mind how this commitment threatened the Dutch theological and political establishments. Spinoza's world is not ours, and many features of his work are liable to strike us as implausible or alien. Few of us regard the prophetic narratives of the Bible as a vital source of political insight; few professional philosophers nowadays conceive philosophy as an art of living; most of us are increasingly sceptical of Spinoza's view that we can treat animals as we please; and few of us share his conviction that philosophy can yield a universal and transformative understanding of nature. But despite these radical discontinuities, there are many ways in which Spinoza continues to speak to us. The essays collected here were written with contemporary philosophical issues in mind, and aim to show how

Spinoza's ideas illuminate them. By conceiving philosophy in practical terms as the project of learning to live together, I suggest, we can shift our epistemological and political outlooks, opening up new problems and making space for new solutions. At the same time, Spinoza encourages us to turn to the practice of philosophy itself and look afresh at what it can achieve and what virtues it calls for. Spinoza's worldview may be strange, but it is by no means irrelevant. By jolting some of our everyday presuppositions and reminding us of others, it can help us learn to live together.

PART I

LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER

1

Creating Rational Understanding

Spinoza as a Social Epistemologist

Spinoza's *Ethics* maps a path from an everyday way of life burdened by passion and error to an elevated form of existence in which the philosophically initiated are empowered by their love of God to live together justly and honourably (E IV App. XV; II/270).[1] The transformation he describes has many dimensions, ethical, affective, metaphysical, and psychological, but it partly consists in an epistemological progression through three stages of *cognitio* or knowledge. Starting with knowledge of the first kind, which belongs to the kind of thinking known as imagination, we 'perceive many things and form universal notions' from signs, and from sensory perceptions 'represented to us in a manner that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect'. Building on this foundation, we move to what Spinoza describes as reasoning or knowledge of the second kind, which operates with adequate ideas of the properties of things. Finally, we ascend to *scientia intuitiva* or knowledge of the third kind, a type of *cognitio* that derives adequate knowledge of the essence of things from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God (E IIp40s2; II/122).

Some excellent work has recently been done on Spinoza's account of the transition from reasoning to intuitive science,[2] but less has been said about the prior shift from imagining to reasoning.[3] This omission is not altogether surprising. In the *Ethics* imagination is represented in largely negative terms as a persistent but flawed mode of cognition that has to be transcended in order for philosophical inquiry to get a hold. It is the background, so to speak, against which the drama of philosophy is staged, and it is examined from the vantage point of thinkers who are already in a position to provide a rational account of it, informed by their adequate ideas of its operations and deficiencies. Seen from the perspective of knowledge of the second kind, imagining becomes part of the subject matter of philosophy, and many commentators have treated it in this fashion. In doing so,

[1] Originally published in *The Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume,* vol. 85:1 (2011), 181–99. Reprinted with permission of the Aristotelian Society and Oxford University Press. I am particularly grateful to Jennifer Hornsby, Pieter Pekelharing, and Eric Schliesser for their helpful comments on earlier presentations of this essay. See Schliesser (2011).

[2] See Carr (1987), Malinowski-Charles (2003), Garrett (2009a, 2009b).

[3] For notable exceptions see De Deugd (1966), Curley (1973a), Gatens and Lloyd (1999), Vinciguerra (2005), Gatens (2009a).

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however, they have tended to overlook an issue by which Spinoza is deeply preoccupied: the question of how a community where people mainly think and live on the basis of imagination can make reasoning a part of its way of life, and reap the benefits of the second kind of knowledge. Unusually among seventeenth-century philosophers, Spinoza not only explores the kinds of self-discipline and education that allow selected individuals to acquire adequate ideas;[4] he also treats reasoning as a collective undertaking that depends on social as well as cognitive conditions, and can in principle transform not just the way we think but the way we live. The transition from knowledge of the first to the second kind is in part a social one, and it is this aspect of it that I plan to explore.

Imagining, as it is portrayed in the *Ethics*, yields a kind of *cognitio* that is confused in several familiar ways. Whereas reasoning operates with clear and distinct ideas that in turn yield an adequate conception of the difference between truth and falsehood, the ideas we form on the basis of sensory perceptions or signs are grounded on our fortuitous encounters with things and reflect the limitations of our experience (E IIp29s; II/114). If my knowledge of the sun is based on my perception of it, I shall have a confused or inadequate idea of its distance from the earth; if my idea of a horse was acquired from reading *Orlando Furioso*, it will be mutilated or inaccurate (E IIp35s; II/117). Deficiencies such as these are exacerbated by some of the psychological laws to which humans are subject. Because our imagined ideas lead us to conceive of things as existing, they often fail to track change and give us an erroneous picture of what the world is like. To adapt one of Spinoza's examples, if I saw my friend Melinda last year and am unaware that she has since died, I shall persist in imagining her as existing and falsely believe that she is still alive (E IIp17c; II/105–6).[5] Equally, our disposition to associate ideas leads us to misinterpret situations and misunderstand causal connections. 'A soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war' while a farmer will connect the idea of a horse with that of a plough and a field (E IIp18s; II/107). But such trains of thought can lead the soldier or the farmer astray, as when the soldier jumps to the erroneous conclusion that horses are essentially for military use, or the farmer infers that a particular field must have been ploughed by a horse.

Underlying all these dispositions is the principle that Spinoza calls the *conatus*—the striving to persevere in its being that constitutes the essence of an individual thing (E IIIp6, p7; II/146). Like other individuals, humans manifest their *conatus* in every aspect of their existence, expressing it in languages, artifacts, forms of enquiry, and social institutions. People whose thinking is predominantly imaginative

[4] See for example TIE.

[5] Imagining, Spinoza writes, encompasses 'the fictitious, the false, the doubtful, and absolutely all those [ideas] which depend only on the memory' (Letter 37).

therefore strive to persevere in their being on the basis of their perceptions and encounters with signs, and this generates its own cognitive limitations. In an effort to assert itself, the mind puts a particular gloss on its experience by striving to imagine 'only what affirms or posits its power of acting' (EIIIp54; II/182), and failing to register things that diminish its own power or that of the body (EIIIp13c; II/151). An affective disposition to resist disempowerment makes us insensitive to the more discouraging features of our experience. When we imagine, ideas that are in fact partial and distorted conceal their own privation and represent themselves to us as whole and true, so that their limitations are reflected in the conceptions of truth and falsity we derive from them. As well as misleading us about particular states of affairs, they encourage us to settle for an epistemological second best, and to negotiate the world on the basis of norms that fall short of clear and distinct understanding (E IIp41; II/123).

Despite its failings, however, imagining is far from useless. It is the mode of cognition we normally employ, and the epistemological basis of our everyday forms of life. While Spinoza allows that some features of imagining stand in the way of reasoning and impede our ability to acquire knowledge of the second kind, he also assigns it a productive part in promoting our capacity to reason. Our imaginative striving to persevere in our being can be harnessed to the philosophical project of thinking with adequate ideas and used to encourage the development of a philosophical way of life. One of the ways in which human beings use their imaginative capacities, Spinoza observes, is to develop bodies of knowledge that will empower them. People with an interest in particular areas of human experience such as cosmology, psychology, history, religion, or politics set themselves to achieve investigative ends that will contribute to some aspect of this overall goal, and develop standards of truth and falsity adapted to the particular ends in question.

To exemplify what Spinoza has in mind, we can extrapolate from the account of history that he offers in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. A narrative historian who aims to provide an account of the history of Rome needs to employ appropriate norms for distinguishing true from false historical testimony, for assessing interpretations of archaeological data, and so forth (TTP VII.19–25; III/101–2). When these norms are themselves derived from confused or inadequate perceptions and signs, they will not meet the requirement of clarity and distinctness that reasoning requires, and will remain open to refutation by further imaginative inquiry. As Spinoza puts it, they will not generate mathematically certain conclusions (TTP II.6–7; III/30–1). But they may nevertheless be well suited to their purpose and provide a basis for acquiring knowledge that satisfies a standard of moral certainty. The claims made by a competent narrative historian, for instance, will be regarded as true when she operates with norms agreed to be sufficient for the specific purpose of providing a reliable account of the past, and avoids standards generally regarded as slack or excessively pedantic. Her conclusions will then count as morally certain.

The goals of imaginative enquiries also shape the extent of their concern with truth. There are, for instance, certain facts that our historian needs to get right, and certain stylistic limits that she needs to observe, if her work is to claim authority. (Were she to assert that Cicero was a Greek, or present her information in an arbitrary order, she would not succeed in narrating the history of Rome.) But other features of her project are more open. (It would not be hopelessly vitiated if some of its peripheral claims were held to be wrong, nor would it be undermined by an unusual though recognizable narrative technique.) A shared conception of what a narrative history, or indeed any form of imaginative inquiry, is meant to achieve therefore determines what range of truths are most relevant to guaranteeing its moral certainty.

A community whose way of life is grounded on imagining can generate standards of truth and falsity that, although inadequate, are sufficient for particular ends, and can use these standards to build up bodies of morally certain knowledge of the first kind. Moreover, as Spinoza repeatedly points out, this sort of knowledge is so vital to ordinary life that it would be ludicrous to condemn it because it fails to meet the norm of mathematical certainty to which philosophy aspires (TTP XV.37; III/187). For many purposes, moral certainty is all we need and all we can achieve. On the one hand, then, imaginatively based forms of inquiry can provide us with useful though fallible knowledge about a wide variety of things, and can help us to live peacefully and prosperously. On the other hand, they leave us exposed to errors and vulnerabilities that only philosophical reasoning can systematically diagnose. How, though, does the ambition to reason arise and get a hold?

One might hypothesize that, when people find their imaginative knowledge insufficient or misleading, their *conatus* prompts them to refine their universal notions and question the standards of truth on which they have been relying. This in turn, so the hypothesis might continue, leads them smoothly and seamlessly towards knowledge of the second kind. According to Spinoza, however, the answer is not so simple. At a psychological level, individuals and communities develop attachments to their imaginatively grounded beliefs and habits which in turn make them resistant to change. Even when they see that their beliefs are wanting, they are often unwilling to give up what they take themselves to know in favour of a more adequate but faintly grasped alternative (E IVp6; II/214). Moreover, at a social level, bodies of knowledge are reflected in distributions of power, and established experts are generally unwilling to put their dominance at risk. 'Hence it happens', for example, 'that one who seeks the true cause of miracles and is eager, like an educated man, to understand natural things… is generally considered and denounced as an impious heretic by those whom the people honour as interpreters of nature and the Gods' (E I App.; II/81). Within communities organized around imagining, attempts to reason are sometimes deeply challenging and profoundly unwelcome. So if reasoning is to become the basis of

an established way of life, as opposed to a sequestered minority interest, communities must first find ways of using their imaginative resources to create conditions in which resistance to knowledge of the second kind is not so strong as to be crushing, and in which there is space to develop a philosophical form of existence aimed at truth.

Since hostility to reasoning may originate in many quarters and take many forms, attempts to use imagination against it will themselves be culturally specific, and Spinoza's own writings offer a case in point. In the Dutch Republic, as he represents it in the *Theological Political Treatise*, the most strident enemies of philosophical reasoning were the members of a powerful group of Calvinist theologians, who took themselves to know what doctrinal truths any faithful person must believe. Armed with this set of certitudes, they opposed the style of philosophizing practised by Spinoza and his circle, and intermittently attempted to suppress its methods and conclusions.[6] In this context, then, the general problem of creating a society hospitable to philosophizing mutated into the more specific problem of challenging a particular theological outlook, not only by confronting it head-on and pitting philosophy against an imaginatively based form of theology, but also by promoting an alternative form of religious life that allowed space for critical enquiry. If reasoning is to flourish, Spinoza contended, the theologians' conception of religion will have to give way, not in the first instance to a rational or adequate alternative, but to a more easy-going and inclusive religious practice that will not stunt philosophical inquiry. By appropriating the resources of imagination on which the theologians relied, and using them to defend a different account of religion's demands, *cognitio* of the first kind could at least encourage reasoning by sustaining a way of life in which it was not subjected to harassment.

Writing from within a community where the Bible possessed unparalleled religious authority, Spinoza accepts the existing parameters of theological debate and defines the imaginatively grounded goal of religious life in biblical terms as a matter of loving one's neighbour (TTP XIII.8; III/168). Satisfying this demand, he claims, is all that true religion requires of us, and the function of religious beliefs and forms of worship is simply to help us achieve it by motivating us to live in a loving and steadily cooperative fashion. Since it matters very little how we bring this about, there is no need for us to agree with one another about religious doctrine. You may imagine God as a judge while I believe him to be immaterial, but as long as we both live cooperatively there is no religious reason to examine our differences. Nor is there any need to investigate the standards of truth and falsehood on which we base our beliefs. I may ground my conception of an immaterial God on my reading of the Bible, while your belief that God is a judge may be validated by your feeling that the Holy Spirit dwells in your heart. Our respective

[6] Verbeek 1992.

standards may both be deeply confused, having been picked up from incidental testimony or arbitrary associations; but if they enable us to live cooperatively there is no religious reason to challenge them (TTP XIV.16; III/175). A genuinely religious community therefore has a limited interest in the truth of people's beliefs and focuses instead on the way they behave. To sustain cooperation there is no need to inquire too closely into the epistemological processes by which individuals form their theological convictions, or the degree of confusion that their ideas exhibit. As long as they manage to live harmoniously or love their neighbours they should be allowed to follow their own beliefs and worship as they wish (TTP XIV; III/176).

At first glance this account of true religion seems set against the philosophical project of reasoning. Of all imaginative practices, religion seems particularly devoid of critical standards, particularly uninterested in developing them, and particularly tolerant of falsehood. To learn to live religiously is to learn to accept cooperative people as they are, however crazy, setting aside differences in religious belief and outlook and refusing to jeopardize the benefits of harmony by probing their convictions. While the social and political advantages of such a stance may be clear enough, particularly in a society where theology has traditionally been a source of contention, it is not easy to see how abandoning the collective quest for truth can create circumstances in which the possibility of reasoning is enhanced.

Spinoza's response to this objection is straightforward. To be sure, true religion does not require people to examine their religious beliefs critically, and is indeed tolerant of a great deal of falsehood. However, by enabling individuals and groups to arrive at their own convictions and live in the light of them, it creates conditions in which they have the opportunity to cultivate the habit of examining their ideas and practices, and are free to alter them in the light of their investigations. Moreover, as testing the truth or falsehood of one's beliefs by subjecting them to increasingly rigorous standards of confirmation becomes an option, true religion makes space for people of a philosophical bent who want to press this process of clarification as far as they can, and go all out for truth. As long as philosophers continue to live cooperatively, they are not only individually free to think in the privacy of their own studies, but also collectively free to cooperate publicly with one another in developing their adequate understanding. True religion therefore creates and validates a way of life in which philosophers have latitude to transcend the limits of imaginative thinking and learn to reason.

To make the transition from the first to the second kind of knowledge, a community must live in social and material circumstances where this possibility is not denied them, and true religion exemplifies such an ethos. This condition is far from trivial, but as it stands it is nevertheless comparatively weak. Although a religious way of life offers people the opportunity to reason, it does not encourage them to make use of it. On the contrary, it mainly tolerates the more or less

relaxed epistemological standards around which their beliefs and practices are organized. However, if the religious way of life that Spinoza envisages is to challenge the dogmatic theologies of his contemporaries and foster the art of reasoning, it seems that it must achieve more than mere forbearance. As well as permitting religious ways of life to be grounded on philosophical reasoning, it must somehow positively encourage the growth of knowledge of the second kind.

Following out this line of thought, Spinoza elaborates his analysis of true religion by drawing attention to the epistemological virtues it demands. To live cooperatively, he warns, one must in the first place avoid the hypocrisy of taking refuge in religious practices to which one is not committed, or placating oneself with what one recognizes to be religious fictions or fantasies (TTP XI.20; III/176). Such strategies are destructive because, although ideas that we acknowledge to be fictions can move us deeply and strengthen our resolve to live in a particular way, they lack the power of stable beliefs to generate steady patterns of action, and thus the habits of a cooperative way of life. In religion, where it is vital that one should be able to sustain the patterns of behaviour that constitute loving one's neighbour, one needs to operate on the basis of ideas that one regards as true, and is expected to give up religious outlooks that one no longer finds credible. One consequently cannot be indifferent to the question of what one does or does not believe, or to the criteria on which one's beliefs are grounded.

Alongside hypocrisy, Spinoza condemns the related vice of stubbornness (TTP XIV. 22; III/176–7). In the religious context he has in mind, stubborn people are those who insist on upholding discredited interpretations of Scripture, or reject ideas and outlooks on which cooperation evidently depends. Stubbornness impedes cooperation; but in excluding it, Spinoza imposes an expectation that religious people will be at least somewhat responsive to evidence and argument, rather than hanging on to their beliefs come what may. Easy-going as religion may be, it does not license one to believe absolutely anything, and to some extent requires individuals to be knowledge-seekers. It expects them to gravitate to whatever they sincerely regard as the best-supported religious outlook available, so that as a community modifies the morally certain basis of its commitment to true religion, beliefs and attitudes that were once acceptable may cease to be so. In Spinoza's view, for example, a person who continues to insist, in the face of extensive textual evidence, that all the recorded utterances of the biblical prophets are revealed truths, may be held to be guilty of stubbornness and thus of failing to live in a religious fashion. Cooperation has an intellectual dimension, and by obstinately refusing to take the opinions of one's opponents into account one violates the central religious tenet, 'Love your neighbour'. Since this demand does not apply to people who really do not understand a dispute, or otherwise fail to see its force, true religion will in practice remain pluralist. But because it embodies an openness to well-grounded argument, it imposes a critical pressure on a community's habits of thought and encourages

people, where possible, to converge on religious convictions that satisfy the best available standards of moral certainty.

True religion is therefore not condemned to extreme levels of epistemological fragmentation, nor is it as indifferent to truth-seeking as at first appeared. The requirement of living cooperatively contains an epistemological dimension, and although one can lead an entirely satisfactory religious life on the basis of beliefs and practices that are deeply inadequate and confused, critically minded people are under something resembling a religious obligation to subject their theological convictions to epistemological critique. As Spinoza puts it, 'each person is bound to accommodate [the tenets of religion] to his own power of understanding' so that he can accept them 'without any hesitation' (TTP XIV.33; III/179). Admittedly, the debates in which this will involve them will be conducted in imaginative terms, using inadequate ideas acquired through signs and perceptions, and will thus fall short of the philosophical style of thinking from which knowledge of the second kind arises. But as Spinoza now goes on to illustrate, such debates can nevertheless instill attitudes and habits integral to reasoning, and can therefore help to cultivate the outlook and expectations on which it depends.

Practitioners of true religion may be motivated to live cooperatively by many diverse beliefs and practices, but if they are to avoid hypocrisy and stubbornness, each of them must be willing to examine their own beliefs when these are challenged. This process may, of course, be one of individual reflection, but Spinoza is more interested in the public debates, controversies, and struggles in which it can also be manifested. In his own case, the Dutch discussions that particularly concern him focus on disagreements about the nature and grounds of a truly religious life. Engaging with theologians who take it for granted that the Bible is the source of religious knowledge, he sets out to challenge the conceptions of moral certainty on which these opponents rely, focusing on their appeals to divine revelation. Treating theology like any other form of interpretative inquiry and viewing it as a matter of decoding signs, he assumes that we first of all need a hermeneutic theory that will allow us to determine, with moral certainty, what claims the text makes about God's revelations to the prophets. In some contexts, such as that of literary criticism, establishing the meaning of the text might be enough; but if we are to use conclusions about biblical revelation as the basis of a religious way of life, we also need some morally certain grounds for treating them as authoritative.

At this point, some of Spinoza's theological opponents appeal directly to divine revelation. But he remains unsatisfied. Rather than taking refuge in ignorance, he argues, we need to examine the biblical text to work out what sort of insight the prophets possessed, and on what topics they were authoritative. If we can provide convincing answers to these questions, we shall be able to conclude with moral certainty not just that the prophets happened to teach this or that, but that when they spoke about topics on which they were authoritative, what they said was

true. We shall be morally certain not just that the prophets do as a matter of fact teach us to live cooperatively, but also that they were exceptionally well placed to know, on the basis of their imaginative experience, that God 'ordains' this way of life as particularly beneficial to us. Much as we trust physicists or gardeners in their own domains, so we shall have good reason to trust the prophets' testimony in their particular area of expertise. We shall then be able to justify our commitment to a biblically based interpretation of the character of a truly religious life, and will have coherent reasons for rejecting alternative accounts of what such a life involves.

The *Theological-Political Treatise* offers an argument to this effect: careful interpretation of the Bible shows that the prophets were human beings whose exceptional imaginative capacities gave them an extremely unusual degree of insight into moral questions about how to live. In this domain we therefore have reason to take their opinions seriously. Moreover, people who accept this argument put themselves in a position to live religiously on a morally certain basis, and are able to give a satisfactory discursive account of their reasons for living as they do. The epistemological norms around which their religious life is organized gain strength from the fact that they overlap with those underpinning less contentious imaginatively grounded practices such as narrative history or moral psychology; and as in these other cases, both the extent of theology's concern with truth and the particular truths on which it focuses are determined by its goal. Just as a historian needs to recognize and respect a certain range of facts if she is to tell the story of Rome, so there are various truths that a religious person needs to acknowledge and respect. She must, for example, live in a manner that is in fact cooperative (as judged by the prevailing morally certain standards), and accept any other truths that turn out to be necessary for realizing this end (TTP XIV.22; III/177).

As before, the religious authority of Spinoza's own analysis remains limited. Deeply as he may disdain the positions of his theological opponents, his argument is powerless in the face of individuals or groups whose cooperative lives are sincerely based on competing standards of moral certainty. However, among the qualities that true religion requires of them is an openness to his position, and by putting it into circulation, the *Treatise* places them under a religious obligation to consider it on its merits. Instead of sticking rigidly to their existing criteria of moral certainty, truly religious people will make intellectual engagement an aspect of their cooperative way of life and assess accounts of the basis of religion to the best of their ability. The question now is how far this exercise can help to create an imaginatively grounded social ethos hospitable to the development of the second kind of knowledge. Will a religious community whose members examine Spinoza's analysis of religion merely be made to reconsider the standards of moral certainty by which they vindicate their beliefs, or will they also be brought closer to the more stringent demands of philosophical reasoning? One of the aims of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is to narrow the gap between knowledge of the first