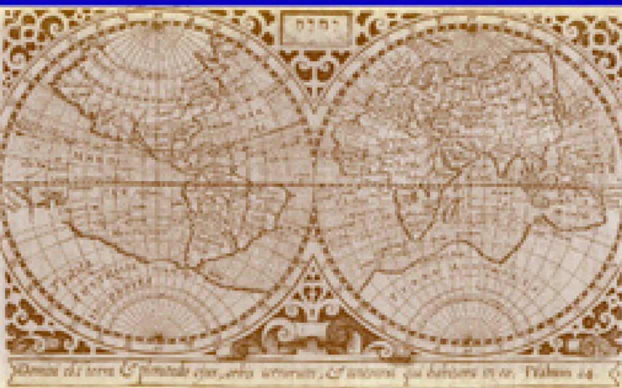
Nancy K. Levene

Spinoza's Revelation

Religion, Democracy, and Reason



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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construction of an "imaginary, semirational bridge where a genuinely rational one could not have been erected":[10] something that encourages the masses to conform to rational precepts as a substitute for understanding them in themselves, and at worst, a tool to distract the majority while the minority get on with the dangerous business of truth.[11] In other words, the opposition between reason and revelation – between what is universal and what is particular – ironically constitutes the opposition between the few who can discern what is universally true and the many who are left with what can be true only for them.[12]

But Spinoza's revelation – and thus Spinoza's reason – begins from entirely different premises.[13] The crucial issue is that since Spinoza's God is no more transcendent than immanent – since revelation itself is no more faithful than rational – all human beings are equally in

[10] Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics, vol. I: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 144. Yovel also argues for this position in "Bible Interpretation as Philosophical Praxis: A Study of Spinoza and Kant," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11 (1973): 189–212, and "Spinoza: The Psychology of the Multitude and the Uses of Language," *Studia Spinozana* 1 (1985): 305–333. This is also the thesis of Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997). Smith is a careful reader of Spinoza's political thought, and argues persuasively for Spinoza's importance in the articulation of "a new kind of liberal citizen" (20). But he assumes that Spinoza's "purpose" in the TTP is "the liberation of philosophy from religion" (20), and thus that Spinoza's defense of true religion is insincere and manipulative.

[11] For Strauss, Spinoza conceals his meaning not only in order to avoid persecution but also because he regards the masses as incapable of understanding him and because those who can understand him need further instruction. Such strategies as "obscurity of plan, contradictions, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements . . . do not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can" (*Persecution*, 36).

[12] Confronting the difficulties of Spinoza's view of religion needn't take the view that religion is entirely contradictory or external to rationality. For treatments of religion as a useful and indeed integral dimension of political life, see Heidi Ravven, "Spinoza's Rupture with Tradition: His Hints of a Jewish Modernity," in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*, ed. Heidi M. Ravven and Lenn E. Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 187–223; Michael Rosenthal, "Why Spinoza Chose the Hebrews: The Exemplary Function of Prophecy in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*," in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*, ed. Ravven and Goodman, 225–260; Douglas Den Uyl, "Power, Politics, and Religion in Spinoza's Political Thought," and Richard Mason, "Faith Set Apart from Philosophy? Spinoza and Pascal," in *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize*," ed. Paul Bagley (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 133–158 and 1–23 respectively; and Alan Donagan, "Spinoza's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 343–382. My own argument is closest to Mason and Donagan insofar as both make clear that faith (theology, piety) is not unrelated to blessedness. I part with both, however, insofar as they conclude that the relationship between the two is hierarchical.

[13] For a more extensive treatment of Strauss and his legacy in the interpretation of the TTP, see Nancy Levene, "Ethics and Interpretation, or How to Study Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* without Strauss," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 10 (2000): 57–110.

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possession (and equally dispossessed) of the way to salvation. Both reason and revelation come into existence, both are revealed – as natural, sovereign, universal. Understanding God or Nature is necessary to Spinoza because it is above all in our views of these entities, as transcendent or immanent, that we are most likely to enslave ourselves, that is, enslave ourselves to false ideals, enslave one another by claiming divine authority (*summum arcanum*), and enslave ourselves to a natural world which will have all that much more power over us the less we understand how it works (and the ways in which *we* are natural). The two false alternatives are to see human beings, as theology traditionally has, as beginning (through the fall) without a knowledge of God, making God humanity's transcendent standard, and to see human beings and human reason, as many other Enlightenment thinkers would, as the measure of all things, including God. The first position ensures we will never know what it is that we are seeking, the second that there is nothing to seek.[14] Both, to Spinoza, eventuate in despotic, or as we would put it today, totalitarian political regimes. If he was in some ways the archetypal retiring philosopher, it is nevertheless clear to him that the struggle against tyranny is always the struggle against the ideology that supports it. As he says in introducing the TTP, "when I saw that the disputes of philosophers are raging with violent passion in Church and Court and are breeding bitter hatred and faction which readily turn men to sedition, together with other ills too numerous to recount here, I deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh" (TTP, 5).

In the preliminary pages of the TdIE, Spinoza presents the prerequisites for "emending the intellect and rendering it capable of understanding things in the way the attainment of our end requires." In these passages, he speaks of "bringing the intellect back to the right path," and of adopting in this context "certain rules of living as good." Among these rules is "to speak according to the power of understanding of ordinary people, and to do whatever does not interfere with our attaining our purpose . . . For we can gain a considerable advantage, if we yield as much to their understanding as we can" (TdIE, §17). It is easy to see why these rules might support the contention that Spinoza's posture vis à vis "ordinary people" is one of dissimulation, or at the very least condescension, a kind of condescension that could warrant deceptive measures.

[14] I borrow this Socratic "pugnacious proposition" from the opening to Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985]). Kierkegaard uses the proposition to explore the difference between Socrates' way out of the dilemma – learning as the recollection of what one once knew and has forgotten – and his own, which involves the notion that the truth can be learned even if one is not in possession of it – even if one is, in fact, dispossessed of it.

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However, on the previous page Spinoza introduces what the work will show to be the highest good, namely (as I quoted above) "the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature." Spinoza then writes,

> This, then, is the end I aim at: to acquire such a nature, and to strive that many acquire it with me. That is, it is part of my happiness to take pains that many others may understand as I understand, so that their intellect and desire agree entirely with my intellect and desire. To do this it is necessary, *first* to understand as much of Nature as suffices for acquiring such a nature; *next*, to form a society of the kind that is desirable, so that as many as possible may attain it as easily and as surely as possible. (TdIE, §14)

In this light, it would seem that for Spinoza, there is not only no reason to deceive the "many" or the vulgar. There are positive philosophical reasons – which, we will see, are equally theological and political – for ensuring their participation in the attainment of what Spinoza considered the highest good.

What Spinoza says in the TdIE is telling, for it depicts Spinoza's philosophical and theologico-political goals as significantly continuous, not simply in the sense that the polity will allow for philosophy to go on unmolested.[15] Rather the continuity is itself at once philosophical, theological, and political. What Spinoza is saying here is that it is precisely *part of* the ends of *conatus*, of human striving, to ensure that an understanding of Nature (or God), the *causa sui*, is attained by "as many as possible"; that God or Nature is at the origins of society, culture, the human multitude. What he clarifies in his later works, in the *Ethics* and the TTP alike, is that the reverse is just as true: that the human multitude is at the origin of God or Nature; that each depends on, constitutes, and is constituted by the other.[16]

The notion of speaking according to the understanding of "ordinary people" must thus be squared with what Spinoza clearly aspires to bring into existence for such people – not simply a life that in its external form resembles his own, but one substantively the same in content, a profoundly radical view, then as now. In this light, speaking according to the

[15] Cf. Den Uyl, who claims that "the ends of the state [for Spinoza] are limited; it [the state] makes no contribution to blessedness" ("Power, Politics, and Religion," 138).

[16] I have learned a great deal on the relationship of Spinoza's philosophy and politics from the Continental literature on him, beginning with Alexandre Matheron's *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969), and including Pierre Macherey, *Hegel ou Spinoza* (Paris: François Maspero, 1979); Andre Tosel, *Spinoza ou le crépuscule de la servitude: Essai sur le* Traité Theologico–Politique (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1984); Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 1998); and Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

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understanding of ordinary people is about pedagogy, not dissimulation. It is a pedagogy directed toward the dissemination of wisdom, but one that sees this task in theologico-political as well as rational terms. For, as he puts it in the *Tractatus Politicus*, "Rebellions, wars, and contemptuous disregard for law must certainly be attributed to the corrupt condition of the commonwealth rather than to the wickedness of its subjects. For citizens are not born, but made" (TP V: 2).

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1 *Vera religio*

> Whatever we desire and do of which we are the cause insofar as we have the idea of God, *or* insofar as we know God, I relate to Religion.
>
> (E IV p37s)

> Just as men are accustomed to call divine the kind of knowledge that surpasses human understanding, so they call divine, or the work of God, any work [*opus*] whose cause is generally unknown. For the common people [*vulgus*] suppose that God's power and providence are most clearly displayed when some unusual event occurs in Nature contrary to their habitual beliefs [*opinionem*] concerning Nature, particularly if such an event is to their profit or advantage. (TTP, 72)

Superstition

Spinoza uses the term true or universal religion, *vera religio*, in the TTP to distinguish between those precepts that teach "the divine law revealed to all mankind through the Prophets and the Apostles" (TTP, 6) and the teachings of sectarians that "preach only such novel and striking doctrine as might gain the applause of the crowd" (TTP, 4). He distinguishes, in other words, between true and false religion, between religion and superstition, between what is truly divine and what is merely a "relic of man's ancient bondage" (TTP, 3), between the divine light that produces equanimity and fellowship and the "arrogant ravings" that produce strife and persecution (TTP, 5). In this sense the TTP goes further than the *Ethics*, which reserves the term religion only for what Spinoza directly approves, namely, as in the quotation above, the idea and knowledge of God. But both works strive to disentangle true and false ways of understanding God, true and false ways of forming relationships, true and false ways of understanding (and thus attaining) freedom. The question is *how and to what end* are these pairs disentangled? How does one know when one's religion, one's ideas, one's relationships, one's aims are true as opposed to false, adequate as opposed to inadequate, liberating as opposed to enslaving? What both works pursue in detail is that truth and falsity are

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obstacles to freedom are overcome, whether by grace, or the judicious use of reason, or by sheer human strength.[5]

By contrast, when Spinoza uses the term *servitus*, he means to set the question of freedom on an entirely different basis. *Servitus*, he insists, is entirely natural. It is not something that happened as a result of a "fall" nor is it something temporary from which one could be liberated through effort or the intervention of a divine being.[6] Rather, *servitus* describes something about the human condition that will always be true, namely that "there is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger" (E IV a1). As he puts it more bluntly in the TTP, "fish are determined by nature to swim, and the big ones to eat the smaller ones." This fact is a fish's "sovereign natural right," and the same is true for human beings insofar as they are "considered as living under the rule of Nature alone" (TTP, 179). Spinoza's point, at least initially, is *not* to discriminate between "singular" human beings and the other beings that comprise the natural order, "nor between men endowed with reason and others to whom true reason is unknown, nor between fools, madmen, and the sane" (TTP, 179). If escaping this condition shared by all singular things is what one would count as freedom, Spinoza says, it doesn't exist.

Bondage, then, refers to the fact that human beings are part of the natural order, and a comparatively fragile part at that. As Spinoza puts it, "the force by which a man perseveres in existing is . . . infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes" (E IV p3). But the term has the advantage of connoting not simply a static state of unfreedom, in the way one might speak about a tree or a rock, but a state of disempowerment at least partly exacerbated by human beings.[7] To Spinoza, it is crucial to understand the degree to which (and the ways in which) we are at the mercy of other natural things, for failing to do so precisely compounds, indeed constitutes, our bondage. Understanding, for Spinoza, is power;

[5] Descartes is a frequent target. His theory of the will, especially as articulated in "Passions of the Soul" (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], vol. I, 348) leads Spinoza to accuse him of holding that "that there is no Soul so weak that it cannot – when it is well directed – acquire an absolute power over its Passions" (E V pref).

[6] Wolfson unaccountably translates *servitus* as vice or sin (*Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. II, 184).

[7] As Spinoza retorts to Willem Van Blyenbergh: "When you say that by making men so dependent on God I reduce them to the level of the elements, plants and stones, this is enough to show that you have completely misunderstood my views and are confusing the field of intellect with that of the imagination . . . This dependence on God and necessity of action through God's decrees can best be understood when we have regard, not to logs and plants, but to created things of the highest degree of intelligibility and perfection" (Ep 21, 156).

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understanding the nature of disempowerment, unfreedom, bondage, is part and parcel of liberation. Thus the thrust of the language of *servitus* is to ask: What exactly is the nature of human power and disempowerment? How do we avoid being eaten by bigger fish or alternatively worsen our vulnerability? Given our bondage, to what can we aspire – what *is* human power, relative to the power of fish? If on the one hand it is true that we did not put ourselves in bondage (through sin, for example), it is nevertheless legitimate to ask: What is our role in keeping ourselves in this state? If the point is not freedom *from* bondage, what *is* the meaning of freedom, the *libertas humana* that forms the title of the climactic portion of the *Ethics* and that structures the TTP throughout? Spinoza's first response is to say what unfreedom is; what restricts and inhibits freedom. To this end, superstition – a term that covers both what we might normally think of as religious beliefs and also other beliefs and actions that are disempowering – is the principal obstacle. To this, then, let us turn.

The pervasiveness of superstition is the problem with which Spinoza begins the TTP:

> If men were able to exercise complete control [*certo consilio*] over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition. But since they are often reduced to such straits as to be without any resources, and their immoderate greed for fortune's fickle favours often makes them the wretched victims of alternating hopes and fears, the result is that, for the most part, their credulity knows no bounds. In critical times, they are swayed this way or that by the slightest impulse, especially so when they are wavering between the emotions of hope and fear; yet at other times they are overconfident, boastful and arrogant. (TTP, 1)

Superstition above has two sources. First, there is the misery that results from being "without any resources," and second, there is the "immoderate greed [*cupiditas*] for fortune's fickle favours." The first is a kind of sadness, which Spinoza defines in the *Ethics* as "the idea of any thing that . . . diminishes [or] restrains our Body's power of acting" (E III p11). This use of the word *sadness* to denote everything that diminishes or restrains us gives an affective character even to such seemingly indifferent or habitual experiences as, for example, being unable to see at night. But the language of sadness has a sharper valence in the TTP where its connection to "being without resource" is closer to a conventional use of the term. The second source of superstition, greed, is also a form of sadness through its connection to hope and fear, which are species of joy and sadness conditioned by uncertainty. Hope is "nothing but an inconstant Joy which has arisen from the image of a future or past thing whose outcome we doubt," and fear is "an inconstant Sadness, which has also arisen from the image of a doubtful thing" (E III p18s2). Hope and fear can easily

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become overconfidence and pride since, if the doubtful thing is given, we will tend to overcompensate for our experience of inconstancy by veering into a dogmatic certainty all the stronger for being unwarranted. Greed is simply to place the bulk of one's energy in what is only ever inconstant, and thus to exacerbate a vulnerability that is already pervasive.

One might assume that Spinoza is holding individuals responsible only for the second source of superstition, "immoderate greed," since being without resources is surely not something that is as easily controlled. Spinoza spells out in the *Ethics* that "to be preserved, the human Body requires a great many other bodies" (E IV p39dem), and insists in the TP that "it is hardly possible for men to maintain life and cultivate the mind without mutual help" (II: 15). Thus "the case of the poor falls upon society as a whole, and concerns . . . the general advantage" (E IV appXVII). But it is precisely this partial lack of control that *both* features of superstition share, for as Spinoza notes, even features of temperament like a "tranquil and friendly disposition" are possible "only in a state," only in a setting in which one's basic needs are taken care of (TP II: 21). This is not to say there is an inevitable correspondence between being "reduced to such straits as to be without any resources" and "immoderate greed," as if only the poor are greedy or as if greed by definition signals poverty. Spinoza very clearly distinguishes them, and undoubtedly intends the language of "greed" to have precisely the connotation of culpability that being "reduced to such straits" does not. Yet Spinoza's deployment of the experience of scarcity in the TTP recalls what in the *Ethics* he identifies as the feeling of being overpowered in a more inclusive sense. It is this feeling, he holds, that accompanies the "passions," that is, the ways we are affected by things of which we are not the cause:

> It is impossible that a man should not be part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause . . . From this it follows that man is necessarily always subject to the passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires. (E IV p4)

Spinoza speaks drily of human beings "accommodating" themselves to nature as much as is required. But experientially, this fact is a source of continual anxiety. By nature we strive to preserve our being, but we cannot do so alone, and therefore we can never be certain *that* we will be able to do so, nor by virtue of whom or what. Our lack of power over against nature is equally a lack of power over, and a fundamental uncertainty about, others. Taken together, human vulnerability and the dependence on others is termed "fortune" (*fortuna*), for "anything whatever can be the accidental

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cause of Hope or Fear . . . and we are so constituted by nature that we easily believe the things we hope for, but believe only with difficulty those we fear, and we regard them more or less highly than is just" (E III p50 and s). "Human beings," then, "are *necessarily* always subject to the passions," and thus "by nature they pity the unfortunate, but envy the fortunate, and incline more to vengeance than to compassion" (TP I: 4). In other words, we are subject to greed and other "immoderate" desires as inevitably as we are subject to scarcity:

> Man's lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call Bondage [*servitus*]. For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worst. (E IVpref)[8]

This inevitability ("by nature") should not be confused with the claim that we are not responsible to address these things. On the contrary, Spinoza considers greed, envy, vengeance, and pity to be among the greatest obstacles to "true knowledge" (E IV p73s). But there is a tension here in seeking to evaluate what is in our control and what is not. For as Spinoza also observes, "when a greedy man thinks of nothing else but profit, or money, and an ambitious man of esteem, they are not thought to be mad, because they are usually troublesome and are considered worthy of Hate. But Greed, Ambition, and Lust really are species of madness, even though they are not numbered among the diseases" (E IV p44s).

The claim is not that affects per se enslave us. An affect is simply "an idea by which the Mind affirms of its Body a greater or lesser force of existing than before" (E IV p14dem). All knowledge – ideas – are accordingly "nothing but an affect of Joy," if we increase our force of existing, "or Sadness," if we decrease it (E IV p8). Joy and sadness can themselves be constant (a function of understanding) or inconstant (a function of uncertainty, and therefore hope and fear), but all human states, both laudable and lamentable, are "affected," according to Spinoza. Yet he also notes that superstition arises not from "reason [*ratio*] but from emotion [*affectus*]" (TTP, 2, G III: 6). In the terminology of the *Ethics*, this is simply to say that not all affects are equal. Some empower and some occlude reason, and affects like hope and fear are most definitely the latter. Bondage, then, is the "lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects," meaning the lack of power to prevent ourselves from "swaying this way or that by the slightest impulse" (TTP, 1). One could just as correctly say bondage arises from uncertainty. It concerns both something

[8] The allusion is to Medea's complaint in book 7 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: *video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequor* (I see and approve the better, but follow the worst). Spinoza gives the full reference in E IV p17s. See Curley's note, *Collected Works*, 554.

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we ourselves are doing (or not doing) *and* those things against which we can do nothing.

This lack of control or feeling of being overpowered can torment us for two reasons. First, while understanding something truly or adequately, which Spinoza also connects to the power to act, is augmented by the desire (and joy) that comes from the sense of the increase in power – power is the cause of itself, it increases itself – the desire that "arises from affects by which we are torn is also greater as these affects are more violent. And so their force and growth . . . must be defined by the power of external causes, which, if it were compared with ours, would indefinitely surpass our power" (E IV p15dem). The desire (and thus the power to act) that arises from understanding something truly is significantly less powerful than the desire that arises from understanding things only inadequately.

Spinoza defines an inadequate idea as an idea that it is incomplete, missing information, and therefore one that has completion as a standard. The example Spinoza gives is that of the human body. On the one hand, the human mind doesn't know anything except through the way its body is affected. The mind knows neither itself (E II p23), nor the body (E II p19), nor external bodies (E II p26), except "through the ideas of the affections of its own Body" (E II p26). Knowledge doesn't bypass the body; it is not something that happens irrespective of bodies. This claim is implicated in *conatus* – in striving – and in the self-interest that goes along with it. It is not only that we won't ordinarily care about something unless we have a vested interest in it. What Spinoza is saying is that we *can't* know anything at all except insofar as we are affected by it. We are thus correct in saying that, at the very least, we know "our body," for, in Spinoza's distinctive phrase, the idea of the body is the "first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind" (E II p11). What this means is that "whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human Mind must be perceived by the human Mind," and therefore "if the object of the idea constituting a human Mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body which is not perceived by the Mind" (E II p12).

On the other hand, "the human Mind does not involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human Body," i.e., "the parts of the human Body are highly composite Individuals," each of which itself has many parts (E II p24dem). We have only inadequate knowledge of the body taken as something composed of thousands or millions (or more) of parts, most of which we do not even sense, let alone understand ("Nature's power is infinite" [TTP, 74]). But we "perceive" whatever happens in the body (E II p12) according to the logic that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (E II p7). I may not sense, for example, that the blood flow through one

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Everyone realizes this, he says, although this realization doesn't itself solve the problem.[9] The question is, what use is wisdom if it vanishes in adversity when, it would seem, one most needs it? What use is wisdom if we see the better and nevertheless choose the worst? It might be possible to read this as the prelude to an exhortation to seek equanimity in the face of suffering and to disassociate wisdom from the turmoils of personal experience. But personal experience is what is at issue here: Who can have lived in the world and not known that it is easier to be wise when things go well for us than when they do not? Does this mean the wisdom we possess in good times only – the wisdom that vanishes, or chooses the worst when we see the better – isn't wisdom? Or alternatively, does it mean we ought to strive harder to maintain what little wisdom we do possess when we enter more "critical times"?

Where Spinoza focuses his energy in the TTP is on the ways in which, given the close relationship between the insecurity of "material welfare" (TTP, 48) and "an inconstant and irresolute spirit" (TTP, 53), the dissemination of extraordinary and wondrous things is incredibly attractive, all too easily performing the function of a consolation, regardless of whether their contents are silly or reasonable – regardless of whether what is being disseminated is "religion, true or false" (TTP, 3). The "common people," Spinoza observes, usually "take [more] pleasure in the stories and in strange and unexpected happenings [in the Bible] than in the doctrine implicit in the narratives," which might require them actually to address their own conditions, or to live otherwise than they are living (TTP, 69). In this light, whatever its intrinsic merits, the extraordinary or the novel effectively distracts people from turning their efforts to what can actually ameliorate both material and mental hardship, and by the same token prevents them from detaching themselves from those things they genuinely cannot change. There is nothing intrinsically false or disingenuous about novelty.[10] But the origin of superstition is fear, and therefore,

> like all other instances of hallucination and frenzy, [superstition] is bound to assume very varied and instable forms [since] it is sustained only by hope, hatred, anger and deceit. For it arises not from reason but from emotion, and emotion

[9] Spinoza's use of knowledge from experience here can be summed up in the paradox that no one ignores the lessons of experience except the fact that, or the extent to which, they themselves are subject to them. Pierre-François Moreau interprets Spinoza's point here more strongly, viz., "the conditions of experience ensure that experience is opaque to its own lessons" ("Fortune and the Theory of History," in *The New Spinoza: Theory Out of Bounds*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 102).

[10] Spinoza grounds his critique of the novel on his critique of miracles, arguing that here more than anywhere, novelty is used in superstitious ways.

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of the most powerful kind . . . Indeed, as the multitude remains ever at the same level of wretchedness, so it is never long contented, and is best pleased only with what is new and has not yet proved delusory. (TTP, 2)

Wisdom, then, appears to have something to do not only with *what* one knows but with the effects of knowledge and the condition of those apprehending it. Such information as the multitude is able to glean in the condition of wretchedness cannot properly be considered wisdom, whatever its contents, for their wretchedness prevents them from putting it to use. But what of the sense of resignation in this passage, the claim that "as," i.e., *since* "the multitude remains *ever at the same level* of wretchedness" (*imo quia vulgus semper aeque miserum manet*), it is never long content (G III: 6)? The implication seems mixed: superstition is connected to and at least partly explained by wretchedness, but wretchedness, no less than superstition, is constitutive of the multitude in itself – multitudes will always be wretched (through scarcity and greed equally), and thus the problem to be ameliorated is not wretchedness per se but simply its most egregious symptoms, the hope and fear of superstition or, more generally, the sense that things could be otherwise.

Spinoza gives direct support to such a reading when he counsels in the *Ethics* that "concerning matters of fortune, or things which are not in our power, i.e., concerning things which do not follow from our nature . . . [these] we must expect and bear calmly both good fortune and bad" (E II p49s[IVB]). To the extent that there are things about the human condition that cannot be changed (death being the most dramatic example), it is proper for human beings not to meditate on this at all. Indeed, "a free man thinks of nothing less than death," not because a free man accepts or resigns himself to his death, nor because a free man studiously avoids this recognition, but simply because a free man is not led by fear. His wisdom, Spinoza says, "is a meditation on life" (*vitae meditatio est*), on what he can actually do to preserve his life and advance his own interests (E IV p67, G II: 261). It is fear of fortune (and conversely hope for fortune's favor) that most detracts from wisdom, for it is fear that makes human beings at odds with what is in their own interest, "doing what they are most opposed to doing, taking no account of the usefulness and the necessity of the action to be done, concerned only not to incur capital or other punishment" (TTP, 64).

Fear, then, is most destructive of both the power and the genuine and hard-won equanimity that reason confers. Accordingly "we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where

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we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow" (E IV appXXXII). But this "if" is not insignificant regarding the multitude and their wretchedness. We (we the multitude *and* we the philosophers) are necessarily fearful, subject to misery, and likely to be carried away by lusts (we are necessarily fearful at least in part *because* we are subject to misery and lust). However, we (we the philosophers *and* we the multitude) can adopt a calm bearing – an attitude of stoicism or dispassion in the face of misery and lust – *only* when "the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things." In other words, misery and wretchedness beget themselves (just as tyrannical regimes do). But this is hardly the end of the story.

Spinoza wants to know exactly what disempowers the multitude, what contributes to its servitude, its bondage, its wretchedness, all of which are "facts." But he permits *himself* a calm bearing toward these facts only when he himself has done his duty, has extended his power to the furthest extent possible. As he says in the *Ethics*, "because, among singular things, we know nothing more excellent than a man who is guided by reason, we can show best how much our skill and understanding are worth by educating men so that at last they live according to the command of their own reason" (E IV appIX). "At last" indeed. Educating men so that they live at the command of their own reason is no easy thing given the structural and psychical obstacles. Speaking to enlightened and unenlightened alike (for both are part of nature), Spinoza's point is that there will be things that happen to us over which we are powerless. In this case we should try to be phlegmatic. But it is the very "essence" of human beings, and thus of the multitude, too, to strive to augment their power, and this striving ("the first and only foundation of virtue"[E IV p22c]) is the beginning of the way out of wretchedness:

> He who wishes to avenge wrongs by hating in return surely lives miserably. On the other hand, one who is eager to overcome Hate by Love, strives joyously and confidently, resists many men as easily as one, and requires the least help from fortune. Those whom he conquers yield joyously, not from lack of strength, but from an increase in their powers. (E IV p46s)

Those who would have us rise above human misery, or those who think that this misery "depends on our will" alone "and that we can [therefore] command [the affects] absolutely," get it wrong, according to Spinoza. For "experience cries out against this . . . [and] much practice and application are required to restrain and moderate them" (E V pref).[11]

[11] As Spinoza puts it in the TTP, "one needs godly and brotherly exhortation, a good upbringing, and most of all, a judgment that is free" (TTP, 106).

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Thus it may be ironic but it is thoroughly predictable that those most in the thrall of fortune, "greedily coveting [its] favors," are least successful at procuring its goods. In retaliation for this injustice, what is "merely" ordinary is not only ignored; it is vilified:

> reason they call blind, because it cannot reveal a sure way to the vanities that they covet, and human wisdom they call vain, while the delusions of the imagination, dreams, and other childish absurdities are taken to be the oracles of God. Indeed they think that God, spurning the wise, has written his decrees not in man's mind but in the entrails of beasts, or that by divine inspiration and instigation these decrees are foretold by fools, madmen or birds. To such madness are men driven by their fears. (TTP, 2)

Spinoza's account of superstition is intended to emphasize that it does not simply consist in having a "confused idea of the deity" (TTP, 2). He thinks the majority of human beings *do* have confused ideas of the deity, but what also interests him about superstition is where it comes from, and it comes, not from simply being *mistaken* about who and what God really is, due, say, to an insufficient philosophical education, but from the tumult of vacillating between hope and fear. The extraordinary in this sense is a shortcut, a way for human beings to avoid doing the work that is actually before them and a way to surpass by far what any actual, human work could actually accomplish. This is why ordinary reason is seen as so threatening – it denies our fantasies to be gods.

But superstition is clearly only half of the problem; or rather, the superstitious multitude includes both the wretched and the tyrannical. What concerns Spinoza is the relationship between greed and adversity, the promulgation of "novel and striking doctrine" by those "actuated by desire . . . to attract admiration," and the provocation of "great quarrels, envy, and hatred, which no passage of time could assuage" (TTP, 4). Novelty, and the wonder to which it gives rise, are not only problematic from the standpoint of the wretched; they are also usually the sign of a desire for self-aggrandizement. Unlike Descartes, who lumped wonder among the primary affects and considered it fruitful, Spinoza thinks it simply signifies a lack of understanding.[12] To Descartes, wonder is useful in that "it makes us learn and retain in our memory things of which we were previously ignorant," i.e., it is a passion which accompanies the experience of the unusual and provokes us to learn about it.[13] Thus he says, "we see that people who are not naturally inclined to wonder are usually

[12] Descartes defines wonder as "a sudden surprise of the soul which brings it to consider with attention the objects that seem to it unusual and extraordinary" ("Passions of the Soul," *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 353).

[13] "Passions of the Soul," *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 354.

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very ignorant."[14] Spinoza defines wonder in a similar way, as the unusual, noting that "when we suppose that we imagine in an object something singular, which we have never seen before, we are only saying that when the Mind considers that object, it has nothing in itself which it is led to consider from considering that." But it is not, for him, a provocation to knowledge, nor is it especially useful in other ways. "If," for example, "[Wonder] is aroused by an object we fear, it is called Consternation, because Wonder at an evil keeps a man so suspended in considering it that he cannot think of other things by which he could avoid that evil" (E III p52dem and s). What is wondered at is simply what doesn't connect up with what we already know. As an emotion, wonder "detains" or "fixes" the mind "until [such a time as] it is determined by other causes to think of other things," that is, until we can connect the novel to the storehouse of things we already know and hence demystify it (E III Def.Aff.IV). It is certainly not in itself either the condition for knowledge (it easily acts as a "distraction" [E III Def.Aff.IV]) or something to be cultivated, for rather than stimulating a desire to understand, it tends to stimulate just the opposite – what is "least comprehensible . . . evokes the greatest wonder" (TTP, 72):

> If [those in the grip of fortune's fickle favors] are struck with wonder at some unusual phenomenon, they believe this to be a portent signifying the anger of the gods or of a supreme deity, and they therefore regard it as a pious duty to avert the evil by sacrifice and vows . . . There is no end to the kind of omens that they imagine, and they read extraordinary things into Nature as if the whole of Nature were a partner in their madness. (TTP, 1)

Wonder and mystery are crutches for the ignorant and swords for the impious, for the latter "know that if ignorance is taken away, then foolish wonder, the only means they have of arguing and defending their authority, is also taken away" (E I app).

It is not simply that human beings can be contrary to one another due to their lust for, and pursuit of, goods that cannot be shared ("immoderate greed"). It is that those goods that *can* be shared are made "wondrous," and subjected to "so much quarreling and such bitter feuding" that they become virtually unrecognizable. Even wisdom, which is ostensibly insusceptible of being hoarded, is made to seem as if it is something elite or exclusive. As Spinoza says of theologians who "make no attempt whatsoever to live according to the Bible's teachings," the "blind and passionate desire to interpret Scripture and to introduce innovations in religion" is substituted for what is "most clearly taught by Scripture itself" (TTP,

[14] "Passions of the Soul," *Philosophical Writings*, vol. I, 355.

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by foolish wonder, and because they do not know the causes of so great an art, they infer that it is constructed, not by mechanical, but by divine, or supernatural art, and constituted in such a way that one part does not injure another" (E I app, 443). Although we may be dimly aware that "infinitely many things are found which far surpass our imagination," and thus far surpass in complexity our conception of what is "ordered" or "disordered," we nevertheless assume that our notions of harmony are God's, and that he has "created all things in order" (E I app, 445, 444).

Spinoza holds, by contrast, that *everything* in nature can be seen as "perfect," not because he claims to understand its true purpose, but because everything strives in its own way to preserve its being and to flourish on its own terms, even when in doing so it causes grief or suffering for us:

> many are accustomed to arguing in this way: if all things have followed from the necessity of God's most perfect nature, why are there so many imperfections in nature? why are things corrupt to the point where they stink? so ugly that they produce nausea? why is there confusion, evil, and sin? [But] those who argue in this way are easily answered. For the perfection of things is to be judged solely from their nature and power; things are not more or less perfect because they please or offend men's sense, or because they are of use to, or are incompatible with, human nature. (E I app, 446)

This is not to deny that we should see the world in the terms that most matter to us. Indeed, this is the only thing we *can* actually do, that is, judge things on the basis of whether they are useful or repellent, pleasing or offensive, life-enhancing or life-denying to us (there is no world taken in itself). Spinoza's view is precisely that "from the laws of his own nature, everyone necessarily wants, or is repelled by, what he judges to be good or evil . . . [for] knowledge of good and evil is itself an affect of Joy or Sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it . . . [and] this appetite is nothing but the very essence, *or* nature of man" (E IV p19). The error is in assuming that in doing so we are simply conforming ourselves to the way things actually are, or to the way God has made things.

The problem with the model of a perfect God guiding nature providentially is not simply that it is false, i.e., it is not simply that this view of God fails to agree with its object, as a true idea must (E I a6). The problem is that the view is not adequate. Spinoza distinguishes between a "true idea" (agreement between idea and object) and an adequate idea, an idea "which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, *or* intrinsic denominations of a true idea" (E II d4), such as clarity and distinctness. One faces here a potentially fatal conflict between what we would call a correspondence theory of truth

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and a coherence theory of truth. Adequate ideas can be considered apart from their relation to an object because, considered in themselves, they are truth-bearing; they are productive of truth, one might say, constrained only by their fit with other adequate ideas. True ideas, by contrast, connect up with a particular object, and are relative thereto. Spinoza intends these two "theories" to fit together, for he claims that all adequate ideas are also true: "Every idea that in us is absolute, or adequate and perfect, is true" (E II p34), which presumably means that, although correspondence with an object is not what makes an idea adequate, there still could be some kind of test whereby such an idea was shown not to conflict with the world.[19] It is more difficult to reverse the situation, however, by asking whether all true ideas are adequate, that is, meaningful within a particular system, since what makes an idea true is its correspondence with something, not its coherence relative to other ideas.

This difficulty is partly due to the poverty, or at least the anachronism, of this contemporary philosophical distinction.[20] Once Spinoza gets to Part II, he introduces a second conception of truth, holding that "an idea true in us is that which is adequate in God insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind" (E II p43dem). Since God is not external to the mind (though nor is he internal to it), our ideas cannot be said to correspond to him or his ideas. Therefore, Spinoza tells us, "to have a true idea means nothing other than knowing a thing perfectly, *or* in the best way. And of course no one can doubt this," he continues, "unless he thinks that an idea is something mute, like a picture on a tablet, and not a mode of thinking, viz. the very [act of] of understanding" (E II p42s). The continued advantage of the first meaning of truth is that it emphasizes Spinoza's conception of reality as *real*, i.e., not constructed by the mind or language. The notion of agreement continues to make sense in a Spinozian universe in a common sense way (i.e., with reference to objects other than God). But at the same time, adequacy (with the second meaning of truth) becomes the stronger term for him because it makes reference to the ways in which, even though the world does not take our wishes into account, the world *we value* is not a different world. Thus,

[19] In the demonstration to this proposition, Spinoza simply reiterates the conditions of adequacy, noting that "when we say that there is in us an adequate and perfect idea, we are saying nothing but that . . . there is an adequate and perfect idea in God insofar as he constitutes the essence of our Mind, and consequently . . . we are saying nothing but that such an idea is true" (E II p34dem).

[20] Dan Nesher solves this problem by way of Peirce, arguing that Spinoza no more suffers a contradiction here than other "pragmaticists" ("Spinoza's Theory of Truth," in *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions*, ed. Graeme Hunter [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994]), 140–177.

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Spinoza writes a few lines after having introduced adequacy, "by reality and perfection I understand the same thing" (E II d6).[21]

Truth is something we perceive (knowledge). Adequacy is something we do (power). The difference between truth/falsity and adequacy/inadequacy is one of emphasis. As Spinoza puts it, "there is nothing positive in ideas on account of which they are called false" (E II p33). Rather (as so many medievals had similarly expressed it), "falsity consists in the privation of knowledge" (E II p34). However, once this privation is related to adequacy and inadequacy, it becomes clear that falsity is not simply a lack of knowledge. We cannot be said to err insofar as we are ignorant of something. Rather, falsity consists in "mutilated and confused" ideas, and this comes, he thinks, from the fact that we are not autonomous relative to nature, from the fact that we are disempowered, in a condition of *servitus*, and, as above, from the fact that we worsen these things through our misery, our greed, our preference for consolatory illusions. Therefore on one level, "inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate, *or* clear and distinct ideas," for inadequacy is just limitation (E II p36). Yet at the same time this is what the *Ethics* is explicitly seeking to remedy, that is, to "lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human Mind and its highest blessedness" (E II pref).

Falsity/inadequacy, then, also signifies a misdirection of energy and constitutes a decrease of power (including both cognitive and physical power). By contrast, true/adequate ideas act in the opposite way, constituting an increase of power. Both indicate modifications (increases and decreases) of perfection rightly understood, that is, a model of flourishing which explicitly *does* take human grief and suffering into account, and against which we can judge as "good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to [this] model of human nature we set before ourselves" (E IV pref, 545).

The two crucial things to see here are first, perfection is something that can be augmented or diminished, and second, perfection is both a model *we* put before ourselves and one against which we may be measured. The paradox is that it is we who determine what perfection amounts to, but insofar as we don't live up to it, the degree of perfection in/of the world as a whole is diminished – in other words, our making (*factum*) has reality. Perfection itself (God itself) is both finite and infinite. On this view, perfection is at once essentially human and humanly essential (essential

[21] The literature on Spinoza's notion of truth is vast, and needless to say I cannot do justice to it here. A good place to begin is Thomas Carson Mark, *Spinoza's Theory of Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), and the essays in Yirmiyahu Yovel, ed., *Spinoza on Knowledge and the Human Mind* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

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for human beings), in contrast to some essence or quality human beings lack: "the main thing to note is that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, *or* form, to another . . . Rather we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished" (E IV pref).

According to Spinoza's notion of falsity, the judgment that perfection and imperfection simply describe something about the world (independently of human valuation) is a major source of the diminution of human power because it leads to two assumptions that confuse us and thus make us more vulnerable to being "acted on" (disempowered) by things external to us: first, that, as human beings, we are by definition imperfect and are striving more and more to perfect ourselves according to a transcendent standard that functions as our telos; and/or second, that as human beings we originate in some kind of lost perfect state that we are striving more and more to recover. While both of these assumptions clearly have a place in the religions of Judaism and Christianity, Spinoza's philosophical interlocutors here are Aristotle and Plato and their "followers" (KV, 86–87). As Spinoza puts it in the preface to the TTP, the enormous and convoluted effort to find Greek philosophical teachings in the Bible is utterly inconsistent with the "divine light" that is properly there:

> I grant that they have expressed boundless wonder at Scripture's profound mysteries, yet I do not see that they have taught anything more than the speculations of Aristotelians or Platonists, and they have made Scripture conform to these so as to avoid appearing to be the followers of heathens. It was not enough for them to share in the delusions of the Greeks: they have sought to represent the prophets as sharing in these same delusions. This surely shows quite clearly that they do not even glimpse the divine nature of Scripture, and the more enthusiastic their admiration of these mysteries, the more clearly they reveal that their attitude to Scripture is one of abject servility rather than belief. (TTP, 5)

With respect to Aristotle, the "delusions" Spinoza has in mind concern the structure of potentiality and actuality, whereby movement and change are always signs of imperfection and where one's "end" is always figured in opposition to (that is, absolutely transcendent of) where one begins. For Aristotle, the absolute good against which all partial, practical goods are measured is that intellectual contemplation of the eternal, substantial, first principle of all existence, and the attainment of a self-sufficient life.[22] In a similar vein, in Plato's structure of being and becoming, becoming

[22] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. II, 1860–1862 (bk. VII).

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is always the sign that being proper has been lost. As Socrates puts it in the *Phaedo*, we must strive in life to recollect the truth that we once knew before birth but which is lost by virtue of coming into existence;[23] and as the end of the *Republic* similarly displays, to be born is to be separated from this truth (true being) by the waters of the stream of Oblivion.[24] The philosophical life, to be sure, is that life that can most closely approximate this original knowledge, for "it is only those who practise philosophy in the right way, we say, who always most want to free the soul; and this release and separation of the soul from the body is the preoccupation of philosophers."[25] But as Socrates also tells us, the philosopher simply knows more than others that he is and forever in life must be in ignorance of what he seeks, since what he seeks is the end of life, the end of change, the end of existence:

> Philosophy then persuades the soul to withdraw from the senses in so far as it is not compelled to use them and bids the soul to gather itself together by itself, to trust only itself and whatever reality, existing by itself, the soul by itself understands, and not to consider as true whatever it examines by other means, for this is different in different circumstances and is sensible and visible, whereas what the soul itself [in its pure state apart from the body] sees is intelligible and invisible . . . it [ideally] has no willing association with the body in life but avoid[s] it and gather[s] itself together by itself and always practise[s] this, which is no other than practising philosophy in the right way, in fact, training to die easily . . . Therefore, as I said at the beginning, it would be ridiculous for a man to train himself in life to live in a state as close to death as possible, and to resent it when it comes? In fact, Simmias [Socrates] said, those who practise philosophy in the right way are in training for dying and they fear death least of all men.[26]

While Spinoza would agree that the "enlightened" fear death least of all, the notion that one is to train oneself in life to live in a state close to death contrasts sharply with his insistence that "a free man thinks of nothing less than death . . . instead his wisdom is a meditation on life" (E IV p67). "Withdrawing from the senses" equally doesn't make sense to Spinoza because all modes of thinking involve the affections of the body. In order to engage in reasoning or to form "common notions and the adequate ideas of the properties of things," we have to engage with "singular things which have been represented to us through the senses." On its own, this knowledge is "mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect" – Spinoza calls it "knowledge from random experience" (E II p40s2). But

[23] Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 114.
[24] Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 263.
[25] Plato, *Phaedo*, 104. [26] Plato, *Phaedo*, 122, 119–120, 104.

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in the *Republic* on the way towards such a goal, these lower perfections are but shadows, entirely defined with reference to what they are not and ultimately outside of or external to what they are to culminate in. As Socrates explains, in seeking to understand the Forms, the soul must proceed from hypotheses (comprised of visible figures, images, mathematical examples) "not to a first principle but to a conclusion." In the case of students of geometry, for example,

> they use visible figures and talk about them, but they are not thinking about them but about the models of which these are likenesses . . . These figures which they fashion and draw, of which shadows and reflections in the water are images, they now in turn use as images, in seeking to understand those others in themselves, which one cannot see except in thought . . . This is what I called the intelligible class [Forms], and said that the soul is forced to use hypotheses in its search for it, not travelling up to a first principle, since it cannot reach beyond its hypotheses, but it uses as images those very things which at a lower level were models and which, in comparison with their images were thought to be clear and honoured as such . . . Understand also that [reason] does not consider its hypotheses as first principles, but as hypotheses in the true sense of stepping stones and starting points, in order to reach that which is beyond hypothesis, the first principle of all that exists.[32]

Likewise for Maimonides wealth is a stepping stone to health, and health a stepping stone to virtue. But the difference *between* these three is unlike the difference between all of them and the highest perfection, since the latter involves the knowledge of God, and God, for Maimonides, cannot be known (in the same way as anything else). As he puts it in the final chapter of the *Guide*,

> if you consider each of the three perfections mentioned before, you will find that they pertain to others than you, not to you, even though, according to the generally accepted opinion, they inevitably pertain to you and to others. This ultimate perfection, however, pertains to you alone . . . the prophets too have explained to us and interpreted to us the self-same notions . . . clearly stating to us that neither the perfection of possession nor the perfection of health nor the perfection of moral habits is a perfection of which one should be proud or that one should desire; the perfection of which one should be proud and that one should desire is knowledge of Him, may He be exalted, which is the true science.[33]

"All men by nature desire to know," says Aristotle in the opening lines of the *Metaphysics*.[34] But this originary desire only ever shows us that we "must in a sense end in something which is the opposite of our original

[32] Plato, *Republic*, 165. [33] Maimonides, *Guide*, vol. III, ch. 54, 635–636.
[34] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, *Complete Works*, vol. II, 1552 (bk. I).

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inquiries," for desire exists only in the realm of perishable life, and perishable life is the opposite of eternal life.[35] As Maimonides asks:

> what then should be the state of our intellects when they aspire to apprehend Him who is without matter and is simple to the utmost degree of simplicity, Him whose existence is necessary, Him who has no cause and to whom no notion attaches that is superadded to His essence, which is perfection – the meaning of its perfection being, as we have made clear, that all deficiencies are negated with respect to it – we who only apprehend the fact that He is?

His response is unequivocal. We desire to know God. But we cannot do so:

> when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity; and when they contemplate the proceedings of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns into ignorance; and when the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity![36]

Here, then, the model is one of the individual positioned between two transcendents, one might say: her origin and her end. Between these two markers, life in all its chaos takes place as the striving to overcome what stands between the achievement – the recovery – of what is finally true. Spinoza begins his critique of transcendence here, i.e., not with the God of the Bible but with the particular transcendence of origins and ends whereby one cannot simultaneously be in possession as well as in quest of what is being sought. The notion of God's transcendence falls into two errors, equally generated by what is commonly called the "Euthyphro" problem.[37] As Socrates states the question to Euthyphro, either something is good because God (or the gods) loves it or God loves something because it is good – either God is the absolute arbiter of value to which everything is subject or God himself is subject to the value-creating standard of the good.[38] At Socrates' prompting, Euthyphro is cajoled into opting for the latter, the sovereignty and independence of the good. But Spinoza's claim is that these are versions of the same error,

[35] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, *Complete Works*, vol. II, 1555 (bk. II).

[36] Maimonides, *Guide*, vol. I, 58, 137.

[37] David Novak employs the Euthyphro problem to good effect in his discussion of the validity of the notion of natural law in Judaism. In fact, while he makes Spinoza something of a scapegoat in his discussion, his conception of "God's wisdom" as both rationally available beyond its articulation and inseparable from its historical and theological context and source is not altogether unlike what I argue Spinoza is saying about the relation of divine and human laws. Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16–26.

[38] Plato, *Euthyphro*, in *Five Dialogues*. As Socrates asks Euthyphro, "Consider this: Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" (14).

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for either way what is of value is transcendent, i.e., constituted independently of human beings. In Spinoza's terms, both conceptions of God – the one making God the sole measure of value (the position attributed to R. Alpakhar in the TTP) and the other utterly subjecting God to some higher standard (the position attributed to Maimonides) – are anthropomorphic displacements that deprive human beings of understanding the nature of both *servitus* and freedom. Euthyphro's either-or is, for Spinoza, a both-and: both positions subject the human being to something outside of her (the biblical text, for Alpakhar) or inside of her (reason, for Maimonides), and thus both imprison her in a world of ignorance.

Spinoza thinks there are good reasons for anthropomorphisms of both varieties, for when we experience the ways in which the satisfaction of our appetites is limited by nature, we immediately imagine "nothing less" than an "all-powerful" God who, stronger than us but with identical human interests, can rectify these limitations; and when we then contemplate the expansiveness of the divine in this light, "we can think of nothing less than of [these] first fictions," that God, as simply a stronger version of humankind, is subject to limitation, too (E II p10s).

The connection between the imagination and impotence is likely responsible for the idea that the masses as a whole (as opposed to the philosopher) live solely under the guidance of the imagination – that this is Spinoza's "theologico-political" problem.[39] Certainly, if it were possible to live solely under the guidance of the imagination, the masses would be especially likely to do so since, in the main, poverty is more prevalent than wealth, and laziness is more prevalent than zeal for self-knowledge. But the imagination is never found alone. Or as Spinoza puts it, "I grant that no one is deceived insofar as he perceives, i.e., I grant that the imaginations of the Mind, considered in themselves, involve no error. But I deny that a man affirms nothing insofar as he perceives." All figments of the imagination, then, are modes of thinking involving assent and judgment, and it is at the level of judgment and assent that their actual reality is affirmed or excluded (E II p49s [IIIB(ii)]). Thus the imagination is not simply random, fantastic opinions. Grounded in, and emotionally inflected by, the ways in which the body is affected by other bodies, the imagination, and its inadequate ideas, is just as essential

[39] See Yovel, who contends that "Spinoza regards the multitude as a special category in itself. Individuals could rise above the *imaginatio* and attain *ratio*, even *scientia intuitiva*; but the great majority is incapable of doing this – and the concept of the multitude is defined by this majority" ("Spinoza: The Psychology of the Multitude and the Uses of Language," 305).

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truth: (*cont.*)
  of the text (Scripture): 92, 99–129
  theoretical and practical truth: xiii, 229–230
    see also ideas

understanding: 13, 18, 22, 23
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