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Determined to Be Free: The Meaning of Freedom in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*

Steven Frankel

Abstract: The goal of this essay is to offer an alternative account to the view that political freedom and philosophical freedom are consistent, harmonious, and mutually reinforcing. Certainly, freedom is central to Spinoza's political thought, but to understand it properly, we need to explain how it alleviates, rather than encourages, superstition among the nonrational multitude. In light of his belief in the permanency of irrationality and superstition, Spinoza does not hope to expunge illusions from political life. Advocating freedom is an attempt to adapt the facts of the imagination to the needs of our political order and create stability. The belief in freedom—that is, the belief that we are individual actors who decide our actions and determine our fate—is the most powerful and abiding illusion in politics.

In the preface to his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza announces his intention to prove two propositions: that freedom is essential to political stability and that it is necessary to religious faith.[1] The book, in fact, culminates in a stirring defense of the freedom of speech and thought as an essential condition for the best regime, "where nothing is considered dearer or sweeter than freedom" (*TTP* preface, xviii). If these claims were not enough to spark our interest and sympathy, Spinoza goes further to argue that democracy is the best and "most natural" regime because it preserves freedom to the greatest degree (*TTP* XX, 235). Spinoza's advocacy of liberal democracy, that is, "a Republic where each is granted the full freedom to judge," is particularly notable because he is among the first thinkers to advocate openly such propositions even at the risk of persecution and death (*TTP* preface, xviii).[2] Not surprisingly, contemporary students of liberalism have returned to

[1]*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth *TTP*), in *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Verlag, 1925), 3:1–267. *TTP* references are given according to chapter number and Latin page number. I have used Martin D. Yaffe's outstanding recent translation in *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe (Newburyport: Focus, 2004), which incorporates the Gebhardt pagination. I have also consulted Edwin Curley's translation in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[2]See, for example, Leo Strauss: "Spinoza may be said to be the first philosopher who advocated liberal democracy" (Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gilden [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989], 254). See

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Spinoza to study and to celebrate his attitudes toward freedom, liberal democracy, and religious belief.[3]

But the attempt to induct Spinoza into the pantheon of liberalism has been consistently thwarted by what appear to be inconsistencies, even outright contradictions, in Spinoza's argument. Nowhere is this more striking than in his treatment of the question of freedom at the very heart of his argument in the *TTP*. Spinoza advocates freedom, particularly the freedom to believe and think what one wishes, while at the same time casting doubt on the very possibility of realizing such freedom. Throughout his work, Spinoza rejects the notion of free will or the capacity to choose freely between various alternatives.[4] In the *Ethics*, for example, Spinoza claims that "in the mind there is no absolute, or free will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity."[5] Men believe they have free will because of their ignorance of the causes that determine their behavior (see *E* I, appendix). We are, Spinoza suggests in his correspondence, like a stone rolling down a hill:

> while the stone continues to move, it thinks and knows that as far as it can, it strives to continue to move. Of course, since the stone is conscious only of its striving, and not at all indifferent, it will believe itself to be free, and to persevere in motion for no other cause than because it wills to. *And this is the famous human freedom which everyone brags of having, and which consists only in this: men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined.*[6]

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also the preface to the English translation of Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 1–6.

[3]See, for example, Nancy Levene, *Spinoza's Revelation: Religion, Democracy, and Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Graeme Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2005); Grant Havers, "Was Spinoza a Liberal?" *Political Science Reviewer* 36 (2007): 143–74.

[4]As Paul Kashap describes it, "the sort of freedom involved in speaking of moral freedom is generally believed to consist of the feeling or awareness that human beings have of being able to choose between alternative ends themselves, without consciousness of any psychological or physical compulsion" (Paul Kashap, *Spinoza and Moral Freedom* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1987], 153).

[5]*Ethics* (henceforth *E*) Book II, proposition 48. The Latin version of the *Ethics* is in *Spinoza Opera* 2:45–308. I have used Edwin Curley's translation in *A Spinoza Reader*.

[6]Epistle 58, in *A Spinoza Reader*, 267–68 (emphasis in the original). Spinoza argues that freedom means "to exist solely from the necessity of one's nature and to be determined to action by it alone" (*E* Idef7). A thing is free if its "existence and action are determined exclusively by its own nature; and 'forced' if its existence and action are determined by something else, according to a fixed and determinate law. ... Thus God's understanding of himself and all things is free because it follows necessarily from his nature alone. So you see that I base freedom not on free decision but on

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The stone absurdly believes that it has exercised free will by rolling down the hill when in reality it is simply ignorant of the forces which act continuously upon it. This notion of free will depends upon our ignorance of our actual, determined position in nature. The belief in freedom is no more than an illusion which is the product of our ignorance:

> So experience itself, no less clearly than reason, teaches that men believe themselves free because they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined, that the decisions of the mind are nothing but the appetites themselves, which therefore vary as the disposition of the body varies.[7]

In Spinoza's metaphysics, everything is in God and nothing can be conceived apart from or outside of God. This God exists necessarily, so that every expression of God's power is also necessary. Human behavior is no freer, no more self-determined, than the behavior of anything else in Nature. As Leszek Kolakowski explains, "our power of choice is illusory. Whatever happens happens because it must; whatever does not happen does not happen because it cannot. In reality, there is no middle ground between impossibility and necessity: what we think of as the realm of the contingent exists only in our imagination, and reflects our defective understanding of the world."[8]

What then does freedom mean for Spinoza? In the *Ethics*, freedom is described in terms of knowledge, specifically the knowledge of causes that determine our thoughts and actions. Freedom in this sense occurs when we acquire adequate ideas and our desire is to act in accordance with those ideas. As Paul Kashap points out, "Spinoza's argument is that when a man acts according to his wishes and desires, and hence does what he wants to do without any external compulsion, he acts necessarily in the sense that his conscious desires are his reasons or sufficient conditions for doing what he does."[9] Because of our capacity for reason and self-consciousness, man

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free necessity" (Ep. 58). God is the only fully determined thing and hence the only free thing in the world (see also *E* IIp7d).

[7]*E* IIIp2s. In his lucid and useful account of Spinoza's determinism, Harold Skulsky shows that "the idea of self-determination is empty. On the other hand, his parable of the slung stone goes to show that nothing is easier than to confuse the absence of compulsion with the absence of necessity. The confusion is ripe for the using. Nothing can serve the legislator better than to build the illusion of 'freedom' into the regime of reason we design for a species with so feeble a grip on reason" (Harold Skulsky, *Staring into the Void: Spinoza, the Master of Nihilism* [Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009], 153; see also chap. 10).

[8]Leszek Kolakowski, *The Two Eyes of Spinoza, and Other Essays on Philosophers* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2004), 5.

[9]Kashap, *Spinoza and Moral Freedom*, 169.

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is capable of passively observing the efficient causes of his behavior. Such awareness, however, does not preclude the fact that our actions are determined, that we always act according to the necessity of our wishes and desires. The freedom of a free individual is not an escape from this determined course of nature, but an awareness and acceptance of it.[10] Freedom, in other words, means the liberation from inadequate ideas or illusions and superstitions which we imagine to be the causes of our behavior.

The philosophical notion of freedom appears to be sharply at odds with the political notion of freedom which Spinoza celebrates in the *TTP*.[11] Are these notions of freedom consistent with one another? Many scholars have argued that they are, and moreover, that political freedom is a prerequisite for philosophical freedom. Steven Smith, for example, claims that freedom in both cases means freedom from external causes, both political and intellectual. This account envisions a continuum from lesser to greater freedom, beginning with freedom from physical coercion and culminating in intellectual recognition of our place in nature: "When we understand the causes of our desires, we can become *in a sense* liberated from them. . . . Only by understanding the causes of our desires do we gain power over them. This power in turn enhances our sense of freedom."[12] Democracy is the best regime from this point of view because it encourages and provides the basis for freedom: "Spinoza endorses the democratic republic because it is the regime most consistent with the autonomous individual or liberated self. Democracy is desirable because *it fosters the conditions for reason* and the expression of the individual."[13]

Putting aside the question of whether our ability to observe passively our relation to nature constitutes the efficient cause of our physical actions, such a position appears to accord with the argument in the *TTP*.[14] For one

[10]Spinoza's discussion of freedom in the *Ethics* is closely connected with his argument about knowledge. In this sense, there is a gradual ascent toward freedom as we ascend toward knowledge of necessity, not just of particular things and their causes, but of the very essence or nature of particular things. Spinoza claims that by understanding things through their essence, we can have a knowledge that is akin to the "infinite intellect of God" (*E* IIp40s2; see also Kashap, *Spinoza and Moral Freedom*, 180–81).

[11]As Douglas Den Uyl puts it: freedom does not "have the same meaning in the political writings [as] in the *Ethics*. 'Freedom' in the political writings, for example, does not refer to 'freedom' as an activity in books 4 and 5 of the *Ethics*. One can therefore be free in the political sense and yet be completely passive from an ethical perspective" (Den Uyl, *God, Man, and Well-Being: Spinoza's Modern Humanism* [New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008], 16; see also 58).

[12]Steven Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 135 (emphasis added).

[13]Ibid., 122 (emphasis added).

[14]Kolakowski exposes this problem: "when [Spinoza] says that a thing is free, he means simply that its behavior is not determined by external conditions. . . . But it is

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thing, the *TTP* aims at reducing the illusions, particularly religious superstitions, which guide people's passions. Most dramatically, the *TTP* reduces the Bible's teaching to a mere seven dogmas. By reducing the number of illusions, we come closer to recognizing the true causes of our behavior, and such liberation clearly accords with philosophical freedom. Along these lines, Edward Halper argues that Spinoza's theological argument is a tool, a means for pulling citizens willy-nilly closer to philosophical freedom: "Spinoza views freedom of religion as a tool that the sovereign can use—cynically perhaps, but not necessarily so—to entice citizens to still or mold their passions voluntarily and, thereby, to exercise, through politics a semblance of the freedom that the philosopher enjoys through thought."[15] Spinoza himself appears to advocate this position when he writes at the end of the

unclear whether it is possible at all. God is free in this way, but can this kind of freedom also characterize human existence? . . . It is hard to see how the view—that our capacity of self-consciousness is not more than passive observation, and cannot be the efficient cause of our physical actions—could be reconciled with the view that our behavior is not, or need not be, externally determined" (*The Two Eyes of Spinoza*, 13). He refers to these views as the "two eyes" of Spinoza's thought, one directed toward the all-encompassing power of God, and the other toward the finite view of the Cartesian scientist. Kolakowski argues that these two eyes fix their gaze in different directions, and these visions cannot be harmonized. An alternative view is suggested by Kashap, who argues that certain inadequate ideas are "natural": "This awareness [of freedom] is by no means an illusion, but an authentic idea of perception in the common order of nature" (*Spinoza and Moral Freedom*, 162). In other words, he argues that our belief in free will does reflect a natural prejudice, or a common way of imagining reality. This opens up a space for subjectivity and political life, which though not true, has an overwhelming reality for most people. Political freedom is an interpretation of the world whereby we use man's consciousness of his freedom of choice to hold him responsible for his actions. In this sense, freedom is a "natural" interpretation of the world by the imagination since it expresses our experience, however inadequate, of nature.

[15]Edward C. Halper, "Spinoza on the Political Value of Freedom of Religion," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2004): 167–68. A more radical position was pioneered by Louis Althusser nearly fifty years ago in France, where it has been developed ever since. For a recent example, see Filippo Del Lucchese, "Democracy, *Multitudo* and the Third Kind of Knowledge in the Works of Spinoza," *European Journal of Political Theory* 8, no. 3 (2009): 339–63. One of the most subtle versions of this view was developed by Alan Donagan over of the course of nearly forty years of work on Spinoza. Donagan refers to Spinoza's view as a "naturalized theology," by which he means (in Edwin Curley's reconstruction) that "nature has sufficiently many of the characteristics traditionally ascribed to God to make it reasonable to identify nature with God" (Curley, "Donagan's Spinoza," *Ethics* 104, no. 1 [1993]: 117). But even Donagan concedes that Spinoza's work is aimed at "chosen readers" who are open to his mechanical conception of nature. See Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 65.

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TTP that political freedom "is necessary first and foremost for advancing science and the arts. For such pursuits are only cultivated with happy success by those who have judgment that is free and unhampered."[16]

This view, that there is a harmonious relation between philosophy and politics, however, must contend with some serious difficulties. First, Spinoza himself contrasts a political with a philosophical concept of freedom in the *TTP*. Philosophers grasp that "no one chooses for himself any plan of living nor puts any into effect," that is, they know that nature is fully determined and that we have no free will (*TTP* III, 32). Once we recognize that we are determined in infinitely many ways, free will is exposed as an illusion, among the first superstitions we must jettison if we wish to be rational. Insofar as political freedom rests on the belief in free will, metaphysical freedom clearly undermines it. Wise statesmen, however, understand that such metaphysical teachings can be harmful politically because most people "are plainly ignorant of how things are really ordered and chained together" in nature. As we shall see, a healthy regime requires some illusions, especially the illusion of political freedom, the view that "considers things as open possibilities" (*TTP* IV, 44). Spinoza praises the wisdom of these lawgivers for prudently ignoring the truth about freedom in favor of effective illusions.

Another difficulty with trying to harmonize politics and philosophy is that Spinoza denies that the goal of politics is to make men more rational. Even if we concede that political freedom is a prerequisite for intellectual development, Spinoza denies that such development is the purpose of government: "freedom of mind is a private virtue; the virtue of government is security."[17] Security, not intellectual progress, is the goal of politics. Still, one might contend that the most stable and secure regimes are those in which the citizens are free and rational because freedom contributes to security. Spinoza insists, however, that most men remain vulnerable to superstitions that corrode the stability of a regime, so that freedom contributes to political and intellectual chaos.[18] The citizens are no match for would-be tyrants and

[16]*TTP* XX, 233. Alternatively, we could interpret this statement to mean that, even if most people will not enjoy or benefit from philosophical freedom, it remains essential as a stepping stone for a few extraordinary individuals who require political freedom to achieve intellectual excellence. In turn, when the arts and sciences flourish, everyone benefits from the advances in technology. Such freedom indirectly benefits the entire society. This is a plausible argument but it ignores Spinoza's continual warning that philosophy might undermine the security and stability of the community (*TTP* III, 33).

[17]*Political Treatise* (henceforth *PT*) chapter I, paragraph 6. I have used the widely available translation of the *PT* by Elwes in Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (Mineola: Dover, 1951), unless otherwise noted.

[18]Spinoza rejects equality and refers contemptuously to the overwhelming majority of any community as "the vulgar," a group characterized by ignorance and superstition. This elitism and contempt for the multitude of irrational citizens

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religious figures who easily manipulate the multitude's ignorance for their own decidedly illiberal goals. To establish "a republic where everyone's judgment is free and unshackled" is a risky, not to say foolhardy, endeavor among men who are free but not rational (*TTP* preface, xviii).

As for the possibility of making men rational so that they do not abuse their freedom or fall prey to superstitious leaders, here too Spinoza is not sanguine. He notes in the *TTP* several instances where philosophers have tried to improve the multitude by making them more rational, or at least limiting their superstitious illusions. As we shall see with the case of Maimonides, Spinoza concludes that the attempt to accord reason—even covertly—ultimate authority over the community is futile.[19] The *Political Treatise* goes further in chastising philosophers for clinging to the belief that the goal of politics is to make citizens rational or intellectually virtuous. Rather than contemplate their consistent failures to achieve this goal, philosophers continue to imagine political regimes that have never existed. He concludes that philosophers "have never conceived a theory of politics which could be turned to use, but such as might be taken for a chimera, or might have been formed in Utopia. . . . As in all sciences, which have a useful application, so especially in that of politics, theory is supposed to be at variance with practice; and no men are esteemed less fit to direct public affairs than theorists or philosophers" (*PT* I, 1).[20] Because philosophers naively insist that "the multitude or those busily

clearly conflicts with his advocacy of freedom. This is because inequality for Spinoza refers primarily to intellectual inequality, and such inequality is largely irremediable. Lewis Feuer, observing the contradiction between Spinoza's elitism and his advocacy of equality and freedom, argued that it reflects Spinoza's deep-seated ambivalence about democracy, and ultimately could not be resolved. See Lewis Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987), 103. Steven Smith, on the other hand, argues that such a contradiction, though problematic, is not fatal to Spinoza's argument: "Not for nothing have readers often found it difficult to square Spinoza's defense of democracy with his passionate commitment to the radical autonomy of rational life. Spinoza recognizes that the relationship between the rational individual and the ordinary run of mankind is deeply problematic. He therefore wants to assure his readers that society has nothing to fear from this type of [philosophical] individual while at the same time retaining his emphasis on the utterly solitary character of the philosophic life" (Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question*, 137).

[19]Maimonides, according to Spinoza, attempted to import reason covertly into religion and inadvertently exacerbated superstition within the Jewish community. Spinoza also refers to Aristotelians and Platonists who have done the same within the Christian community.

[20]In contrast, practical political men have little knowledge of philosophy or nature; despite this fact, they have been far more successful at managing public affairs. Spinoza's point is *not* that the theoretical perspective, or reason, is worthless. To the contrary, such understanding as provided by philosophy helps us to avoid the

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engaged in public business can be persuaded to live at reason's behest," Spinoza concludes that no one is "less fit for governing a state than theoreticians or philosophers."[21] In contrast, wise statesmen recognize the weakness of reason's authority among the multitude and have created stable societies through other means.

If political freedom does not benefit nonrational men, perhaps it is essential for the practice and dissemination of philosophy. Again, this view does not seem to be supported by the text. True freedom is essentially a private experience of the highest human perfection and the highest joy (*E* Vp27d). Spinoza notes that philosophy can flourish in any regime, and whenever he describes freedom in philosophical terms, politics appears irrelevant (see *TTP* XVI, 263 note 33). In the *Political Treatise*, for example, freedom depends less on the regime than on reason: "In my lexicon one is altogether 'free' only to the extent that one is led by reason. To that extent one's acts are determined by causes that can be adequately understood only by reference to one's own nature, even if as causes they determine one's acts necessarily" (*PT* II, 11). In other words, philosophy does not depend on political freedom.[22]

The goal of this essay is to offer an alternative account to the view that political freedom and philosophical freedom are consistent, harmonious, and mutually reinforcing. Certainly, freedom is central to Spinoza's political thought, but to understand it properly, we need to explain how it alleviates, rather than encourages, superstition among the nonrational multitude. We shall argue that in light of his belief in the permanency of irrationality and superstition, Spinoza does not hope to expunge illusions from political life. Advocating freedom is his strategy for adapting the facts of the imagination to the needs of our political order so as to create stability. The belief in freedom—that is, the belief that we are individual actors who decide upon

errors of the imagination by analyzing human behavior, including vice, dispassionately as "natural phenomena following nature's general laws" (*E* III, preface). But such knowledge, while it may lead to the salvation of philosophers, is no substitute for the practical experience of statesmen who understand how to deal effectively with the imagination.

[21] *PT* I, 5 and I, 1. The translation here is by Samuel Shirley, in Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, ed. Douglas Den Uyl, Steven Barbone, and Lee Rice (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).

[22] Douglas Den Uyl, responding to Smith's claim that democracy fosters rationality, makes a similar point: "Political action is never active in Spinoza's sense, and the effort to make it such carries with it confusions that can translate into social conflict. Politics for Spinoza has a simple limited function that in itself has nothing to do with perfection, activity, or blessedness. . . . The best we could say is that 'democracy' does not contradict the perfected active life—not that it fosters it. To foster it would mean we would have some clear conception of how to bring activity about through political means" (*God, Man, and Well Being*, 12–13).

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our actions and determine our fate—is the most powerful and abiding illusion in politics. As such, it is essential to integrate this superstition seamlessly into our political life. Freedom can be made into an effective tool for promoting political stability and with it, the well-being of philosophers, only when it is accorded predominance over all other illusions.

Political Life and Superstition

The *TTP* begins with an account of the role of superstition in political life. In the very first sentence of the work, Spinoza suggests two distinct causes of superstition: If men could manage all their affairs by a certain plan (*consilium certum*), or if fortune were always favorable (*fortuna semper prospera*) to them, they would never be in the grip of superstition (*TTP* preface, xv).

Strangely, the beginning of the work places us immediately into the middle of the argument. The opening sentence takes for granted the claim that most men cannot govern their lives with a consistent and prudent plan and that this is a central cause of their superstitious beliefs. Spinoza suggests that not only do we lack rational counsel, but in the absence of such knowledge, we stubbornly refuse to recognize or heed good advice. But why should we accept Spinoza's assertions? Should we not first inquire into whether certain counsel is available, and if so, seek strategies for recognizing and practicing it?

Indeed, according to Spinoza's *Ethics*, it is possible to govern our affairs well and achieve happiness by using reason to identify the laws that determine the course of our lives. In the *TTP*, Spinoza also indicates that "everything is determined on the basis of universal natural laws to exist and operate in a given, determined manner" (*TTP* IV, 43; see also III, 32). But he stops short of explaining how our reason can recognize this order, how we can grasp our position in nature as a single mode incorporated into an infinite, determined whole. In other words, the discussion of religion and politics begins with an account of superstition rather than reason because most men cannot understand their relation to nature or the laws that govern it, nor recognize the wisdom of those who understand them. The starting point of the *TTP* ignores the possibility of happiness made possible by reason because most people do not possess adequate ideas, particularly of the universal and necessary laws of nature which Spinoza counts as essential to knowledge.[23]

[23]See F. Mignini, "Theology as the Work and Instrument of Fortune," in *Spinoza's Political and Theological Thought*, ed. C. De Deugd (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1984), 130. Mignini argues that reason can never have very much control over the passions and therefore religion is always necessary, even for rational men: "the imagination is the instrument and impassable limit of fortune; if it is founded upon the relation between the human body and other bodies, as the representative structure

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Instead, Spinoza focuses on the illusory beliefs about nature and her causal relations that most people cling to in the absence of certain knowledge. He describes these beliefs in detail in the *TTP*, including the belief that God exists apart from nature and the belief in free will. Rather than interpret nature in terms of universal laws, men describe it by imagining an undetermined realm, fortune, which is controlled by an equally mysterious or capricious God. Spinoza uses the term *fortuna* to describe the various illusory descriptions of nature. The particular content of fortune is flexible enough to accommodate this multiplicity of imagined views. Fortune, he says, is "nothing else but God's guidance insofar as it directs human affairs through external and *unforeseen* causes" (*TTP* III, 33; emphasis added). Because of this ignorance, we imagine and speculate on the causes of events that affect our well-being. For example, regarding the means whereby a society achieves security and health, Spinoza says that these "are called gifts of fortune, no doubt since they depend chiefly on the direction of external causes of which we are ignorant" (ibid.). The concept of fortune, then, refers to the belief in a realm distinct from nature in which we appear—however erroneously—to possess power and freedom.

Superstition is difficult to hold in check because the belief in fortune presents a virtually limitless array of illusions. Our interpretation of nature is subject to constant change according to the perception of our well-being, especially when we experience misfortune, that is, disappointments whose causes we do not fathom. Once our initial, superstitious explanation fails, we turn not to reason for answers but to other absurd causal claims to secure "the uncertain goods of fortune" (*TTP* preface, xv). Subsequently, as we experience misfortune and insecurity, we become further entrenched in the emotions of hope and fear.[24] In turn, a life based on the hope of good fortune or the fear of losing or not obtaining the goods of fortune is ineluctably connected with the imagination:

> If, while they are tormented by fear, men *see* something happen which *reminds* them of some past good or evil, they *deem* it portends either a

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of *affectiones*, one can understand why Spinoza affirmed that reason, considered as true knowledge, has no power of the imagination and can do nothing against the course of fortune and the emotions which it produces" (ibid.). See also Wolfgang Bartuschat, "The Ontological Basis of Spinoza's Theory of Politics," in the same volume. Bartuschat argues that, for Spinoza, the state "fits into an ontological structure which is independent of all human projects, without being based on a knowledge of this ontological structure" (35).

[24]Spinoza's concern with relieving the misery of the multitude is revealed not so much in combating superstition but rather in preserving religious superstitions and dogmas which are "a great source of comfort to those who cannot exert much power by reason" (*TTP* XV, 176).

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> fortunate or an unfortunate outcome . . . even though it may dupe them a hundred times. . . . They *fantasize* countless fictions and *interpret* nature in amazing ways, as if the whole of nature were as insane as they are. (*TTP* preface, xv–xvi; emphasis added)

Driven chiefly by the passions of fear and hope, men continue to imagine any number of superstitious interpretations of the world, usually attaching to each some sort of divine significance. Such "delusions of the imagination" lead to ignorance and confusion and "turn men from rational beings into beasts since they completely prevent everyone from using his free judgment . . . and distinguishing between true and false" (*TTP* preface, xix). In the absence of the certain counsel that can only be provided by reason, we are dominated by our imagination, particularly in uncertain times when we most fear misfortune and hope for fortune. To make matters worse, the power of the imagination also undermines our ability to recognize wise and certain counsel by portraying reason as limited and ineffective.[25] Spinoza emphasizes that ambitious political and religious leaders are eager to manipulate us in the depths of our credulity and desperation.[26]

To combat superstition, the scope and meaning of fortune must somehow be checked among men already ruled by their imaginings. One potential solution is to reduce the imaginings and superstitions which govern a society, but even so, fortune resists a static definition and so accommodates more effectively men's shifting desires and fears. To sum up, the starting point of the *TTP* is a portrait of the political community where man is ignorant and subject to his passions to the extent that he is unable to follow consistently rational counsel. One of the ways that this ignorance gets expressed is our belief in fortune, which subjects us to a terrifying, because unpredictable, fate. To make matters worse, there is no shortage of ambitious theologians to encourage superstitious fantasies in order to satisfy their own ambitions.

Natural Superstitions

Spinoza chastises philosophers for suggesting that reason judiciously applied to political life can cure man of his attraction to superstition. But if reason cannot check the imagination, what are the prospects for peace or stability in political life? To answer this question, Spinoza presents a detailed analysis of our natural superstitions, that is, the common features of superstitions.

[25]"Those who long without measure for uncertain things are very addicted to every kind of superstition; and all beg for divine help with prayers and effeminate tears—mostly when they're caught in dangers and unable to be of help to themselves—and call human wisdom vain and reason blind (since it is unable to show the certain way to the vain things that they long for)" (*TTP* preface, xvi).

[26]See my "Politics and Rhetoric: The Intended Audience of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," *Review of Metaphysics* 52, no. 4 (1999): 897–924.

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Rooted in ignorance and the imagination, men's superstitions and beliefs are capricious, but they are not wholly unpredictable. Men pursue their own well-being and perceive themselves and their relation to others in light of that pursuit. Spinoza claims that "each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being" (*E* IIIp6). This striving to preserve one's being is "nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (*E* IIIp7). Spinoza goes on to show in the *Ethics* how human beings can preserve themselves most effectively through adequate ideas. The *TTP* presents the same teaching in chapter XVI, where this striving is described as part of the right or power of nature itself: "The highest law of nature is that each thing endeavor, as much as is in it, to persevere in its state—and do so without regard to anything but itself" (*TTP* XVI, 179).

However, in contrast to the *Ethics*, the *TTP* focuses on the natural expression of the *conatus* in the multitude of individuals who are unable to pursue adequate ideas. The primary impulse of every individual in nature is a striving to preserve himself as he comes into contact with others.[27] Self-preservation is naturally self-centered, focused on maintaining an equilibrium of one's parts and thereby preserving one's whole being. The pursuit of self-preservation is a far more complex process in the case of human beings than it is with other things in nature because our perception of our being is partly conscious. As a result, our calculation of self-preservation involves beliefs about the objects of our desires and fears. Specifically, our pursuit of self-preservation, as we become conscious of it, involves the belief that one's efforts are one's own, the result of one's own will and freedom.[28]

Though my belief that certain things are desirable and conduce to self-preservation might well be erroneous, nothing in nature has greater authority than my own evaluation of the most efficacious means to self-preservation. In political life, desire and imagination dominate our self-perception, not reason or wisdom: "The natural right of every man is thus determined, not by sound reason, but by desire and power" (*TTP* XVI, 180). In short, we are misled to believe in such things as freedom, will, and equality by our conscious perception of our *conatus*.

[27]This account in chapter XVI is natural in the sense that it applies universally to all men without, Spinoza says pointedly, taking into account the claims of revelation or theology.

[28]The pursuit of self-preservation is a passion which is connected closely with the imagination: I feel an urge to preserve myself and I imagine that I am free to pursue those things which I believe will enhance my self-preservation. "Each deems that he alone knows everything, and wants everything to be modified on the basis of his own mental cast, and figures something is equitable or inequitable ... insofar as he judges it to fall to his profit or harm" (*TTP* XVII, 193). Spinoza's account of human action is developed in *E* III, especially propositions 28–39. For a more detailed commentary, see Skulsky, *Staring into the Void*, 121–29.

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The belief in free will is particularly durable because it occurs naturally, or as Spinoza describes it, "after the common order of nature": "whenever the human mind perceives things after the common order of nature, it does not have an adequate knowledge of itself nor of its body, or of external bodies, but only a fragmentary and confused knowledge" (*E* IIp29c). Moving from these illusions and imaginings toward reason requires first that we recognize the images and beliefs that accompany our striving to preserve ourselves as powerful illusions. To do so requires an active and continual endeavor to replace appearances with knowledge. Even if we stumble from time to time upon true opinions or images, these are not sufficient to move us to a higher level of rationality. As Den Uyl points out: "opinions can be true, but the truth of an opinion does not of itself move it to a higher level of knowledge. For that to occur, the idea must be ordered by reason and integrated with others into a coherent intellectual framework."[29] The acquisition of knowledge is a long and difficult endeavor which defies our natural beliefs and superstitions as well as the affective components of such beliefs.

If philosophy cannot make men rational, it can teach political founders and legislators some essential lessons about politics: the essential fact in political life is our *conatus* and the accompanying belief in our freedom. The other fundamental fact in politics is the priority of self-interested judgment and the irrelevance of wisdom or reason (*PT* II, 12). This combination usually gets expressed as a belief in equality since it is rooted in the rejection of superior wisdom of others. If we are all motivated by our desire to enhance our power and preserve ourselves, why should we submit to the will of another on the grounds that he possesses superior wisdom?[30] The primacy of self-interested judgment means that distinctions between wisdom and ignorance, however important to happiness and blessedness, ultimately carry no political weight. The wise do have better strategies for preserving their *conatus*, but the unwise cannot and will not recognize their wisdom. This is because the unwise neither recognize their true good nor admit the superiority of the wise.[31]

[29]Den Uyl, *God, Man, and Well-Being*, 108.

[30]As we shall see, theocracy is a perpetual possibility in political life because it remains the most effective means for convincing the multitude of the superiority of a few.

[31]Some readers, like Nietzsche, suspect the sincerity of Spinoza's claim here and point out that the wise, like everyone else, are concerned first and foremost with their own preservation. As such, they are willing to employ any means—including deception—to secure it. "Just as the wise man has highest right to do everything that reason dictates, or to live on the basis of the laws of reason, so also he who is ignorant and weak-spirited has the highest right to everything that the appetite dictates, or to live on the basis of the laws of appetite" (*TTP* XVI, 180). Clearly Spinoza does admit that deception is, at times, necessary and sanctioned by nature herself: whatever an individual perceives is useful to himself, he "is permitted to seek and to take for himself by the highest right, whether by force, ruse, prayers, or any other means"

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Upon these grounds, all superstition—whether political or theological—is constituted.[32]

Religious Superstition

In addition to these natural (though illusory) beliefs that stem from our striving to preserve ourselves, we are also subject to a variety of particular superstitions which are shaped over time by religious and political founders. We cannot hope to change the interpretation of reality in most men who are disposed toward seeing themselves as free individuals pursuing self-preservation. But in discussing the teachings of the prophets and apostles in the Bible, Spinoza suggests that it is possible and worthwhile to reform these more particular, historical superstitions. Indeed, Spinoza presents the political history of the West in part as a battle over the meaning of these historical interpretations. As we shall see, he pins his hopes of political reform in part on reforming the various theological claims of the Bible to emphasize political freedom. By doing so, he harmonizes our natural and religious superstitions and provides a solid foundation for building a modern state.

His first task is to identify the essential teachings of the Bible. But even narrowing down the scope of superstition to the Bible does not limit superstition since, as with fortune, so many different doctrines are attributed to scripture.[33] The continual flux of religious beliefs is the product of both the inconstancy of the imagination and the manipulations of ambitious political and religious figures who are interested in interpreting scripture to serve their ambitions. To redress these problems, Spinoza attempts to establish the authoritative teachings of scripture by distinguishing doctrines that are part

(*TTP* XVI, 180; see Skulsky, *Staring into the Void*, 128–32). "Everyone has by nature a right to act deceitfully, and to break his compacts, unless he be restrained by the hope of some greater good, or the fear of some greater evil" (*TTP* XVI, 182). See *E* IVp18. Also see Donagan, *Spinoza*, 164.

[32]In lieu of intellectual or moral virtue, Spinoza proposes that the domain of politics concern itself with subrational goods that all men can appreciate, particularly bodily health and security. These lower goods are not unreasonable, even if they neglect intellectual and moral perfection, and have the further advantage of promoting the stability of the community (see *TTP* III, 33–34). The pursuit of bodily well-being, when combined with the belief in freedom, does not undermine reason even while it accepts the intractability of superstition.

[33]"Ordinary people have found no stronger proof of God's providence and rule than that based on the ignorance of causes. This shows clearly that they have no knowledge at all of the nature of God's will, and that they have attached a human will to him, i.e., a will really distinct from the intellect. I think this misconception has been the sole cause of superstition" (*Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts*, Part II, chap. 7, in *Spinoza Opera* 1:261).

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of "the old religion" and those superstitions ("credulity and prejudices") that have accrued subsequently to revelation (*TTP* preface, xix). In order to return to the "living faith" of the old religion, Spinoza proposes that we return to the text of the Bible to discover its essential teachings.[34]

The results of this study are made plain by chapter V: "What Scripture means to teach which has to do with theory alone is mainly this: namely, there exists a God, or a being that has made everything, has directed and sustained it with the utmost wisdom, and takes the utmost care of human beings, namely those who live piously and honestly. The rest, however, he punishes with many comeuppances, and separates them from the good ones" (*TTP* V, 62–63). These views, which are reiterated in the seven dogmas of biblical religion, cover both Judaism and Christianity.[35] These teachings, which emphasize the importance of peace and charitable behavior, are meant to contribute directly to the stability of the community. But there is another element to his theology that is just as critical to stability. Even while establishing the central teachings of scripture, Spinoza does not fix the precise meaning of each tenet. Instead, he extends the belief in political freedom into the domain of religious belief. He argues that since each claim is open to various interpretations, men should be free to interpret them according to their capacity. A "living faith" must be flexible enough to tolerate an endless variety of interpretations of these central tenets so that it does not eclipse the main tenet which is freedom: "man obeys God on the basis of *free will* . . . and is bound to accommodate these dogmas of faith to suit his own grasp" (*TTP* XIV, 166; emphasis added). Living faith requires freedom to interpret the essential teachings of scripture as best as one is able. The hallmark of true faith combines the central teachings of scripture with the free consent of the believer:

> every man is bound to accommodate these dogmas of faith to suit his own grasp, to interpret them to himself in the mode in which it seems easier to him to be able to embrace them without any hesitation, but with his spirit's full consent, so that consequently he obeys God with his spirit's complete consent. (*TTP* XIV, 166)

[34]In other words, he wishes to challenge the authority of the Bible in order to restore it selectively. Elsewhere I have shown how the paradoxical strategy is meant to work by enlisting a new cadre of scholarly theologians to check the spread of religious superstition. See "Spinoza's Response to Maimonides: A Practical Strategy for Resolving the Tension between Reason and Revelation," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2005): 309–25.

[35]We should note that Spinoza does not rule out "the Koran or dramatic fables of the poets" from the lists of texts which may have a salutary effect on the mores of society (*TTP* V, 64). Nevertheless, he is quite critical of the Ottoman Empire and Islam for enslaving its subjects. Spinoza's observation about the Western tradition is historical, not prescriptive.

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Spinoza supports this claim, that scripture's central teachings include freedom, with an extensive interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels. In this account, Moses liberates the Israelites from slavery but then wisely attaches this rough, uneducated multitude to a comprehensive, divine law. The fulfillment of Mosaic law comes under Christ, who frees all nations from the divine law of the Hebrews and gives to them in its place the true divine law, the hallmark of which is its free acceptance: "Paul concludes that since God is the God of all nations, that is, is equally propitious to all, and since all men equally live under the law and under sin, therefore God sent his Christ to all nations, to free all men equally from the slavery of the laws, that they might no longer act well by the command of the law, but by a steadfast decree of their spirit. So Paul teaches exactly the same as ourselves" (*TTP* III, 39).[36] To achieve this steadfastness of spirit, individuals will necessarily discover their own (superstitious) path. Spinoza had promised in the preface to restore the "living faith" of scripture. The lifeblood of that faith is freedom, a decision to obey the divine law enumerated in scripture according to one's "free will" (see also *TTP* V, 61).

Spinoza's invocation of freedom in chapter XIV confirms this strategy. There he argues that since men vary in their capacities, they will also vary in their beliefs. As such it is necessary to tolerate any number of interpretations of the universal dogmas of religion as long as they lead to the practice of charity and justice. Salvation is a question of freely choosing those beliefs that conduce to the practice of charity. Further, in enumerating a short list of acceptable beliefs that are not necessarily true, Spinoza mentions freedom twice: "It is irrelevant to faith if someone believes that God ... directs matters on the basis of freedom ... that a man obeys God on the basis of freedom of the will" (*TTP* XIV, 166). In drawing our attention to the questionable status of freedom, even while making the case for freedom of religious belief and freedom of the will, Spinoza points us to the crux of his argument, the salutary belief in political freedom.

It is important to note here that Spinoza's theological teaching, particularly his emphasis on interpretive freedom, is not intended to promote rationality.

[36]Spinoza uses the expression "God is equally gracious to all" ironically throughout the *TTP*. It could mean that God truly cares about our fate or, to the contrary, God is equally indifferent to the fate of all individuals. See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 171. Paradoxically, our belief in freedom, in an undetermined realm where we can exercise our power and choice, actually weakens our power over nature because it subjects us to any number of false interpretations of nature. For more details on this theology of freedom, see my "Spinoza's Liberal Theology: A Practical Solution to the Quarrel between Religion and Revelation," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 84 (2002): 273–96. See also Hilail Gildin, "Notes on Spinoza's Critique of Religion," in *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza*, ed. Richard Kennington (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1980), 155–71.

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To the contrary, Spinoza explicitly rejects such a strategy.[37] Once we grasp the power of the imagination, the strength of our belief in fortune, the weakness of reason, and its corresponding lack of authority, the dream of using religion to make men more rational is exposed as folly. Whenever philosophy has attempted to make men rational, the results have been predictably dismal: philosophy is overwhelmed by superstition and enlisted into the service of unscrupulous theologians to attract and control followers. This is the case, Spinoza argues, within Christianity where theologians quarrel fiercely over "the theories of Aristotelians and Platonists" (*TTP* preface, xix; see also XIII, 156). Not only do these debates fail to strengthen reason, they make it vulnerable to the hatred of the multitude who treat it as a "source of impiety" (*TTP* preface, xx). Even when the motives of the reformers are noble, as in the case of Maimonides who cunningly attempted to import reason covertly into theology, Spinoza observes the same outcome. The multitude will not accept the authority of reason:

> the vulgar, having generally no comprehension of, nor leisure for, demonstrations, would be reduced to receiving all their knowledge of Scripture on the authority and testimony of those who philosophize, and consequently, would be compelled to suppose that the interpretations given by philosophers were infallible. Truly this would be a new form of ecclesiastical authority, and a new sort of priests or pontiffs, which the vulgar would ridicule rather than venerate.[38]

Spinoza does not deny that potential philosophers may be assisted in their philosophical education by the Maimonidean method of importing reason into scripture. Nor does he reject the employment of images and the imagination more generally in such a philosophical education. Instead, he asserts that these methods are simply ill suited to the multitude of superstitious non-philosophers. In practical terms, the admixture of philosophy and reason is "harmful, useless, and absurd" (*TTP* VII, 100; see also XIII, 159). For Spinoza, political life should not be conceived as a choice between reason and superstition but rather as a choice between those superstitions which effectively promote stability and peace, and those which sow further

[37] "Faith," as Spinoza says, "does not require truth so much as piety, and it is not pious and salutary except by reason of obedience" (*TTP* XIV, 166).

[38] *TTP* VII, 99. When describing intellectual perfection, Spinoza notes that for most people the highest good is bodily pleasure, a mistake that distorts their view of reason: "The worldling cannot understand these things, they appear foolishness to him, because he has too meager a knowledge of God, and also because in this highest good he can discover nothing which he can touch or eat, or which affects the fleshly appetites wherein he chiefly delights, for it consists solely in thought and purely in the mind" (*TTP* IV, 46).

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discord and anarchy. Practically speaking, then, it is best to separate philosophy from religion and allow religion to guide men (see chap. XV).[39]

The Religion of Freedom

Spinoza fashions a set of superstitions which are politically effective because they accord with our natural view of the world as particular modes striving to persevere; specifically, our grasp of ourselves as free and self-determining.[40] The Bible too, if we understand it properly, confirms this account of our freedom and endows it with divine status. Spinoza celebrates his achievement by praising his own theology, while playfully leaving others *free* to disagree: "How salutary and necessary this teaching is in a republic, so that human beings might live together peacefully and harmoniously; and how many and great causes of disturbance and crime are thereby prevented—I leave everyone to judge for himself!" (*TTP* XIV, 166).

Spinoza suggests here that freedom is most useful for a republic. But if the goal of Spinoza's politics is peace and stability, why assume that a liberal republic is the best vehicle for achieving that? If most men are superstitious, and if political freedom is an illusion, why not promote a regime that invites more elaborate superstitions that encourage obedience to the state? Spinoza's example of the Turks suggests that rulers can create a stable and secure state

[39]Democracy is based on reason in the sense that it is the most effective strategy for securing the well-being of the entire community, but not because it makes men more rational. The piety which embraces freedom is the most stable and least threatening superstition. This is why all "honorable men" (*honestos*)—philosophers and nonphilosophers alike—will accept the dogmas of universal faith (*TTP* XIV, 166; see also *E* IV, appendix). By conceding the essential teachings of the Bible, the philosopher avoids the reputation for being dishonorable, an all-too-common fate, and gains the power to pursue philosophy in relative safety and security. Moreover, conceding such religious claims in no way restricts the philosopher's own exercise of reason since he is free to interpret the dogmas according to his intellectual capacity. As Alan Donagan explains, Spinoza shows us how a "naturalized theology" allows us to move easily between the terms "nature" or "substance" and "God" without compromising the demands of reason (Donagan, *Spinoza*, esp. chaps. 4–6). In short, philosophers must sacrifice their hope of making the community more rational and with it their authority in the community, but at least such actions are consistent with their well-being (see *E* IVp18). For an analysis of "*ad captum vulgi loqui*" see Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 178–93.

[40]Compare this with Hobbes's *Leviathan*: "For men measure, not only other men, but all other things, by themselves: and because they find themselves subject after motion to pain and lassitude, think everything else grows weary of motion, and seeks repose of its own accord; little considering whether it be not some other motion wherein that desire of rest they find in themselves consisteth" (*Leviathan*, chap. 2). For Hobbes, common sense is a poor point of departure for science and philosophy.

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by deploying ever more superstitions to encourage fealty to the state. If the belief in free will is simply a prejudice, then Spinoza cannot defend his choice of Holland's relatively liberal regime on the grounds that one enjoys there true freedom and rationality while the Turks are mired in superstition. Yet Spinoza appears to do just that, namely, judge regimes in terms of the freedom they allow their citizens. The Turks' insistence on a public religion forces them to "occupy each person's free judgment with prejudices, or control it in any mode; [this] conflicts altogether with common freedom." In contrast, in the city of Amsterdam, "nothing is considered dearer or sweeter than freedom" (*TTP* preface, xvii–xviii). In view of such claims, it is easy to conclude that Spinoza wishes to advocate freedom as a natural right or a precondition of rationality. Nowhere, however, does Spinoza present such an account of freedom. Despite his rhetorical praise of freedom, Spinoza defends his choice of Amsterdam over the Turks on the grounds that freedom conduces to greater stability and security. To appreciate how the belief in political freedom contributes to stability, without necessarily making men more rational, we must examine Spinoza's account of political authority in the *Political Treatise*.

Spinoza's analysis of the social contract avoids a Hobbesian moment whereby a host of individuals suddenly sacrifice their *conatus* to the sovereign out of fear.[41] In the *Political Treatise*, he presents a more dynamic view of power which emphasizes the ongoing relation between the pursuit of one's *conatus* and the perception of authority.[42] This distinction, according to Steven Barbone and Lee Rice, is presented in Spinoza's work by way of contrasting *potentia* and *potestas*: "when Spinoza uses the term *potentia*, he is almost always speaking of the ability or capacity to be able to do something. This ability is an innate ability or operation of the individual who has it; that is, it is not something given to or bestowed upon the individual, but the

[41]Spinoza writes: "You ask how I differ from Hobbes in politics. The difference is that I, for my part, maintain natural right intact, and claim that the sovereign's right over the subject in any civil society does not exceed the measure of his power over the subject. This is always the case in the state of nature" (Epistle 50, in Baruch Spinoza, *The Letters*, ed. Steven Barbone et al. [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995], 258). Regarding this last point, Skulsky adds: "And the state of nature is always the case. To put the main point delicately, the state of nature survives the social contract in Spinoza, allowing the sovereign no more or less right than the power ceded to him by the parties to the contract. To put the point less delicately, inside and outside civil society, might makes right" (Skulsky, *Staring into the Void*, 133).

[42]Den Uyl shows that Spinoza "conceives political society to be a dynamic process of individual interactions" (Douglas Den Uyl, *Power, State, and Freedom* [Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1983], 67). Our account follows Den Uyl's explanation of collective power, especially the relation between political institutions and individual *conatus*.

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individual exists and acts because of this power."[43] *Potestas*, on the other hand, is the authority or privilege which permits us to do an action. Citizens always retain their *potentia* even when they transfer authority or *potestas* to the state.

The state, then, has a great deal of authority over its citizens, but this power is continually mediated by the citizens' willingness to obey. The citizens always retain some power or *ius* even as they submit to the laws of the state (see *TTP* XVII, 203). Nor should we identify all power with physical power. For human beings, our willingness to obey is closely tied to our perception of the legitimacy and usefulness of that power. "So," Edwin Curley observes, "the problem of forming a society with any chance of enduring becomes the problem of designing a society whose members will continue to perceive it to be useful to them."[44] The state may for a time compel me to obey because it has more power, but such force cannot assure my loyalty and obedience to the state forever:

> For no one will ever be able to transfer to another his *potestas*, and consequently his right so as to stop being a human being. Nor will any such highest power ever exist which can execute everything as it wants. For in vain would it command a subject to hate one who has done him a favor, to love one who has borne him harm ... to long to be freed from dread, and many other things in this mode which follow necessarily from the laws of human nature. (*TTP* XVII, 191)

The state's various strategies to assure my obedience are limited because its authority rests in part on my perception of its power. What is striking is that Spinoza focuses on two such strategies in the *TTP*: theocracy, which rejects equality, and democracy, which embraces it. These are the fundamental political alternatives, despite the fact that the source of their claim to legitimacy could not be more different:

> authority [*imperium*] should either be vested in the hands of the whole society collectively, so that everyone should be bound to serve, and yet not be in subjection to his equals; or else, if power [*imperium*] be in the hands of a few, or one man, that one man should be something about average humanity, or should strive with the utmost strength to persuade the vulgar of it. (*TTP* V, 59)

Spinoza suggests here that the state must either persuade me that it has ultimate sanction from a divine source, as in a theocracy, or confirm my natural view that I am free as an individual and that this freedom is consistent with the authority of the state (i.e., democracy).

[43]Steven Barbone and Lee Rice, introduction to *Political Treatise*, 16–17. In chap. XVII of the *TTP*, Spinoza links an individual's *potentia* to his essence.

[44]See Edwin Curley, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 65 (1991–1992): 41.

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Spinoza opts for democracy because its superstitions, especially the belief in freedom and equality, accord more closely with our natural superstitions and thus are more stable. In contrast, when authority rests in the hands of an individual ruler as in theocracy, the belief in equality persists and tends to undermine stability. For example, the multitude "cannot help rejoicing at evil or harm to a commander and longing for him to have every evil and bringing it on him whenever they can, even though it comes with great evil to themselves as well. Furthermore, least of all can human beings abide serving their equals and being regulated by them" (*TTP* V, 59). Theocracy is less effective than democracy because it depends on an inordinate amount of effort to suppress equality and thereby preserve the leader's authority. The leader must continually "endeavor with the utmost strength to persuade the vulgar" that they have special authority. Even when a leader is successful, as was Moses when he convinced the Israelites that he was a messenger of God, the regime is likely to teeter after the demise of its extraordinary leader.

Conclusion

We have seen that superstition rather than knowledge is a permanent fixture of politics because its source is one's imaginative interpretation of the world. The particular content of these imaginings is in constant flux. For Spinoza, politics must manage this instability, a problem accentuated by the fact that we cannot cure superstition by invoking the authority of reason. Rather, we must return to the most natural superstitions, particularly those which stem from our pursuit of self-preservation. These include the belief in personal free will and universal equality. The challenge that Spinoza takes up in the *TTP* is to harmonize our natural and religious superstitions with our view of the state. The stability of the state depends on a dynamic relation between the power of the state and individual assessments of its authority. Such harmony is best maintained by a political theology of freedom.

The meaning of political freedom has nothing to do with the philosophical notion of freedom as defined in the *Ethics*. Political freedom refers to the perception that my actions accord with my will and interests. This perception is an illusion since neither my idea of free will nor my perception of self-interest is adequate. Spinoza writes that "he alone is free who lives with a full spirit solely on the basis of the guidance of reason" (see *TTP* XVI, 184; *E* IVp20). Since most men are not rational, such metaphysical freedom is not relevant to the community. Political freedom, however, is a very different matter and Spinoza contrasts it tellingly with slavery. He argues that slavery is not simply a matter of living in obedience to another's command. Rather the slave lives in obedience to commands that are not useful to him. The politically free individual or subject also obeys external commands—and in this sense is not free—but since he imagines that those commands contribute to his well-being, he obeys them willingly. This willful obedience, that is, the

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perception of acting in accord with what one perceives as one's true good, is the hallmark of political freedom.[45] The fact that irrational men do not grasp their true benefit turns out to be irrelevant to political stability.

Obedience to law is freedom in a political sense because political authority depends in part on the perception of a harmony between one's interests and the interests of the community. Freedom, rooted in democracy, provides the most stable and secure regime because it appears to accord most closely with an individual's perception of his own *conatus* as freedom of will. As Spinoza remarks, a liberal democratic state "*seems* the most natural and to go along most with the freedom that nature grants to each" (*TPP* XVI, 185; emphasis added). The seeming freedom of liberal democracy, that is, the fact that everyone can perceive its value, is the cornerstone of Spinoza's political theology. As with his biblical theology, Spinoza leaves us free to interpret it according to our capacity. Many individuals will undoubtedly see political freedom as the highest type of freedom sanctioned by nature. Others will recognize that such freedom is an illusion, but one that is nonetheless effective for producing political security and stability without threatening reason. Despite these differences, all citizens in Spinoza's regime can readily agree to cherish political freedom.

[45]"We cannot without great impropriety call a rational life obedience" (*PT* II, 20).

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