

**Ultimate Grounds,
Political Power,
Philosophical
Intervention:
Inheriting the
Tractatus
theologico-politicus**

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Abstract: Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was written during an interruption of the writing of the *Ethics*. The book reacts to immediate political problems of the time in a radical philosophical way. This change of registers or of the mode of writing, from pure theory to intervention, provides an occasion to rethink the relation between politics and philosophy. It might even contain a model still valid today for understanding philosophy in general as a critical practice.

Keywords: Enlightenment, knowledge, plurality, power, religion, Spinoza, state.

My favorite feature of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, published clandestinely and anonymously almost exactly 350 years ago, first in 1669 (the covers say 1670), is how it came into being; its status as an interruption of the *Ethics*. According to the biographical evidence available, around 1665 Spinoza felt that his own philosophical system that was about to emerge from his manuscript that was to become the *Ethics* could wait, and that the times called for a different and more focused philosophical intervention.¹ Could we imagine other 'great' philosophers, fully aware of the significance of their main work, setting aside a manuscript of this ambition and scope, in order to intervene into the much more contextual and restricted political and theological debates of the time? Could we imagine Descartes, Hume or Kant bringing their main philosophical work to a halt for the sake of a more direct engagement?

But then we can easily imagine Wittgenstein, Sartre, or Arendt, doing this, setting aside the purely theoretical in favor of the occasional and urgent. Because this is what Spinoza must have felt, the urgency not only of a theoretical project but also of the form and the specific terms of engagement of a philosophical contribution; the task of shedding some light on questions that haunt the present. And this is where philosophy is needed most, in clearing a path, dispelling illusions and mystifications, maybe even attempting to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.

For Spinoza, attacking some untruths for a few year interlude seemed more urgent than establishing the other and more eternal truth of his own philosophy. Which were these untruths and which mystifications did they imply? And did their critique lead to solutions or reassurance, or to new worries and concerns? And on what grounds could they be addressed? Let me recapitulate, briefly and carelessly, some of the steps of the arguments in the first and the second part of the *Treatise* and let me suggest some broad gestures concerning the question why this still matters and whether these concerns continue to haunt us and our present, maybe similarly in need of philosophical intervention. So

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¹ Nadler 2011.

these remarks will refer, first, to theology, second, to politics, and third, to their point of juncture, what has been called the theologico-political complex which might be just another name for what constitutes, in any given period, the reigning politics of knowledge.

Theology, or ultimate authority

The first and much longer part of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* famously deals with the strained relationship between theology and philosophy, and the claims to know proponents of both raise. Since Protestant Christianity, and particularly Calvinism, the dominant confession in the social world Spinoza was sharing, is a religion of the Book and of the authority of scripture, Spinoza has to address the authority and status of the Bible and its interpretation, and he has to comment on the nature and the grounds of the Christian tenets of faith.² Asking what we know when we read the Bible faithfully, also means to ask how we can know what the Bible talks about even when we don't know these events and phenomena themselves, let alone first-hand: prophecy, wonders, direct communication with God.

The general answer to the question, what is the relationship between theology and philosophy, or theology and reason, is simple, even if the specifics and the logics of Spinoza's argument are highly complex. The answer is that they are separate forms of activity, and even if it seems that they share a realm of themes and that they raise competing claims to knowledge in it, they do not. Theology is not metaphysics, religious teaching is not philosophy. The one is based on moral certainty and uses the images, metaphors and tropes to reinforce obedience to the law of God, the other tries to establish intellectual certainty with the means of the light of human reason. Where there appears to be conflict or rivalry between the teachings of theology and the teachings of philosophy, there in reality is none, since theology cannot even claim to know things in the way a philosophical doctrine tries to. The practical dimension of theology aiming at obedience and its foundation on revelation does not even make it a candidate for metaphysical truths, even if most theologians at the time thought otherwise.

The apparent conflict of truths appears to be an effect of a misunderstanding from the side of religion. The strategy of isolation and differentiation carves out a space for both activities. This operation secures, and this is might very well be the ultimate goal of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, a safe space, a right to and legitimacy of philosophical knowledge or philosophizing, also implying the right to live and to teach for an intellectual dissident or heretic like Spinoza himself.³

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2 James 2012.

3 Laerke 2020.

Let me leave out all the rather difficult questions about the alleged scope of both activities, especially in moral issues, and about the priority Spinoza sometimes seems to attribute to philosophy (in epistemic terms) sometimes to theology (on the issue of salvation). What I want to rather focus on and highlight is the methodological or metatheoretical form of Spinoza's argument. The quarrel between faith and reason is not only an age-old topos of the history of Christianity, it is a political and pressing social problem.⁴ And it seems to lead to a full-blown conflict or war of interpretations and authorities, a sort of epistemic civil war. Theologians claiming knowledge and condemning secular or heretic views, appeal to a form of epistemic authority that would grant them a foundational, non-disputable position. But even if Protestant theology of his time invests enormous energy to establish this stance, Spinoza holds that neither the biblical teachings nor the status of Bible interpretation can accord or justify it. By dissecting these arguments or claims to authority as misleading, Spinoza can establish in a sort of immanent critique that the ambitions of theology have to be restricted to its practical side, making it a sort of important moral authority without any right to claim epistemic dominance.

Let me describe this theoretical operation in a slightly different language: Spinoza's strategy rests on a conception of the logics or forms of discourse, it analyzes and dissects epistemic claims and refers them back to their practical, pragmatic contexts and functions. This is, in a way, a discourse analysis, or even ideology critique of sorts. What it does is situating theories in their practical contexts, unmasking the non-purity, non-neutrality of supposedly objective knowledge, but not debunking the ideological or world-view dimension of certain discourses but showing this to be their main function.

For current philosophizing, following such a model might mean to be similarly critical, similarly reflexive (about one's own grounds to know) but also similarly relentless in attacking false claims to knowledge. Spinozists are non-foundationalists or anti-foundationalists in that they think that the alleged possession of ultimate foundations is not a part of the epistemic game named philosophy but something else, and worthy of philosophical rebuttal. Apply this to esotericism, conspiracy theories, but also to scientism or positivism, the wrongful invocation of neutral scientificity in areas where there is none to be had. Spinozism as applied philosophy is the systematic critique of non-epistemic claims to knowledge, of semblances of knowledge, of pseudo-knowledge.

Politics, or factual power

The chapters 16 to 20 of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* are explicitly political, a contribution to political philosophy in the Hobbesian fashion, a

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⁴ Habermas 2019.

contribution to natural law theory and to the question of the rights and the limits of the state. But also the proposals in this part still concern religion and theology, but now from a different angle, namely seen as forces that condition political rule. Again, Spinoza is taking up an issue that is ultra-relevant for the political culture of his time, namely the question whether state authorities should model themselves after religious leaders who execute the will of God. This is why ancient Jewish history is the theme of the lengthy chapters 17 and 18, but it is preceded by a free-standing, we might even say 'secular' image of the state as arising out of collective will in chapter 16. This is where Spinoza sounds like a faithful Hobbesian, with some slight differences, the most important being to call democracy the "most natural" form of state, something that comes naturally to beings with given natural powers and liberties and an inherent interest in preserving them.⁵

The philosophical analysis of the structure of the state makes clear that it is nothing else than a product of the joining of forces of a collective of limitedly powerful subjects, sharing and therefore increasing their overall power, as it were. This end and the need to preserve this collectively born power, constraints the state to do nothing to weaken its citizens' power and well-being. This thought is the result of a long and difficult line of arguments and leads rather directly to the demand to restrict the religious powers in their influence on politics, and it leads to a certain freedom of speech, religious belief and practice and to a certain kind of general toleration (with all the well-known disputes whether this makes Spinoza a 'liberal' in the classic sense or not).

Again, let me rephrase and highlight some elements of this philosophical construction that to me seem far-reaching even beyond their immediate application to certain religious and political discussions at the time. Spinoza is, first, a constructivist about the state, disassembling it into acts of founding and forms of establishing an order that derives from natural impulses but gains a new, completely artificial form that is in need of constant legitimation and constant affirmation by its members – there is nothing given, nothing natural, nothing self-understood about political rule and domination. Spinoza is, second, thinking from below, from the formless mass of subjects that form into a state, conceptually prioritizing what in the later *Tractatus politicus*, published right after his death in 1677, will be consistently called the *multitudo*, but the still quasi-contractualist picture of the earlier *Tractatus theologico-politicus* already contains all of its elements (this is what many call Spinoza's affirmation of 'radical' democracy).⁶

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5 Spinoza 2007, XVI, 11, p. 202; Lazzeri 1998.

6 Balibar 1998; Negri 2004; Israel 2009; Saar 2014.

Spinoza is, third, at the same time respecting and limiting political difference. He knows that the people forming a state or a political community *are* different, in their identities, powers, capacities (both bodily and intellectual), in their desires, urges, and interests. The process of founding a state or a community makes use of all of these differences without denying them, every power joining others adding something useful into the ultra-powerful machinery that is to emerge. But after the formation of the state, nothing would be more harmful than to hand over this machine to some with a particular creed or interest and allow them to crush the differences they take to be aberrations or heresies. Building on difference and preserving difference but within the unitary functional form of the state, this seems to be the imperative of Spinozist statecraft, and this is why the state has to treat the true-believers and the heretics alike, so that all can strive, in a whole that increases its overall power by allowing for difference in its many parts and on the many (maybe a thousand) levels and plateaus of the social.

It might have become evident why such a line of thought might still be of use today. Recommending a politics of plural constitution, of multiplicity and difference, as Spinoza does, seems astonishingly apt to describe the structure and life of hyper-differentiated, diverse societies as ours, and to recognize their main danger, namely the hegemony and privilege of some. Attacking certain ideas about the state, as he does in the chapters 16 to 20, amounts to attacking a certain ideology of homogeneity and natural order, and it means reminding the polity that its base is comprised of the many who are not one and cannot be made one except by force.⁷ A political order capable of granting liberties and of accepting dissensus, however, will remain dynamic and processual, and this might be an endless source for individual and collective human flourishing. It is hard not to be seduced by the promise of this formula and dream of a society to come, maybe not confined by the form of the nation any more, that might live up to this aspiration.

The Theologico-political, or knowledge/power

The philosopher, in 1665-1669, intervening into the religious and political debates of his time is fighting on two frontlines. Against dogmatic theology, the claims of reason and philosophy are defended. Theology's teachings are practical, not theoretical, and they are no basis for the regulation of what everyone should think. Against political rulers who take themselves to be exempt from critique, the denaturalizing analysis of the state as a composite being is another effective demystification. Political authority arises from the popular basis of the entire polity and must never be a weapon in the hands of some. A fine balance of plural freedoms and liberties, combined with a strong and functional state

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7 London 2013.

apparatus that is not in the service of one group, and an encouragement of productive civil encounters is what the philosopher can propose.⁸

But this rational vision of politics is, now as ever, obscured by half-truths, errors and ideologies. To fight them is a war of ideas, struggling with knowledge against knowledge. In this epistemic warfare, the political realist Spinoza reckons, all parties will also rely on and use imaginary means and they will be bound by fantasies about themselves⁹. Philosophy as a form of critique, or a public practice of reasoning, will not deny or delegitimize these affective resources and imaginary motivations but it will deny them any unchallenged claim to generality and hegemony. It will neither justify nor respect attempts to ground the structures and rules of social life in undisputable claims to ultimate truths or in appeals to mere factual power.

Understood in this way, philosophy as an epistemic practice always already exceeds the realm of the merely academic. By methodically examining the grounds of what we know, it already intervenes into the orders and powers of its time, since claiming to know and taking the right to rule are their basis. Questioning these claims and rights is philosophy's eternal task. Putting down the manuscript containing 'his' philosophy and addressing problems within the ideological and rhetorical registers of his time, Spinoza was not leaving philosophy proper behind. He was merely using a different pen, different paper, a different style.

For philosophy today, this example can only be inherited, not imitated. At first sight, it might seem unclear what in any meaningful sense might be seen as the theology of our time, and it might even be more unlikely to think that there is a ruling ideology granting absolute legitimacy to factual political authorities. But on second thought, the parallels impose themselves. Even our modernized, rationalized and scientificized world contains pillars of absolutist and foundationalist claims to authority, as well in the realm of knowledge as in the realm of politics, many of them solidified and fortified in institutions and powerful discourses (science, the university, education, law, borders, prisons), others dispersed and ubiquitous like any real ideology (racism, sexism, exploitation, hypocrisy). Maybe now as ever, philosophy's responsibility lies with unsettling and undermining what just seems to be true, logical, natural, normal.

Philosophy, then, combats false universalities and pseudo-legitimacies. It will, rather, call for a constant collective negotiation of the universal, confronting politico-epistemic subjects with something they not already feel and know about themselves. Philosophy or public reasoning is offering them perspectives that might help them

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8 James 2020.

9 Gatens/Lloyd 1999; Sharp 2007.

overcome some of their own limitations. But this de-centering, possibly emancipatory experience has to be made, if possible, by all citizens willing and daring to enter the space of the public, or of politics proper. Here, the philosopher will have one voice among many, and s/he will try to help others finding theirs. For Spinoza, this was the moment when philosophy had to leave the study room. This is what a century later will be called 'enlightenment'.¹⁰

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¹⁰ A first version of these remarks were presented as an introduction to a roundtable discussion on "democracy, public reasoning and the imagination" with Mogens Laerke during the online conference "Spinoza's *TTP*: Politics, power and the imagination", organized by Dan Taylor and Marie Wuth, Open University, London, March 30th, 2021.

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