

Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics

The Theologico-Political Treatise

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Contents

Introduction	1
1. Spinoza's Project	7
Superstition	14
Cultivating true religion and political freedom	26
Revelation	
2. The Meaning of Prophecy	37
Interpreting Scripture by Scripture	44
The limits of revealed knowledge	49
Prophecy and moral knowledge	60
3. What Divine Law Is Not	66
God and his chosen people	67
The means to salvation	75
4. What Divine Law Is	83
Defining law	85
Defining divine law	91
Defining natural divine law	99
Defining revealed law	105
5. Worship	111
Ceremonies: their character	112
Ceremonies: their use and abuse	119
Biblical narratives	124
Miracles	130
Demystifying the Bible	
6. The Meaning of Scripture	139
Interpreting the Bible	144
Situating a proper interpretative method	154
7. Putting the Interpretative Method to Work	161
The authors of the Old Testament	164
The authenticity of the text	171
Preaching and prophesying	179
Interpreting the divine word	183

Meeting the Demands of a Religious Life

8. True Religion	187
Philosophy and the law	196
Defining faith	204
The tenets of the universal faith	207
9. Theology and Philosophy	215
Divide and conquer	216
An unequal relationship	221
Shedding theology	228

The Politics of True Religion

10. Life in a Republic: The Lessons of Philosophy	233
The state of nature	235
The state	243
Contract	248
Sovereign and subject	251
Resistance	258
11. Life in a Republic: The Lessons of Theology	261
Founding a theocracy	269
Maintaining the integrity of the law	275
Learning from history	282
12. Sovereignty and Freedom	290
Civil and religious right	294
Free thought, speech, and action	303
Freedom in the state	315

<i>Bibliography</i>	320
<i>Index</i>	339

Introduction

One of the cultural images of Spinoza that has come down to us is of an unworldly philosopher who shunned society and devoted his life to the articulation of a highly abstract metaphysical system.¹ Spinoza was indeed an ascetic person, who lived simply amidst the burgeoning luxury of seventeenth-century Holland, so that this picture of him is not altogether wrong; but it is a partial representation, or what he would call an inadequate idea. To appreciate the scope and fecundity of his thought, we need to supplement it with a more sociable image of a man who was neither solitary nor isolated, but was deeply concerned about the condition of the society in which he lived. This Spinoza had many friends who shared his intellectual interests, and was connected to a number of outstandingly original scientists and philosophers. He was a close follower of Dutch theological and political debates, and his interventions in them made him a famous, and in some quarters a notorious, figure. By the end of his life he had become something of a celebrity, a philosopher known as much for his radical views about the organization of a good society as for his metaphysical account of God or nature.

Of the six major works that Spinoza produced, only two were published during his lifetime. One of these was the *Theologico-Political Treatise* of 1670, in which he discussed some of the most divisive and contentious problems then being debated in the Dutch Republic. The book confirmed his reputation as a radical, and according to some people as an atheist, and excited the opposition of religious and secular authorities alike. However, his readers were only able to appreciate his philosophy as a whole when, after his death, his friends published a complete edition of his *oeuvre*. This contained his most comprehensive

¹ One influential source for this picture is Pierre Bayle's article on Spinoza in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697). Bayle says that when Spinoza had retired to the countryside he would sometimes not leave the house for three months at a time. See Pierre Bayle, *Écrits sur Spinoza*, ed. Pierre-François Moreau and Françoise Charles-Daubert (Paris: Berg international, 1983), p. 22.

philosophical text, the *Ethics*, on which he was working when he broke off to compose the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and to which he returned once the *Treatise* was finished. Although these two works vary enormously in style and scope, they are intimately connected. In the *Ethics* Spinoza offers a long philosophical defence of a particular conception of the good life. By cultivating and sharing our capacity for philosophical understanding, he claims, we can learn how to live in ways that avoid the psychological and social conflicts that are usually so prevalent, and approach an ideal of maximal harmony and empowerment. Achieving this ideal is a difficult process, which always remains incomplete, but its rewards are such that we have every reason to work towards it and get as far as we can.

Couched in the abstract terms that dominate the *Ethics*, the good life is liable to seem a distant goal, attainable, if at all, by only a small number of philosophers in circumstances far removed from the hurly burly of everyday political life. But this is not how Spinoza conceives it. For him, striving to create ways of life that are genuinely empowering and rewarding is an immediate and practical project, to which he and as many as possible of his fellow Dutch citizens can, and should, commit themselves. If they are to make any headway, however, they will first have to foster conditions in which their efforts have a chance of flourishing; and in order to create such conditions they will have to overcome a number of obstacles. This programme drives the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, which is in effect an analysis of the conditions in which the Dutch Republic will be able to sustain a way of life informed by Spinoza's philosophical ideal. It brings his comparatively abstract goal down to earth by spelling out some of its main political and theological implications, by identifying the most important barriers that currently stand in its way, and by showing that they can safely be removed. The *Treatise* translates a philosophical sketch of the good life into a reform plan for a particular community, designed to enable it to cultivate a more harmonious way of life, and to strengthen its capacity to deal with conflict and stress.

The main obstacles that impede the capacity of the Dutch to work constructively towards a more satisfying existence revolve, in Spinoza's view, around the relations between philosophy, politics, and religion. Individuals are best placed to co-operate when they are as free as possible to live as their own ideas dictate. They need to be free to philosophize, as Spinoza puts it, and free to worship in their own fashion. As things stand, these capacities are suppressed by established religions, above all the Dutch Reformed Church and its political allies, who take it upon themselves to dictate what philosophical claims are acceptable and what dogmas the faithful must accept. A large part of Spinoza's

task is therefore to overturn this religious outlook. By showing where it goes wrong, he aims to discredit its authority and make way for a form of religious life orientated towards his own harmonious ideal.

Religious and philosophical pluralism are, therefore, preconditions of a peaceful community that can dedicate itself to learning how to improve its way of life by understanding its own situation and potential. But these conditions also need to be sustained by a political system with the same aims, and can easily be thwarted by an oppressive form of rule. Focusing again on the United Provinces, Spinoza defends its republican form of government and speaks up against the supporters of a mixed constitution. The best way for the Dutch to promote increasingly harmonious ways of life is to live in a republic that encourages freedom of worship and the freedom to philosophize.

This bare outline of Spinoza's programme provides a sense of the overall argument of the *Treatise*, and indicates how it complements the philosophical argument of the *Ethics*. But it cannot begin to do justice to the depth and subtlety of his discussion of theologico-politics, or to the determination with which he defends his views against a wide range of opponents. It is this more detailed level of argument, as much as its overarching theme, that philosophical commentators have found so stimulating and have put to many kinds of use. Some have mined it as a source of insight into contemporary problems, exploring Spinoza's work for pertinent themes and arguments.² Others have read his work teleologically, interpreting him as an early advocate of contemporary values such as free speech and democracy.³ A third group has explored the relationship between Spinoza's treatment of theologico-politics and that of other individual philosophers such as Hobbes.⁴ A fourth has concerned itself with his debts to particular traditions, such as Judaism.⁵ And a fifth has placed

² See for example Louis Althusser, 'On Spinoza', in *Essays in Self-Criticism* (London: New Left Books, 1976); Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999); Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

³ The most celebrated current exponent of this approach is Jonathan Israel. See his *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ See, for example, Edwin Curley, "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly'" or How to Read Hobbes' Theologico-Political Treatise', in *Studi su Hobbes e Spinoza*, ed. Emilia Giancotti (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1996); Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁵ For example, Steven M. Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Heidi M. Ravven and Lenn E. Goodman, eds., *Jewish Themes in*

Spinoza's *Treatise* within some canon, whether of rationalists, Cartesians, or Dutch philosophers.⁶

Each of these approaches has illuminated aspects of Spinoza's work, and this book is deeply indebted to all of them. Nevertheless, it aims to do something different. Works of philosophy are best understood as contributions to ongoing conversations or debates. They question or support, challenge or defend, and even ridicule or dismiss. In some cases, such as Spinoza's *Ethics*, this is not immediately obvious: the geometrical style in which the work is presented is designed to make it appear self-sufficient, and largely removes traces of the conversational partners whose claims are implicitly contested. But in the case of the *Treatise*, where Spinoza argues furiously against a sequence of theological and philosophical opponents, these motivations are impossible to miss. Here philosophy is not so much a conversation as a struggle—a fight against a powerful and deeply entrenched outlook, over issues that both sides regard as utterly fundamental.

Because Spinoza is not only advocating a position of his own, but trying to persuade his readers that his opponents' views are irretrievably flawed, the *Treatise* is shaped by the positions it is contesting. To vindicate his programme, Spinoza has to discredit the theological and political positions that stand in its way; and in order to appreciate both what he is saying and why he is saying it one needs to understand what views he is attacking. For seventeenth-century readers, familiar with the milieu in which the *Treatise* was written and the debates in which it intervened, this would have been relatively straightforward. But it is much more difficult for us. Spinoza addresses himself to problems from which we are estranged and factions that have long ceased to exist, and does not pause to set out their positions in a way that nowadays makes the force of his own arguments perspicuous. To follow him, and to grasp the significance of his claims, it is not enough to explicate his text: one must also set it in the context of the sequence of theological and political debates to which he is contributing.

A great deal of illuminating research has been done on Spinoza's various allies and opponents: on the group of Dutch Cartesians to which he both does and

Spinoza's Philosophy (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁶ See, for example, Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Wiep van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637–1650* (Carbondale, Ill. Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

does not belong; on the conservative Calvinists who opposed them; on more moderate strands of Calvinism with which he sometimes allies himself; and so on. These groups and their convictions form landmarks, some clearer than others, in the intellectual landscape through which Spinoza is journeying, and he relies on them to pinpoint his own position. In what follows, I draw extensively on this impressive body of research. But whereas it has largely been used to cast light on Spinoza's treatment of particular themes, I use it to interpret a particular text. I try to reconstruct the variety of interconnecting polemics that organize the *Treatise*, and offer a systematic account of the argument that Spinoza builds up by opposing them. Rather than focusing on a specific aspect of the text—for example its theory of biblical interpretation, its construal of revelation, its defence of religious pluralism, or its analysis of the state—I trace the course of the struggle on which Spinoza is engaged and follow him as he develops his case, addressing first one set of opponents and then another. If one were to take any single section of his polemic, it would of course be possible to reconstruct the debates to which he is contributing in more detail, and to recover a richer set of allusions and controversies than those I have discussed. But the benefits of detailed argument have to be weighed against the pleasures of an overall picture, and I have mainly opted for the latter.

Although attempts to examine the *Treatise* as a unity have not been common, there are, I think, a number of reasons in favour of this approach. The habit of moving easily from one of Spinoza's texts to another, implicitly assuming that his works cohere, is deeply entrenched among commentators and sometimes justified. As it happens, Spinoza is the kind of systematic philosopher who gradually extended his grasp of a set of core problems by approaching them from different angles, steadily building up the structure and implications of a distinctive philosophical outlook. In many cases, then, one text functions as a mirror in which one can get a fresh view of arguments contained in another, and it would be foolish to deny oneself the insights that this mode of interpretation yields. Nevertheless, Spinoza's texts are far from forming a seamless whole. Written for various audiences and diverse purposes, they operate on a number of levels and use different methods to win the agreement of their readers. The context in which a point is made alters its valency, so that it can be dangerous to uproot an argument from one text and plant it in another.

To appreciate what Spinoza is trying to achieve in the *Treatise*, one needs to be sensitive to the levels at which he is arguing in its different sections, and to the way that each level contributes to the overall goal of this particular text. The best way to observe this rule, so it seems to me, is to follow the development of the *Treatise's* polemic from beginning to end, concentrating both on

what it advocates and on what it rejects. The benefits of this approach are partly historical. It enables one to reconstruct, at least in part, the ground-clearing aspect of Spinoza's enterprise, by revealing what he regards as the main obstacles to an empowering way of life, and what he takes to be wrong with them. It allows us to see the *Treatise* not just as a set of more or less appealing claims, frozen in the past, but as an active theologico-political intervention in the politics of its time and a bid to redirect the course of power. Perhaps this should be enough; but in the case of such a wild and suggestive work as the *Treatise*, approaching it systematically and contextually also yields insights of general philosophical interest, which bear on our own predicament as much as on that of the Dutch state in the second half of the seventeenth century. These will emerge as we go along, but they include Spinoza's analysis of superstition; his account of the relationship between theological and philosophical thinking; and his analysis of the affinities between religion, politics, and philosophy, each of which contributes in its own way to the creation of a harmonious and empowering way of life. What we do with these conclusions is up to us. But the better we understand the interlocking set of positions that Spinoza defends in the *Treatise*, the more clearly shall we be able to hear them.

Chapter 1

Spinoza's Project

During the 1640s René Descartes became embroiled in a series of disputes with a group of Dutch professors at the Universities of Utrecht and Leiden who attacked the theological orthodoxy of his philosophical method and conclusions.¹ In the spring of 1647, immediately after composing a letter of protest to the curators of Leiden University, Descartes complained to one of his regular correspondents, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, that his difficulties with the Dutch were exacerbated by the form of their political organization. In Holland, he wrote, 'as is ordinarily the case in all states run by the people', the theologians who are most insolent and shout the loudest have the most power.² This being the case, it was hardly surprising that Gijsbertus Voetius, Rector of the University of Utrecht and one of the Dutch Reformed Church's most combative and vocal theologians, had launched a campaign to get the teaching of Cartesian philosophy banned, and with the help of allies at Leiden had pursued it for the past six years.³ Elisabeth responded sympathetically but calmly. Disagreements

¹ For a full account of this dispute, see Wiep van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637–1650* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), pp. 13–33; Theo Verbeek, 'Tradition and Novelty: Descartes and Some Cartesians', in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, ed. Tom Sorell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

² Descartes to Elisabeth, 10 May 1647, in René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1974) vol. V. p. 17. References to this edition of Descartes' works will be abbreviated as 'AT' below. Translation from *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes* ed. and trans. Lisa Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 161.

³ Gijsbert Voet, or Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), was the primary professor of theology and the Rector of the University of Utrecht during and after Descartes' final residence in the Netherlands. A staunch defender of orthodox Calvinism, he became one of the most powerful critics of Cartesian philosophy, which had come to the attention of the theological faculty at Utrecht by way of Descartes' friend, the professor of medicine Henricus Regius (1598–1679).

of this kind were, she explained, just part of the price that the Dutch pay for their liberty. Although theologians can speak their mind in all societies, their liberty knows no restraint in democratic states such as Holland, where conflict is consequently prone to arise.⁴

Descartes and Elisabeth were both beneficiaries of the freedoms that the Dutch prized so highly. He had moved to Holland in 1628 and had remained there for many years, pursuing his philosophical and scientific work without interference from the authorities. Her family had taken refuge in The Hague after her father, the Elector Palatine, had been ousted from power and driven from his territory.⁵ However, in this exchange of views they dwell on the limitations of the state that had made them welcome. Republics or democracies such as the United Provinces tend to privilege liberty; but by allowing freedom of judgement and thus of worship, such states not only permit theologians to uphold their theological opinions, but also give them power to oppose views of which they disapprove. As a republic, then, the United Provinces is vulnerable to theologically driven conflicts, of which the Voetian attack on Cartesianism is just one example.

Judging from the long drawn out history of this particular dispute, Elisabeth and Descartes had a point. What began as a local disagreement about the Utrecht university curriculum turned in the course of the 1640s into a highly politicized split, which extended far beyond academia and shaped Dutch political life for several decades. On the one side, orthodox Calvinist theologians led by the tirelessly polemical Voetius defended the teaching of Aristotelianism as the only philosophy consonant with Scripture and thus with true religion. Cartesianism, they argued, represented a heterodox threat to faith and did not belong in Christian universities, where philosophy should be subordinated to theology. On the other side, Descartes' advocates defended his novel philosophical approach to the investigation of nature, despite the fact that some of its results conflicted with claims made in the Bible. Cartesian philosophy was in their view independent of theology and did not threaten the essential teachings of Scripture. There was therefore no reason why it should not be taught.

As this conflict developed, each side became roughly aligned with a broader political party on which it relied for support. The Cartesians looked to the

Descartes complained of Voetius' abusive and threatening remarks in the *Letter to Father Dinet*, appended to the second edition of his *Meditations*, published in 1642.

⁴ Elisabeth to Descartes, May 1647, AT V.47, Shapiro ed., *Correspondence*, p. 162.

⁵ Shapiro ed., *Correspondence*, pp. 7–8.

republicans who dominated the States of Holland and were led from 1653 by the Grand Pensionary, Johann de Witt. While De Witt sometimes ruled in the Voetians' favour, he created an environment in which their demands were held in check and the Cartesians remained, as they put it, free to philosophize.⁶ More generally, he upheld an unusual level of intellectual and religious freedom. The Voetian theologians, by contrast, made common cause with those of de Witt's opponents who were hostile to his republican government and favoured a mixed constitution, in which the power of the States was offset by that of a quasi-monarchical Stadtholder.⁷ One of De Witt's most dramatic innovations had been to abolish this traditional office in the province of Holland and diminish its power elsewhere, but many people still longed for a more hierarchical system, and hoped for the return of a Stadtholder who would impose greater uniformity on religious and intellectual life.

The controversy between Voetians and Cartesians went on by fits and starts, lurching from one compromise to another. As late as 1656, for example, the States of Holland found it necessary to issue a decree ordering the two groups of university professors to refrain from trespassing on each other's domains and avoid provoking one another. (They were to abstain from invectives and odious insinuations, present the truth simply, and avoid pointing out hateful consequences that could be expected to give offence to others.⁸) As far as their teaching was concerned, the two parties gradually established a reasonably effective division of labour. But the broader tensions that they had come to represent did not disappear, and supporters of each side remained suspicious of the other. Any attempt to limit or suppress philosophical discussion or publication tended to stir up an old fear that the theologians were trying to extend their authority, and philosophers who overstepped the official boundary around their subject could expect to arouse a comparably anxious response on the part of the theologians.

Spinoza, who embarked on his philosophical career sometime in the early 1650s, belonged firmly on the Cartesian side of this divide. After his excommunication from the Amsterdam synagogue in 1656 he became part of an

⁶ Herbert H. Rowen, *John De Witt, Grand Pensionary of Holland, 1625–1672* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), ch. 20.

⁷ *Ibid.* ch. 19.

⁸ The final draft of the edict was released on 30 September 1656. While it stipulated that 'the *'philosophemata'* drawn from the philosophy of D. Cartesius, which now gives some offence, shall cease to be set forth', it also required both sides of the conflict to 'refrain from all invectives and all direct or indirect labelling of one or the other side, being satisfied to present the truth simply'. *Ibid.* p. 407.

intellectual circle whose members were interested in Descartes' work, and is thought to have attended lectures at Leiden University where Cartesianism was being taught.⁹ A letter from Henry Oldenburg, Secretary of the Royal Society in London, records that in 1661 he and Spinoza had a conversation 'about the principles of the Cartesian philosophy, and of the Baconian',¹⁰ and two years later, Spinoza was giving instruction on Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* to a young student, Johannes Caesarius.¹¹ From the point of view of the teacher, the lessons were disappointing: Spinoza confided to a friend, Simon De Vries, that Caesarius was nothing but trouble, and was too boyish and unstable to appreciate the truth.¹² Nevertheless, the exercise prompted him to work up the course he had written for his unworthy pupil into an exposition of Parts I and II of the *Principles*, set out in geometrical order. The result was published in 1663 by the radical Mennonite publisher Jan Rieuwertsz with an introduction by Lodewijk Meijer—both members of Spinoza's circle—and was translated from Latin into Dutch by a third friend, Peter Balling.¹³

The Principles of Philosophy Demonstrated in the Geometrical Manner cannot but have consolidated Spinoza's reputation as a philosopher sympathetic to Descartes. It placed him alongside the Dutch Cartesians and against the Voetian Calvinists who continued to regard the new philosophy as dangerously heterodox. At the same time, its *Appendix concerning Metaphysical Thoughts* put into circulation some of Spinoza's own philosophical views, which, as De Vries indicates in a letter of 1663, were already being studied in a fuller form by friends and sympathizers. As De Vries writes, 'Our group is arranged this way: one of us (each in turn) reads through, explains according to his own conceptions, and then proves everything, following the sequence and order of your propositions. Then, if it happens that one cannot satisfy the other on some

⁹ Steven M. Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 191ff.

¹⁰ Letter 1; Spinoza, *Epistolæ*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, vol. IV, *Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1924), p. 5; English translation: *Letter: August 1661–August 1663*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 163–4.

¹¹ Theo Verbeek, 'Spinoza and Cartesianism', in *Judaeo-Christian Intellectual Culture in the Seventeenth Century: A Celebration of the Library of Narcissus Marsh (1638–1713)*, ed. Allison Coudert (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), p. 175.

¹² Letter 9; Spinoza, *Letters: August 1661–August 1663*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, pp. 193–6. Simon de Vries (1633–67) was an Amsterdam merchant who at various points tried and failed to give Spinoza financial assistance.

¹³ Pieter Balling (dates unknown) was a Mennonite merchant who participated in a group to discuss Spinoza's philosophy. In 1662 he published a pamphlet, *The Light upon the Candlestick (Het licht op den kandelaer)*, which argued for a non-confessional, personal form of religion that was mistaken by many for a tract by the Quaker William Ames.

point, we make a note of it and write to you, so that you can if possible make it clearer to us. Under your guidance we may be able to defend the truth against those who are superstitiously religious and Christian, and to stand against the attacks of the whole world'.¹⁴

The work to which this letter refers seems to have been a version of the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza's first extant attempt to set out the lineaments of the radical philosophical system he would later develop in the *Ethics*.¹⁵ It is therefore not surprising that De Vries should take it for granted that its claims will run into opposition from 'superstitious' Christians. Spinoza expresses the same worry himself, and when Oldenburg urged him to publish the work he hung back: 'I fear, of course, that the theologians of our time may be offended and with their usual hatred attack me, who absolutely dread quarrels'.¹⁶ Oldenburg responded with some light-hearted encouragement. 'Let it be published, whatever rumblings there may be among the foolish theologians. Your Republic is very free, and gives great freedom for philosophizing. . . . Come, then, excellent Sir, banish all fear of arousing the pygmies of our time. Long enough have we appeased ignorant triflers. Let us set full sail for knowledge and penetrate more deeply into Nature's mysteries than anyone has done before us'.¹⁷ But Spinoza was not convinced.

Since criticism by Calvinist theologians could be extremely harsh, it is easy to understand why Spinoza might have preferred to avoid their mixture of philosophical and personal abuse. However, by the 1660s Cartesianism had become an established feature of Dutch intellectual life, and it seems possible that his anxieties about the Reformed Church were excessive. What did he really have to fear? The answer is difficult to gauge, but at least two factors need to be taken into account. Both in his *Appendix containing Metaphysical Thoughts*, and in the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza makes claims about God that are, from a Calvinist point of view, more heterodox than any expressed by Descartes.¹⁸ He

¹⁴ Letter 8. *Letters: August 1661–August 1663*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) p. 190, modified. On Spinoza's philosophical associates, see K. O. Meinsma, *Spinoza et son cercle: Étude critique historique sur les hétérodoxes hollandais*, trans. S. Roosenberg and J.-P. Osier (Paris: Vrin, 1983); Nadler, *Spinoza*, ch. 8.

¹⁵ Nadler, *Spinoza*, p. 202.

¹⁶ Letter 6. *Letters: August 1661–August 1663*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, p. 188.

¹⁷ Letter 7. *Letters: August 1661–August 1663*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, p. 189.

¹⁸ Probably the most significant of these was the suggestion that all things exist necessarily, which would entail that God did not create the world by freely choosing something contingent. Spinoza, *Korte Verhandeling Van God, Den Mensch, En Deszelfs Welstand*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, vol. I, *Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1924). English translation: *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, pp. 59–156. I. iv; Spinoza, *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiæ Pars I. Et Ii., More Geometrico Demonstratæ Per Benedictum De Spinoza. Accesserunt Ejusdem Cogitata Metaphysica*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, vol. I, *Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl

could therefore expect to be challenged. In addition, the political situation was becoming more dangerous. De Witt's authority was waning, and the United Provinces found itself without effective political or military leadership at a point when longstanding international disputes over fishing, trade, and colonial territory were coming to a head. In 1664 war broke out, and in the following year the Dutch navy was badly defeated. But even during the prelude to this crisis, old fissures reopened. The supporters of the Stadtholder gathered strength, and the Republican party increasingly began to be viewed as libertine. In these circumstances De Witt's government could no longer be counted on to protect Cartesians and religious nonconformists from the theologians, so that people such as Spinoza and his friends were more vulnerable than before.¹⁹

At such a juncture, Spinoza might have been expected to keep quiet; but in fact he did quite the opposite. Leaving his *Short Treatise* unpublished, and setting aside the draft of his *Ethics*, he began to work in earnest on a *Theologico-Political Treatise*, directly confronting the outlook on which the theological opponents of Cartesianism had built their case. In the autumn of 1665 he explained to Oldenburg that his reason for writing about the interpretation of Scripture was threefold: to speak out against the prejudices of the theologians, which prevent people from turning their minds to philosophy; to disabuse the populace of their opinion that he is an atheist; and to defend the freedom to philosophize in the face of the preachers' attempts to suppress it.²⁰ The space for philosophizing that had been carved out during the struggles of the 1640s and 1650s was evidently not secure enough to prevent theologians, preachers, and populace from invading it.²¹

Establishing that philosophy and theology can safely cohabit is one of the central aims of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*; but rather than dealing with this issue in

Winter, 1924). English translation: *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, pp. 299–346, Appendix II, chs. 8 and 9. This was a suggestion that had been made by Jacobus Arminius and was rejected by orthodox Calvinists. Jacobus Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1986), II. 33–5. Voetius's strongly opposing, orthodox Calvinist view is presented in Andreas J. Beck, 'Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676): Basic Features of His Doctrine of God', in *Reformation and Scholasticism: Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought*, ed. W. J. van Asselt and E. Dekker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001).

¹⁹ Maarten Roy Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Golden Age*, trans. Diane Webb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. 3.

²⁰ Letter 30; Spinoza, *Epistolae*, p. 166.

²¹ See Piet Steenbakkers, 'The Text of Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus', in *Spinoza's 'Theologico-Political Treatise'*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

isolation, Spinoza addresses the broader set of disagreements with which it had become associated. Directly contesting the pessimistic assessment of republics on which Descartes and Elisabeth had agreed twenty or so years earlier, he sets out to show that theologically inspired discord of the sort that had plagued the United Provinces is not an unavoidable consequence of a republican constitution. On the contrary, it can and should be resolved, and the goal of the *Treatise* is to show how this can be done. As its title page explains, the work is made up of several dissertations, 'wherein it is shown not only that freedom to philosophise can be granted without injuring piety or the peace of the republic, but that peace and piety are endangered by the suppression of this liberty'.²² Despite the conviction of the Voetians and their allies, the freedom to philosophize is not, so Spinoza aims to show, incompatible with piety. There need be no tension between the requirements imposed by religion and the practice of philosophizing, and no struggle between philosophers and theologians. In fact, *unless* the freedom to philosophize is respected, piety is threatened; and so, too, is the peace of the republic.

As Spinoza presents the *Treatise*, it is an explicit intervention in the political debates by which he is surrounded, and an offer to resolve a longstanding struggle without compromising freedom, that most central of all republican values. 'Since we happen to have the rare good fortune of living in a republic where everyone is granted complete freedom of judgment and is permitted to worship God according to his understanding, and where nothing is thought to be dearer or sweeter than freedom, I believed that I should be doing something that is neither unwelcome nor useless if I showed not only that this freedom can be granted without harm to the piety and the peace of the Republic, but also that it cannot be abolished unless piety and the peace of the Republic are abolished with it'.²³ The task of the *Treatise* is thus to reconcile three values: the freedom to philosophize, piety, and peace. By interpreting each in the light of the others, and by setting them in the context of his broader philosophical commitments, Spinoza will outline a form of political life in which they are not only compatible, but mutually dependent. Without the freedom to philosophize, piety cannot be fully achieved and peace is fragile; without stable peace there can be no piety or freedom to philosophize; and so on.

²² Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, vol. III, *Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1924), Preface, p. 3. All translations of this text are by Edwin Curley whose edition is forthcoming with Princeton University Press.

²³ *Ibid.* Preface, p. 7. On the complex notion of Dutch freedom, see Martin van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt, 1555–1590* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), ch. 6, Raia Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), chs. 3 and 5.

Spinoza was not alone in desiring such a harmonious way of life, but because the tensions and conflicts standing in its way had proved so intractable, the possibility of achieving it seemed remote. Needless to say, he is alive to the ambitiousness of his project, and its complexity is reflected in the structure of his work. The path traced by the text is a tortuous one, and before he can set out along it, Spinoza needs to win his readers' trust. To gather them around him, he presents the position he is going to defend as an antidote to a corrosive and degraded way of life dominated by superstition. At first glance, this may seem a strange place to start, but it is carefully calculated to direct attention to what will prove to be two of Spinoza's deepest preoccupations. Superstition's status as the opposite of true religion alerts us to the fact that, of all the values the *Treatise* is aiming to uphold, the nature of piety will prove to be the most controversial. The question of what constitutes true religion and what is merely superstition will run through much of his text. Still more fundamentally, superstition is a phenomenon in which theological and political issues are inextricably bound up. The problems that it raises set the scene for a theologico-political treatise, and illuminate the nature of the difficulties with which Spinoza is going to grapple.²⁴

Superstition

Like the majority of his contemporaries, Spinoza views superstition as a deformation of religion, a pathology that arises when religion goes wrong. This disturbing relationship had been forcefully characterized by Francis Bacon, one of the philosophers whose work Spinoza had discussed with Oldenburg. 'For as it addeth deformity to an ape to be so like a man', Bacon comments, 'so the similitude of superstition to religion makes it the more deformed. And as wholesome meat corrupteth to little worms, so good forms and order corrupt into a number of petty observances'.²⁵ These petty observances are indeed numerous, and take a plethora of forms. In a wilfully eclectic catalogue of follies, Spinoza's contemporary Thomas Hobbes notes that superstition encompasses pretended experience, pretended revelation, false prophecy, oracles, the leaves of the Sybils, enthusiasm, theomancy or the prediction of events, horoscopy, judiciary astrology, thumomancy or presage, necromancy, conjuring,

²⁴ Nancy Levene, *Spinoza's Revelation: Religion, Democracy, and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); André Tosel, 'Superstition and Reading', in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

²⁵ Francis Bacon, 'Of Superstition', in *Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers, *The Oxford Authors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 374.

witchcraft, augury, palmistry, monsters, portents such as inundations, comets, earthquakes, or meteors, 'and innumerable other such vaine conceipts'.²⁶ However, although superstition can be made to look merely ridiculous, it is in fact dangerous. As Bacon again explains, it dismounts sense, philosophy, natural law, piety, law, and reputation, and 'erecteth an absolute monarchy in the minds of men'. So much so, that it 'hath been the confusion of many states, and bringeth a new *primum mobile* that ravisheth all the spheres of government'.²⁷

The phenomenon Bacon describes is an extremely powerful one. Superstition cuts us off from the material and immaterial worlds by obstructing crucial and elementary forms of response such as sight, hearing, and touch. At the same time, it threatens accepted standards of probity by destroying our susceptibility to natural piety and blunting our concern for reputation. As the disciplining hold of social norms loosens, the threats embodied in the law cease to carry weight, and even the universally valid inferences of philosophy can get no purchase on the distempered self. By degrees superstition creates an 'absolute monarchy' in the mind, a rule verging on tyranny both in its inability to control itself and in its adamant refusal to be checked.

One of the most striking features of this account is the marginal position that it allots to the epistemological critique of superstitious practices. While nothing in Bacon's analysis undermines the likelihood that the claims made by witches, diviners, or sorcerers are false, this in itself does not make them more threatening than any other kind of error. What makes superstition so ominous is not its epistemological status, but rather something about the psychic condition of its victims, namely the rigidity with which they adhere to a particular affective outlook, and the intransigence with which they cling to the various beliefs and feelings that it sustains. Viewed like this, superstition is worlds away from the ignorant misconstrual of nature, or from the cynical manipulation of popular passions for political gain. It is a form of obsession that disempowers the self by shutting down its capacity to modify its own beliefs and affects and making it resistant to external remedies.

What sustains these unfortunate dispositions? In the writings of a range of classical authors and their humanist descendants, superstition is said to be rooted in a kind of fear, and is in its most naked form a species of terror. Perhaps the most vivid and influential exposition of this view is to be found in an essay

²⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 81–2.

²⁷ Bacon, 'Of Superstition', p. 373.

written by Plutarch, which draws a distinction between two kinds of error. Although error is always to some degree harmful, certain mistakes such as the belief that atoms are the principal elements of material things, do not cause ‘any pricking and troublesome pain’.²⁸ By contrast, other false judgements should arouse our pity, ‘because they engender many maladies and passions, like unto worms and such filthy vermin’.²⁹ Among the latter class of errors are the errors surrounding superstition, an excessive and torturing fear of the gods that ‘humbles a man down to the very ground’.³⁰

As Plutarch portrays it, superstitious fear of the gods is painful in itself; but the suffering it causes is aggravated by its tendency to reinforce the mistaken beliefs and inappropriate feelings around which it is organized. Because it generates a kind of passionate constancy that lies at the other end of the spectrum from the steady critical outlook delivered by reasoning, superstition gives rise to a cognitive and psychological rigidity that can damage even the everyday capacity to relate means to ends.³¹ In most circumstances, our passions generate corresponding desires, such as the desire of the proud for esteem or of the angry for vengeance, and someone in the grip of an affect will be motivated to try to achieve whatever goal it dictates. But this is not the case with fear, which ‘carries with it a certain blockishness or stupidity, destitute of action, perplexed, idle, dead, without any exploit or effect whatsoever’.³² To varying degrees, fear undermines our capacity to engage with the world.

In the case of superstition, this passivity is exacerbated by the fact that the fear in question lacks a determinate object, so that the desires to which it gives rise are not sufficiently specific for practical reason to get to work on them. The superstitious man ‘that stands in fear of the gods, feareth all things, the land, the sea, the air, the sky, darkness, light, silence and his very dreams’.³³ Fearing everything might in principle make one want to flee from everything, but since it is not clear how one would go about satisfying such a desire, there is something peculiarly paradoxical and self-defeating about superstition.³⁴ Of all types of fear, Plutarch concludes, ‘there is none so full of perplexitie and unfit for action’.³⁵ To compound their suffering, the victims of superstition are vulnerable to a range of typical afflictions, including insomnia and terrifying fantasies and dreams. In an effort to deal with these symptoms, they resort to

²⁸ Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbit (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 164E. Quoted from Plutarch, *The Philosophie, Commonly Called, the Morals Written by the Leamed Philosopher, Plutarch of Cheronea*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1603), p. 260.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Plutarch, *The Morals*, p. 261.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

ceremonies and rituals, and when these devices fail to cure them of their anxiety, are liable to spiral down into a state of abject desperation,³⁶ intensified by the fact that superstition weakens their capacity to resist it. 'Thus, unhappy and wretched superstition, by fearing overmuch and without reason . . . never taketh heed how it submitteth itself to all miseries'.³⁷ Once a person is in this state of mind, circumstances that would not otherwise be particularly dangerous come to pose a serious threat. Superstitious rulers and military leaders, for example, become unable to deal effectively with their responsibilities, and are liable to embark on destructive courses of action. Some commit suicide; some become incapable of making necessary decisions; and some act out their frustrations in displays of cruelty and barbarism. Superstition is therefore not just a cause of individual misery. It can also constitute a political problem against which states need to be on their guard.

Plutarch's account is reiterated in a wide range of early modern writings, some of them political, others medical or philosophical, and is also explored in the drama of the period.³⁸ Spinoza clearly has this general conception of superstition in mind, both in the *Ethics*—where the dangers of obsessive anxiety and mental vacillation run through his reflections on human psychology—and also in the Preface to the *Treatise*. It is common knowledge, he there remarks, that fear encourages and preserves superstition, and that people only suffer from it when they are afraid. 'If men could manage all their affairs in accordance with a definite plan, or if fortune were always favourable to them, they would never be possessed by superstition'.³⁹ As things are, however, our desires for ends that we cannot be sure of attaining expose us to the interdependent passions of fear and hope, so that we are not only inclined to shift from one affect to the other as our perception of our prospects changes, but also tend to swing between exaggerated states of confidence and anxiety.⁴⁰ When things go well, we become over-optimistic and blind to the limits of our knowledge and power (though, even then, our satisfaction is often tinged with fear of loss). When things go badly, our efforts to alleviate our anxiety drive us to grasp at straws

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Plutarch, *The Morals*, pp. 262–3.

³⁸ Evan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason and Religion, 1250–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Susan James, 'Shakespeare and the Politics of Superstition', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, ed. David Armitage, Conal Condren, and Andrew Fitzmaurice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁹ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Preface, p. 5. On Spinoza's conception of vacillation, see Minna Koivuniemi, 'L'imagination et les affects chez Spinoza', *Documents Archives de Travail et Arguments*, 52: *Spinoza. L'esprit, les passions, la politique* (2010).

and take refuge in all sorts of fanciful hypotheses. To relieve the fear to which uncertainty exposes them, people construct and cling to beliefs and practices that they find comforting, and this is how superstition gets a hold. For instance, Spinoza elaborates, if an event reminds an individual of some past happiness, they will take it to be a lucky omen, and are liable to stick to this belief even if it ‘deceives them a hundred times’.⁴¹ Again, when a person is struck with wonder at some strange occurrence, they will often treat it as an indication of divine anger. ‘Prey to superstition and contrary to religion, they will consider it a sacrilege not to avert disaster by sacrifices and prayers’, and will recklessly invent things ‘as if the whole of nature were as insane as they are’.⁴²

Since hope and fear are in Spinoza’s view normal responses to uncertainty, superstition is a pervasive feature of human existence. The more people strive for ends that are beyond their control, the more they expose themselves to anxiety; and the more anxious they become, the more they are liable to console themselves with superstitious beliefs and practices, to the point where there is ‘no advice so foolish, absurd or groundless that they will not follow it’.⁴³ Moreover, superstition is quick to spread: once an individual or group has acquired an emotional investment in a superstitious practice, they will try to bolster their confidence by persuading other people to share their outlook, even at the cost of making them ‘as wretched as themselves’.⁴⁴ Rehearsing the standard account of the sufferings to which superstition gives rise, the *Treatise* also enumerates its cognitive deficiencies. As the superstitious become fixated on their delusions they become impervious to reasoning, and cling to whatever practices they favour, regardless of their irrationality.⁴⁵ ‘Indeed’, Spinoza observes, ‘they believe that God rejects the wise, and writes his decrees not in the mind, but in the entrails of animals, and that fools, madmen and birds predict his decrees by divine inspiration and prompting. Thus does fear make men insane’.⁴⁶

Superstition, as it is portrayed here, is both a theological and a political phenomenon. In its theological dimension it springs from a misunderstanding of God that arises when individuals and communities deal with their anxieties

⁴¹ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Preface, p. 5. See also Spinoza, *Ethica*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, vol. II., *Opera* (Heidelberg Carl Winter, 1924). English translation: *Ethics*, in Curley ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, pp. 407–617, 3p50.

⁴² Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p63s.

⁴⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p44, 5p9.

⁴⁶ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 5.

by turning in an uncritical vein to imaginary conceptions of the deity and making them the basis of pseudo-religious forms of worship. But superstition also has political features. Both because it tends to take diverse forms, and because the loyalty aroused by any single superstition tends to be shortlived, it introduces a source of endemic instability and division into the life of a community. Equally, it creates risks when it afflicts particularly powerful individuals, and can do enormous damage to the smooth running of the state. Superstition therefore needs to be seen as a theologico-political phenomenon. It intertwines the political and theological implications of fear, and simultaneously opposes piety and peace. Since it represents such a grave danger to the values of a republic, taking steps to control it is bound to be one of the essential tasks of government.⁴⁷

Dwelling on this theme, Spinoza spells out the forms of political and theological corruption to which superstition leads. Starting with its political aspect, he reiterates a judgement voiced by Plutarch and numerous Roman moralists and historians, and echoed by their humanist successors;⁴⁸ although the psychological need for reassurance to which superstition answers is always present, it is particularly strong at moments of political or military crisis, when even leaders are liable to succumb to it. To illustrate this point, Spinoza appeals to the Roman text that he cites most frequently in the *Treatise*, Quintus Curtius Rufus's life of Alexander the Great. Curtius Rufus's work had been widely admired within the humanist tradition as a model of eloquence. It had been praised by Lipsius for its language and style, Erasmus had produced an edition of it,⁴⁹ and it had been put into Dutch by Jan Glazemaker who would later become the translator of part of Spinoza's *Ethics*.⁵⁰ Mining its insights, Spinoza now focuses on Quintus Curtius's claim that even the boldest rulers are liable to become superstitious when they confront great danger and uncertainty.

⁴⁷ Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 29–34. On this theory of superstition and government, and its relation to Althusser's theory of 'Ideological State Apparatuses', see Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, 'Preface', in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. xviii.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, ed. Joseph B. Mayor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1880), II. 70–2.

⁴⁹ Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 3–6.

⁵⁰ Jan Hendriksz Glazemaker (1619–82) was probably the translator of Spinoza's works into Dutch, and is also likely to have translated much of Descartes' work for Jan Rieuwertsz.

For example, it was only when Alexander feared military defeat at the hand of Darius that genuine superstition drove him to employ seers. Once he emerged victorious he stopped consulting them until he and his army were again in trouble, at which point he ‘lapsed again into superstition, that mocker of men’s minds’, and ordered Aristander ‘to enquire into the outcomes of things through sacrifices’.⁵¹

As well as corrupting the judgement of political leaders, superstition undermines their power. On the one hand, it creates a niche for agents who claim to be able to allay fear, and thus for augurs, seers, or prophets who may challenge the authority of a sovereign or general. On the other hand, since the relief that such figures offer is usually only temporary, people who rely on it tend to shift restlessly from one form of consolation to another, and are in Spinoza’s judgement ‘best pleased with what is new and has not yet deceived them’.⁵² Because, as Curtius Rufus again summarizes, ‘nothing sways the multitude more effectively than superstition’, leaders need to be wary of it.⁵³ However, as Spinoza points out, it is difficult to heed this advice. One way of coping with superstition is to impose a religion so grandiose that it will win and sustain popular loyalty, which is why such immense efforts have been made to ‘embellish religion, whether true or false, with such ceremony and pomp’ that everyone will adhere to it with the deepest reverence’.⁵⁴ The most systematic advocates of this approach are the Ottomans, but as their case illustrates, it carries prohibitive costs. To uphold religious uniformity, ‘the Turks consider it a sacrilege even to debate religion, and fill everyone’s judgment with so many prejudices that they leave no room in the mind for sound reason, and no room even to be in doubt’.⁵⁵ The outcome is a counter-productive form of irrationality: ‘the greatest secret of monarchical regimes is to deceive men, by cloaking the fear by which they are held in check with the specious name of religion. They will then fight for slavery as if for freedom, and

⁵¹ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Historiae*, ed. C. M. Lucarini, *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), IV.x.7; Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 6.

⁵⁴ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, pp. 6–7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Preface, p. 7.

count it no shame, but the highest honour, to give their blood and lives so that one man may have grounds for boasting'.⁵⁶

The Ottoman strategy for suppressing the political dangers of superstition therefore amounts to tyranny. In order to create absolute political loyalty, monarchical regimes such as theirs are sometimes willing to quash their subjects' critical capacities, described here in recognizably Cartesian terms as rooted in the freedom to doubt. People who have been thus indoctrinated are indeed submissive, but they are also slaves; and for the Dutch, 'who have the rare good fortune to live in a state where nothing is held to be dearer than freedom', such a policy would be disastrous.⁵⁷ Here Spinoza encourages his readers to reflect on the destruction that absolute government would wreak in their own case. But it is striking that his illustrations of the *political* dangers posed by superstition appeal to two relatively distant examples, Alexander the Great and the Ottoman Empire, neither of which speaks directly to the situation of the United Provinces. This is quite deliberate. Spinoza's aim is not to suggest that the existing government of the Dutch Republic relies on superstition to maintain the loyalty of its citizens; on the contrary, he commends it for upholding political liberty. Nevertheless, his critique of Turkish absolutism is intended to alert his readers to the risks inherent in monarchical regimes, and implicitly evokes two potential dangers. It serves first of all as a reminder of the Spanish, who had been driven from the United Provinces at the beginning of the seventeenth century and remained hostile to the republic. By winning their independence, the Dutch had thrown off a regime that, as Amsterdam Jews were all too aware, used its Inquisition to impose religious uniformity, and continued to persecute dissidents, including *conversos* accused of secret Judaizing.⁵⁸ In addition, Spinoza's critique functions as a warning against the party of people within the republic who regretted the loss of the

⁵⁶ As Curley points out, this is an allusion to Quintus Curtius Rufus, one of several in this section of the Preface. Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander*, trans. John C. Rolfe, 2 vols., *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), I.iv.10.

⁵⁷ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 7.

⁵⁸ On the Dutch Revolt, see Martin van Gelderen, *The Dutch Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ix–xlviii; Pieter Geyl, *A History of the Dutch Speaking Peoples 1555–1648* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), ch. 4; Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*, ch. 1. On the Amsterdam Jewish community, see Chaya Brasz and Yosef Kaplan eds., *Dutch Jews as Perceived by Themselves and by Others: Proceedings of the Eighth International Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Yosef Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity: The Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). On the relation between Jewish tradition and the Inquisition, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin *The Censor, the Editor and the Text: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

Stadtholder, and favoured a return to a mixed constitution. As friends of a quasi-monarchical system that might degenerate into the kind of tyranny exemplified in popular imagination by Spain and the Ottoman Empire, they pose an indirect but internal threat to an existing way of life in which political stability is not obtained by superstitious means.

When Spinoza moves to discuss superstition's *theological* dimension, his analysis comes still closer to home and criticizes a state of affairs that is implicitly but recognizably that of the United Provinces. In a deeply unflattering sketch, he portrays a pluralist society where superstition rules, and where religious authorities use the pretext of religion to undermine the political loyalty of the populace. 'With shameless licence', these figures 'turn the heart of the multitude (who are still liable to pagan superstition) away from the sovereign powers, so that everything may again collapse into slavery'.⁵⁹ Alongside the relatively distant threat of state-imposed slavery, we now come to the more immediate threat of a form of slavery that may ensue if the political powers of the republic are taken over by the church. Getting into his stride, Spinoza bluntly condemns what currently passes for religion. People who claim to be Christians committed to love and peace devote themselves to ferocious and corrupting conflict. Individual denominations require their members to adhere to faiths that amount to the unquestioning acceptance of dogmas antithetical to reason and, by punishing anyone who fails to conform, stunt the capacity for free and rational judgement. Furthermore, by applying this policy quite generally and condemning rationality as irreligious, churches do their best to suppress the freedom to philosophize, not only within their own congregations but outside them as well.⁶⁰

This malaise is not confined to Christianity, but extends to pagans, Turks, and Jews. The members of a religion are distinguished by their dress, their place of worship, the particular beliefs they profess, and the master whose words they swear by, but they all lead the same kind of life, in which 'their faith is known more easily from their hatred and contentiousness than from their love'.⁶¹ However, although corruption is universal, what chiefly concerns Spinoza is not the state of religion in general, but the mores of the most powerful Christian denomination in Holland, the Dutch Reformed Church.⁶² By playing on the

⁵⁹ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Preface, p. 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² The Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*), founded in the late sixteenth century, was prevented from becoming an officially established church by Article 13 of the Union of Utrecht (1579). Nevertheless, it enjoyed a unique level of public influence: it provided

fears of the populace, the Church encourages superstitious beliefs and practices, and where necessary uses coercive methods to impose them.⁶³ This in turn undermines its members' capacity to reflect on the limitations of a superstitious way of life, and to distinguish truth from falsehood. Furthermore, since no single faction within the Church possesses enough power to impose its outlook on the whole community, conflict is endemic, and containing it consequently becomes one of the burdens of government.⁶⁴

How has this lamentable situation arisen? According to the *Preface*, it has been precipitated by the fact that religious officials view themselves, and are viewed by others, as eminent dignitaries deserving of substantial rewards. The social status and financial benefits attaching to their positions make the ministry attractive to men who lack any religious vocation and are motivated solely by ambition and greed. In consequence, 'the temple itself has degenerated into a theatre where one hears, not the Doctors of the Church, but orators who have no desire to teach the people, and are possessed by a longing to win popular admiration for themselves, to censure those who disagree with them, and to teach only those new and unfamiliar doctrines that the people most admire'.⁶⁵ The least spark of the divine light has been extinguished, and dissension, envy, and hate are the order of the day.

At one level, this analysis is straightforward. Ministers who are engaged in a competitive quest for followers and prestige feel no compunction about exploiting the anxieties of their supporters, and holding out fanciful remedies in the name of religion.⁶⁶ This policy has a detrimental effect on the rationality and freedom of ordinary people and, as we have seen, tends to be politically destabilizing. However, Spinoza's account also draws attention to a further dimension of the instability that superstition engenders, and thus of the knot of problems he is addressing. Religious corruption, as he has so far portrayed it, is fuelled by the longing of ministers to be admired above the rest, and each of them will typically feel some combination of envy, hatred, and resentment for those who outstrip them. But because these officials are competing for ends

pastoral care to the republic's soldiers and sailors as well as owning or at least controlling many of its public, charitable, and educational institutions. It was common for the Dutch to refer to the NHK as 'the public church'. Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 177–8. See also Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477–1806*, pp. 367–71.

⁶³ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Preface, p. 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Preface, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p63s.

over which they have little control, they are particularly vulnerable to superstition. ‘The men who are most thoroughly enslaved to every kind of superstition are the ones who immoderately desire uncertain goods’.⁶⁷ When churchmen bent on gaining ephemeral forms of prestige expose themselves to hope and fear, they are liable to become superstitious and to display the credulity and inconstancy that this condition brings with it. Like the populace they seek to control, their vulnerability will incline them to seek solace in doubtful beliefs and practices, adapted in each case to their own particular psychic needs; and when this is combined with their competitive desire for popular support it will fuel religious conflict.

Spinoza’s contempt for the majority of the religious class is shared by many of his fellow-philosophers. His friend, Lodewijk Meijer, for example, had compared the Church’s dogmatic philosophers to oracles, unfitted for discussion or debate;⁶⁸ and in his *Ethics*, Spinoza would again explain that, when self-esteem depends on the good opinion of the populace, it lasts only as long as the admiration on which it is based. ‘That is why he who exults at being esteemed by the multitude is daily made anxious, and strives, sacrifices and schemes in order to preserve his reputation. For the multitude is fickle and inconstant; unless one’s reputation is guarded, it is quickly destroyed. Indeed, because everyone desires to secure the multitude’s applause, each one willingly puts down the reputation of the other. And since the struggle is over a good thought to be the highest, this gives rise to a monstrous lust of each to crush the other in any way possible’.⁶⁹

In the *Treatise*, this attack is no doubt partly directed at the Reformed Church’s preachers, who were often poorly educated and are, as we have seen, picked out by Spinoza as opponents of the freedom to philosophize. But it is significant that he nowhere suggests that superstition is an affliction of the ignorant alone. The assumption that education can protect people against superstition is implicit in the widely held seventeenth-century view that superstition arises from false beliefs about the relations between cause and effect. This opinion is voiced, for example, by Thomas Hobbes, who remarks that a superstitious person is someone who hopes ‘for good or evil luck . . . from things that have no part at all in the causing of it’.⁷⁰ It is also present within the Protestant theological tradition, for instance in a commentary on the

⁶⁷ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Préface, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Louis Meyer, *La philosophie interprète de l’écriture sainte*, trans. Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau (Paris: Intertextes, 1988), Prologue, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p58s. ⁷⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 78.

Heidelberg Catechism written by the prominent theologian Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83). Ursinus describes superstition as a matter of attributing effects ‘to certine things, or observations of gestures or words, as depend not either on natural, or moral reason, or on the word of god, and either doe not at al follow and fal out, or are wrought by the divels’.⁷¹ Attributing events to forces that cannot be explained by appeal either to reason or to the word of God contained in Scripture therefore qualifies as superstition. And even if the forces are in fact inefficacious, it is still impious to appeal to them, because this is a way of failing to obey the divine word and worship God alone.⁷² On this basis, the Reformed Church did its best to outlaw a wide range of ordinary practices that were held to be incompatible with natural reason and the religion commanded in Scripture. Some, such as witchcraft and fortune telling, were mentioned in the homilies used to drum the catechism into church congregations.⁷³ Others were explicitly ruled out by the catechism itself, which specified that members of the church must eschew all idolatry, sorcery, and enchantments.⁷⁴ Interpreting these exclusions, the Church at various times appealed to them to condemn devotional images and religious music, and to police popular habits such as the use of talismans, diviners, and healers.⁷⁵ By drawing on a classical understanding of superstitious practices, Spinoza stands back from the assumption that they are solely to be understood in epistemological terms, as ignorant and mistaken beliefs about causes. While he concedes that hard-headed authorities can appeal to superstition to dupe the uneducated, and that when they do so they exploit an ignorance of causal connections that does indeed make people vulnerable to superstition, the effectiveness of their strategy depends on superstition’s passionate aspect, and in particular on the capacity of the powerful to play on the hopes and fears of the populace.⁷⁶ Quoting a remark attributed to Alexander the Great, who is reported to have said that, during war, ‘prestige is an

⁷¹ Quoted in Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 484.

⁷² *Ibid.* pp. 489–508.

⁷³ *Ibid.* pp. 493, 506.

⁷⁴ ‘The Heidelberg Catechism,’ in *The Creeds of Christendom: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo Books, 2007), Q.94.

⁷⁵ On the view that attempts to define and control superstition were part of a broader attempt by all churches to regulate lay behaviour, see Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation*, trans. Jeremy Moiser (London: Burns and Oates, 1977), pp. 175–202.

⁷⁶ ‘For example, Augustus persuaded the Romans that he was descended from Aeneas, who was believed to be the son of Venus and among the Gods; he wanted to be worshipped with temples and sacred images, by flamens and priests’. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 17, p. 204. This passage draws on Tacitus, *Annals*, I.10.

important factor, and a false belief has often done duty for the truth',⁷⁷ Spinoza acknowledges the obvious fact that many superstitious beliefs are mistaken. But as Alexander indicates, what makes these false beliefs efficacious is a commander's prestige, which enables him to sway his soldiers when they are particularly vulnerable to fear.

Since superstition arises 'not from reason, but from the strongest passions' including hope and fear, hatred and anger, and since all human beings are susceptible to these passions, almost anyone may in principle become superstitious, the educated along with the ignorant and the great along with the multitude. Spinoza is convinced that an understanding of the philosophical principles he sets out in the *Ethics* can conquer superstition, by simultaneously transforming our knowledge of causal laws and our affective responses to events;⁷⁸ but the same cannot be said for other kinds of education. There is therefore no reason to assume that the training received, for example, by theologians or political leaders will necessarily protect them against superstition. All ranks and classes are subject to this kind of deformation, and when it afflicts them, conflict will inevitably arise. Thus, in the case of the Reformed Church, as Spinoza portrays it, the anxieties of the populace are sometimes coolly exploited by preachers bent on gaining power and prestige.⁷⁹ And as he points out in the *Ethics*, nothing but 'a savage and sad superstition' legitimates the suppression of pleasure on which the Church tends to insist.⁸⁰ But superstition also affects the Church's officials, and enters into the competing positions that are passionately defended by opposing theological factions. Much as the preachers struggle amongst themselves for followers, so Calvinist theologians engage in ferocious disputes in order to gain or uphold their authority. Superstition and its consequences extend right up the church hierarchy, infecting its disputes about the nature of Christian doctrine and the practice of true religion.

Cultivating true religion and political freedom

The predicament to which Spinoza aims to offer a solution is, therefore, a delicate and pervasive one. In order to contain the damaging effects of superstition, the Dutch must find a way to reform a powerful religious class that is doubly implicated in a superstitious way of life, both because its members are

⁷⁷ Quintus Curtius Rufus, viii.8.

⁷⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics* 1 Appendix.

⁷⁹ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 6.

⁸⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p45s.

themselves to varying degrees superstitious, and because its status to some extent depends on encouraging superstition in the population at large. However, for the reasons already sketched, any such reform will be a difficult undertaking. The use of coercion is dangerous, because it reduces freedom and tends to produce its opposite, slavery. The fluidity of superstition suggests that attempts to contain one form may have the effect of creating others. And the streak of cognitive rigidity to which superstition gives rise makes it particularly difficult to shake.⁸¹

Spinoza is nevertheless undaunted. His contempt for the religious milieu in which he finds himself is palpable, and as he explains in the Preface, it is a sense of outrage that has impelled him to write.⁸² Religion has become a battlefield in which what is called faith is nothing but a set of prejudices and mysteries that turns men from rational beings into beasts, prevents them from using their judgement to distinguish truth from falsehood, and seems designed to put out the light of the intellect. Theologians have grossly distorted the Scriptures by accommodating them to Platonic and Aristotelian speculations until the prophets rave with the Greeks; and out of fear for their own positions, religious officials persecute anyone who disagrees with them.⁸³ In summary, 'the natural light is not only disdained but condemned by many as a source of impiety, human inventions are treated as divine teachings, credulity is taken for faith, the controversies of the philosophers are debated with the utmost passion in Church and State, and in consequence, the most savage hatreds and disagreements arise, by which men are easily turned to rebellions'.⁸⁴

By unmasking the flawed assumptions on which the theologians ground their conclusions, Spinoza aims to discredit their conception of piety and undermine the superstitious practices that feed on it; and since they derive their account of the beliefs and behaviour that a religious life requires from the Bible, the way to reveal their errors is to adopt their own method of enquiry and find out what Scripture teaches us. This is why, as Spinoza explains, he has resolved to examine Scripture afresh, 'with an unprejudiced and free spirit, affirming nothing concerning it, and admitting nothing as its teaching, that it did not very clearly teach me'.⁸⁵

But how persuasive can Spinoza expect his investigation to be? As he is quick to acknowledge, once people become emotionally invested in a purportedly pious doctrine that is in fact grounded on prejudice, nothing he can say is likely to shift their opinions. Equally, since he cannot hope to free the common

⁸¹ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 7.

⁸³ *Ibid.* Preface, pp. 7–9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* Preface, p. 9.

⁸² *Ibid.* Preface, p. 9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

people from fear, he cannot hope to free them from superstition. Their constancy, Spinoza claims, lies in their obstinate adherence to impulse rather than reason, and they are inured to any arguments he can offer. So, given that there is virtually no chance of persuading people like these, it would be pointless and even counterproductive for them to read the *Treatise*. ‘I do not ask the common people, or anyone who suffers from the same passions as the common people, to read these pages; indeed, I would prefer them to neglect this book entirely rather than making trouble by interpreting it perversely, as is their custom with everything. They will do themselves no good, but will harm others who would philosophise more freely if they were not prevented by this one thought: that reason must be the handmaid (*ancilla*) of theology. For the latter, I am confident that this work will be extremely useful’.⁸⁶

It is unlikely that the common people would have had much opportunity to read the *Treatise*, which was written in Latin. But what about the other group Spinoza mentions who, though not themselves of the common people or *vulgus*, suffer from its passions? This body surely includes the more intransigent theologians of the Reformed Church, but as Spinoza knew from experience, it also contains some of their secular supporters. In the December of 1664 Spinoza had embarked on a correspondence with a Dordrecht grain merchant, William Van Blyenbergh, who had read his exposition of Descartes’ *Principles* and wrote asking him to resolve a metaphysical problem with a bearing on providence.⁸⁷ If God not only creates the soul but maintains it in existence, is he not the immediate cause of all its volitions? But if so, is he not the immediate cause of evil volitions, and thus the cause of evil? ‘Be assured, Worthy Sir, that I ask these things only from a desire for the truth, not from any other interest. I am a free person, not dependent on any profession, supporting myself by honest trade and devoting my spare time to these [metaphysical] matters’.⁸⁸ Spinoza’s candid reply produced a string of further objections, and as letters flew back and forth the intellectual differences between the two men became increasingly evident. At the end of a month Spinoza wrote to Blyenbergh in

⁸⁶ Ibid. Preface, p. 14.

⁸⁷ Willem van Blyenbergh (?–1696) was a grain broker with an avid interest in philosophy and theology. In 1663 he published a small book entitled *Theology and Religion defended against the views of Atheists, wherein it is shown by natural and clear arguments that God has implanted and revealed a Religion, that God wants to be worshipped in accordance with it, and that the Christian Religion not only agrees with the Religion revealed by God but also with the Reason which is implanted in us*. See Spinoza, *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Abraham Wolf (London: Frank Cass, 1966), p. 54.

⁸⁸ Letter 18. *Spinoza: Letters: July 1664–September 1665*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, pp. 349–97, 357.

exasperation. 'I hardly believe that we can instruct one another with our letters. For I see that no demonstration, however solid it may be according to the laws of demonstration, has weight with you unless it agrees with that explanation which you, or theologians known to you, attribute to sacred Scripture'.⁸⁹ What aligned the likes of Blyenbergh with the *vulgus* and made them unable to benefit from Spinoza's work was their obstinate adherence to the view that rational enquiry must not contradict the Bible.

While the *Treatise* is *about* these people's attitudes, it is not written *for* them. Who, then, is it for? Who is meant to read it?⁹⁰ Like Descartes, who had conceded in the Preface to his *Meditations* that few people were capable of getting much out of his text,⁹¹ Spinoza warns that he is writing for a limited audience. His book is addressed to 'philosophical readers',⁹² and particularly to those whose willingness to philosophize freely is hindered by their belief that philosophical enquiry must submit to the conclusions reached by theologians. While these people are not so deeply sunk in superstitious forms of thought and action as to be beyond persuasion, some of them are nevertheless held back by the worry that philosophizing may lead them into an impious way of life and jeopardize their salvation. One aim of the *Treatise* is to liberate them by showing that piety or true religion does not conflict with the freedom to philosophize.

Since he is writing for an audience versed in philosophical reasoning, Spinoza is free to address its members in philosophical terms. As we shall see, he assumes that some of the readers he has in mind are already familiar with his own philosophical position, whether because they have read the Appendix to his published *Principles*, or because they have come into closer contact with him.⁹³ They include, one can assume, the group of friends mentioned by Simon De

⁸⁹ Letter 21. *Letters: July 1664–September 1665*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, p. 375.

⁹⁰ Daniel Garber, 'Should Spinoza Have Published His Philosophy?', in *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. Charlie Huenemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁹¹ 'I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me. . . . Such readers, I know, are few and far between. Those who do not bother to grasp the proper order of my arguments and the connections between them, but merely try to carp at individual sentences, as is the fashion, will not get much benefit from reading this book'. René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (3 vols), trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), II.8. References to this translation of Descartes' works will henceforth be abbreviated 'CSM'. AT VII.10.

⁹² Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Preface, p. 12.

⁹³ Edwin Curley, 'Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece: The *Tractatus Theologico Politicus* as Prolegomenon to the *Ethics*', in *Central Themes in Modern Philosophy*, ed. M. Kulstad and J. Cover (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990).

Vries who had discussed Spinoza's ideas and were ready to defend them. In fact, small as this group may have been, it is possible that the *Treatise* was written primarily for them. Just as they had used his earlier manuscript to learn how 'to defend the truth against those who are superstitiously religious and Christian',⁹⁴ Spinoza may have thought that the *Treatise* would show them how to defend the autonomy of philosophy against opponents who thought it should be subordinated to theology. Treating them as a sort of Leninist vanguard, he may have been trying to equip them with a forensic manual that would enable them to concede as much as possible to the theologians, yet trip them up when necessary.

If so, the individuals who made up Spinoza's cadre held a range of unorthodox religious views. Several of his closest philosophical associates came from Mennonite backgrounds, and a number of these were members of the Collegiant movement, a nonconformist sect which adhered to a minimal set of doctrines and practices, and was viewed with deep suspicion by the Reformed Church.⁹⁵ Already non-Calvinist, and already committed to Spinozist philosophy, they were primed to find the arguments of the *Treatise* persuasive. However, judging from his own account, Spinoza also seems to be writing for people who are not part of this inner circle and still need to be persuaded that philosophizing is compatible with piety; and if this aspect of his project is to succeed, it must be couched in terms that this group of readers will find convincing.

In the *Treatise* Spinoza draws a standard distinction between two ways of thinking. Each depends on and is manifested in individual and collective ways of life, and each incorporates a form of reasoning that can be used more or less effectively.⁹⁶ The first way of thinking, imagining, is grounded on our everyday experience, and its basic materials can be roughly divided into three classes:

⁹⁴ Letter 8. *Letters: August 1661–August 1663*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, p. 190.

⁹⁵ The Collegiants, a movement of radical Protestants who had no ministers but met to discuss and interpret the Bible, broke away from the Arminian Remonstrants in the 1620s. Theologically eclectic, they took on elements of Arminianism, Anabaptism, and Socinianism, as well as spiritualism. Their first college was founded at Rijnsberg, where Spinoza lived from around 1661 to 1663, and their members included a number of his friends, including Balling and Jelles. Andrew C. Fix, *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁹⁶ The distinction between imagining and reasoning to which he is appealing was a familiar one, which went back to Aristotle and continued to be used by both Aristotelians and their opponents. We find versions of it in several of the authors whose work Spinoza had studied most carefully, including Maimonides, Descartes, and Hobbes; but as this suggests, it was part of an accepted framework on which normal philosophical discussion relied.

our ideas of particular things together with the signs by which we organize and communicate them; the desires and other passions that shape both the nature of our experience and the way we act on it; and the informal modes of reasoning that we bring to bear on our passions and ideas.⁹⁷ It is mainly on the basis of imagining that we construct conceptions of ourselves and the world, and take part in collective forms of life. However, because imagining works with what Spinoza describes as the inadequate or incomplete ideas yielded by our limited experience, and because the passions integral to it have their own dynamics and effects, the actions and social practices to which it gives rise are not always advantageous to us. At worst, they may be destructive, as for example when an individual routinely becomes enraged and violent but cannot break the habit, or when a community is unable to find a way out of endemic internal conflict. But imagining can also be productive, and in many circumstances people use their experience to build comparatively if imperfectly harmonious ways of life.

In addition, communities and individuals can use the resources of imagination in a critical spirit: they may, for instance, modify the classificatory assumptions underlying a system of signs, bring their experience to bear on their current passions, or revise the means–ends inferences on which they base particular patterns of action. In doing so, they engage in an informal kind of reasoning that is part and parcel of imagining; but their capacity to reason well or badly will be largely determined by their passions. For example, someone whose strong affective investment in a belief undermines their capacity to assess it will be disadvantaged as a reasoner (at least in this particular case), while someone who has a broader ability to exercise what Spinoza calls free judgment will be better placed to reason well. As we have seen, superstition is one of the affective phenomena that puts one at a disadvantage; but even the most accomplished imaginative reasoning will always be limited by the fact that it works with ideas that are grounded on our limited experience, and embodies an incomplete understanding of nature. While the actions to which imagination guides us may satisfy our desires, and the conclusions to which they lead may enable us to achieve many of our ends, the knowledge that we gain through it will only possess what Spinoza calls moral certainty and, however compelling it may seem, remains fallible.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 2p40s2, Spinoza, *Short Treatise*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, p. 98ff. Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus De Intellectus Emendatione*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, vol. II, *Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1924). English translation: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, pp. 3–45, §19.

⁹⁸ On the distinction between moral and mathematical certainty, see Rosalie Colie, *Light and Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians* (Cambridge: Cambridge

Different qualities of imaginative thinking can therefore have vastly different effects, and a community such as the Dutch Reformed Church which lacks the capacity to imagine well can do a huge amount of damage. Part of Spinoza's project is to show his readers how to use the resources of imaginative thinking to examine their attitudes to particular things such as the Bible, and to criticize the dogmas and practices of the Reformed Church. Cultivating the capacity to use one's imaginative capacities fruitfully, for example by making reliable inferences about the nature and relationships of natural objects, is part of what is involved in using what Spinoza calls the natural light of reason. As individuals and members of communities we may be better or worse at it; and our skills are reflected in our ways of life.

Contrasted with imagining is a more specialized way of thinking, practised by people who can rightly be described as philosophers. Whereas imagining focuses on particulars, deals in incomplete or inadequate ideas, and arrives at fallible conclusions, philosophical reasoning transcends these limitations. It concerns itself with general notions of types of things, strives to articulate adequate or accurate ideas, and demonstrates its conclusions with absolute certainty. Unlike imagining, it provides a true account of the most general ontological categories, and of the general laws that govern types of things. In principle it can offer us a true understanding of ourselves, and in doing so can open up the possibility of a profoundly empowering common form of life.⁹⁹

This latter way of thinking constitutes reasoning in the fullest sense. But because it makes use of specialized skills that have to be learned and is at least in part the fruit of a particular type of education, only some people are equipped for it. Like everyone else, philosophers bring the natural light of reason to bear on their deliberations about particular things and actions, and exercise this capacity throughout their lives. However, they also aim for something more: to cultivate a further kind of rational understanding that Spinoza sets apart from the everyday business of imagining and portrays as transformative. Rational understanding enables us to overcome the inadequacy of our ordinary beliefs and outlooks, and gives us a new and unified conception of ourselves, nature, God, and how to live. As we learn to philosophize we come to see things very differently, and this in turn alters what we can do.

University Press, 1957); Henry G. Van Leeuwen, *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630–1690* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1963).

⁹⁹ On the relation between imagining and reasoning, see Spinoza, *Ethics* 2p40–4, 4p35, 4p59–73.

Philosophy's power to change us makes it attractive, but also alarming. If reasoning of the kind that philosophers engage in can eclipse the deliberations that underpin our everyday ways of life and threaten what we take to be the most fundamental pieties of religion, is the freedom to pursue it desirable? Or would it be safer not to cultivate it? The more philosophically advanced of Spinoza's readers who are thoroughly committed to the project of acquiring philosophical knowledge will already have resolved this dilemma. But others who are still hovering on the brink may be held back by the fear that further philosophical study will jeopardize their religion and way of life. In order to take the plunge, they need to be reassured that it is safe to do so; and in this state of mind they will probably not be willing to put their trust in philosophical reasoning, since its power is what is in question. To bring them round to his view, Spinoza will therefore need to draw on the resources of imagination in order to show that philosophizing does not threaten salvation.

This diversity of Spinoza's audience helps to explain why the argument of the *Treatise* proceeds on two interconnected levels. Sometimes it is conducted in an abstract vein that presupposes a familiarity, not just with the tools of philosophy in general, but more specifically with the doctrines of Cartesianism and with Spinoza's own position. At other times it appeals to the everyday forms of evidence and probabilistic inference that belong to the realm of imagination, and is consequently accessible to readers who do not have, or need to have, much philosophical knowledge. While Spinoza's reasons for arguing at these two levels are partly explained by his intended audience, he also acknowledges that the problems he is dealing with are not all susceptible to a single form of investigation. Some can only be fully resolved in philosophical terms, while others arise out of, and depend on, imagination. For example, questions about the history of particular individuals such as Adam or Moses can only be settled by means of imaginative, historical reasoning, whereas questions about the true nature of God are—so Spinoza will claim—the preserve of philosophy. The way that he presents and defends a specific point is therefore shaped by two cross-cutting concerns—type of audience and type of problem—and the four resulting categories interweave as he shifts from one to another.

During the five years in which the *Treatise* was written, 1665–70, the Dutch Reformed Church gave notice of its willingness to prosecute authors who contested its doctrines. Among the people who suffered from this policy were two of Spinoza's friends: Lodewijk Meijer, the author of the Introduction to Spinoza's exposition of Descartes' *Principles*, and Adriaan Koerbagh. In 1666, Meijer published *Philosophy, the Interpreter of Holy Scripture*, in which he boldly

argued that Cartesian philosophy provided the only sure way to determine the meaning of the divine law revealed in Scripture.¹⁰⁰ This attempt to show that Cartesianism could resolve theological problems confirmed the Voetians' worst fears, and Meijer was investigated by the Church. Two years later, Koerbagh's *A Flowerbed Containing All Sorts of Delights* appeared.¹⁰¹ Ranging in satirical vein over a number of risky subjects, it challenged the Church's conception of superstition, questioned its interpretations of the Bible, contested its account of the status of Scripture, and proposed that the power of religious institutions should be strictly limited. Koerbagh was arrested and taken chained in an open cart to Amsterdam, where he was questioned by the city's magistrates. Sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, he died in jail in 1669.

With these warnings before him, it is not obvious why Spinoza went ahead and published the *Treatise*. While he presumably calculated that he would avoid prosecution, he must have known that his book would not be received quietly and have prepared himself for the attacks launched against it by individuals and authorities alike. Perhaps after Koerbagh's death he felt a responsibility to stand up for the views he shared with him, by exposing the errors of the Reformed theologians. Perhaps he was also trying to overcome the anxieties about which Oldenburg had gently teased him, and act courageously in the manner that Oldenburg had recommended. (In this sense, too, we might read the *Treatise* as a struggle against the passions that are conducive to superstition.) Perhaps he was moved by his avowed sense of outrage. Whatever his reasons, publishing the *Treatise* was the second great confrontation of Spinoza's life. Just as he had refused to bend to the rabbis of the Amsterdam synagogue and had accepted the costs of excommunication, so he now refused to compromise with the theologians and their supporters.¹⁰² The *Treatise* sets out to undermine the outlook on which they based their claim to authority, and thus to challenge their power.

¹⁰⁰ Lodewijk Meijer, *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* (Amsterdam: 1666).

¹⁰¹ Adriaan Koerbagh, *Een Bloemhof von allerley lieflykheyd sonder vedriet geplant* (Amsterdam, 1668).

¹⁰² In July 1656, Spinoza was excommunicated from his Synagogue and symbolically cast out of the people of Israel, for his 'evil opinions and acts'. No member of the Jewish community was allowed to communicate with him in writing or in person, nor even to come within four cubits of him, nor to read any treatise composed by him. Detailed examinations of Spinoza's excommunication can be found in Lewis Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Brunswick: Transaction, Inc., 1987), ch. 1; Asa Kasher and Shlomo Biderman, 'Why Was Baruch De Spinoza Excommunicated?', in *Skeptics, Millenarians and Jews*, ed. David S. Katz and Jonathan Israel (Leiden: Brill, 1990); Nadler, *Spinoza*, ch. 6.