

Article

# The Coherence of Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise

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**Abstract:** Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* has been critiqued as contradictory and inconsistent. This is why I believe that the question with regard to Spinoza's 'neglected masterpiece' should be: How to read the Treatise as a coherent philosophical work? I suggest that the reason why the Treatise seems contradictory is because of the complex juxtaposition of its two main foci: the relationship between theology and philosophy, and that of theology and politics. In this paper, I will argue against the claim of contradiction and pursue to demonstrate a close correlation and mutual interdependence of both relations. While the domains of theology and philosophy may be separate, there is no contradiction between the salvation of the ignorant and the salvation of the wise. Similarly, there is no contradiction between the theological part of the Treatise—which focuses on 'piety' and the defense of the freedom of 'internal religion'—and the political part—which focuses on 'peace', and claims that the state should have absolute power over 'external religion'.

**Keywords:** political philosophy; philosophy of religion; enlightenment; modern philosophy; Spinoza; Theological-Political-Treatise; *Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus*; salvation; religion; philosophical religion; natural theology; Bible; scripture; philosophy



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## 1. Introduction

A host of commentators believe that Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [1] (TTP, hereafter Treatise) is a muddled, confused and incoherent work. Leo Strauss asserts that the Treatise 'abounds in contradictions' [2]; a claim to which Yuval Jobani agrees. [3] Carlos Fraenkel states that the Treatise is inconsistent: Spinoza, according to Fraenkel, wavers between two mutually exclusive positions [4]. Theo Verbeek is struck by the incoherence of the Treatise; the reader, he writes, 'fails to see how things combine; how particular arguments fit into a comprehensive argument; how a single chapter or couple of chapters relate to the book as a whole and how the book relates to Spinoza's other work [5].'

In this article I will not, due to lack of time and space, defend Spinoza's Treatise against all these charges. Instead, I will try to resolve two of the main problems which apparently make it difficult to read the Treatise as a coherent work. First, I will address the subject of two accounts of salvation. Then, I will proceed to address the seeming contradiction in the two accounts of religion. Moreover, I suggest that the proposed solutions will offer greater clarity regarding other criticism pertaining to incoherence and "contradictions". Commentators find the Treatise to be incoherent because they view Spinoza on the one hand as a critic of religion who on the other hand claims religion is not only valuable but in fact indispensable for the well-being of society. Commentators also raise questions about Spinoza's claims that philosophy, theology, and politics are separate and yet very similar, though not in their means, but most certainly in their ends. What we need to understand in order to solve the difficulties is how the three separate domains can nevertheless form an interdependent, mutually reinforcing, philosophical-theological-political unity, necessary for a free, pious, and peaceful polity [6].

The first "problem" I address are Spinoza's two separate accounts of *salvation*: a 'salvation of the wise' and 'a salvation of the ignorant'. Some commentators detect here an unsolvable contradiction. Others believe that the two accounts can be bridged [7]. Alexandre Matheron's proposed solution (that Spinoza believed in a form of reincarnation) is

unconvincing [8] for reasons stated by Paul Juffermans [9]. Other commentators, following Strauss, maintain that the problem of the two accounts can only be solved when we assume that Spinoza engaged in ‘the art of writing’ or concealing the truth [10], a hermeneutical approach which has been rightly criticized [11]. Douglas den Uyl [12] and Michael Rosenthal [13] have tried to solve the problem by making a distinction between ‘salvation’ and ‘blessedness’, which, according to me, is not supported by the actual texts, because Spinoza uses these terms interchangeably, as will become clear in some of the citations below.

The second “problem” discussed in this paper is that Spinoza’s Treatise gives two accounts of *religion*: internal religion as a matter of individual right and freedom; external religion falls under the authority of the state. The first seems to make Spinoza into one of the founding fathers of liberalism, the second seems to depict Spinoza’s political position as conservative and autocratic. Strauss, paraphrasing the critique of Hermann Cohen, writes that while Spinoza in the first part of the Treatise ‘takes the side of spiritual and trans-political Christianity against carnal and political Judaism, he contradicts his whole argument by taking the side of the State, not only against all churches but against all religion as well [14].’ Writing about the distinction between internal and external religion, Balibar states: ‘Even with the best will of the world one cannot remove a feeling of an underlying contradiction [15].’

The solutions I propose for these two problems may be criticized as yet *another* contradiction. For how can Spinoza separate philosophy from theology, and theology from politics, while he, at the same time, connects them respectively? In discussing the two contradictions I will regularly return to this third and deepest “contradiction” in the Treatise.

The first section of this article turns to Spinoza’s descriptions of ‘salvation’ and ‘religion’ in the Ethics in order to show that Spinoza’s *philosophy* is at the same time a *theology* (a study of God). I comment on the fact that Spinoza defines religion in the Ethics in the context of his exposition of political matters, indicating a connection in Spinoza’s philosophy between religion (or theology) and politics. Furthermore, I point out that in the Ethics intellectual salvation is accompanied by a psychological and by an ethical salvation, and that the distinction between ‘the ignorant’ and ‘the wise’ is not a dichotomy, but a difference in kind.

The second section—on salvation in the Treatise—claims that it becomes most clear that Spinoza separates as well as unites philosophy and (biblically revealed) theology when the Treatise discusses ‘prophecy’ and ‘divine law’. The salvation of the ignorant is compatible with the salvation of the wise, I argue, because the first kind of knowledge of God which the Bible provides can save people from superstition, hatred and conflict.

The third and final section argues—by clarifying the distinction between *internal and external religion*—that also theology and politics are both separated and connected, without contradicting each other.

## 2. ‘Religion’ and ‘Salvation’ in the *Ethics*

Spinoza is often labeled an atheist [16], and a harsh critic of religion [17], who claimed the Bible had no ‘authority’ [18]. However, others saw his philosophy as a ‘religion of reason’ [19], a ‘philosophical-ethical path to salvation’ [20], a ‘philosophical religion’ [21] or a ‘philosophy that can function as a religion’ [22]—‘mystical to the core’ [23], ‘Judaic to the core’ [24], a form of ‘radical Protestantism’. [25] His philosophy, Donagan argues, is in fact a ‘natural theology’ [26]. Importantly, Spinoza’s theology or study of God in the Ethics stands in sharp contrast to the anthropomorphic God found in the Bible. His theology is also far removed from the dualistic and teleological way of thinking found in the tradition of ‘natural theology’. And yet, Spinoza’s philosophical masterpiece begins with God, and ends with salvation by means of knowledge of God, a salvation which is obtained through the ‘natural light’, and not by ‘supranatural’ means.

It is reason, according to Spinoza, that helps us become more pious and loving towards our neighbors. In the fourth part of the Ethics Spinoza intends to prove the thesis that the dictates of reason command us to desire the good not only for ourselves, but for the rest of

mankind (E4p18s till E4p37s2, pp. 330–341) [27]. It is at the end of this proof that Spinoza defines religion: ‘Whatever we desire and do, whereof we are the cause insofar as we have the idea of God, that is, insofar as we know God, I refer to religion’ (E4p37s1, p. 339). We see here that Spinoza makes a clear connection between reason and faith: the person who is guided by reason will also be a religious man [28].

However, the connections do not stop there. Spinoza in the following scholium goes on to explain what justice and merit are. He shows that they cannot exist in a state of nature, and that they therefore have to be understood in terms of ‘obedience’ to the laws of the state. In order to do good to one another people need to unite in the state (E4p37s2, p. 340). Note that reason and religion also are related to the political dimension in Spinoza’s thought [29].

The connections between reason, faith and the state are affirmed in the propositions at the end of Ethics 4, regarding the free man and in the Appendix that follows. ‘The man who is guided by reason is more free in a state where he lives under a system of law than in solitude where [he] obeys only himself’ (E4p73, p. 357). This free, ‘strong-minded’ man endeavors, Spinoza writes, ‘as far as he can, to do well and to be glad’ (E4p73s, pp. 357–358). In E4 Appendix, Spinoza refers to these propositions when he writes that the most important factors for winning the love of people ‘are those that are concerned with religion and piety’ (E4A15, p. 360). Spinoza argues in the Ethics, in other words, that reasonable religion strengthens the bonds of the state more than anything else, and this applies to its citizens as well as to its leaders. At the end of E2 Spinoza states the fourth and final advantage of his philosophical-religious ‘doctrine’: ‘it teaches the manner in which citizens should be governed and led, namely, not so as to be slaves, but so as to do freely what is best’ (E2p49s, p. 277).

In the Ethics Spinoza also explains how one can find ‘salvation’, which gives ‘us complete tranquility of mind’, with the further advantage of ‘teaching us wherein lies our greatest happiness [summa felicitas] or blessedness [beatitudo], namely in the knowledge of God alone, as a result of which induces only such actions as urged by love [amor] and piety [pietas]’ (E2p49s, p. 276).

‘From this [that the love of God toward men and the mind’s intellectual love toward God are one and the same] we clearly understand in what our salvation [salus] or blessedness [beatitudo], or freedom [libertas] consists, namely in the constant and eternal love toward God, that is, in God’s love toward men. This love or blessedness is called glory [gloria] in the Holy Scriptures, and rightly so. For whether this love be related to God or to the mind, it can properly be called spiritual contentment [animi acquiescentia], which in reality cannot be distinguished from glory’. (E5p36s)

According to E5p36s, to be saved is to be blessed, to be freed, to be full of love, and to experience the greatest inner peace, but all this is made possible through the intellectual understanding of what God truly is. Fortunately, according to Spinoza, all minds possess the ‘adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God’, necessary for understanding things through the third kind of knowledge. Most people, however, cannot make the connection to this ‘internal’ knowledge of God. The ‘external’ things that affect their bodies continuously divert their attention, making them associate ‘the word ‘God’ with the images of things which they commonly see’, creating anthropomorphic and other false ideas of God (E2p47 and E2p47s, p. 271).

The Ethics explains that such confused ideas of God hinder the path to salvation. We are ‘slaves’ when the only thing the mind can do is continuously react to the ways in which the body is affected. The mind is then determined ‘externally—namely by the fortuitous run of circumstances’; reason, on the other hand, determines the mind internally, ‘through its regarding several things at the same time, to understand their agreement, their differences, and their opposition’ (E2p29s, p. 262).

Spinoza often describes salvation in terms of positive psychological effects, such as the diminution of anger, hatred and fear of death, corresponding to their replacement by love, happiness, and peace of mind. These effects are made possible by the second and the third kinds of knowledge (E5p38, p. 379) as cognitive liberation logically precedes the affective-conative liberation [30]. Donald Rutherford has argued that reason in Spinoza's philosophy brings forth a different kind of contentment or inner peace than intuition: *acquiescentia in se ipso* (self-contentment or self-esteem) is related to reason and is 'the effect most directly expressive of the mind's movement towards greater virtue and understanding'. *Acquiescentia animi* (contentment of mind or spiritual contentment) is related to intuition. It is this second, spiritual contentment, Rutherford believes, to which the end of the Ethics refers as it states 'all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare' (E5p42s), because this type of contentment requires a 'rebirth' through the third kind of knowledge in which we no longer perceive ourselves as embodied beings that go through time, but 'take up the perspective of eternity' [31].

The concluding line of the Ethics suggests an 'elitist reading' of Spinoza's philosophy, endorsed by some commentators [32], but rejected by others [33]. I question the idea of an unbridgeable gap between 'the many' who are 'lost', living as they do under the sway of imagination, and 'the few' who are 'saved' because they have come to understand things through the second and third kinds of knowledge. My first reason for asserting that the divide can be bridged is based on Spinoza's own epistemological framework. Therein we find the rather commonsensical point that imagination categorized as the first kind of knowledge is a kind of knowledge. The imagination is the knowledge we receive through our senses, and through recollections, associations and fantasies, which are all essential for understanding ourselves and the world around us. The first kind of knowledge, Spinoza writes, taught him 'everything that is of practical use in life' (TIE 20, p. 7) [34].

The first kind of knowledge is the only source of falsity (E2p41, p. p. 268). Imaginings are 'inadequate'. They do not offer a complete picture of reality. However, partial knowledge can be supplemented. Spinoza writes that 'the imaginations of the mind, looked at in themselves, contain no error' (E2p17s, p. 257). Hence, the imagination can help us arrive at a more complete picture of reality. To use a metaphor, the imagination provides us with different pieces of the puzzle; it is the task of reason to arrange these pieces in the right order.

Secondly, it would be incorrect to claim that imagination makes people less reasonable. The imagination can stand in the service of reason, showing us 'what we ought to do in order to make ourselves more powerful and perfect' [35]. In the introduction to E4 Spinoza offers an example of how imagination can help us lead a better life: we should picture (imagine) a model of human nature. Spinoza presents this model in a number of propositions about 'the free man' (E4p68- 73, pp. 355–358). Imitating this model by memorizing and rehearsing the rules of living that this model embodies can help us find remedies against the (depletive negative) emotions (E5p10s, p. 369).

Thirdly, and most importantly, in the Ethics Spinoza consistently reminds us that knowledge is gradually acquired. In E5p24, E5p26, E5p38. E5p39 and E5p40 Spinoza speaks of the mind being able to come to understand and to love God more and more. Fraenkel [21], Viljanen [36] and Steinberg [37] have also written about the idea of salvation as a gradual process. Although at the end of the Ethics Spinoza juxtaposes 'the ignorant man' and 'the wise man', these should be considered ideal types. In reality no one is completely devoid of reason, and no one is completely wise. Rather, we move closer to idealized wisdom as we gradually come to understand more things. We can already be very content when we live under the guidance of reason and find *acquiescentia in se ipso* (E4p52, p. 347), even though only the perfection of the mind by means of the third kind of knowledge leads to *acquiescentia animi* and beatitude. Understanding that salvation is something that comes gradually can help solve the seeming contradiction between the two accounts of salvation; it enables us to view the salvation of the ignorant in the Treatise as one of a *lesser kind* than the salvation of the wise in the Ethics.

In order to be saved, we need not arrive at an awareness of what ‘eternity’ means. The importance of religion and piety remain, even if we did not know that our minds are eternal (E5p41, p. 381). The final two propositions of the Ethics emphasize the link between salvation and virtuousness. We are saved when we wholeheartedly do the right thing for our own good as well as for the good of others: ‘Blessedness [beatitudo] is not the reward of virtue [virtus], but virtue itself. We do not enjoy blessedness because we keep our lusts in check. On the contrary, it is because we enjoy blessedness that we are able to keep our lusts in check’ (E5p42, p. 382). The philosophical-religious account of salvation in the Ethics is in its final manifestation an ethical teaching.

Notably, the Ethics does not explore whether Spinoza’s philosophical religion, which embraces natural theology, contradicts the teachings of revealed theology as found in Scripture. The relation between philosophy and (revealed) theology is, however, the main theme of the first part of the Treatise. Reason, Spinoza argues there, does not conflict with faith. Philosophical thinkers are exclusively interested in truth; religious believers only desire a life of obedient love. Philosophy and theology can coexist because their goals are completely different. Yet both lead to salvation.

### 3. Salvation in the Treatise

In the first fifteen chapters of the *Treatise* Spinoza separates philosophy from theology, establishing ‘the freedom to philosophize which this separation allows to everyone’ (TTP xvi-1, p. 189). Theology is defined by Spinoza, as ‘revelation in so far as it proclaims the purpose which we said that Scripture intends, namely the manner of obedience that is the dogmas of true piety and faith’ (TTP xv-6, p. 190). The Treatise starts with a discussion of prophecy because theology is dependent on it.

Spinoza defines ‘prophecy’ as ‘certain knowledge about something revealed to men by God’. From this definition, Spinoza continues, ‘it follows that we could apply the word ‘prophecy’ just as well ‘to natural knowledge’, because ‘natural knowledge has as much right to be called *divine* as any other kind of knowledge, since it is the nature of God, so far as we share in it, and God’s decrees, that may be said to dictate it to us’ (TTP i-1, p. 13) However, biblical prophecy is different from philosophy in that it consists of knowledge from hearsay. The prophets only understood certain ‘words and images’, that is, the prophets understood everything by means of the first kind of knowledge alone. (TTP i-27, p. 25).

Prophetic imagination cannot give us ‘mathematical certainty’, only ‘moral certainty’ (TTP ii-6, p. 30). Spinoza’s use of the term ‘moral certainty’ adds a normative, ethical element to its traditional meaning of a subjective kind of certainty [38]. The ‘moral certainty’ the Bible provides consists of elementary guidelines for ordinary men and women, meant to bring the common people under the guidance of reason. These guidelines are ‘taught by experience’, and not deduced ‘from a few premises’ (TTP v-14, p. 76).

Spinoza writes that the prophets only had access to knowledge of the first kind. They did not and could not teach philosophical, eternal truths. This was also not necessary. Faith does not require knowledge of astronomy or mathematics. One can even be pious without possessing adequate knowledge of God. The only knowledge about God that is necessary for faith is to know of God’s justice and charity (TTP xiii-4, p. 174). These assertions clear the way to Spinoza’s emphatic stance that *the freedom to philosophize* includes the freedom to have different ideas of God. Everyone should be allowed ‘to worship God according to his own mind’ (TTP, Preface 8, p. 6). Since the prophets also had varied ideas about God (TTP ii-18, p. 43), and since the prophets were all upright men, there is no reason to believe that it would be impious to allow people this freedom.

Furthermore, since biblically revealed theology consists of imaginative knowledge, and since imaginative knowledge is linked to private experiences, everyone should always be free—and even encouraged—to adapt the teachings of Scripture to his or her own level of understanding. Adaptation is a crucial aspect of Spinoza’s theology. In order that everyone can wholeheartedly obey the divine law, everyone ‘must adapt the doctrines of

faith to his own understanding and to interpret them in whatever way seems to make them easier for him to accept unreservedly and with full mental assent' (TTP xiv-11, p. 183). Note specifically the *Treatise's* subtitle: prohibition of this freedom would destroy piety, because it lies in the nature of the imagination that different people understand the same things differently. Besides, the divine law, to which we now will turn, demands that people should love their neighbor. To persecute others for their ideas would therefore be tantamount to sinning against this law (TTP xiv-13, p. 185).

In chapter 4 of the *Treatise* Spinoza's makes several distinctions within the concept of law. The first is between a law of natural necessity and a decree that people prescribe to themselves for some good. Within the law or decree that people prescribe to themselves he makes a second distinction between 'human law', meant 'to protect life and preserve the country', and 'divine law', which 'looks to the supreme good', consisting out of knowledge and love of God. Regarding divine law, Spinoza makes the further distinction between 'natural divine law', which comes forth out of the natural light, and 'revealed divine law', which is the result of prophetic imagination [39]. These categorical distinctions regarding concepts of law are essential for an adequate, non-contradictory reading of Spinoza's *Treatise* [40]. The third of these distinctions is, in the context of this article and the debate on the two accounts of salvation, most relevant for us [41]. Understanding the difference between revealed and natural divine law enables one to grasp how the two kinds of salvation can coexist without any degree of contradiction.

Both natural (philosophical) religion as well as (biblically) revealed religion teach the divine law which tells us that 'love of God is the highest felicity [*foelicitas*] and happiness [*beatitudo*] of man, his final end [*finis ultimus*] and the aim of all its actions.' From this, Spinoza continues, 'follows that he alone observes the divine law who is concerned to love God not from fear of punishment nor love of something else, such as pleasure, fame, etc., but from the single fact that he knows that the knowledge and love of God is the highest good. (. . .) For the idea of God requires that God should be our highest good: i.e., that the knowledge and the love of God is the ultimate end to which all our actions are to be directed' (TTP iv.5, p. 60).

The divine law also saves us from 'superstition', which Spinoza describes in the *Treatise's* Preface. People living in uncertain times never know what horrors the future might bring, making them prone to embrace all kinds of superstitious beliefs. The idea of God saves them from fluctuating between hope and fear (and therewith from superstition), and this happens irrespective of whether they understand God theologically (by means of prophetic imagination) or philosophically (the second and third kinds of knowledge). For the idea of God provides all people with a 'fixed plan' in life [35]. Religious believers can always find support and strength in the example of supreme love that God provides, while philosophers can always understand the necessity of the forces they see at work in the whole of nature and in themselves.

However, it is this second kind of salvation, Spinoza reminds us, that remains a preserve for the few. Which is why revelation is so important. It provides a path to salvation for 'the common people'. Hence his strong emphasis on 'the usefulness and necessity of Holy Scripture. (. . .) If we did not possess this testimony of Scripture, we would have to consider the salvation of almost all men in doubt' (TTP xv-10, p. 194). In the accompanying note he adds that 'it is not reason but rather revelation that can teach us that it suffices for salvation [*salutem*] or happiness [*beatitudinem*] to accept the divine decrees as laws or commandments, and there is no need to understand them as eternal truths' (TTP Annotation 31, p. 271). In chapter iv Spinoza concludes that 'God is described as a legislator or a prince, just, merciful, etc. due to the limited understanding of the common people and their lack of knowledge. In reality God acts and governs all things from the necessity of his own nature and perfection alone, and his decrees and volitions are eternal truths and always involve necessity.' (TTP iv-10, p. 64–65). The majority of mankind, Spinoza argues in chapter xiii, need not understand 'the eternal truths' that 'involve necessity' because they will comprehend the divine law in its adapted form, not as something that necessarily

follows from nature, but as something that depends on a decision of the divine will. In other words, both the natural and the revealed divine law can lead to salvation: the first does this by helping us understand ourselves and how everything follows necessarily from the nature of God, while the other gives us trust in an almighty and benevolent being who is also a perfect example that we can imitate and thereby be happy.

Spinoza's treatment of biblical revelation fits squarely in the tradition of 'philosophical religions' that Fraenkel describes, because Spinoza redefines revelation as 'a pedagogical-political program' used to bring the masses under the guidance of reason [21]. However, what seems contradictory to Fraenkel is that Spinoza simultaneously turns against the tradition of philosophical religions when he denies that the prophets were philosophers. But is this really a contradiction? Both philosophy as well as theology, Spinoza claims, have a similar *ethical* effect on people. Biblically revealed religion teaches that we should understand God as a king or a lawmaker who commands us (and the whole of nature), whereas Spinoza's philosophical religion makes clear that God is *identical* to Nature. However, both ideas of God give us a degree of knowledge that can help us on the path to psychological and ethical salvation. Spinoza's plea to separate philosophy from theology should therefore be restated: both natural theology as well as revealed theology teach us the right way to live, but differ with regard to their theoretical, speculative teachings. In other words, we can learn the good life from both revealed as well as natural theology, but we can only learn to intellectually understand God or Nature through philosophy [26].

The analysis of salvation in the *Ethics* in this paper's first section attempts to make clear that salvation can take on an intellectual, a psychological and an ethical form. Note that 'the salvation of the ignorant' includes but two of these distinctions: the psychological and ethical, but not intellectual salvation. This salvation is therefore of 'a lesser kind'. Spinoza contrasts this with the person unfamiliar with the Bible's stories, 'but who does know, by the natural light of reason, that there is a God and so forth (. . . ) and who also possesses a true code for living, is entirely happy [*beatum*], and happier than the common people, because, besides true opinions, he possesses a clear and distinct understanding of them' (TTP v-16, p. 77). The philosophical religion which makes use of natural theology, Spinoza states here, leads to 'a higher kind of salvation' than can be derived from revealed theology.

It is therefore no great leap for even novice Spinoza readers to see how man's capacity for justice, charity and especially obedience tie into Spinoza's claims about the nature of political stability. Obedience is fundamental for a peaceful society. Political stability according to Spinoza is strengthened when we are aware that we obtain our highest good in the knowledge and love of God. However, we do not love God in order to have a stable state, which is temporal and external, but for the love of something everlasting and internal of which our highest good consists.

Spinoza writes in the *Treatise* that outward expressions such as rituals and 'ceremonies contribute nothing to human happiness [*beatitudinem*] and are only relevant to the temporal prosperity [*temporaneam foelicitatem*] of the state' (TTP v-3, p. 69). True and lasting happiness or salvation is connected to certain inner convictions that can always assist us, irrespective of the continuously changing (political) circumstances and vicissitudes of life (TTP Annotation 33, p. 271–272).

The TTP then not only aims at the separation of philosophy from theology, it also proposes the separation of theology from politics. The essential teachings of theology involve, among other things, finding a lasting love of God. Politics however, is concerned with matters of external laws and ever-changing circumstances. Spinoza argues that philosophy and theology are separate yet overlapping [42], as is the case with the theological and the political, to which we now will turn.

#### 4. Internal and External Religion

Spinoza treats the relation between the theological and the political in the second part of the *Treatise*. ‘The time has now come to enquire how far this freedom to think and to say what one thinks extends in the best kind of state’ (TTP xvi-1, p. 189). In the final five chapters of the *Treatise* Spinoza endeavors to prove that allowing the freedom to philosophize is no threat to the peace in the Republic, but that forbidding this freedom would seriously endanger the peace (TTP subtitle).

Why does freedom not pose a threat to peace? Spinoza bases his argumentation on an analysis of natural right: that is the way in which nature determines, and, at the same time limits the power of each particular thing. The state, Spinoza argues, does not have the power, and therefore not the right, to force people to think in a particular way. In society people retain their natural right to judge for themselves. And although they have relinquished *some* of their freedom to act on their own judgment *as agreed to in the social contract*, nonetheless, the state cannot force them to think in another way than nature determines them to think and feel (TTP xvii-1, p. 208). There can only be peace if a government is wise enough to understand and respect the necessary laws of human nature which affirm that there are many differences in how people think, feel, and act (TTP xx-4, p. 251).

According to Spinoza the best kind of state is a democracy, defined by him as ‘a united gathering of people who collectively has the sovereign right to do all that it has the power to do’ (TTP xvi-8, p. 200). The people’s representatives, assembled in the ‘supreme council’ (TP xi-1, p. 752), need the freedom to think and speak in order to determine the best laws (TTP xx-7, p. 242). Furthermore, forbidding citizens the right to voice their true thoughts will inevitably lead to a society in which flatterers and hypocrites are valued, while honesty and love of truth is outlawed, which will undoubtedly lead to protests, that is, disturbance of the peace (TTP xx-11, p. 244).

But does peace—i.e., collective harmony—not require the curtailment of individual freedom (the individual right to think and say what one wants), and inversely, does not a society’s endorsement of individual freedom and diversity necessarily threaten collective harmony? Spinoza does not deny that there exists tension between the two: ‘Undeniably, there are sometimes some disadvantages in such freedom’ (TTP xx-10, p. 254). An excessive, licentious freedom would disturb the peace, whereas a tyrannical order and ‘harmony’ would end all freedom: ‘( . . . ) experience seems to teach us that peace and harmony are best served if all power is conferred on one man. ( . . . ) But if slavery, barbarism, and desolation are to be called peace, there can be nothing more wretched for mankind than peace’ (TP vi-4, p. 701). This is why he searches for a balance between collective harmony and peace on the one hand, and individual freedom and diversity on the other. He also warns that upsetting this balance is a problem for peace as well as freedom. In other words: in the best kind of state there is no freedom without peace, and no peace without freedom.

My premise that the *Treatise* is a unified and coherent whole requires not only understanding a necessary balance between individual freedom and societal peace but also the distinction between internal and external religion, something which is also discussed by Rosenthal [43], Frank & Waller [44], Giardino [45] and Juffermans [20]. The underlying importance of these related distinctions in fact *connects* the theological part of the *Treatise* to its political part. One’s inner *idea* of God, Spinoza explains, should be of no concern to the state. The state authorities should not care whether people think of God as a legislator or as nature’s fixed order. It is of no concern to the state whether its citizens understand the divine law by means of the imagination or by means of reason. For them the only thing that matters is that people obey God. However, how one *acts on* this idea of God, i.e., ‘outward piety’ and one’s behavior in terms of justice and charity—are expressions of external religion which fall entirely under the jurisdiction of the state.

In chapter ix of the *Treatise* Spinoza proceeds ‘to demonstrate that religious worship and pious conduct must be accommodated to the peace and interests of the state and consequently must be determined by the sovereign authorities alone.’ (TTP xix-2, p. 328). In Spinoza’s view, state laws would prohibit church ministers (who are in fact civil servants)



from using their power and influence against the state. Furthermore, the state has the legal authority to prosecute and enforce strict public criminal justice. Nevertheless, laws cannot ensure salvation because the knowledge of God required for salvation rests not in authority but in the *heart*. In this sense theology and politics are most definitely separate domains.

Yet, the practice of justice and charity has ‘the force of law only via the authority of the state’ (TTP xix-4, p. 239). However, the idea that religion falls completely under state jurisdiction is modified by Spinoza when he adds:

‘I speak expressly of pious conduct and formal religious worship [*externo Religionis cultu*] and not piety itself or private worship of God or the means by which the mind is internally directed wholeheartedly to revere God. For internal veneration of God [*Dei interno cultu*], and piety as such, are under everyone’s individual jurisdiction (as we showed at the end of chapter vii) and *cannot be transferred* to another. Furthermore, what I mean by ‘the kingdom of God’ here is plain enough, I suppose, from chapter xiv ( . . . ) ( . . . ) that a kingdom of God is a kingdom in which justice and charity have the force of law and command’. (TTP xix-3, p. 239)

At the end of chapter seven Spinoza alerts us to the difference between civil authority and individual rights, arguing that the interpretation of laws rests under the authority of the sovereign, while the interpretation of religion is an individual (and private) right. Since religion, he writes,

‘does not consist so much in external actions as in simplicity and truth of mind, it is exempt from state authority. It requires rather pious and fraternal advice, a proper upbringing and, more than anything else, one’s own free judgment. Therefore, since freedom of thought and freedom of conscience belong to each and every individual, and it cannot be conceived that anyone could surrender this right, every individual will also possess the supreme right and authority to judge freely about religion and to interpret it for himself’. (TTP vii-22, p. 116)

Spinoza understands internal religion as an *intentional disposition*. The state cannot force its citizens to either love and respect their fellows or else be punished by law. To love justice and charity, to love God, is something that people find within themselves. Religion is not a matter of coercion. People can find meaning and the importance of the divine natural law, the understanding of which is an internal process best nourished where people are free to think for themselves.

However, this does not mean that everyone has an absolute right to say and write what they want. People are not free to express subversive opinions that deny the sovereign’s legislative rights (TTP xx-9, p. 254). Additionally, denial of the fundamental articles of faith is prohibited (TTP xiv-11, p. 178). It is important to note that the freedom to philosophize as described here is not the same as the 21st Century Western conceptions of freedom of speech and freedom of expression.

Spinoza writes in chapter xx of the *Treatise* that governments do not have the power, that is, the right ‘to control people’s minds to the same extent as their tongues’. To a certain degree sovereign powers can ensure that ‘a very large part of the people believes, loves, hates, etc. what the sovereign wants them to’ (TTP xvii-2, pp. 210–211). However, it will never be possible to have all people think exactly the way the state-powers want them to think. No sovereign power can take away the individual freedom to think, judge and feel as one naturally does.

What *can* be enforced is behavior. Since behavior is the defining feature of faith in the theological part of the *Treatise*, this has created the ‘contradiction’ that some have found particularly troubling in Spinoza’s account of internal and external religion [15]. For what is the difference between internal and external religion when Spinoza writes:

‘Any pious act becomes impious if it entails harm for the whole state, and, conversely, there can be no impious act against a neighbor which is not deemed pious if done for the preservation of the state. It is pious, for instance, if I hand over my cloak to someone who is in dispute with me and aspires to take my tunic, also. But in a situation where this is judged prejudicial to the preservation of the commonwealth, the pious thing, rather, is to bring him before a court, even if he will be condemned to death’. (TTP xii-10, p. 242)

When Spinoza writes that a pious citizen brings a law breaker to court Spinoza does not imply that such a citizen should do that out of a desire for retribution. For a philosopher who denies that people have a free will this would make no sense. Laws are necessary in order to protect society against those who have not understood—either by means of the imagination or by means of reason—that our highest good consists in the love of God and our neighbor.

However, to better understand what is at stake in the perceived contradiction between the individual freedom of internal religion on the one hand, and the state-controlled religion on the other hand, requires a two-pronged approach: firstly to differentiate between *internal* intentions and *external* behavior, and secondly to connect *theological* obedience to *political* obedience. Internal religion we have defined as an intentional disposition in which we desire to do good for no other reason than out of love for God and our fellow man. This inner drive, this ‘good will’ as Kant would put it, cannot be instilled through coercion, and in this sense theology and politics need to be kept strictly apart.

However, there is also a sense in which theology and politics belong together. The divine law states that we should love our neighbor wholeheartedly through acts of justice and charity. However, that which is just and charitable in a society is *decided* by the sovereign powers. Without society there would not be justice nor charity as everyone would decide for himself what is good and bad. For the faithful therefore this means that obeying the laws of the state is *also* a religious matter, because in matters of justice and charity, state law and divine law are one and the same. In other words, it is in *obedience* that we find the key matter on which theology and politics overlap.

We may conclude that on the one hand, aspects of theology and politics are separated by Spinoza. The internal religion, the knowledge and love of God that leads to salvation, is a matter of the individual alone. The external religion, the rule over public religious life, its doctrines, its judgments about morals, its ceremonies and its stories (TTP xix-15, p. 245), is a matter of the State alone, ensuring that the church not become ‘a state within the state’. Yet, on the other hand, Spinoza sees the necessary unity of internal and external religion because without religion, piety and obedience no state would, as Seneca put it, ‘last for long’, and without the state there would be no ‘kingdom of God’.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article I argued that Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* is a coherent work.

First, I argued that the *Ethics* makes clear that intellectually derived salvation is a gradual process which takes place in this life, including cognitive, affective and ethical elements. In the salvation of the wise reason and faith combine, because the man who is led by reason is also the religious man who desires the good for himself and for the rest of mankind, or, what amounts to the same thing, loves his neighbor as he loves himself. When we examine spiritual salvation and its love of God as described in the *Treatise* it too occurs as a gradual process although it lacks an *intellectual* understanding of God’s eternal nature. The revealed divine law is understood by the common people as God’s commandments, rather than his eternal decrees, and God is imagined by the common people to be as an exemplar of justice and charity, rather than the cause of the fixed order of nature. In this way simple men and women will be eager to obey God, and to imitate God, and perform acts of justice and charity. This will guarantee the *ethical* salvation of the ignorant. Furthermore, because they can put their trust in a loving father who is at the same time imagined as the almighty, but just king of the universe, they can enjoy peace

of mind. In this way the *psychological* salvation of the common people is also possible. In Spinoza's hands, I argue, one can understand without contradictions, the two kinds of salvation, and that both theology and philosophy can lead to a life of peace and love. However, only philosophy leads to *intellectual* salvation.

My second premise regarding cohesion in the TTP concerns the relation between theology and politics. Here too the separation and interdependence model apply. The moral element of theology I argue is intrinsically linked to the legislative nature of politics. Among the various basic distinctions between 'internal' and 'external' religion in the *Treatise*, I argued, is the important distinction between the *moral sphere* that lies outside the control of the state, and the *legal sphere* that falls under state authority. Therefore, Spinoza separates theology from politics, but also connects the two. He separates theology from politics because he stresses that theological knowledge of God, which we need for our salvation, is an individual and internal affair in which governments must not interfere. However, he also brings the theological-political together, because Spinoza argues that without piety the state's stability is at risk. If the sovereign engages in coercion and violence to enforce authority, it undermines the kingdom of God which could be realized by the laws of the state.

Religion, and the obedience it teaches, according to Spinoza, is therefore indispensable for a well-functioning society. It helps prevent that civilians become rebels, and leaders become tyrants. Furthermore, true religion allows each individual to think and say what they want. Spinoza's *Treatise*, in other words, sketches an ideal religious society where theology, philosophy, and politics work together—each within its limitations—to ensure a democratic Republic that is pious, peaceful, and free.

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