

Article

Spinoza's Defense of Democracy and the Emergence of Secularism

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Abstract: Prof. Stephen Strehle's recent study suggests that modern politics is informed by secularism, which tends to promote hostility toward religion and the desire to purge religion from the public sphere. This essay considers one of the founding documents of secularism and modern political thought, Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Spinoza's account is ambiguous: his theology raises doubts about the truth of revelation even as he argues that salvation, as taught by the Bible, requires the practice of *caritas*. Spinoza also attempts to separate religion and politics. He grounds political life on universal natural rights and directs it toward the pursuit of comfort and security rather than salvation. This teaching appears to neglect the extraordinary possibilities and peaks of human life, both intellectual and spiritual. Spinoza's account appears to support Prof. Strehle's concern that such a single-minded focus on material comfort will lead ultimately to a debasement of humanity, and a confusion or denial of the distinction between high and the low.

Keywords: Spinoza; liberal democracy; commercial republicanism; secularism



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Prof. Stephen Strehle has written a comprehensive and persuasive account of the development of secularization. The term "secularization" is difficult to capture. Its meaning is apt to shift, and its effects are difficult to measure. Does secularism refer to a radical break from religious tradition or a continuation and even perfection of religious thought? Do secular movements incorporate religious terms and concepts to reinvigorate or obliterate them? Strehle begins with the definition offered by social scientists, that is, a "disposition that finds religious categories irrelevant, that interprets the world as a self-sufficient system, containing an autonomous causal nexus or immanent force, negating any need for divine intervention . . ." (Stephens 2018).

The problem with such technical definitions is that they obscure the anxiety and gloom felt by many Christians in the West, a sense that the regime is hostile to religious life and thought. For his part, Strehle agrees:

"One can simply walk through an art gallery and notice the shift in focus over the centuries, beginning with iconic religious figures of the Middle Ages, proceeding to the realistic portraits of the Italian Renaissance and later period in the Netherlands, and ending with the subjective abstractions of inward dispositions, characterizing the modern period." (3)

These experiences are common and attended by the sense that there is an unmistakable tendency or trajectory of modern life: to repudiate the Bible and reject revelation. To answer this question, Strehle compiles "a representative sample of some important intellectual and social influences that have caused many people to move away from a religious perspective of the world and illuminate the process of secularization in significant ways." (4). Strehle's study provides a myriad of compelling examples from economics, science, history, and politics that appear to suggest so.

At the same time, his study raises a question regarding the underlying cause of this movement. Secularism seems to have emerged with a new type of regime, liberal democracy devoted to commerce, a regime that also embraces the separation of church and state. Is this political regime the root cause of secularism? Strehle approaches this

question by examining first the religious roots of secular thought. He chooses to begin his study with a thought-provoking account of Christian notions of love and self-love to show the emergence of self-interest as a legitimate, if non-Christian, motive for action. Indeed, as several early modern Christian thinkers, including Bayle and Mandeville discovered, self-interest is generally more effective than charity in promoting the well-being of others and the fulfillment of their needs. Under the proper incentives, self-interest promotes civility, kindness, justice, and honesty more effectively than preaching or encouraging caritas. As Christians developed arguments to accommodate these teachings, they were faced with a “spiritual crisis.” The secularization of the political sphere comes to light as the solution to this crisis, that is, as an explanation of how Christianity adapted to liberalism. One might also wonder if liberalism is in some sense the fulfillment of Christianity. Strehle is rightly cautious about making such ambitious claims.

In this paper, I propose to supplement Strehle’s account by examining one of the earliest and most influential attempts to explain and defend liberal democracy, *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise*.¹ Examining Spinoza’s account will offer a useful place to start unraveling the causes of secularism and its relation to the rise of liberal democracy. This does not mean that history has always followed Spinoza’s account; nonetheless, his account is useful for clarifying the questions raised by Strehle’s book about the origins and trajectory of liberalism. We shall also try to understand how the development of liberalism affects the prospects for faith in a liberal regime.

1. The Theological-Political Problem

In the preface of the TTP, Spinoza frames the relation of politics and religion by referring to a perennial problem in Christianity, namely, the disjuncture between the teaching of the gospels and the actual practice of Christians. He provocatively raises the question of why Christians, who profess love and goodwill toward all, “indulge daily in the bitterest hate toward one another” (preface, p. 8). Rather than blame the lay people, Spinoza turns his attention to the corrupt clergy who use their offices as a means for securing wealth and honor. To gratify their own desire for power and authority, the clergy appeal to the passions, fears, and hopes of their followers. Moreover, they wish to create theologies that distinguish them from the other clergy. As a result, their teaching fosters division and enmity rather than cooperation and charity.

Due to this struggle for power, Christianity has lost sight of its essential teaching and become indistinguishable from every other faith and superstition. “Clearly,” he writes, “the [Christian clergy] do not see the divinity of Scripture even through a dream” (preface, p. xix). Indeed, Spinoza makes a point of discussing the Muslim Ottoman Turks who, he claims, were even more effective at generating superstitious beliefs and practices to ensure the obedience of their people. He also discusses the example of a pagan, Alexander the Great, to illustrate the general inclination of rulers, even wise ones, to do anything to gain and consolidate their power. Alexander, for instance, attempted to persuade his subjects that he was a god. In all of these examples, the pattern is the same: politically ambitious individuals seek to use religion to manipulate and control a multitude that is vulnerable to superstition.

Spinoza’s sketch of the problem points to a solution. First, Christians need to recover the essential teachings of the New Testament, so that they are not misled by novel theological and political teachings. Identifying the Bible’s true teaching on salvation will prevent ambitious men from promulgating novel theologies to accumulate power and ascend the ecclesiastical hierarchy.² To facilitate the discovery of Scripture’s fundamental teaching, Spinoza crafts a hermeneutic that has two prongs: first, it provides straightforward tools, accessible to everyone, that allow us to identify the fundamental teachings of Scripture. Second, it offers a way to limit the meaning of Scripture by suggesting that it is a historical document. Not every word or idea in Scripture is true or holy. Some errors may have crept in, for example, through the transmission of the document. Other errors reflect commonly held ideas at the time. Once we have identified the fundamental teaching of Scripture,

which is nothing more than *caritas* or the practice of loving-kindness, we can see that the notions that support this teaching are taught throughout Scripture and supported by a few essential beliefs such as divine providence. This is Spinoza's civil religion, which he presents as the Biblical teachings necessary for a healthy democracy.

At first glance, then, Spinoza seems to be a strong advocate for Biblical religion as a cornerstone of democracy because it promotes toleration and freedom. However, Spinoza has subtly planted the seeds of secularism by challenging the idea that every word of Scripture is holy. The truth of Scripture is "the very thing that ultimately has to be established from an understanding of it and by strict examination." Spinoza proposes to the contrary "to examine Scripture anew in a full and free spirit and to affirm nothing about it and to admit nothing as its teaching which I was not taught by it very clearly" (preface, p. xx).

Instead of being a document that contains the revealed truth, we must approach the Bible without deciding in advance on its divinity. In other words, Spinoza's approach to the Bible has two contrary premises: we turn to the Bible for instructions on how to live. This assumes that the Bible is true and divine. Yet, at the same time, he argues, we cannot be sure in advance that every word of the Bible is true. This conclusion can only be drawn after we understand its teaching.³ The doubt sown by this method is further strengthened by Spinoza's remarks in chapter xiv, where he argues that even the beliefs that are clearly taught throughout Scripture are open to interpretation. The result is that their plain meaning can be easily subverted. Finally, because Spinoza insists on separating philosophy and religion into separate domains, the claims of Scripture can be judged solely by their effectiveness rather than their truth. If the Bible encourages kindness and charity, then it can be said to be "holy." However, Spinoza insists, it cannot and should not be called "true".

By allowing people latitude in their interpretations and separating those interpretations from claims to truth, Spinoza succeeds in promoting a wide range of toleration for various, even clashing, interpretations of Scripture. Indeed, Spinoza understands liberalism as "the right to think what one pleases and to say what one thinks," the title of chapter XX of the TTP.⁴ Spinoza takes this phrase, and much else, from the Roman historian, Tacitus. This too indicates his political agenda of restoring freedom and toleration, as he believed it had existed in antiquity, that is, *before it was destroyed by Biblical religion*. The ostensible cause of this was a historical accident, namely, that Christianity emerged among private individuals who had virtually no political power:

"Why has there always been dispute about this right of religious command in Christian States? . . . if you look at the origins of the Christian religion, you'll see clearly what the explanation is. The Christian religion wasn't initially taught by kings, but by private men who—against the will of those who had sovereign power and whose subjects they were—for a long time customarily addressed meetings in private churches, set up and conducted sacred ceremonies, arranged everything by themselves, and made decrees; all without giving any thought to issues about sovereignty. And when, much later, religion began to be introduced into the State, it was the ecclesiastics who had to teach it—their version of it—to the Emperors. So it was easy for them to get recognized as its teachers and interpreters—and also as shepherds of the Christian flock and (as it were) God's deputies. And they took care of their own interests by prohibiting marriage to the supreme ministers of the Church and interpreters of religion, so that Christian kings couldn't muscle in and take this religious authority for themselves. They also increased the number of religious doctrines, and mixed them up so much with philosophy that the supreme interpreter of religion had to supreme philosopher and theologian, and had to have abundant spare time in which to engage in a great many useless speculations" (XIX, pp. 236–37).⁵

The tension between Church and State was greatly increased with the rise of the Papacy, which immediately attempted to consolidate its power and subject kings to the Church's authority. The division of power leads to a constant and often violent struggle, which destabilizes the state and turns Christianity into a warlike faith.

Spinoza's theological argument aims to resolve the problems caused by the emergence of Biblical religion and intolerance and the erosion of secular sovereign authority.⁶ He does so by pitting Christ's saving teaching against Christianity, as it has emerged in Europe. Contrary to the attempts to render Christianity consistent with philosophy, Spinoza restores the simple message of salvation through charity. As for other opinions regarding the nature of God and providence, they are less essential to salvation and should not be the cause of quarrel. To the contrary, he shows in chapter xix that the practice of toleration, in all sacred and religious matters, requires forbearance and obedience to the sovereign: "for once an imperium is removed, nothing good can subsist" (XIX, p. 232).⁷ In this way, Spinoza shows that Christ's teaching is opposed to the Christianity of his day, and that true followers of Christ should be liberal and embrace toleration, including freedom of thought and speech. Most importantly, they should defer to the sovereign authority in all matters of dispute (Curley 2015). The teachings of Christ not only allow for the flourishing of an undisputed secular authority, but they also embrace such an authority as the prerequisite of the true faith.

2. The Argument for Democracy

In the midst of his theological analysis, Spinoza foreshadows his argument in favor of democracy in chapter five. However, in contrast to his defense of democracy in chapter sixteen, Spinoza does not refer to either natural rights or freedom as the justification for democracy. He argues instead that individuals are fundamentally irrational and therefore need some sort of social organization to restrain them. The alternative is some kind of anarchy or chaos, which ensures that men will live in continual misery and strife. Creating a sovereign power to coerce men into obeying the law is essential; however, it too creates a problem, namely, that the sovereign's use of force incites continual resentment at the sovereign's authority. The resentment is remarkable because it is so strong that it overwhelms self-interest. There are only two solutions to the problem of unifying irrational individuals and alleviating resentment, theocracy, and democracy. Theocracy resolves the problem of resentment as long as citizens believe that the authority is ultimately divine. Democracy too can alleviate resentment as long as the citizens believe that they are the ultimate source of authority.

By setting up the problem of politics in this way, as a choice between manipulation and self-empowerment, Spinoza clearly indicates the trajectory of his argument. What is less clear is whether his theological argument is directing his political argument, or whether his political considerations are determining in advance his interpretation of the Bible. If the latter is the case, then do Spinoza's political considerations ultimately direct his liberalism toward secularism?

Theocracy is an extension of the problem that Spinoza had indicated in the preface, that is, the competition among power-hungry priests within the Church.⁸ Spinoza indicates his preference for democracy on the grounds that equality is a more stabilizing belief than fear of divine punishment. Theocracy was possible, in fact, when religion emerged with or from the political order.⁹ With the advent of Christianity, however, political life must accommodate itself to the teaching of the Gospels, a teaching based on equality rather than an aristocratic or other native, home-grown regime. In this respect, it appears that practical considerations about the origins of Christianity drive Spinoza's political argument.

However, these practical reasons do not exhaust Spinoza's motives. Spinoza does claim that the belief in equality and freedom, once established by Christianity, is difficult to take away, but this does not fully account for his defense of equality.¹⁰ The reason is

that Spinoza indicates throughout the TTP that equality is false, that men are naturally unequal, and that to understand political life, we must distinguish between the few who are rational and the many who are driven by their destructive passions.¹¹ From this, it would seem to follow that Spinoza would be more sympathetic to theocracy—one directed by the rational few—rather than democracy. Spinoza explains his preference for democracy in practical terms: theocracy does not work because in most cases, the most powerful or most ruthless seize power rather than the most rational. Even where the wise do rule, they are hard-pressed to convince the unwise who do not recognize the authority of reason.¹² He bolsters this practical argument in chapter sixteen with a non-Biblical account of nature that supports equality where he presents his argument for natural rights.¹³ This argument brings us closer to the heart of Spinoza’s analysis.

In sharp contrast to the Bible, Spinoza’s account of natural rights aims for a universal validity to the extent that it obscures the differences between man and animals. Everything in nature, Spinoza argues, is characterized by the irresistible drive to preserve itself: “[t]he highest law ... is that each thing endeavor, as much as is in it, to persevere in its state—and do so without regard to anything but itself” (XVI, p. 189). All creatures have a “natural right” to do this; that is, they are conditioned by nature to pursue self-preservation and cannot do otherwise: “fish are by nature determined for swimming and the big ones for eating the small ones; and so fish take possession of water, and large ones eat small ones, with the highest natural right” (XVI, p. 189). This striving for power, rather than the biblical teaching of *caritas*, is the basis of Spinoza’s political teaching.

3. The Argument for Equality

From these universal—if rather low—considerations, Spinoza derives his argument for equality. All men are driven to pursue self-preservation, and therefore self-interest rules above all else:

Whatsoever, therefore, an individual (considered as under the sway of nature) thinks useful for himself, whether led by sound reason or impelled by the passions, that he has a sovereign right to seek and to take for himself as he best can, whether by force, cunning, entreaty, or any other means; consequently he may regard as an enemy anyone who hinders the accomplishment of his purpose (XVI, p. 190).

The primacy of self-interest in political life has several consequences. Most importantly, in order to develop a universal set of political rights, Spinoza tends to ignore nobler goals, which are rare and rarely achieved. For example, a nobler or more rational individual might choose to check voluntarily their selfishness or even practice charity toward others, but political life cannot be grounded in the exceptional acts of a few.¹⁴ Rather, a lawgiver or political leader must take into account the motives of most people; that is, the lawgiver must address less noble motives. Preaching morality and urging virtue has little effect on the desires and fears of the multitude. To be effective, leaders must employ strong checks, including the death penalty.

This new political teaching of natural right remains true so long as we focus on the primacy of our desires or fears, the centrality of our concern for ourselves, and the fact that we refuse to be subject to the authority of others in nature. The focus on our own well-being reflects our conviction that we as individuals are better suited than anyone else to choose a strategy for self-preservation and well-being:

“Each deems that he alone knows everything, and wants everything to be modified on the basis of his own mental cast, and figures something is equitable or inequitable ... insofar as he judges it to fall to his profit or harm” (TTP XVII, p. 193; cf. PT II, para. 12).

This solid conviction, the belief in our own evaluation of our best interests, explains the solid basis for the belief in equality.¹⁵ In fact, there is a kind of calculated reasonableness in the principle that no one is more concerned with my well-being than I am. If each person

is primarily self-interested, then claims of selflessness, or of caring about others before oneself, are doubtful. A display of compassion may simply be an attempt to deceive me and further the well-being of the other. How, then, can any lawgiver achieve civic unity?

At first glance, the only incentive stronger than self-interested desire is the threat of force or punishment. Spinoza suggests that fear alone is insufficient to motivate men in the long run and must be complemented by the hope of achieving comfort and security. Of course, this hope of worldly comfort and security falls short of salvation, but it has the advantage of being scarce in nature. Thus, nearly everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs or their rationality, recognizes the goodness of comfort and security. The pursuit of material comfort is, as Leo Strauss describes it, a “sub-rational good” that is, it is shared in the lower end of rationality.¹⁶ A commercial society is founded on this opinion, which it understands as the very goal of politics. Indeed, in such a society, everyone can pursue their own well-being as they see fit with the fewest limits or restrictions. The main restriction is the mutual recognition of the sovereign’s authority, which in a democracy is most closely connected to the will of the citizens. In short, the combination of democracy and commerce remains closest to the natural situation of self-interest among a variety of individuals of varying rationality.¹⁷

The focus on natural rights, that is, the self-interested pursuit of preservation, provides the meaning and substance of “equality” in Spinoza’s regime. The best—or most stable—government protects the natural rights and thereby the equality of its citizens. Democracy is more successful than other regimes because it is “a society whose *imperium* is in the possession of all and whose laws are sanctioned on the basis of common consent” (V, p. 74). Not only is it democratic but Spinoza’s regime is also liberal in the sense of embracing freedom of thought and speech, “the right to think what one pleases and to say what one thinks” (the title of chapter twenty). The basis for such freedom is the equality of judgment among individuals who are calculating their self-interest.

Liberal democracy, as conceived by Spinoza, appears to give insufficient consideration to the wisest and best individuals, including saints and philosophers. In response to this charge, Spinoza points out that such individuals remain free. Even with respect to the civil religion that supports democracy, Spinoza emphasizes the fact that citizens are free to accept it. They need only accommodate their outward expression to its dogmas: “each is bound to accommodate these dogmas of faith to suit his own grasp and to interpret them to himself in the mode in which it seems easier to him to be able to embrace them without . . . any conflict of mind and without any hesitation” (XIV, pp. 178–79). We are obligated to pay lip service to the dogmas of society but are free to interpret them so that they conform to one’s own opinions. For example, an atheist may be obliged to concede the existence of God but mean by this only the existence of material nature.

In accepting this compromise, the wise demonstrate their wisdom, namely, their recognition that their intellectual excellence has little relevance in political life:

the wise man has sovereign right to do all that reason dictates, or to live according to the laws of reason, so also the ignorant and foolish man has sovereign right to do all that desire dictates, or to live according to the laws of desire.... Nature has given them no other guide, and has denied them the present power of living according to sound reason; so that they are not more bound to live by the dictates of an enlightened mind, than a cat is bound to live by the laws of the nature of a lion (XVI, p. 190).

The wise know the limits of reason in politics and recognize that rationality, like behavior, is fully determined by nature. Politics must rest on grounds other than reason or intellectual virtue. The advantage of natural right is its allegedly universal applicability: it encompasses the desires of both rational and non-rational citizens. Even though the unwise do not recognize the superior rationality of the wise, they nonetheless have been weaned off religious superstition (and therewith the power of priests) in favor of a sub-rational good. The belief in equality is true in this qualified way. Natural rights, democracy, and equality provide a basis of agreement for non-rational individuals to live together (cf. p. 191).

Yet, by promoting equality and rejecting hierarchy of any sort, Spinoza's liberalism appears to undermine, or cause us to forget, the very wisdom which is the basis of his regime. One example, which looms large in the TTP, is Spinoza's novel definition of divine law. Initially, in chapter four, Spinoza presents a traditional concept of divine law, which emphasizes moral and intellectual virtue. The divine law, he writes, "has to do with the highest good, that is with the true knowledge and love of God . . ." (IV, p. 59). As he develops a theology suited for liberal democracy, he redefines the divine law in chapter twelve so that it refers only to the practice of *caritas*. Intellectual virtue, which "depends solely on the knowledge of God" is omitted from the definition (IV, p. 59): "the true mode of living, which does not consist in ceremonies, but in charity" (XII, p. 162). The fundamental teaching of Scripture, we can discern "without any difficulty or ambiguity . . . to love God above all and one's neighbor as oneself" (XII, p. 165).

Here, it seems that, despite his protests to the contrary, Spinoza's political considerations shape his account of religion. Specifically, liberalism narrows the scope of religion to remove obstacles from the path of equality. The danger is that those same "obstacles" allow for the development of extraordinary individuals. Without them, there is a possible danger of confusing the high and the low or forgetting the high altogether. Such a society might preserve freedom in name but deny its substance.

4. Conclusions

We began with Prof. Strehle's concern that "the process of secularization is gaining momentum and sure to overwhelm the religious community if the trend continues in its present direction, with no sign or prospect of significant reversal" (p. 267). In order to determine whether secularization is an inevitable result of liberalism, we turned to the original account and defense of liberalism in the TTP. Spinoza begins with the phenomena of manipulative priests, whose authority depends on keeping the multitude enthralled by outlandish fears and hopes to subvert the true meaning of Christianity. To recover the meaning of Christianity, Spinoza turns to the study of Scripture. In doing so, he deliberately raises the question of its truth and relevance. One can see already in his initial approach to the problem the emergence of secularism as a critique of the Bible.

Spinoza does eventually recover Scripture's essential teaching, namely, the practice of *caritas*. This justifies his political project to curtail the power of the priests, make theocracy obsolete, and prevent the church from interfering in the state's sovereignty. To this end, he presents a political teaching of natural rights and equality. This frees the multitude to pursue the subrational goods of comfort and security. It also makes room for other substantial goods such as toleration and freedom to philosophize. In addition, liberalism directs the passions of the citizens, especially the desire for comfort and security, toward peace. Although liberalism does not establish authority so that it can direct the passions (as in Plato's *Republic*), it provides incentives that direct the multitude to pursue interests that benefit everyone. Such are the considerable blessings of a commercial republic that Spinoza identifies with great cities like Amsterdam.

This account, however, does not fully respond to Prof. Strehle's concerns. Indeed, to support liberal regimes, Spinoza creates a theology that raises doubts about revelation. The practice of *caritas* may be a critical part of salvation, but it does not exhaust virtue or give a fully satisfactory account of political life: to what extent does moral virtue depend on the sovereign? Is the government obliged to practice *caritas* regardless of its consequences? Spinoza creates a civil religion that answers these questions by separating philosophy and religion, as well as granting the sovereign authority over religion. Such a solution is problematic for Christians.¹⁸

In his effort to ground political life on a universal basis of natural rights, Spinoza's teaching appears to slight the extraordinary peaks of human life, both intellectual and spiritual, in favor of the pursuit of comfort and security. One may worry with Prof. Strehle that such a single-minded focus on material comfort will lead ultimately to a debasement of humanity, and confusion—or outright denial—of the high and the low. While the verdict

on liberal democracy is out, we can take comfort in Prof. Strehle's optimism: "Religion has a way of hanging around as an indispensable element in addressing the basic needs of the human heart, which remain unfulfilled in the secular world of instrumentality . . . we would rather be wrong with those who accept the possibility of meaning in life and the hope of immortality than sink into the secular abyss with the boast of being right about the utter futility of one's existence" (pp. 267–68). Such a hope or prayer seems consistent with Spinoza's liberalism.

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Notes

- ¹ (Gebhardt 1925). TTP references are given according to chapter number and Gebhardt page number. As for the translations into English, I have mainly used Martin D. Yaffe's outstanding translation in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* (Yaffe 2004), which incorporates the Gebhardt pagination. I have also consulted Edwin Curley's translation in (De Spinoza 1994) as well as Jonathan Bennett's more colloquial and provocative translation, which has the advantage of being available online (Bennett 2017)
- ² "Christianity has been corrupted; [this is] the whole teaching of the Reformers. But Spinoza draws now the final conclusion, [the] radical conclusion, from that: we must return, radically, to primitive Christianity, and that means to the New Testament. And we must do this in the proper way; that is to say, we must study the New Testament without any prejudices, read it as we would read any other book." (Strauss 1959).
- ³ Leo Strauss argues that "the real teaching of Spinoza is not the biblicist argument but the other (secular) one" Strauss 1959 Seminar on Spinoza, p. 26.
- ⁴ Spinoza takes this phrase, and much else, from the Roman historian, Tacitus. This too indicates his political agenda of restoring freedom and toleration, as he believed it had existed in antiquity, that is, *before it was destroyed by Biblical religion*. On Tacitus's influence on Spinoza see (Wirszubski 1955; De Bastiani 2021).
- ⁵ This translation, by Jonathan Bennett, captures the more colloquial—not to say cruder—expression of Spinoza's argument. It can be found at (Bennett 2017).
- ⁶ "[T]his right [of the secular state to control religion] has always been disputed in a Christian imperium . . ." (XIX, p. 236).
- ⁷ The argument of chapter nineteen is as follows: "justice and loving kindness can get the force of law and of a command only from the authority of the State, then, since the State's authority is all in the hands of the sovereign ·civil· powers, I can easily draw the conclusion that religion gets the force of law only by the decree of those who have the right to command, and that God has no special kingdom over men except through those who have governmental authority" (XIX, p. 229).
- ⁸ For a fine treatment of this topic, see Ward (2013).
- ⁹ See also chapter XVII: "For the sake of making themselves secure, kings who seized the throne in ancient times used to try to spread the idea that they were descended from the immortal gods, thinking that if their subjects and the rest of mankind did not look on them as equals, but believed them to be gods, they would willingly submit to their rule, and obey their commands" (p. 217). By endorsing democracy, Spinoza advances the cause of freedom and equality, noting that once people believe such concepts, it is very difficult to reverse such beliefs (cf. V, p. 74).
- ¹⁰ "Furthermore, least of all can human beings abide serving their equals and being regulated by them. Finally, nothing is more difficult than to take freedom away from human beings again, once it has been granted" (V, p. 74).
- ¹¹ Throughout the TTP, he frequently refers to the multitude using the derogatory term "plebs." See, for example, IV 35; XVII 44, 103; XVIII 11, 23, 25; XIX 40; XX 8, 21, 31, 33, 42.
- ¹² The former refers to the theologians mentioned in the preface who seize power from the wise, and the latter example refers to Maimonides whose efforts to persuade the multitude were ridiculed. Spinoza observes that this effort failed because it foolishly believed that philosophy could resolve conflicts among irrational people: "the vulgar, having generally no comprehension of, nor leisure for, demonstrations, would be reduced to receiving all their knowledge of Scripture on the authority and testimony of those who philosophize, and consequently, would be compelled to suppose that the interpretations given by philosophers were infallible. Truly this would be a new form of ecclesiastical authority, and a new sort of priests or pontiffs, which the vulgar would ridicule rather than venerate" (TTP VII, p. 99).
- ¹³ "So far, we have taken care to separate Philosophy from Theology and show the freedom of philosophizing which Theology grants to each. Therefore it is time for us to inquire how far this freedom . . . extends in the best Republic" (XVI, p. 189).
- ¹⁴ "Everyone will, of two goods, choose that which he thinks the greatest; and, of two evils, that which he thinks the least, for it does not necessarily follow that he judges right. This law is so deeply implanted in the human mind that it ought to be counted among eternal truths and axioms" (XVI, p. 191–92).

- ¹⁵ Spinoza argues in chapter sixteen that democracy is the best regime because it is the “most natural” regime in the sense that it best preserves the belief in freedom and equality (p. 195).
- ¹⁶ According to Strauss, “... here is a good which I will now call subrational, by which I do not mean that it is irrational but [that] it is only a very small part of the story: the desire for security and comfort, nothing else. But still, even on the basis of this subrational good I can think rationally. That is what they are trying to do in economics and social science generally; they take almost any good and think rationally about the means to that good.” (Strauss 1959).
- ¹⁷ Spinoza cites Amsterdam as an example: “In this most flourishing republic, this outstanding city, people of every nation and sect live harmoniously together. Before they extend credit to someone, all they want to know is whether he is rich or poor and whether he has a reputation for being trustworthy. They aren’t in the least interested in his religion or sect...” (xx, p. 246).
- ¹⁸ For a discussion of these issues in the American Founding, see Muñoz (2022).

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