

Article

Spinoza and the Possibility of a Philosophical Religion

Martijn Buijs

Humanities & Social Change Center, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA; mbuijs@ucsb.edu

Abstract: What is a philosophical religion? Carlos Fraenkel proposes that we use this term to describe “the interpretation of the historical forms of a religion in philosophical terms”. Such a philosophical interpretation allows religious traditions to be utilized in service of a political-pedagogical program, the goal of which is orienting society towards the highest good: human excellence. Here, I outline the idea of a philosophical religion as it can be found in the Arabic tradition of rationalist Aristotelianism and scrutinize Spinoza’s ambiguous response to this idea. Despite his programmatic separation of theology and philosophy, I argue, Spinoza, at least in some crucial passages, shows himself to be engaged in the project of retrieving the truths of philosophy through the interpretation of Scripture. Thus, there are two contradictory strains at work in Spinoza’s philosophy of religion: he systematically denies that Scripture is the locus of truth, yet he articulates parts of his philosophical anthropology and rational theology by means of Scriptural exegesis. Both of these strains, however, depend on the claim that the final arbiter of truth about the divine and the one true act of worship of God is metaphysics.

Keywords: Spinoza; *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*; Maimonides; Leo Strauss; philosophy of religion



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1. Introduction

Spinoza’s attitude to the mass of outward customs and inward sentiments that we conventionally group under the word religion is laden with puzzles. Accused of atheism, Spinoza argues not only that God exists, but also that, necessarily, God is fundamentally *all* there is. A scathing critic of the idea that prophecy is a source of truth, he holds up the prophets’ writings as an authoritative guide to right conduct. Militantly anti-clerical, he insists on the necessity of institutionalized religion. Defender of the freedom to philosophize, he calls on the state to propagate among its citizenry certain crucial beliefs concerning God and to defend them from naysayers—beliefs which his own writings contradict. This brief list presents us with a Spinoza who is deeply invested in religion and who at the same time is its fiercest critic.

One convenient way of dealing with puzzles is, of course, to ignore them. A certain strand of historiography that has grown around Spinoza in recent decades—taking him as the enlightened forerunner of our supposed secular, tolerant, democratic order—does just that. Whatever prominence this liberal hagiographic image of Spinoza may have in the popular imagination, it is not one that can stand up to scrutiny¹.

A potentially more rewarding way of approaching the puzzles with which Spinoza’s handling of religion confronts us is to read them against the background of the philosophers whose thought he receives, criticizes, and transforms. Here, it has long been recognized that the project of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* cannot be understood without some grasp of the intricate way in which metaphysics, politics, and religion are interrelated in the rationalist Aristotelian thinkers of the medieval Islamic world and the Jewish philosophers who follow their lead. While Spinoza’s treatise is passionately concerned with the political and religious situation of the Dutch Republic and addresses itself to an audience that is largely Christian, if not necessarily in any particularly orthodox way, it is decisively

¹ The foremost example of this Whiggish tendency remains Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* [1].

shaped by its engagement with a position Spinoza describes as that of “the Dogmatists” (*TTP* Chapter 15 | III 180).² The primary representative of these Dogmatists to Spinoza is Maimonides.

One thing that makes the Dogmatic tradition salient for understanding the nature of Spinoza’s project is that it draws on an idea of the nature of religion that is common currency in the medieval Islamic world—although it is by no means the only idea available, nor uncontested. This idea of religion is, as the Arabic *dīn* and Hebrew *dat* loosely suggest, that of Divine Law—that is, as a comprehensive social and political order that regulates the life of the community of believers and, in doing so, orients it towards God. Leo Strauss succinctly draws a contrast with Christianity in the following terms: “For the Christian, the sacred doctrine is revealed theology; for the Jew and the Muslim, the sacred doctrine is, at least primarily, the legal interpretation of the Divine Law (*talmud* or *fiqh*)” [4]. One may well object that Strauss’s brevity risks bluntly homogenizing the diversity of religious thought and practice within the Medieval Islamic world.³ For all that, the idea that sacred doctrine is to be thought of as Divine Law was certainly one intellectual resource available to thinkers in the Aristotelian tradition from Farabi to Maimonides. What is more, they took up this resource philosophically in such a way that allowed them to conceptualize the religious sphere as falling under the art of politics. Much of the thrust of Spinoza’s own theological-political program first becomes clear when seen in light of this idea.

As the quarrel that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* picks with Maimonides makes clear, however, engagement with a position is by no means agreement with it. If an understanding of the Dogmatic tradition is to be of help in pinning down Spinoza’s seemingly ambiguous stance on religion, his relation to this tradition—whether one of adoption, rejection, or some more complex negotiation—will have to become clearer. This in turn requires an idea of what form the Dogmatic tradition’s own commitment to religion takes.

In what follows, I will proceed in the following way. First, I will take a closer look at the rationalist Aristotelians of the Arabic tradition to highlight some of the features most relevant to the understanding of Spinoza (“The Dogmatic Position”). In doing so, I will critically engage with Carlos Fraenkel’s recent rich and enlightening suggestion for framing this tradition—the concept of a *philosophical religion* [6]. By this, Fraenkel understands the interpretation of the historical forms of a religion in philosophical terms. Such an interpretation provides those who do not have access to the truths of metaphysics with an imaginative substitute that allows them to nevertheless partake, to the best of their abilities, in a life guided by reason.

Turning next to Spinoza (“Spinoza’s Ambiguous Response to Dogmatism”), I show that such a concept of a philosophical religion is present, if not uncontested, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. This is a surprising fact, because Spinoza argues for a strong separation between philosophy and theology—the former a rational science that has access to truth, the latter a set of teachings that, based on the imagination, is indifferent to truth and strives only to produce the love of one’s neighbor. Despite this disjunction, Spinoza, in ways closely akin to Maimonides, finds at least some of the rational truths of philosophy contained in Scripture. This becomes particularly clear in Spinoza’s reading of the account of the Fall and his understanding of the Divine Name. An unresolved tension thus remains at the heart of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: on the one hand, Spinoza is invested in the basic presuppositions and goals of the project of a philosophical religion. His critique of religion, on the other hand, threatens to destroy the basis of such a project by denying that Scripture has any grounding in truth.

² In Chapter 15 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza contrasts the *dogmatici*, who wrong-headedly turn theology into the handmaiden of philosophy, with the *sceptici*, who fall into the opposite error [2]. All English translations in this piece are from Curley’s edition. [3] Many scholars have pointed out that beyond those who Spinoza names as representatives of these two camps (Maimonides and Alpakhar), his real targets may be closer at hand: his friend Lodewijk Meijer’s *Philosophia Sanctae Scripturae Interpres* on the one hand and the doctrinaire *predikanten* of the Calvinist church on the other hand. Here, I am less interested in the intended reference than in the systematic position articulated.

³ For a particularly withering critique of the scholarly tendency to reduce the totality of historical manifestations of Islam to the idea of Law, see Chapter 2 of Shahab Ahmed’s *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* [5].

Following this (“The Possibility of a Philosophical Religion”), I will briefly argue that the project of a philosophical religion, such as that in which Spinoza remains ambiguously engaged, can only be pursued if the fundamental notions upon which it rests—that human reason is such that it can know God and that the perfection that such knowledge represents is our highest calling—can be defended. This requires the validity of Spinoza’s proofs for the existence of God.

2. The Dogmatic Position

According to a core doctrine of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, philosophy and theology each have their own domain, and neither is to transgress their mutual border. One aim of the work is thus to neatly and clearly separate philosophy, which concerns itself with the production of knowledge through the rational exercise of the intellect, and theology, which through imagination teaches practical obedience to God.

“We have established, unshakably, that theology is not bound to be the handmaid of reason, nor reason the handmaid of theology, but that each rules its own domain. As we have said: reason’s domain is truth and wisdom [*regnum veritatis et sapientiae*]; theology’s is piety and obedience [*pietatis et obedientiae*]” (TTP, Chapter 15 | III, p. 184)

Dogmatists such as Maimonides, who contravene this rule by making Scripture subservient to philosophy, hold that the true meaning of any of its passages not only has to accord with reason, or not contradict it, but also has to be such that it can be established independently by reason. Reason has its own unshakable demonstrative clarity, whereas Scripture is often obscure. Dogmatists therefore hold that to understand what Scripture says about any particular matter, one needs to know beforehand what the truth—that is, the demonstrative truth as taught by philosophy—is when it comes to that matter. Whether, for example, God has a body or not, or whether the world is created or rather eternal, are questions that only philosophy can decide. If one comes to Scripture armed with such knowledge, the correct interpretation can reveal that Scripture teaches nothing other than this truth. No doubt, the literal sense of a Biblical passage may well resist this endeavor to read rational truth into it. The dogmatic reader, Spinoza therefore underlines, finds himself in the position where he must “twist and smooth out [*torquere et explicare*]” (TTP Chapter 7 | III, p. 114) Scripture until it yields the requisite sense. Yet, the Biblical authors are rarely described by Scripture itself as men of deep rational insight. Why would anyone wish to attribute philosophical knowledge to them?

To see where this methodical assumption that Spinoza lambasts as “harmful, useless, and absurd [*noxiam, inutilum et absurdum*]” (TTP Chapter 7 | III, p. 116) comes from, a closer look at the rationalist Aristotelian tradition is required. The following programmatic statement from Maimonides’ contemporary Averroes is instructive in this case. In his *Decisive Treatise*, dedicated to the question of whether the Divine Law—or *shari’ah*—allows or perhaps even commands that we engage in philosophy, he says:

Since this Law is true and calls to the reflection leading to cognizance of the truth, we, the Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative reflection does not lead to differing with what is set down in the Law. For truth does not oppose truth; rather, it agrees with it and bears witness to it. [7]

For the rationalist Aristotelians, one cannot contradict what philosophy establishes beyond doubt through rational proof. If we uphold as axiom that the Divine Law is true, it must follow that what it teaches and what reason proves cannot be at odds, and any apparent conflict must be resolvable. However, it is the nature of rational demonstration that it is in and of itself clear and unequivocal, whereas what the Law says is first and foremost accepted on the strength of its authority. If an apparent contradiction does manifest itself between rational insight and the Law, the solution must therefore be, so to say, at the latter’s

expense: The Law has to be read in such a way that, first appearances notwithstanding, it is allegorically in agreement with what has been established by demonstration.⁴

Yet, from what does the Law derive its authority, or why should we call it divine? The answer—that it is the result of divine revelation—is by no means as obviously an orthodox answer as it seems. For revelation is understood by the tradition not as the self-manifestation of God, but as the result of prophecy. As such, it requires a human intermediary, the prophet. The prophetology of the rationalist Aristotelians frames the prophet not as the fragile human bearer of a divine message, but as a man of consummate powers of reason and imagination. Revelation is not the deity, inscrutable in his will, choosing to send off a message, but the product of what is tempting to call a natural process: The prophet, having achieved intellectual perfection, enters into conjunction with the Active Intellect. This conjunction, filling his intellect and making it flow over into his imagination, is what allows the prophet to then express his rational knowledge of the divine in the less austere medium of evocative images and words. These the prophet offers as a substitute or imitation of philosophical truth to the masses of mankind, who do not themselves have the intellectual powers to philosophize.⁵

In what sense is this imitation of truth divine? Not, it is clear, because it has in any obvious sense been dictated by God. Its divinity instead is twofold. On the one hand, it has a divine *origin*, for it is the result of participation in the cosmic order, itself divine, that the highest human intellectual perfection affords. It is divine, on the other hand, in that it has a divine *goal*. For the prophet is not only a philosopher, but also a lawgiver. The words and images revealed through the prophet—or perhaps less reverently, shaped and used by him—are the foundation of the Divine Law in its practical and political sense. The precepts and commandments laid down in it for the community of believers create a social order that is geared towards realizing the one true form of human excellence: intellectual perfection. In light of this ideal of intellectual perfection, all other aspects of human life—whether of ethical behavior, political organization, or religious comportment—have a merely instrumental value and serve its furthering and accomplishment. Thus, we find Maimonides asserting, in a passage we will have to return to, that to a human being who is intellectually perfect, the words good and bad simply lack meaning [12].

What the precise status of the Divine Law is to the Aristotelian rationalists, however, is murky enough of a question to have spawned two radically opposed scholarly answers.

According to the first answer, associated with the name of Leo Strauss, philosophers from Farabi to Maimonides are covert but hardened atheists. Reason and revelation from their point of view are irreconcilably opposed. Philosophy as rational science is the sole key to truth and the only way of achieving human perfection. At the same time, it is an anthropological fact that only a few are by nature endowed with the intellectual ability to attain the standpoint of reason. If human perfection is to be achieved in a society in which most are incapable of rational truth, and potentially hostile to it, then religious law—though philosophically not a *genuine* locus of truth—must be used as a substitute. In the hands of the prophet-philosopher-lawgiver, who himself is above such substitutes, it becomes the instrument with which a society can be shaped that does not altogether despise rational inquiry and allows for the few to philosophize in peace so as to actualize their intellectual potential. If this is to be achieved, however, the true nature of the Divine Law cannot be openly acknowledged in front of those who are not philosophers.⁶

⁴ On the *Decisive Treatise's* relating of philosophy and religion against the backdrop of Averroes' work as a whole, see also Chapter 2 of Catarina Belo, *Averroes and Hegel on Philosophy and Religion*, [8] as well as Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and Scripture in the Theology of Averroes" [9]. Both Fakhry and Belo support Fraenkel's claim that for Averroes, philosophy as the highest form of worship is not only allowed, but positively commanded under Islam for those who have the intellectual capacity to engage in it, and that harmony between Divine Law and "demonstration" (i.e., philosophy) is to be achieved by the metaphorical re-interpretation of the former to accord with the truths of the latter. They thus deny both the "atheistic" reading of Averroes provided by Strauss, and the once-common attribution of a theory of "double truth" to Averroes.

⁵ The foundational text in Arabic philosophy for the prophet as both philosopher and lawgiver is Farabi's *On the Perfect State* [10]. On this, see (aside from Strauss and Fraenkel) Muhsin Mahdi's celebrated study *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, in particular Chapter 7 [11].

⁶ This, in brief, is the position offered already offered by Strauss in his early *Philosophie und Gesetz* [13].

The second answer has recently been championed by Carlos Fraenkel. It insists against the Straussian reading that the philosophers from Farabi to Maimonides, rather than being atheists, are sincere believers for whom the projects of reason and revelation are so far from being opposed that they are, strictly speaking, indistinguishable. If God is reason, then acquiring rational insight and so achieving human perfection *is* the highest form of worship. Though it is no less true on this reading that the many are incapable of performing this highest kind of worship, religious law is not some magnificent lie or cynically wielded instrument. It is an indispensable political and pedagogical tool. Though not true in a literal sense, the Divine Law as imitation of philosophy holds a genuine allegorical truth. Moreover, as none of us are born philosophers, but acquire rational insight only slowly and through hard work, religious law allows us to discipline our irrational selves and become, if not necessarily possessors of the truth, at least not altogether cut off from it. Such a pedagogy makes it possible for all people, however circumscribed their intellectual powers may be, to participate in a life of reason to the furthest extent of their ability. If the real nature of the Divine Law cannot be publicly acknowledged, this is because such divulgence would rob non-philosophers of the substitute of knowledge that they have but without turning them into philosophers. This philosophical interpretation of religious law as a political-pedagogical program for achieving human excellence can, Fraenkel suggests, be best understood as a “philosophical religion”.

What is striking about these two diametrically opposed readings of the significance of religion for the rationalist Aristotelian tradition is how little difference, when all is said and done, there is between them. They are, one might say, two sides of the same coin. Whether one describes the concept of the divine at work here as the de-throning of God in favor of a cosmic rational order or the purification of the concept of the one true God from the irrational anthropomorphic encrustations it bears in popular belief, there can be little question that we are dealing with the God of the Philosophers and that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is no more than its allegorical double. Whether we call this position atheism or philosophical religion at this point hardly seems relevant. The holy writings, practices, and institutions that make up historical religions are, in either case, as a substitute for actual perfection, no more than a rueful concession to the limitations of human nature.

3. Spinoza’s Ambiguous Response to Dogmatism

Despite Spinoza’s avowed distaste of Maimonides’ “harmful, useless, and absurd” views on Biblical hermeneutics, he shares a great deal of the basic tenets of rationalist Aristotelianism outlined above. His God is utterly non-anthropomorphic, purely rational, and acts only out of necessity. Spinoza recognizes intellectual perfection as the only human excellence and reduces morality to a question of utility in service of this goal. He distinguishes sharply between the imagination and the intellect, assigning all possibility of error to the one and the certainty of truth to the other. He also accepts as anthropological fact that most men and women, in thrall to their passions, cannot live a life guided by reason and are therefore in need of religion to teach them obedience and piety⁷. Yet, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* programmatically refuses the idea that religion—which to the rationalist Aristotelians is an allegory of philosophical truth—can be the locus of truth at all. Why this refusal?

One response to this question might be that, in fact, Spinoza’s refusal of the Dogmatic project of reading philosophical truth into the Bible is in fact overstated. As Fraenkel points out, we find Spinoza articulating in the *Cogitata Metaphysica* the very position we found in Averroes:

⁷ For the purposes of my argument here, I do not dwell on the nevertheless very real differences between Spinoza and Maimonides. The most glaring of these is, of course, that Maimonides’ God is a strictly incorporeal intellect distinct from the world, whereas Spinoza famously holds that all that is, is in God (E1P15) and that God himself is an extended thing (E2P2). Great as this difference is, it does not impact the discussion here directly. One other matter of non-trivial significance I do not touch upon here is how Spinoza’s concept of *amor intellectualis Dei* relates to the rationalist Aristotelian notion of conjunction with the Active Intellect. For an extensive recent discussion of these and other differences see Joshua Parens [14].

It suffices that we demonstrate those things [that we can know by reason] clearly for us to know that Sacred Scripture must also teach the same things. For the truth does not contradict the truth [*veritas veritati non repugnavit*], nor can Scripture teach such nonsense as is commonly supposed. (CM 2.8II, p. 265)

Around the time he starts writing the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1665), Spinoza repeats his claim in his correspondence with Blyenbergh. The pious Blyenbergh, articulating what Spinoza in the *Tractatus* would come to call the Skeptical position, had insisted that what the Bible teaches must be held as unconditionally true. Feigning that for his part he “does not understand” Scripture, Spinoza admits he has given up its study and reserved his time for rational inquiry instead:

And I am well aware that, when I have found a solid demonstration, I cannot fall into such thoughts that I can ever doubt it. So I am completely satisfied with what the intellect shows me, and entertain no suspicion that I have been deceived in that or that Sacred Scripture can contradict it (even though I do not investigate it). For the truth does not contradict the truth, as I have already indicated clearly in my Appendix. (*Ep.* 21IIV, p. 126)

To say that Scripture cannot contradict truth, however, is not the same as asserting with the Dogmatists that, adequately read, it positively contains the same truths that the intellect establishes through demonstration. It might instead simply be silent on matters that fall within the realm of truth and contain nothing but exhortations to loving kindness. That, after all, would be the expected result of Spinoza’s anti-Dogmatic claim that the only thing Scripture teaches is piety and obedience. Yet, any closer look at the way in which Spinoza handles Scripture will swiftly make clear that this is not necessarily how he operates.

Here, I want to examine two paradigmatic cases where Spinoza not only gives his assent to the principle underpinning the Dogmatic project, but also indulges in it by reading his philosophemes into the Biblical text. These cases are Spinoza’s interpretation of the Fall and his understanding of the Tetragrammaton. They might be said, respectively, to articulate *in nuce* his philosophical anthropology and his rational theology. Together they make up the two sides of the relation between man and God that forms his philosophical religion. It is indicative that in both cases, Maimonides has substantively preceded him in his conclusions.

What brings Spinoza to the Scriptural account of the Fall in Chapter 4 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is the question of what Scripture teaches us about the natural light and natural law. He comments:

The first thing which strikes us is the story of the first man, where it is related that God told Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This seems to mean that God told Adam to do and seek the good for the sake of the good, and not insofar as it is contrary to the evil, i.e., that he should seek the good from love of the good, and not from fear of evil. For as we’ve already shown, he who does good from a true knowledge and love of the good acts freely and with a constant heart, whereas he who acts from fear of evil is compelled by evil, acts like a slave, and lives under the command of another. And so this one thing which God told Adam to do contains the whole divine natural law, and agrees absolutely with the dictate of the natural light. (*TTP* 4IIII, pp. 65–66)

This passage is at first cryptic. What would it mean to act from love of the good rather than from fear of evil? Why is it to Spinoza’s mind precisely this story that suggests such an idea? Moreover, what does any of this have to do with “the natural law and the natural light”? The key to the passage is to differentiate between the uses of “good”. First, there is the good of “seeking the good for the love of the good”. This good is the intellectual perfection that is our highest calling, about which we are instructed by natural light. “Good and evil”, the fruit of the tree, are on the other hand moral concepts. Eating this fruit, making it part of ourselves, we are somehow diminished. However, why should we be

made less by acknowledging that we are moral creatures, and why should a moral sense prevent us from striving for intellectual perfection?

These questions can be answered in light of the passage in the *Ethics* devoted to the same story:

E4P68: If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free.

Dem.: I call him free who is led by reason alone. Therefore, he who is born free, and remains free, has only adequate ideas, and so has no concept of evil (by P64C). And since good and evil are correlates, he also has no concept of good, q.e.d.

SCHOLIUM This, and the other things I have now demonstrated seem to have been indicated by Moses in that story of the first man. For in it the only power of God conceived is that by which he created man, i.e., the power by which he consulted only man's advantage. And so we are told that God prohibited a free man from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that as soon as he ate of it, he immediately feared death, rather than desiring to live [. . .].

This passage confirms the reading above: The trouble with "good and evil" is that they are inadequate ideas founded on imagination. Adam's "transgression", then, is to have thought of himself under the category of prohibition and transgression to begin with—that is, thinking that divine laws are commandments to be obeyed rather than laws of nature to be understood.

This latter point also becomes clear from the explanation that Spinoza gives in a letter to Blyenbergh about God's commandment not to eat from the tree:

The prohibition to Adam, then, consisted only in this: God revealed to Adam that eating of that tree caused death, just as he also reveals to us through the natural intellect that poison is deadly to us. And if you ask for what purpose he revealed it to him, I answer: to make him that much more perfect in knowledge. (*Ep.* 19 IV, p. 95)

God's only desire—if one may call it that—is for the perfection of human knowledge. The fruit of the tree, in instilling in us illusory notions of good and evil and the upheavals of the affects that come with thinking in them, are thus deadly distractions from the truth. God's "commandment" does not prohibit or enjoin but informs Adam of this natural fact; "obeying" it would mean arranging one's life for the pursuit of knowledge alone.

This reading of the account of the Fall may strike one as an audaciously amoral reading for a philosopher who insists that Scripture has nothing to teach but simple moral precepts. Yet, Spinoza is here following the well-established exclusive focus on intellectual perfection that Maimonides also advances. Reason concerns itself with true and false, and good and evil (or in Maimonides' words here, fine and bad) by contrast are illusory notions of the imagination. Whoever regained the intellectual perfection that Adam the first man had would consequently be quite unaware of them:

For the intellect that God made overflow unto man and that is the latter's ultimate perfection, was that which Adam had been provided with before he disobeyed. It was because of this that it was said of him that he was created in the image of God and in His likeness. It was likewise on account of it that he was addressed by God and given commandments, as it says: And the Lord God commanded, and so on. For commandments are not given to beasts and beings devoid of intellect. Through the intellect one distinguishes between truth and falsehood, and that was found in [Adam] in its perfection and integrity. Fine and bad, on the other hand, belong to the things generally accepted as known [*al-mashhūrāt*], not to those cognized by the intellect. [. . .] Now man in virtue of his intellect knows truth from falsehood; and this holds good for all intelligible things. Accordingly, when man was in his most perfect and excellent state, in accordance with his inborn disposition and possessed of his intellectual cognitions—because of which

it is said of him: Thou hast made him but little lower than Elohim—he had no faculty that was engaged in any way in the consideration of generally accepted things, and he did not apprehend them. [. . .] With regard to what is of necessity, there is no good and evil at all, but only the false and the true. (*Guide* I 2; tr. Pines Volume I, pp. 24–25)⁸

Spinoza's open avowal of amorality in the *Ethics*—that good and evil have no intrinsic meaning but are confused notions that, properly expressed, concern only what is useful for our perfection or harmful to it—is, seen from this perspective, nothing but the full-mouthed endorsement of what the rationalist Aristotelian tradition has long asserted more covertly. The central point of Spinoza's philosophical anthropology, as demonstrated by the account of the Fall, is that man's thinking of good and evil, as the product of imagination, is itself his fall from grace and his enslavement; his freedom and his escape from death are the perfection of his reason—(1) freedom, because whoever only has adequate ideas is, by that very fact, free from the passivity of the affects and thus only and necessarily acts out of his own essence, and (2) escape from death, because "a free man thinks of nothing less than of death" (E4P67).

The second question to be investigated here concerns the Tetragrammaton. The revelation of the divine name *I am that I am* to Moses (Exodus 3:14) is a *locus classicus* of philosophical theology and one often understood as the "metaphysics of Exodus": God is not only the highest being but is also, in some qualified sense, to be equated with being itself or perhaps must be understood as the ground of all being. Maimonides here is no exception. In his discussion of the names of God, he claims that, unlike all other divine epithets, which describe God's actions, the Tetragrammaton alone clearly and unequivocally expresses God's essence:

All the names of God, may He be exalted, that are to be found in any of the books derive from actions. There is nothing secret in this matter. The only exception is one name: namely, Yod, He, Vav, He. This is the name of God, may He be exalted, that has been originated without any derivation, and for this reason it is called the articulated name. This means that this name gives a clear unequivocal indication of His essence, may He be exalted. (*Guide*, I 61; tr. Pines Volume 1, p. 147)

What is this essence? Insisting on the absolute oneness of God, Maimonides holds that no attributes attach to his essence. Existence is considered an attribute and must be thought of as added to the essence of whatever being is under consideration if it does indeed exist. Yet, if God is the perfect being, then nothing could be added to God's essence. God's existence must therefore be a different matter: In God's case, and in God's case alone, "His existence is identical with His essence and His true reality, and His essence is His existence" (*Guide* I 57; tr. Pines Volume 1, p. 132). God could therefore not *not* exist. It is this, Maimonides argues, that the Tetragrammaton expresses:

He, May He be exalted, has no name that is not derivative except the name having four letters, which is the articulated name. This name is not indicative of an attribute but of simple existence and nothing else. Now absolute existence implies that He shall always be, I mean He who is necessarily existent. (*Guide*, I 63; tr. Pines Volume 1, p. 156)

By contrast with this high flight of metaphysical speculation, Spinoza's discussion of the Tetragrammaton in its Biblical context seems to serve deflationary purposes. In line with the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus'* stated aim of disproving that there are genuine philosophical truths to be found in Scripture, he points out that the Patriarchs, far from

⁸ On Maimonides as an allegorical reader in particular reference to the story of the Fall, see Warren Zev Harvey, "On Maimonides' Allegorical Readings of Scripture", [15] which notes the proximity of Maimonides' position to that of Averroes in the *Decisive Treatise*. For a more differentiated view of the status of ethics across Maimonides' corpus and a suggestion for how intellectual perfection might not exhaust itself in contemplation alone, see David Schatz, "Maimonides' Moral Theory" [16].

having knowledge either by reason or by divine revelation of God's essence, were in fact altogether ignorant of it:

The first point follows with utmost clarity from Exodus 6:3, where God says to Moses, to show the special grace he has given to him: [. . .] and I was revealed to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name Yahweh I was not known to them. [. . .] Next, note that there is no name in Scripture except Yahweh which makes known the absolute essence of God, without relation to created things. And therefore the Hebrews contend that only this name of God is peculiarly his, the others being common nouns. (*TTP* Chapter 13 | III 169)

Spinoza here seems to overshoot his mark. In arguing that Scripture itself admits that the Patriarchs were ignorant of God's one true name, i.e., did not know the absolute essence of God, he leads us to a passage where God extends precisely this privilege of getting to know his name to Moses. The true concept of God's essence thus *is* present in Scripture—and made known to Moses. This hardly seems to be a trivial piece of knowledge.

One might wonder, of course, whether Moses also understood what was revealed to him. The casual reader might think here that Moses had at least some trouble grasping what God intended—but not so Spinoza. Earlier in the *Tractatus* he had already argued that Moses' opinion of God was "that he is a being who exists, has always existed, and always will exist [*quod semper extitit, existit, et semper existet*]", hence the name Yahweh, "which in Hebrew expresses these three times of existing" (*TTP* Chapter 2 | III 38). God's essence as Scripture teaches it, encompassing past, present, and future, is his existing at all times, or eternally.

If we relate these readings to the account of God offered in the *Ethics*, we see moreover that they do not express some superficial, pre-philosophical grasp of the divine essence, such as one might, at best, expect the unlearned prophet of the *Tractatus* to possess, but that they represent faithfully the structure of Spinoza's metaphysics. What it means to say is that God's essence is his eternal existing becomes clearer, if we add that according to Spinoza's definition, eternity is "existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing" (E1D8). He goes on to explain that "such existence, like the essence of a thing, is conceived as an eternal truth, and on that account cannot be explained by duration or time, even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end". In other words, to understand God as eternal is to understand his essence to be self-necessitated existence. Moses as Spinozist *avant la lettre* understands the divine as *causa sui*⁹.

These philosophical interpretations of the Fall and of the Tetragrammaton are hardly to be classed as edificatory parables for instruction in piety and obedience, nor simple truths for the ignorant. They are succinct but profound articulations of Spinoza's anthropology and rational theology through the medium of Scriptural exegesis, and taken together, they purport to show how we, as finite human beings split between intellect and imagination, can flourish by realizing our place in the eternal necessity of God's order.

4. The Possibility of a Philosophical Religion

The effective display of the Dogmatic method highlighted above raises the question why Spinoza felt the need to criticize the Dogmatists at all. It is, of course, Spinoza's aim above all in the *Tractatus* to safeguard the *libertas philosophandi*. However, nothing in the program of a philosophical religion is intrinsically irreconcilable with the idea that philosophers should be allowed to think and write as they please, as long as they do not upset the public peace by all too directly undermining the prevailing traditions of the land.

The problem, then, lies on the other side. The genuine threat to the freedom to philosophize comes not from the Dogmatists but from their opponents, those whom

⁹ My discussion here is indebted to Yitzhak Melamed, "Spinoza's Deification of Existence" [17]. Melamed notes that to say that God "exists, has always existed, and always will exist" and cannot be understood as happening to exist at any given time; God's eternity is to be understood as outside of time altogether and defined without reference to temporality purely as self-necessitation.

Spinoza calls the Sceptics. These not only bluntly assert the divine truth of religious writ and custom in however irrational a form, but also seek to impose their authority on the thoughts and actions of society as a whole. To effectively resist such imposition, the worry is, it may not be enough to adhere to the program of a philosophical religion. For it will always be possible for the Sceptic to subvert the attempt to find the truths of philosophy in the documents of the faith by pointing out how unlikely such readings are, as indeed Blyenbergh does to Spinoza in *Ep.* 20. As long as the Sceptics are unopposed in their claim that they are the guardians of a truth not accessible to reason and willing to enforce this truth in the polity, they will threaten the freedom to philosophize. If this threat becomes too pressing, it may become an attractive option for the philosopher to deny, as Spinoza in fact does, that truth is a matter of theology at all.

Such a denial, however, while it is effective at subverting the Sceptical position, equally undermines the Dogmatic position. For where the philosophical religion the Dogmatists advance could at least be allegorically true, Spinoza's radicalism throws out the claim to truth altogether. This is not just unfortunate for the philosopher, whose tools for instructing those not yet as intellectually advanced are of considerably less impact now. It is detrimental to the non-philosophers as well, whose need for guidance Spinoza does not seem to think any less than his rationalist Aristotelian predecessors. There is an unresolved contradiction between Spinoza's systematic claim that religious means are needed to order a commonwealth consisting largely of non-philosophers towards human perfection and his empirical assessment that religious authority, as long as it is accorded the status of being a guardian of truth, in fact resists being utilized in this way.

Whatever merit we may see in Spinoza's fight against the repressive power of the theologians and his championing of the *libertas philosophandi*, it is questionable whether his theological politics can indeed serve the purpose for which they are intended. If the problem they seek to address is that domineering theologians and their faction-spawning quarrels are a threat to peace and the freedom of thought and expression in a republic, then placing all effective religious power in the hands of the state certainly promotes conformity of opinion¹⁰, but it hardly benefits the freedom to publicly articulate ideas that contravene the dogmas enshrined in the public cult, however conceived. If one follows Spinoza's suggestions as to how the state is to protect and enforce what the public religion teaches, it becomes unclear that a work such as his own *Ethics*, which seeks to deal a mortal blow to the idea of a providential God, could be allowed to be published.

Spinoza of course cuts back the domain of religion to matters of simple piety and obedience to God and leaves all other aspects of belief beyond its "minimal creed" for people to decide for themselves. Its doctrines are light, its interference minimal, and its core message—to love one's neighbor—surely heartening in an innocuously vague manner. Yet, this vagueness itself is troubling. For as his reading of the account of the Fall demonstrates, good and evil are chimerical notions to Spinoza and have no philosophical status of their own. What it actually and concretely *means* to obey God by loving one's neighbor—a question by no means as obvious as Spinoza here wishes to make it look—therefore remains substantively underdetermined. In practice, it may well fall to the religious state institutions to determine what is to be taught as the proper way of loving one's neighbor, what is to be thought of as good and evil. As Victor Kal has recently argued, there is little to prevent that the seemingly benevolent and undemanding moral religion that the state preaches, untethered from any substantive moral commitments, becomes an empty vessel for whatever ideas the state deems it necessary to convince its citizenry of [19].

¹⁰ The conformity of opinion that the state religion strives for is not, of course, one that touches upon speculative matters (which are excluded from the domain of religion altogether) but regards the "minimal creed" of the universal faith and how it is to be understood. Interpreting these matters and how they are to be taught would fall under the sole control of the state. This is not to say that the state would directly police (as if it could!) people's thoughts. However, as guardian of the universal faith, it would inevitably be tasked with disallowing public expression of anything that would contradict the minimal creed or even the state's particular interpretation of this creed. By reinforcing the teaching of the universal faith, it would seek to influence, by persuasion rather than force, both people's outward conduct and the ideas and attitudes that underlie it. There can thus be no clear distinction between outward and inward religion. On the problem of inward consent and outward obedience, see also Ramond's remarks (and his references to Matheron) in the introduction to the PUF edition of the *Tractatus Politicus* [18].

Yet, a more fundamental worry about Spinoza's project remains, one that equally threatens both strains of his philosophy of religion. The Dogmatic strain in his thought seeks to allegorically recuperate the truth of Scripture. This way, the authority of religion might be used to further the cause of philosophy and the intellectual perfection that is its highest goal. The critique of religion on the other hand, representing the anti-Skeptical strain, aims to sever the connection between theology and truth altogether. The state's control of religious authority can thus at least end the threat of religious strife in the commonwealth, as well as the theologians' interfering with philosophy. Both of these, however, depend on the notion, which Spinoza, in line with his predecessors, takes his rational theology to have demonstrated: that philosophy in the form of theoretical reason indeed has the capacity to cognize God and that such cognition is the sole genuine way of relating to the divine. The interpretation of historically occurring religious traditions in the light of the ideal of intellectual perfection can, after all, only be thought of as a *religious* project—rather than as, say, an exercise in the pacification of human wildness or a way of gratifying the pleasures of our idle curiosity—if the God that the philosopher would contemplate is, in fact, *there*. The same applies to Spinoza's critique of religion: It can only dispute the orthodox claim of ownership of the truth about God by offering an unassailable counter-model—that of God as the being who, causing all that is with necessity, is himself the necessary being.

However one might resolve the contradiction between these two strains, then, the viability of Spinoza's philosophy of religion will, one way or the other, depend on the availability to human reason of demonstrative certainty when it comes to knowledge of God. Only the rational bedrock that the proofs of God's necessary existence in the first eleven propositions of the *Ethics* form begins to provide such certainty.

5. Conclusions

One does well to take Spinoza at his word when he denies so forcefully the charge of atheism that is laid at his door. His thinking is throughout committed to the idea that there is a God and that our perfection as free beings depends on our relationship to him. That this God is nothing other than the eternally and necessarily self-causing cause of all beings and that one loves this God and becomes like him exclusively through rational knowledge of his necessary order does not change the matter. However, if the true worship of God is metaphysics, what remains of historical religious traditions and their Scriptures? We have seen that Spinoza holds onto two conflicting possibilities: religious inheritance is to be understood—and put to work—either as the imitation of truths that a priori reason alone can demonstrate or as a necessary instrument of statecraft that itself is not concerned with truth. There is, in either case, no domain proper to the religious. Whether one sees this as a blindness on the part of Spinoza's thought to what one might call a genuine dimension of human experience, however, or rather takes it as the conclusive sign of Spinoza's overcoming of *superstitio* will depend on one's wider philosophical commitments.

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