Abstract: This article analyzes Spinoza’s unique version of the theological-political problem, which he sought to address in his classic treatise. By elucidating Spinoza’s relation to his main interlocutors—Maimonides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes—the article extrapolates Spinoza’s concepts of religion and politics. According to Spinoza, religion and politics are the two most basic human responses to the instability of human existence and fortune. Religion connects phenomena by omens that it then interprets and stabilizes by means of ritual, whereas politics seeks causal connections culled from experience in order to create political structures that would provide peace and security. Politics is more rational than religion in its mode of connecting events, but it is still not a science in the sense that metaphysics is. Contrary to the common reading of Spinoza, it is argued here that his concept of politics cannot be deduced from his ‘Ethics’ and that the ‘Theological-Political Treatise’ provides a model of political reasoning for conditions of relative ignorance. Metaphysics deduces causal connections from the essence of things, but due to the incompleteness of human knowledge there is no escaping the need for politics as an empirical resource for conducting our lives in relative ignorance regarding the interconnectedness of phenomena. This duality of the human response to the contingencies of fortune explains the ongoing need for a political theology.

1. Introduction: The Theological-Political Problem

Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (TTP), known in English as his Theological-Political Treatise, is an uneven book. Its tone shifts easily...
from rigorous analysis and argumentation to a dismissive—or at times heated—rhetoric of pamphleteering. Spinoza masters the philosophical exposition of clear and distinct ideas and of axioms of reason but is also well versed in the religious “history and language,” that is to say, in theological discourse. The stylistic unevenness of the text has much to do with the fact that the book was composed over more than a decade. The TTP was published anonymously in 1670, but its earliest components may date back to the 1650s, and Spinoza included in it material written for philosophical but also polemical purposes.

The very title of the book is misleading as to its genre. It is not, strictly speaking, a work of theology. Classic themes of theological works, such as the existence of God and the validity of religious language, are absent from the treatise. Neither is it a political treatise in the sense that Machiavelli’s Prince, Hobbes’ Leviathan, or Locke’s Treatise of Government are political treatises. Political themes—the social contract, a conception of the best regime, and the theory of rights—are stated and defended in the TTP, but they lack the comprehensive theoretical development typical of the other treatises mentioned. While the book discusses these themes, they are not its focal point. The TTP is neither a proper work of theology nor of political philosophy. It is a unique blend of the two; but perhaps the price it pays for achieving this mixture is that neither is complete.

The problems encountered when reading the TTP run even deeper: stylistic incongruity alludes to seemingly substantive contradictions of position and of doctrine. Spinoza is committed to a liberalism that celebrates freedom of opinion and expression. “After thus making clear the freedom [libertatem] granted to every man by the revelation of the Divine Law,” he seeks to establish the declared aim of the treatise: “that this freedom can be granted without detriment to public peace or to the right of civil authorities… and cannot be withheld without great danger to peace and grave harm to the entire commonwealth [Reipublicae].” The introduction to the book, however, espouses a grim account of the multitude of human


2 TTP, E, p. 189.


4 At the beginning of chapter 18, Spinoza states that it is not his intention “de Republicae ex professo agere” (TTP, G, p. 221), to provide an exposition of the republic.

5 TTP, S, p. 55. The formulation of the title page, however, suggests a restricted freedom to philosophize: “that freedom to philosophize [Libertatem Philosophandi]
beings. “The mass of mankind [vulgus, the vulgar],” he declares, “remains always at about the same pitch of misery.” As victims of their affectations, they are “prone to every form of credulity.” Doesn’t this view of the multitude undermine the very liberalism Spinoza seeks to promote? How democratically committed—if at all—is his liberalism?

In the first five chapters of the book, Spinoza criticizes, and hopes to undermine, the fundamental principles of Judaism as they are constructed by the political theologies of medieval Jewish philosophy. He delivers a bitter critique of all the central themes of medieval Jewish political theology, rejecting the major tenets of its various paradigms. Election, he argues, is no more than a promise of material good fortune, the law is no longer binding after the destruction of the Judean state, and biblical prophecy has little to do with philosophical excellence.

Maimonides is Spinoza’s favored foil for an attack on what he calls dogmatic conceptions of the Bible. The dogmatists maintain that “the meaning of Scripture should be made to agree with reason.” Spinoza promotes a different relationship between reason and Scripture, where it is not the meaning of Scripture that should conform with reason, but rather the method used to interpret Scripture. The method he provides for interpreting Scripture is thereby modeled on the interpretive method of nature deployed by science:

For as the [method of] interpretation of nature consists in the examination of the history of nature, and therefrom deducing definitions of natural [things] on certain [data], so Scriptural interpretation proceeds by [forming a history] of Scripture, and inferring the intention of its authors as a legitimate conclusion from [certain data and] principles.

can not only be granted without injury to Piety and the Peace of the Commonwealth [Republicae Pace], but that the Peace of the Commonwealth and Piety are endangered by the suppression of this freedom” (*TTP*, *S*). Translating “republic” as “commonwealth” is at least as old as Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. But whereas Hobbes’ politics demanded distancing himself from republicanism, Spinoza’s text demands a highlighting of his republicanism.


*8 TTP, E, p. 99.*
Spinoza has great confidence in the possibility of conjuring a method for stable readings of texts. This is in contrast to the interpretive method employed by Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, which presupposes that the God of nature and the God of the Law are one but also assumes that nature is stable while texts are not. According to Maimonides, texts are objects of interpretation while nature is the object of knowledge, of physics and metaphysics, the sciences of being. Texts should therefore naturally be subject to an interpretation congruent with science. In other words, Maimonides’ theology of nature guides his theology of law. It is precisely this presupposition that Spinoza finds intolerably prejudicial in its approach to Scripture.

But Spinoza’s textual analyses in the political and theological chapters of the *TTP* are not always scrupulous in their fidelity to his own interpretive guidelines. His portrayal of Jesus as a philosopher is as little convincing as the model whose nemesis he hopes it to be: Maimonides’ portrayal of Moses as a Platonic prophetic leader. And Spinoza’s adaptation of Maimonides’ thirteen principles or dogmas of belief indicates a greater affinity for the dogmatic enterprise than he might wish to acknowledge.

Although these tensions do not constitute outright contradictions, Spinoza does confront us with sufficient unevenness in style and substance to warrant the search for an overall organizing principle for the

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11 As is often the case, Spinoza may be steering a midway course between Maimonides and Hobbes. Hobbes’ stated hermeneutic principle with regard to supernatural Scripture is that “wee are bidden to captivate our understanding to the Words”; see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 256. This principle notwithstanding, Hobbes’ interpretive practices are often close to those of Maimonides.

book. The present study examines Spinoza’s concepts of religion and politics and how these two endeavors provide conflicting solutions to the same fundamental problems of human existence.

I argue that the tensions we note in the book are rooted in the conflict inherent in Spinoza’s theological-political agenda. The very title of the book, *Theological-Political Treatise*, assumes a theological-political question or problem that must be attended to. This problem can be formulated as follows. On one hand, following Hobbes, Spinoza believed that no sovereign can afford to be indifferent to religion, and that therefore no sovereign can do without a political theology to buttress his reign. On the other hand, he viewed (at least) popular religion to be no more than superstition, and the church’s institutionalization of religion to be the greatest threat to the legitimacy of any sovereign. The agenda of the *TTP* is hence twofold: it seeks to destroy, to the extent possible, the theological foundations of institutionalized religion, and concomitantly to salvage a significant kernel that would enable the channeling of the elements of existing historical religions for the purposes of the sovereign. The project of political theology as Spinoza conceives of it is therefore conflictual, seeking to retrieve as much as possible from the historical religions for the very purpose of undoing the institutions their beliefs traditionally supported.

2. Phenomenology of Religion and Politics: Religion

Spinoza’s assessment of the human condition is vividly set out in the opening lines of the book:

> Men would never be superstitious, if they could govern all their circumstances by set rules, or if they were always favored by fortune; but being frequently driven into straits where rules are useless, and being often kept fluctuating pitifully between hope and fear by the uncertainty of fortune’s greedily coveted favors, they are consequently, for the most part, very prone to credulity.

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13 For an analysis of the title, see Lorberbaum, “Republic in Hebrew,” pp. 204–205.


15 *Certo consilio*, which might also be rendered “firm counsel.” The difference would relate to the specific role rules or laws might serve in political circumstances. See below.

16 *TTP*, E, p. 5.
Spinoza begins his treatment of political theology from a realistically inclined assessment of the inability of human beings to “govern all their circumstances” and the resulting susceptibility to superstition. In his Political Treatise (PT),\(^\text{17}\) he defines this realistic treatment of politics in contradistinction to the philosophers who “conceive of men, not as they are, but as they themselves would like them to be.”\(^\text{18}\) Indeed, his analysis takes its cue from both Machiavelli and Hobbes, whose discussions he echoes.

Machiavelli’s realism is famed for its unflinching attitude toward dirty hands in his development of the prince’s virtue.\(^\text{19}\) No less important is the awareness of the constraints of fortune in defining the horizons of meaningful and effective political agency.

> It is not unknown to me that many have held and hold the opinion that worldly things are so governed by fortune [fortuna] and by God, that men cannot correct them with their prudence, indeed that they have no remedy at all; and on account of this they might judge that one need not sweat much over things but let oneself be governed by chance [sorte].\(^\text{20}\)

Machiavelli begins his discussion on “How much Fortune can do in human affairs, and in what mode it may be opposed” by distinguishing between fortune and chance: chance implies a fatalistic view of affairs stemming from indolence, whereas fortune assumes the possibility of agency, such that fortune presents opportunity. “It might be true that

\(^{17}\) All citations of PT are in traditional notation with page numbers that follow Spinoza, A Theological-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise. Latin originals follow Spinoza Opera, vol. 3, and are in traditional notation only.


fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern.\textsuperscript{21} Machiavelli seeks to articulate guidelines for the prince’s contention with fortune.

But aside from practical guidelines, Machiavelli’s theoretical contribution lies in the very conceptualization of fortune by means of which he can sketch the general constraints imposed on viable political activity. His realism not only recognizes the role of power in politics; it also stresses the awareness of constraints as part of the adequate assessment of meaningful political agency.

Spinoza begins his treatise with a bleaker appraisal of the general ability to resist fortune. “Being frequently driven into straits where rules [\textit{consilium}] are useless, and being often kept fluctuating pitiabley between hope and fear by the uncertainty of fortune’s greedily coveted favors,” the human response does not exude the self-confidence, let alone the impetuosity or audacity, Machiavelli urges. The typical human response is that of credulity:

The most frivolous causes will raise them to hope, or plunge them into despair—if anything happens during their fright which reminds them of some past good or ill, they think it portends a happy or unhappy issue and therefore… style it a lucky or unlucky omen.\textsuperscript{22}

Superstitions are unfounded beliefs in the portentousness of natural events.\textsuperscript{23} And not only the plebes are prone to this response. In dire straits, even great princes of the rank of Alexander the Macedonian will behave with credulity.\textsuperscript{24}

Human beings are particularly inclined toward superstition because of a psychological instability, an oscillation between fear and hope, due to the unmanageable circumstances of their existence. Ritual is an organized form of this response to the human situation: “If they are struck with wonder at some unusual phenomenon, they believe this to be a portent signifying the anger of the gods or of a supreme deity, and they therefore

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Machiavelli, \textit{Prince}, 25, p. 98.
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textit{TTP}, \textit{E}, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{23} According to Spinoza, “the fickle disposition of the multitude” (\textit{TTP}, \textit{E}, p. 216) is a permanent feature of the psychological foundations of a polity. As we will show, his construction of the basic power equation between sovereign and multitude at the basis of the polity continues to be informed by this infirmity.
\item \textsuperscript{24} “Superstition, then, is engendered, preserved, and fostered by fear. If anyone desire an example, let him take Alexander, who only began superstitiously to seek guidance from seers, when he first learnt to fear fortune in the passes of Sysis… whereas after he had conquered Darius he consulted prophets no more, till a second time frightened by reverses” (\textit{TTP}, \textit{E}, p. 4).
\end{itemize}
regard it as a pious duty to avert the evil by sacrifice and vows, susceptible as they are to superstition and opposed to religion.”

Hobbes provides a parallel analysis of this mindset:

And they that make little, or no enquiry into the natural causes of things, yet from the fear that proceeds from ignorance itself, of what it is that hath the power to do them much good or harm, are inclined to suppose, and feign unto themselves, several kinds of Powers Invisible; and to stand in awe of their own imaginations … making the creatures of their own fancy, their Gods…. And this Fear of things invisible, is the natural Seed of that, which every one in himself calleth Religion.

Hobbes stresses a one-dimensional “Fear of things invisible”; Spinoza’s analysis of the fundamental human response to its existential situation is, psychologically speaking, subtler. Though he acknowledges “that only while fear persists do men fall prey to superstition,” Spinoza takes an additional step, stressing the sway between the poles of hope and fear, the rise and plunge of oscillating affectations in response to the inscrutability of fortune.

Furthermore, and in contradistinction to Hobbes, who speaks of the natural seed of all religious phenomena, Spinoza cautiously differentiates between superstition and religion. It is not merely a rhetorical difference, but one of substance. Spinoza indeed viewed much of institutionalized religious phenomena to be rooted in the human propensity to superstition. “All men are by nature liable to superstition.” And to the degree that men are prone to superstition, they are prone to its manipulation.

25 *TTP*, S, p. 49.
27 *TTP*, S, p. 50.
28 Hobbes describes a similar oscillation in his discussion of the passions (*Leviathan*, p. 44) but stresses the cognitive response of deliberation rather than emotional instability. This example underscores Hobbes' positive assessment of ordinary human deliberative and rational capacities. He therefore claims that “he who hath by Experience, or Reason, the greatest and surest prospect of Consequences, Deliberates best himselfe; and is able… to give the best counsel unto others” (*Leviathan*, p. 46). We have already noted Spinoza’s skepticism as to good counsel in managing human affairs.
29 *TTP*, S, p. 50. Throughout the *TTP* Spinoza stresses that all people are prone to their affectations. Even philosophers are not immune, besides the fact that it takes many years of ethical training to achieve a state of freedom: “… the right and ordinance of nature, under which all men are born, and under which they mostly live, only prohibits such things as no one desires, and no one can attain” (*TTP*, E, p. 202); “However, it is far from being the case that all men can always be easily led by reason alone; everyone is drawn away by his pleasure, while avarice, ambition, envy, hatred, and the like so engross the mind [mens] that reason has no place therein” (*TTP*, E, p. 204).
Yet despite the tight weave between the affectations of fear and hope, the cognitive response of superstition and the institutional cultivation of cult, Spinoza is also committed to a notion of love of God that Hobbes does not seem to share or cultivate in *Leviathan*. This might be the background for Spinoza’s choice of verse from the First Epistle of John as the motto for the book: “Hereby know that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit” (4:13). The verse preceding this states that “if we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us” (4:12).  

Maimonides, Spinoza’s intimate medieval interlocutor, begins his great legal work, the *Mishneh Torah*, stressing the sublimity of the love of God:

And what is the way that will lead you to the love of Him and the fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name… and when he ponders these matters, he will recoil frightened, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge. 

Spinoza gives expression to the sublimity of love of God in all his works. “The love of God is man’s highest happiness and blessedness, and the ultimate end and aim of all human actions [*amor Dei summa hominis foelicitatis sit, & beatitudo, & finis ultimus, & scopus omnium humanarum actionum*].” Therefore, he argues, “he alone lives by the Divine Law who loves God not from fear of punishment, or from love of any other object, [thing]… but solely because he has knowledge of God, or is convinced

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30 See Spinoza’s interpretation of these verses in *TTP*, E, pp. 184–186. The distinction between superstition and religion, as we shall see, should be understood in terms of the parallel and further distinction between the religion of subjugation and what he terms “universal religion” (*Catholica Religio*), on one hand, and his commitment to cultivate a piety that is consonant with the civic virtues, on the other.


32 *TTP*, E, p. 60; *TTP*, G, p. 46.
that [it] is the highest good.” Spinoza’s formulation clearly echoes that of Maimonides’ Laws of Repentance:

Whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with the study of the Law and the fulfillment of commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear nor calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits—such a man does what is truly right [ha-emet, true] because it is truly right [lit., true], and ultimately, happiness [hatoVA, the good] comes to him as a result of his conduct.… It is known and certain that the love of God does not become closely knit in a man’s heart till he is continuously and thoroughly possessed by it and gives up everything else in the world for it…. One only loves God with the knowledge with which one knows Him.

Spinoza purges the Maimonidean formulation of all fidelity to halacha as law and focuses exclusively on the philosophical love of God. Furthermore, contrary to Maimonides, Spinoza does not begin his phenomenology of religion from an experience of the sublime that is open to all human beings. For Spinoza’s differences with Machiavelli and Hobbes notwithstanding, his treatment of religion and politics shares their fundamental realism with regard to the all too human, fickle motivations of politics and religion. He also shares the latter’s conservative anxiety to mitigate potential sources of instability. The political responsibility of his liberal individualism is to create a polity congenial to individuals seeking their own good, not a polity charged with realizing human perfection (although the polity has a crucial role to play in its enhancement).

3. Phenomenology of Religion and Politics: Politics

The firm connection between fortune and fear is the key to Spinoza’s understanding not only of religion but also of politics. Politics is another human answer to fortune, to the impermeability of contingency. Chapter 4

33 Ibid.
35 The laws of human reason aim at “man’s true [utility] and preservation” (TTP, E, p. 202). “The object of government [finis Reipublicae—the end of a republic] is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or puppets [automata], but to enable them to develop their minds and bodies in security, and to employ their reason unshackled; neither showing hatred, anger, or deceit, nor watched with the eyes of
of the TTP, “The Divine Law,” begins by defining “law” as “that by which an individual, or all things or as many things as belong to a particular species, act in one and the same fixed and definite manner, which manner depends either on natural necessity or on human decree.” The word “law” denotes two radically different forms of regularity. One kind, natural regularity, is necessary and analytic to the essence of any given thing. Spinoza provides two examples of such regularity:

The law that all bodies impinging on lesser bodies, lose as much of their own motion as they communicate to the latter is a universal law of all bodies…. So, too, the law, that a man in remembering one thing, straightway remembers another either like it, or which he had perceived simultaneously with it, is a law which necessarily follows from the nature of man.

According to Spinoza, then, natural determination governs, by law, both inanimate bodies and psychological phenomena. Both physics and psychology may exemplify the necessary laws of nature.

The other type of regularity, humanly decreed moral or legal behavioral regularity, is contingent upon human choice and the human assessment of particular life circumstances:

But the law that men must yield, or be compelled to yield, somewhat of their natural right, and that they bind themselves to live in a certain way, depends on human decree.

Political life, the very yielding of natural right for the sake of creating a law-governed polity, is posed as the realm of contingency in contradistinction to the natural-law-governed physics and psychology.

jealousy and injustice. In fact, the true aim of government [Reipublicae—of a republic] is liberty” (TTP, E, p. 259).

36 TTP, E, p. 57.
37 Ibid.
38 Not all physical and psychological science is of the epistemological stature of metaphysics. Spinoza includes these particular laws in the extended discussion of Ethics II between propositions 13 and 18. He does not provide arguments justifying the a priori nature of the laws mentioned but simply states that they are so in a series of lemmas and axioms. Spinoza seems to distinguish between physical and psychological laws that are analytic to his notions of body and mind and those that are reconstructed by an empirical physics and psychology known by the imagination. These two sources are ultimately rooted in the difference between rational conceptions of adequate ideas and sense perceptions (cf. props. 14, 19, 22–24).
39 The Latin word used is placito—decision, resolve; cf. TTP, S, p. 101, where placito is rendered “will.” My suggestion that placito be rendered “human decree” follows the Hebrew translation by Chaim Wirszburg, Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), p. 44. [Hebrew] Spinoza stresses the volitional character, the
Spinoza’s twofold definition of law begs the question of the mutual relation of both types of law: What is the metaphysical status of man-made law? How can Spinoza declare that he freely admits that “all things are determined by the universal laws of Nature” and at the same time “still say that these… laws depend on human will”? On the other hand, how does humanly decreed law view the metaphysically based analysis of nature in general and of human law in particular?

Spinoza provides two answers to the metaphysical question of the possibility of humanly decreed law. First he argues that “man, insofar as he is a part of nature, constitutes a part of the power [potentiae] of nature.” Hence, all human capacities are particular instances of natural power. “Whatever, therefore, follows necessarily from the necessity of human nature… follows… from human power”—including lawmaking as a product of the human mind. Spinoza does not elaborate on this point, and it should be treated as a sketch of the general direction to be taken.

Related to Spinoza’s determinism is his metaphysical monism. This theme finds its political expression in his theory of power and right: “the rights of an individual extend to [his determinate] power.” Whether Spinoza’s identification of right with power is interpreted as a reduction of right to power or only as a statement regarding the coextensiveness of the two, it typifies the monistic tendency of his thought, which is reluctant to accept the bifurcation of right and power as metaphysically warranted. The epistemic status of this very identification of right and power, however, remains unclear. It is not a law of nature, but a semantic point rooted in his metaphysical monism. In any case, Spinoza’s position involved in human law. On this see the formulation in chapter 16 regarding the social contract formed “by the power and will [voluntate] of the whole body,” that “they must, therefore, most firmly decree [statuere] and establish that they will be guided in everything by reason” (TTP, E, p. 203). See also the distinction between the decreto of human sovereigns and the decreta of God in chapter 19 (TTP, G, p. 231; TTP, E, p. 248).

40 TTP, S, p. 101.
41 TTP, E, p. 57.
42 Ibid. p. 200.
43 See McShea, Political Philosophy of Spinoza, pp. 56–59.
44 TTP, S, p. 237, renders extindere as “coextensive.” Edwin Curley points out that this interpretation is not a trivial point; see Curley, “Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan,” in Garret, Cambridge Companion to Spinoza, pp. 318–322. For Spinoza, as for any form of moral political realism, the moral point is that all political rights ultimately depend on adequate power to ensure their applicability. See Spinoza’s letter 50, available in Latin in Spinoza Opera, vol. 4, pp. 238–241.
on right and power is congruent with his political realism and remains a constant component of his political theory.

For the present discussion it is Spinoza’s second argument that is crucial. Although his metaphysics is deterministic in principle, it does not follow that he could provide a full and detailed account of natural contingency in practice. To state the matter in Spinoza’s own words, “I [absolutely] grant that, … all things are determined by universal laws of Nature to exist and to act in a definite and determinate way.”

At the same time, “as to the actual co-ordination and concatenation of things, that is how things are [ordered and concatenated], we are obviously ignorant [plane ignoremus]; therefore, it is more profitable for right living, nay it is necessary for us to consider things as contingent [possibiles].” Because we do not have a full account of nature, the adequate practical management of human affairs necessitates a notion of contingency—a point reiterated in Spinoza’s major works although overlooked by most of his readers. It is because science, the tool that advances our knowledge of nature and its law, does not cover the range of our experiences in this world that law in the sense of human decrees is a necessary feature of life.

I have stated that these laws depend on human decree because it is well to define and explain things by their proximate causes. The general consideration of fate [fato] and the concatenation of causes would aid us very little in forming and arranging our [thoughts] concerning particular [things].

Legislation, or put differently, politics, is thus espoused not only by the ignorant but by the knowledgeable too.

Spinoza is unclear as to the precise causes of the epistemic status of politics. The fact that we lack a full account of nature may be due to the present state of human scientific achievements that could in principle be

46 TTP, E, p. 58.
47 “Nature is not bounded by the laws of human reason, which aims only at man’s true benefit [utile] and preservation; her limits are infinitely wider, and have reference to the eternal order of nature, wherein man is but a speck; it is by the necessity of this alone that all individuals are [determined as existing and operating] and acting in a particular way…. Nevertheless, no one can doubt that it is much better for us to live according to the laws and assured dictates of reason [rationis dictamina, rational dictates], for [their intention is] men’s true [utility]” (TTP, E, p. 202). Spinoza elaborates on this position in Spinoza, Ethics, letter 32, p. 244. He defines the term “contingency” in the spirit of the limits of human knowledge in Ethics I, prop. 33, s. 1.
48 TTP, E, p. 58.
overcome with due progress over time. It is possible, however, that the
inability to offer a comprehensive account of natural law that would cover
the range of detail we experience is due to a theoretical impasse. On this
reading, it is principally impossible to deduce detailed phenomena from
the clear and certain knowledge we do possess of the general essence of
things. I am inclined toward the latter interpretation, which views the
inability to provide a complete science as a theoretical problem. Either
way, even according to the non-theoretical interpretation, there is (at least
to date) no political “science” in the strict sense of the word. Politics is
the field of human legislation precisely because our daily affairs cannot
be subsumed under recognizable laws of nature. Our daily affairs are to
be treated as contingent.

Spinoza further expounds his basic orientation to politics in his last
work, the incomplete Political Treatise. He introduces this work with a cri-
tique of philosophers for their inadequate accounts of politics:

Philosophers conceive of the passions which harass us as vices into
which men fall by their own fault, and, therefore, generally deride,
bewail, or blame them, or execrate them, if they wish to seem un-
usually pious. … For they conceive of men, not as they are, but
as they themselves would like them to be. Whence it has come to
pass that, instead of ethics [Ethica], they have generally written
satire, and that they have never conceived of a theory of politics
[Politicam], which could be turned to use, but such as might… have
been formed in Utopia, or in that golden age of poets when, to be
sure, there was least need of it.

The traditional philosophic treatment of politics has been based on
an unreal conception of human psychology. As philosophical ethics

49 See the discussion of experience as a source of knowledge in Spinoza, Collected
Works, letter 10, p. 196. Curley explores the constitutive role of experience in Spinoza’s
epistemology and discusses the distinction between knowledge through essence and
knowledge through proximate cause in “Experience in Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge,”

50 The difficulty of retaining philosophical repose in the face of such contingency
is expressed in Spinoza’s correspondence. In letter 30 he expressly connects his musings
on this issue with the TTP; cf. Nadler, Spinoza, p. 220.

51 Cf. Hobbes, Leviathan, p. 89: “The Desires, and other Passions of man, are in
themselves no Sin. No more are the Actions, that proceed from those Passions, till they
know a Law that forbids them: which till Lawes be made they cannot know: nor can
any Law be made, till they have agreed upon the Person that shall make it,” which is to
say until they form a body politic.

52 PT I:1, p. 287.
are grounded not in reality but in the dreams of authors, the resultant politics are equally utopian and useless as guides for the practical challenges of policy making.

Accordingly, as in all sciences, which have a useful application, so especially in that of politics [*Politices Theoria*], theory is supposed to be at variance with practice [*Praxi*]; and no men are esteemed less fit to direct public affairs [*regendae Reipublicae*] than theorists or philosophers.53

Spinoza here does not rule out the possibility of a science of politics (the precise meaning of which will soon be elaborated). He decries the failures of philosophers that have led people to generally assume a sharp divide between theory and practice in a matter in which theory might be of the utmost importance: the ruling of the republic.

Spinoza contrasts the worldly experience of statesmen and politicians54 with the practical futility of philosophers. “[Experience] has taught” politicians “that vices will exist, while men do.”55 On the one hand, this has brought upon them the ire of theologians, for

> While they study to anticipate human wickedness, and that by arts, which experience and long practice have taught, and which men generally use under the guidance more of fear than of reason, they are thought to be enemies of religion, especially by the divines [*Theologis*], who believe that supreme authorities [*summas potestates*] should handle public affairs in accordance with the same rules of piety, as bind a private individual.56

Spinoza implies here, presumably following Machiavelli, that princes have a different set of virtues than that of private individuals.57 And as regards the quality of their written works on politics, “there can be no doubt, that statesmen [*Politicos*] have written about politics more happily than

53 Ibid.
54 Spinoza’s *Politici* is translated as “statesmen” by Elwes.
55 *PT* 1:2, p. 288.
56 Ibid.
57 Machiavelli states that his “intent is to write something useful” in contrast to “many [that] have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity.” Machiavelli, *Prince*, 15, p. 61.
philosophers.” The reason for this success is their respect for experience: “For, as they had experience for their [master], they taught nothing that was inconsistent with practice.”

Spinoza charts his own project against the background of these two poles: the theoretical failure of philosophers and the writings of statesmen rich with experience. We may formulate Spinoza’s question as follows: Is there a middle ground that is not a science on the one hand, yet is not superstition on the other, on which we might base politics? Political theory is for him an empirical science that draws its foundational data from experience, not concepts:

I am fully persuaded that experience has revealed all conceivable sorts of commonwealth [Civitatum], which are consistent with men’s living in unity, and likewise the means by which the multitude may be guided or kept within fixed bounds. So that I do not believe that we can by meditation discover in this matter anything not yet tried and ascertained, which shall be consistent with experience or practice. For men are so situated, that they cannot live without some general law. … Therefore, on applying my mind [animum] to politics, I have resolved to demonstrate by a certain and undoubted course of argument, or to deduce from the very condition of human nature, not what is new and unheard of, but only such things as agree best with practice…. We must not, therefore, look to proofs of reason for the causes and natural bases of dominion [imperii], but derive them from the [common] nature or position of mankind.

The science of politics begins with human political experience as recorded for the most part in the works of statesmen. Indeed, both the TTP and the PT are replete with citations of classic works of political history. The theoretician then seeks to ground the practical lessons of experience and generalize these lessons by deductions from the theoretical data regarding human psychology and the human condition.

58 PT I:2, p. 288.


60 In order to overcome what he perceives to be “a possible confusion of aims here” between deductive reasoning and practice, McShea suggests recasting the paragraph from the PT (I:4) as an enthymeme “taking Spinoza to mean that he will not deliberately seek novelty and that he will as far as possible adapt to each other the requirements of human nature and historically known political patterns or, that in some unexpressed way, common political patterns already contain important adaptations to the necessities of human nature.” McShea, Political Philosophy of Spinoza, p. 106. My own reading proposes that Spinoza is describing an agenda for politics as an empirical science. As I continue to argue above, this “confusion of aims” is reflective of the in-depth
As an illustration of the human condition leading to political life, we can recall the description of the human oscillation between hope and fear in encountering fortune and its reversals. As an example of the lessons of human psychology, Spinoza goes on to say that “men are of necessity liable to passions, and so constituted as to pity those who are ill, and envy those who are well off; and to be prone to vengeance more than to mercy: and moreover, that every individual wishes the rest to live after his own mind.” Spinoza states that these are psychological truths regarding human nature that he has already deduced in his Ethics. Summarized here in the PT, they form the psychological constraints of the political that might be paralleled to Hobbes’ sociological analysis of power necessitating the creation of an agreed-upon sovereign. “And so it comes to pass,” Spinoza argues, “that as all are equally eager to be first, they fall to strife, and do their utmost mutually to oppress one another; and he who comes out conqueror is more proud of the harm he has done to the other, than of the [profit] he has done to himself.” Politics begins from the mixture of contentiousness inherent in human relations and human credulity in contending with the circumstances of fortune.

Political science contends with the human condition by structuring stable political institutions independent of the quirks of human character so as to promise both order and security in human life.

A dominion [Imperium] then, whose well-being depends on any man’s good faith, and whose affairs cannot be properly administered, unless those who are engaged in them will act honestly, will be very unstable. On the contrary, to insure its permanence, its public affairs should be so ordered, that those who administer them, whether guided by reason or by passion, cannot be led to act treacherously or basely. Nor does it matter for the security of a dominion, in what spirit men are led to rightly administer its affairs.

tension permeating his project of political theory within a system that otherwise has a thoroughly a priori and deductive conception of science. Cf. McShea, Political Philosophy of Spinoza, p. 125 n. 93.

61 PT 1:5. p. 289.

62 PT 1:5. p. 289. See the laws cited in TTP, chapter 16, as guidelines for formulating the foundations of the republic (TTP, E, pp. 200, 203). Such psychological truths condition the political, but political policy cannot be described as a derivative of these truths; contra Hampshire’s assertion that “there can be a rational political science founded on psychological truths.” Stuart Hampshire, “The Political and Social Philosophy of Spinoza,” in Rotenschtreich and Schneider, Spinoza: His Thought and Work, p. 138.
For liberality of spirit, or courage, is a private virtue; but the virtue of a state is its security \[\textit{imperii virtus securitas}\].\(^{63}\)

Constitutionalism, in the sense of the stable structuring of the basic institutions of society, resolves the tensions between reason and passion as sources of human motivation. Contra Hobbes, constitution—the regime structure, not the sovereign—is the soul of the polity.\(^{64}\)

### 4. Political Theory

The proposed analysis of the scientific status of political theory has important implications for understanding the goals of Spinoza’s major works and their interrelations.

First, it follows from this analysis that there is no direct systemic, architectonic link to be sought between the \textit{Ethics} and the \textit{TTP}. I am not denying the compatibility of the works, but rather critiquing the assumption that the political messages of the \textit{TTP} are derivative of the \textit{Ethics}. Given the epistemological constraints barring the possibility of constructing a complete science of being in practice, a student of the \textit{Ethics} would still need the practical guidance of the \textit{TTP}.\(^{65}\) Put otherwise: although the \textit{Ethics} provides directives for the philosopher’s political life (for

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\(^{63}\) \textit{PT} I:6, pp. 289–290.

\(^{64}\) \textit{Anima enim imperii jura sunt}, translated by Elwes, “For the constitution is the soul of a dominion” (\textit{PT} X:9, p. 383). McShea, presumably hesitant to render \textit{jura} as constitution rather than law, omits the first part of the statement and writes, “The constitution, then, is the soul of the state” (\textit{Political Philosophy of Spinoza}, p. 109). \textit{Imperii} can also be rendered ‘sovereignty,’ and this would underscore Spinoza’s affinity to Locke rather than Hobbes; cf. John Locke, \textit{Two Treatises of Government}, 2:149–150, 212, with Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan}, pp. 9, 153, 228–229.

\(^{65}\) Yirmiyahu Yovel argues that Spinoza envisages “a gradual growth of rationality from within the domain of \textit{imaginatio}, and he thinks it is the philosopher’s task to provide tools for dealing with the various forms of this transition—as he himself does in the \textit{TTP}.” Yovel, \textit{Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 145. Steven Smith too, in \textit{Spinoza, Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), argues that “The task of the \textit{Treatise} as a whole is... to liberate its readers from the terrors of superstition and prepare the way for the transition from a life dominated by the passions to one directed by reason” (p. 30). These readings of Spinoza would be more appropriate as readings of Maimonides, who clearly has a history of religious progression in \textit{The Guide} 3:32. Amos Funkenstein highlighted the proto-Hegelian character of \textit{The Guide} 3:32 in his analysis of Maimonides’ messianism; see Funkenstein, \textit{Perceptions of Jewish History} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 131–155. My formulation above, however, need not contradict Edwin Curley’s more restrictive claim that “The \textit{TTP} is a prolegomenon to the \textit{Ethics}.” See Curley, “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece [II]: \textit{The Theological-Political Treatise} as a Prolegomenon to the \textit{Ethics},” in J.A. Cover and Mark Kulstad, eds., \textit{Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy} (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), p. 113.
example, *Ethics* IV:35–37, 70, 73), the *TTP* provides the political guidance for a polity of the masses.66

I have already noted that the principle identifying right and power continues to function as a constant factor in Spinoza’s political theory. But unlike the psychological truths he mentions, this is not a substantive natural law. The principle functions more as a regulating rule to ensure that the political theory stemming from experience will not develop into a moral science independent of the tight constraints of Spinoza’s monism.67 However, the bulk of his political theory treats politics as an empirical science.

Second, the *TTP* is often treated as an enlarged and sophisticated political pamphlet. According to such a reading, Spinoza the philosopher is enlisted there for the purpose of a particularly acute and pressing political conflict of religion and state. Hence, the book is particularly situated, and it would conceivably be unnecessary if the historical circumstances were different. But my analysis of religion and politics as two fundamental responses to the fortunes of the human condition, along with the analysis of the empirical nature of political science, suggests otherwise. When writing the *TTP*, Spinoza may have believed it the only way to engage in political theory. Politics in the Platonic sense is indeed impossible, but an account can be given—drawing from experience and elucidating it—of the various political-theological regimes existing in history. In his *PT*, Spinoza continues this basic undertaking but focuses on regime structure. Constitutionalism rather than political theology is the central concern of that work.

The analysis of political theology necessitates not only a different institutional focus. Both Judaism and Christianity are text-centered religions, and in that respect theology is a hermeneutical project. The political theory of the *TTP* engages in both conceptual analysis and

66 Cf. Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. xviii–xix, for a neo-Marxist interpretation of the politics of the masses. The nature of Spinoza’s interest in politics ultimately depends upon his conception of freedom. Thus, Hampshire (“Political and Social Philosophy of Spinoza”) provides an individualistic interpretation of freedom and derives from it a liberal interpretation, while Ben-Shlomo (“Reply to Professor Hampshire”), highlighting the mystical interpretation of unity with God, the only substance, stresses Spinoza’s ultimate philosophical indifference to history and, by implication, to politics.

67 In terms of substance, the principle ensures a conception of political life true to Spinoza’s realism regarding human political motivations based, inter alia, on his *a priori* psychology. Hence, Spinoza’s political history (that is, his reading of the Bible) expresses this political empiricism and provides some of the realistic content of the identification of right with power. On the other hand, and on the theoretical level, politics is dissociated from metaphysics. This is the unique Spinozist combination of realism and liberalism. In terms of his actual political positions, it reverberates in Spinoza’s formulation of the
hermeneutics, the latter presented as a method following natural history. In fact, the TTP develops two readings of the Bible. One legitimates an interpretation of the Bible in the spirit of Spinoza’s preferred political theology while criticizing the traditional medieval version (chapters 1–5). The other utilizes the hermeneutical principles developed in the middle chapters of the TTP to religiously sanction an interpretation of the Bible as a work of political history (chapters 17–18).\textsuperscript{68} The former views Moses primarily as a theologian, the latter, primarily as a statesman and founder of a polity.

5. Conclusion

Religion and politics are the two most basic human responses to the instability of human existence and fortune. Both attempt to connect particular events and draw operative conclusions for organizing the human response to fortune. Religion makes these connections by omens that it then interprets and stabilizes by means of ritual, whereas politics seeks causal connections culled from experience in order to create political structures that would provide peace and security. Politics is more rational than religion in its mode of connecting events, but it is still not a science in the sense that metaphysics is. The latter deduces causal connections from the essence of things, but due to the incompleteness of human knowledge there is no escaping the need for politics as an empirical resource for conducting our lives in a relative veil of ignorance regarding the interconnectedness of phenomena. It is this incompleteness that also explains why politics cannot be deduced from metaphysics. Most readers of Spinoza approach the TTP from the geometrical structure of the Ethics and therefore miss the independent character of the TTP as a work conceived within the strictures of Spinoza’s concept of politics. Political theory is not a fiction, but it is not a science either. It is a scientifically informed and empirically based study and therefore more rational than dogmas of belief, as has been argued by Pines, “Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, Maimonides and Kant,” pp. 688–692.

\textsuperscript{68} “I will touch on the teaching of Divine revelation to Moses in this respect, and we will consider the history and the success of the Jews, gathering therefrom what should be the chief concessions made by sovereigns to their subjects, with a view to the security and increase of their dominion” (TTP, E, p. 216). See too Shlomo Pines, \textit{Studies in the History of Jewish Philosophy, the Transmission of Texts and Ideas} (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1977), pp. 300–305 [Hebrew]; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, “Spinoza on the Existence of the Jewish People,” in \textit{Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities}, vol. 6 (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 175–181. [Hebrew]
religion but is also ultimately imaginative, as are other fields of knowledge that are not metaphysical.

This duality of the human response to the contingencies of fortune explains the ongoing need for a political theology. Politics must find a way to deal with religion as a permanent form of human response to fortune.

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