

**Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal, eds. *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. 294.**

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It is surprising how little attention philosophers writing in English have paid to Spinoza's political writings. Whereas his metaphysics and morals in the *Ethics* are enjoying renewed interest with several new monographs and greater presence in a variety of journals over the last several years, careful analysis of his political writings is still less evident than one might hope from this arguably still "neglected masterpiece." Monographs devoted to Spinoza's political writings are more often authored by non-philosophers (e.g., Lewis Samuel Feuer, Robert McShea, Steven B. Smith, and Leo Strauss), or philosophers writing in the Straussian tradition (e.g. Paul Bagley, Douglas Den Uyl). It is no surprise that Strauss and his students would find in Spinoza one of the most important articulators of one of their central concerns – the theological-political problem – and thus be well-placed to offer insights into Spinoza's other *magnum opus*. Despite his importance in the philosophical canon, as the editors of the volume under consideration observe, contemporary philosophers without a religious education are often not in a great position to examine, for example, Spinoza's analysis of scripture, which comprises a substantial portion of his *Theological-Political Treatise* (2). Nevertheless, interest in Spinoza is growing and there is increased willingness to work through questions like "whether the apostles wrote their epistles as apostles and prophets, or as teachers."<sup>1</sup> This is owed in no insignificant part to recent studies in the history of ideas by Jonathan Israel, a contributor to this *Critical Guide*. Although we would be remiss not to acknowledge that feminist (Moirá Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd) and French philosophers (Gilles Deleuze, Alexandre Matheron, and Pierre-François Moreau) have long approached Spinoza's work synthetically and have sometimes meticulously analyzed his political works, the attentive, philosophical analyses contained in the *Critical Guide* are a very welcome addition to Spinoza scholarship.

The objective of the Cambridge Critical Guide series is to feature an international group of scholars doing "cutting-edge research" on major texts, suitable for specialists and graduate students. The volume dedicated to Spinoza's *TTP* fulfills the aims of the series admirably. Scholars hail from North America, multiple countries in Europe, and Israel. Nevertheless, the lack of renowned French scholars in the

collection is a bit perplexing given that much of the most important French work remains untranslated, despite the fact that French philosophers have been leaders in Spinoza interpretation since the late 1960s. Most authors do acknowledge the important contributions of French scholars and Mogens Lærke's essay on Leibniz and Spinoza engages thoroughly with the French literature (and was written, at least partly, in the French institutional context). Although I am not sure what cutting-edge research on Spinoza's *TTP* might look like (new evidence shows that people really *do* fight for their servitude as if for salvation!), the collection assembles original and provocative essays by long-esteemed as well as younger scholars of Spinoza's philosophy. The book is thematically divided roughly in half. The group of essays in the first half pertains more to the history of ideas and Spinoza reception, whereas the essays in the second half examine particular textual problems in depth. A number of essays in the first half of the volume tend to be sufficiently specialized so as to be of interest primarily or exclusively to scholars of Spinoza or early modern philosophy, but those of the second half would certainly be profitable to, for example, the sophisticated undergraduates at my institution. One of the virtues of the anthology is that there are recurrent themes and questions addressed throughout. I will proceed to discuss two key issues that arise repeatedly throughout the essays.

### *Spinoza's Relationship to Christianity*

First- and second-time readers are often unsettled by Spinoza's harsh criticisms of the Jewish people juxtaposed to what appears to be an appreciation for Christ and Christian doctrine. He refers to the Hebrew people as "childish" (*TTP* 3.2; 12.2) and "fickle and capricious" (*TTP* 14.1), suggests that the notion of election is akin to a noble lie that Moses knowingly delivered to his people (*TTP* 3.10), and insists that the Jews have unsophisticated ideas about God (*TTP* 2.15). In contrast, Jesus (whom Spinoza refers to always as "Christ") appears to have knowledge of God superior to the Hebrew prophets (he "understood real things truly") and he is described as teaching eternal truths rather than disciplinary doctrines (*TTP* 4.10). As opposed to rules and daily rituals fit for a rude people recently emancipated from slavery, Christ conveys a message appropriate to all of humankind, suited for inscription on the tablets of the heart (*TTP* 4.4).

In a fascinating essay, Daniel J. Lasker demonstrates how Spinoza's arguments against Judaism typify the strategy of Medieval anti-Jewish polemical literature.

The common theme of these polemics was that “the Jewish religion is no longer valid because it had been superseded by Christianity.” Because Jesus brought a new set of universal laws “intended to purify the souls of the worshippers,” they are superior to the mundane prescriptions of Moses aimed at controlling the behavior of his humble flock (59). But Spinoza did not crib only from the anti-Jewish side of the polemics. According to Lasker, he likewise appropriates several lines of argument from Jewish anti-Christian polemics. He highlights the contradictions in the gospels of the New Testament and asserts the literal incomprehensibility of the trinity as a logical impossibility. Lasker makes the interesting suggestion that what appears to be one of the most laudatory claims about Christ – that he communicated with God mind to mind and thus directly intuited divine commandments (*TTP* 4.10) – may be a subtle criticism of his prophetic status (66). Medieval Jewish critics held it against Jesus that God did not speak to him “like a friend,” as he did with Moses (cf. *TTP* 1.17). Unfortunately, Lasker does not develop how this functions as a criticism in the Medieval popular literature, or offer further evidence of how Spinoza may be invoking it to challenge rather than confirm Christ’s status as a superior messenger of the divine word. I hope that Lasker will develop this provocative point elsewhere. Lasker’s contribution calls into question the impression that Spinoza has an overall higher estimation of Christianity, and clearly shows that he criticizes both religions. “If anything,” Lasker concludes, “Christian doctrines are considered more irrational than Jewish ones” (71).

Jonathan Israel’s brief survey of the early Dutch and German reaction to the *TTP* shows that Spinoza’s contemporaries were all too aware of the implicit challenges to Christianity, and dedicated a great deal of energy to denouncing this “most pestilential book.” Far from being perceived as a demonstration of the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, the heretical arguments of the *TTP* were studied carefully by Christian theologians and philosophers in order to be refuted and condemned in no uncertain terms. According to Israel, the *TTP* was widely regarded “as dire a threat to religion and theology as had ever been known” (77). Importantly, Israel shows that such a judgment was made not only on the basis of hearsay and rumor, but was rather a consequence of attentive study (73). Those who are already acquainted with Israel’s important work on the *TTP* will not find anything surprising in his contribution. Nevertheless, the survey usefully corrects a number of misconceptions about Spinoza reception. Most obviously, this essay, along with his several recent works, eliminates the plausibility of the claim that the Dutch philosopher was a minor figure in the development of Enlightenment

thought. It also erodes the notion that, although the *TTP* may have shocked more conservative quarters of early modern Europe, it reflected the tolerant sensibility of Dutch culture. In fact, according to Israel, the Dutch were no less appalled by the implications of Spinoza's arguments, including the extent of his endorsement of religious toleration (81). In addition to the biographical fact that Spinoza was writing the *TTP* in the wake of his close friend's death following imprisonment for blasphemy, there is reason not to take Spinoza's praise of the freedoms enjoyed in the Dutch republic at face value.

Adding reasons to be suspicious of Spinoza's ostensible appreciation for Christianity are Edwin Curley's examination of Spinoza's exchange with Albert Burgh and Mogens Lærke's analysis of Leibniz's two readings of the *Tractatus*. Although Lærke shows that Leibniz was a careful and ambivalently appreciative student of the *TTP*, Leibniz was an early Christian reader concerned to refute especially the heretical implications of Spinoza's bible scholarship. Leibniz sought, albeit unsuccessfully, someone sufficiently erudite with respect to ancient Hebrew to neutralize Spinoza's challenges to scriptural authority (107). Even if Leibniz admired aspects of his philosophy, on theological matters, Lærke maintains, "Spinoza's doctrine was beyond heresy...pure atheism" (114). Curley's essay calls attention to Spinoza's exchange with a young convert to Catholicism in which the philosopher is less circumspect with his criticisms of the Church than he is in what he wrote for publication. Curley contends that "Spinoza not only rejects Burgh's claim for the Catholic church, but does so in terms which imply a rejection of all forms of Christianity" (13).

With the emerging consensus from those detailing the reception of Spinoza's *Tractatus* among his contemporaries as, at minimum, sharply critical of Christianity and, despite Spinoza's protests to the contrary, as "pure atheism," one might be unsure how exactly to understand Spinoza's writings on God and divine law. The essays by Yitzhak Melamed and Donald Rutherford on the metaphysics of the *TTP* and its conception of law, respectively, complicate rather than simply confirm Spinoza's 17<sup>th</sup> century reception. While Melamed cites Spinoza's admission that his notion of God is a radical departure from that of his contemporaries, his analysis likewise highlights the compatibility between at least one of Spinoza's interpretations and that of Maimonides, a traditional, if highly philosophical, Midrashic interpreter (138). Likewise, Melamed points out that the pillars of true religion that Spinoza outlines can be interpreted to be consistent with "popular, traditional, religion" or with "philosophical truth" (136). Melamed's text suggests

that Spinoza's heretical assertion that God is Nature does not necessarily imply a complete rupture with either popular religion or one of Judaism's greatest Torah scholars. Indeed, perhaps it is not only to speak *ad captum vulgi* to affirm that Nature is God.

Rutherford's essay makes a compelling case, in my estimation, for reading divine law and the dictates of reason in comprehensively naturalistic terms. In doing so, however, his analysis tightens rather than loosens the link between Spinoza's ethics and politics. Thus, living according to reason and enjoying the intellectual love of God are both supported by laws when the function of law is properly understood. Thus, Melamed and Rutherford allow us not only to reassess Spinoza's relationship to Judaism and Christianity, but also to complicate the reception of his thought as "pure atheism." Even if, as Israel's work shows, Spinoza was largely denounced as an atheist and a heretic, his relationship to popular religion and to Midrashic biblical scholarship is perhaps more complex than his contemporaries were in a position to grasp, appalled as they were by the *liber pestilentissimus* and living under threat of persecution.

#### *Spinoza's Pluralism*

Something like a subterranean argument can be detected in the *Critical Guide*. The debate concerns the question of whether Spinoza can be understood as a moral pluralist, and, if so, what kind of pluralist might he be. Spinoza explicitly urges the state to allow several religions with conflicting doctrines to co-exist within the same borders (within certain limits), and to allow individuals to interpret doctrine however it can best allow them to conform to the demands of justice and charity (*TTP* 14.13). But it is open to interpretation whether different interpretations might disclose multiple truths about what constitutes, in secular language, "the good life," or, in theological language, "salvation" or "blessedness." The authors in the volume suggest at least two ways of interpreting Spinoza's acceptance of a plurality of doctrines for living well. We might think of these two ways in terms of a "weak" versus a "strong" pluralism. Several of our authors note that Spinoza endorses religious and moral diversity for prudential reasons. The prudential reasons seem to support to a weak pluralism, grounded in the limits of the human condition. That is, a number of authors see Spinoza's pluralism as a more or less lamentable consequence of the our inability to live according to reason at all times. A strong pluralism, however, has been advocated by other Spinoza commentators.

The strong pluralism maintains that reason itself acknowledges multiple truths about religion and morality, and thus about the content of the good life. Although no one in this volume advocates the reading of Spinoza as a strong pluralist, Justin Steinberg disputes this interpretation (promoted by Steven B. Smith and David West) and calls into question the appropriateness of the label altogether.

Edwin Curley defends the view that Spinoza is a pluralist, albeit a “pluralist with a difference” (26). The label pluralist is apt in that Spinoza denies that there is “one true religion, acceptance of which is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. There are many paths to salvation” (23). Thus, Spinoza explicitly affirms that diverse activities, beliefs, and confessional allegiances are compatible with salvation, or a good life. Curley notes that one of the editors, Melamed, objects to characterizing Spinoza’s position as pluralist. Curley acknowledges that it might be awkward because Spinoza grants these different paths to salvation while concomitantly observing that the beliefs and religious practices that define them may be entirely superstitious, or false. Thus, Spinoza does not necessarily fit into the definition of pluralism that Steinberg cites, in which there are multiple *truths* about morality and goodness (213).

Nevertheless, Curley insists that Spinoza maintains a pluralist orientation toward practical life because “[t]he causes of superstition lie deep in human nature. Even the most knowledgeable and powerful among us have very limited knowledge and power” (28). Our limitations are such that belief in false doctrines may better enable us to live a life in conformity with justice and charity than would disbelief. By virtue of the ineradicable vulnerability of the human condition, Curley contends, at least, that Spinoza is committed to a modest doctrine of moral pluralism, according to which the content of one’s faith does not preclude the possibility of salvation in some form (e.g., 25). It is not clear, however, whether Curley thinks that those who adhere to false doctrines that promote practices of justice and charity might come to enjoy the more robust notion of a good life named by “beatitude.”

It is this distinction between a modest salvation and the fully rational blessedness that Steinberg mobilizes to reject the appropriateness of designating Spinoza a pluralist (216). For Spinoza to be a pluralist, Steinberg claims that he would have to accept that there are different truths about morality and goodness, and diverse ways of living a flourishing, rational life (213-216). Simply put, Steinberg claims that, even if there are many paths to salvation (the good life), what constitutes salvation (flourishing) is the same for everyone. The particularity of our starting points entails that different practices and doctrines will allow us to enhance our

knowledge and power of acting, but the fulfillment of the rational essence that defines the human being will look identical for everyone (if there is anyone) who achieves such blessedness (215-216). Thus, Spinoza's ultimate monism with respect to truth undermines any genuine doctrine of pluralism. Insofar as there are profound differences between us, they are but a consequence of our irrational features.

Yet, a number of the contributors to the volume emphasize how the ineradicability of humanity's irrational features is such that one cannot really understand Spinoza's ethics and politics without taking into account the variability of people's conceptions about the good life. As Susan James argues, in her elegant concluding essay, reason without imagination is blind. The universal principles of Spinoza's – according to the provocative and influential reading of Michael Della Rocca, unparalleled – rationalism remain powerless as long as they are not animated by imaginative narratives that evoke the local experiences of particular peoples. Not precisely about the question of pluralism, James's essay contends that the rational and flourishing life is unattainable without the practical content supplied by imagination. Thus, even if Spinoza is, as Steinberg maintains, a monist about truth (216), universal principles are necessary but insufficient for the practical task of coordinating a collective life in which individuals can flourish. As James puts it, the life prescribed by reason “needs to be brought within imaginative reach if it is to mold our desires and actions.” Thus, “Spinoza gives the last word to the particularist approach” (267). James suggests that particularism is necessary in order to arrive at universalism, and that we maintain our attachment to universal principles only as long as we are passionately committed to the narratives in which they are embedded. The necessity of particularism in the formation and sustenance of political communities implies an affirmation of pluralism. Motivating narratives that attach peoples to universal narratives will not only be particular, they will be diverse. Presumably, the diversity within communities and the various emotional complexions of individuals and groups is part of what motivates Spinoza to support a policy of latitude when it comes to interpretation of moral prescriptions, scriptural or juridical.

On James's account, it still appears that whatever pluralism Spinoza endorses is a consequence of our non-rational features. This remains what I called a “weak” pluralism. Indirectly, however, Don Garrett's essay points toward a third option. His lucid account of the differences between Hobbes and Spinoza on the question of promising likewise implies a kind of moral pluralism. The essay outlines Spinoza's reasons for not issuing a categorical condemnation of lying or violating contracts, which comprises a kind of shadow dialogue with Hobbes. Garrett demonstrates

that, according to Spinoza, one can still act according to the guidance of reason and engage in deceit, since circumstances may be such that the violation of a promise is the lesser of two evils (one of which is unavoidable). Even a very upright and cultivated actor may find herself in a situation such that she must *not* do what an ideal model would do *in order* to better approximate the ideal model of one who lives as much as possible according to the dictates of reason (206). This account may not appear pluralistic, since the same principle – that of pursuing our advantage to the best of our ability – recommends different actions in different circumstances. And Garrett, too, concludes that the inability to act in every circumstance according to an ideal model of the free person is due to our limitations: “guidance *solely* by reason, like being *completely* free or *perfectly virtuous* is literally incompatible with being a human being” (207). Yet, I think we can arrive at Garrett’s conclusion about the lack of categorical moral prescriptions without attributing Spinoza’s flexibility to our lack of complete knowledge. Indeed, on a stronger interpretation, we might suggest that there is something irrational as such about the categorical for Spinoza. This is because what an ideal model prescribes will always reflect general rather than particular truths. These general truths do not allow for a rational prescription for how to act in the face of a concrete dilemma.

To put it in more metaphysical terms, a particular human being enjoys only a finite mind, and, even if one could imagine such a mind comprised entirely of true ideas (which, indeed, is incompatible with human being), it is only part of the divine mind. Although Steinberg and James interpret rationality in terms of universality, it is an overstatement to consider all true ideas to be general ideas, according to Spinoza. He regards some true ideas, the “common notions,” to be the same for everyone. It is for this reason that they provide the “foundations of our reasoning.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the foundations of our reasoning, the ideas without which we could not reason, are but a subset of the totality of true ideas. A significant portion of our true (“adequate”) ideas pertain to singular things. Indeed, the intellectual love of God that characterizes the salvation at which Spinoza’s *Ethics* (and arguably his politics) aims consists in knowledge of the essences of increasingly many singular things.<sup>3</sup> This kind of truth is not primarily an “abstract form of thought” that grasps “exceptionless laws governing types of things” (James, 252).

Thus, it seems to me that one might argue for a pluralism that follows from our finitude in both a negative and a positive sense. First, there are different activities and beliefs proper to the good life because no one is born rational and none of us can be guided solely by reason. This is a negative reason for moral pluralism

in that it is based on being deprived of knowledge of “the actual coordination and connectedness of things” (*TTP* 4.1), which, as Rosenthal points out is a deprivation that no one overcomes completely, once and for all (246). Second, there are different activities and beliefs proper to the fully active and rational life because we occupy different sites in the causal nexus and have true ideas about different things. Thus, a physicist may live a blessed life animated significantly by reflective knowledge of laws of nature as well as how those laws explain particular phenomena (the physicist surely has a subspecialty). An artist may thrive owing to reflective knowledge of how aesthetic experience and particular works of art amplify her powers of those around her. I don’t think the differences between the physicist’s and the artist’s ideas are reducible to the fictions in which their insights are embedded. Thus, I wonder to what extent “the content of [the intellectual love of God enjoyed by the blessed] is the same for everyone” (Steinberg, 225). By virtue of our true ideas comprising only a finite part of the infinite intellect, those who live preponderantly guided by reason may rejoice in quite different aspects of God’s infinite nature, and truth and goodness may be, in a meaningful sense, pluralistic, even as the foundations of our reasoning, the most basic principles of nature, are indeed monistic and the same in everyone.

Other contributions, like that of Michael Della Rocca’s on the appropriateness of moral criticism in Spinoza may also be mobilized to explore the question of whether Spinoza might be considered a moral particularist, or a moral pluralist, and, if so, whether such a stance can be supported by reason and not only by skepticism. This is one of several avenues of future research that the collection of essays opens up for scholars. Although I have not been able to discuss all of the contributions to *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, I find it to be a rich set of studies. The volume as a whole merits the attention of scholars and dedicated students of Spinoza’s philosophy.

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