

**THE (FAILED) EDUCATION OF THE  
*LECTOR PHILOSOPHUS***

**LA EDUCACIÓN (FRACASADA) DEL  
*LECTOR PHILOSOPHUS***

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**Abstract**

*The essay focuses on the figure of the «lector philosophus», to whom the Tractatus theologico-politicus is explicitly addressed: not the contemplative and isolated wise man, nor the philosophers of the future, with whom one can engage in an esoteric debate on truths that are disguised and muffled between the text lines, but a varied cultural and social class abundantly present in the Netherlands at the time. An aristocracy of the mind (open to rational research, against dogmatism), of the economy (free market, against the monopoly of large commercial companies), and of religion (tolerant and libertarian minority cults). It is a plurality of individuals that have to be educated to the definitive liberation from all theological prejudice, on the basis of that deistic «fides universalis» which Spinoza's biblical exegesis outlines in the first fifteen chapters of the treatise: a theology open to reason and intended to support, at the political level, the democratic-republican faction against the repressive authoritarianism of monarchy and official cults. On the*

*other hand, the grand political and pedagogical design of the treatise preventively excludes the «vulgus», whose ignorance and superstitions irremediably put them in the hands of the Calvinist church and of the Orange family. However, the design of a democracy without «vulgus» will soon prove to be doomed to failure.*

**Keywords:** Spinoza, democracy, theology, political philosophy, moral philosophy.

### Resumen

*El ensayo se enfoca en la figura del «lector philosophus», a quien está explícitamente dirigido el Tractatus theologico-politicus; no el sabio contemplativo y aislado, ni los filósofos del futuro, con quienes se puede entablar un debate esotérico sobre verdades ocultas y veladas entre líneas, sino una clase cultural y social variada presente abundantemente en la Holanda de entonces. Una aristocracia de la mente (abierta a la investigación racional, en contra del dogmatismo) de la economía (mercado libre, en contra del monopolio de las grandes compañías comerciales), y de la religión (cultos minoritarios tolerantes y libertarios). Son una pluralidad de individuos que tienen que ser educados para la liberación definitiva de todo prejuicio teológico, en base a esa deística «fides universalis» que la exégesis bíblica de Spinoza recalca en los primeros quince capítulos del tratado: una teología abierta a la razón y con la intención de apoyar, en términos políticos, la facción democrática-republicana contra el autoritarismo represivo de la monarquía y de los cultos oficiales. Por otra parte, el gran diseño político y pedagógico del tratado excluye de modo preventivo el «vulgus», cuya ignorancia y supersticiones los deja irremediablemente de la mano de la iglesia calvinista y de la familia Orange. Sin embargo, el diseño de una democracia sin «vulgus» resultará prontamente destinado al fracaso.*

**Palabras clave:** Spinoza, democracia, teología, filosofía política, filosofía moral.

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In response to Oldenburg, who asked to be informed of the «consilium et scopum»<sup>1</sup> of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza adduces three reasons from which the tangle of science and militancy, and of theory and contingency, emerges as the backbone of all his work with an effective and synthetic epistolary style. First of all, the prejudices of theologians, the greatest obstacle that men encounter along the path of philosophical research, encourage him to compose a «tractatum» on his method of interpreting sacred texts («de meo circa scripturam sensu»): we must «patefacere» said «praejudicia» and remove them «a mentibus prudentiorum». Secondly, he feels the need to «averruncare», as much as possible, the «opinio» of the «vulgus», which persist in depicting him as an atheist. And finally, the book aims to defend «omnibus modis» the «libertas philosophandi dicendique quae sentimus», a faculty which is constantly attacked and threatened by the excessive authority of «preachers».<sup>2</sup> The subtitle of the treatise, which announces «dissertationes» aimed at demonstrating that «freedom to philosophize may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself»<sup>3</sup>, directly refers to the purely political quality of said «libertas», namely to the fact that it is necessarily and directly related to the nature of the «respublica». The style of the *Praefatio*, emblematic in its content, and even more so in its tone and intense register, immediately makes it clear that this is not a mere philosophical speculation. In a passionate and argumentative way, far from the detached pace and the «cold quietness

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<sup>1</sup> *EP XXIX* (G4, p. 165). For the initials and abbreviations used, refer to the bibliographical note.

<sup>2</sup> *EP XXX*, to Oldenburg (G4, p. 166).

<sup>3</sup> *TTP*, p. 1 (G3, p. 4).

of mathematical reasoning»<sup>4</sup> that characterize the *Ethics*, Spinoza denounces the civil damage of «superstitio» and the perverse theological-political link that feeds it solely to instil in people's minds the passivity and submission that hold together the power of authoritarian hierarchies. Such a combination helps the annihilating hallucinations of the «regimen monarchicum», enervating the rational and propelling strength of the «respublica libera».

### 1. The «philosophical reader»

Who are the recipients of the *TTP*? Right from the *Preface* the suggestion appears clear and critical:

These are the topics, philosophical reader, that I here offer for your examination. I trust they will not be unwelcome given the importance and usefulness of the subject matter both of the work as a whole and of each chapter. [...] As for others, I am not particularly eager to recommend this treatise to them, for I have no reason to expect that it could please them in any way.

The author knows well «how obstinately those prejudices stick in the mind that the heart has embraced in the form of piety». He knows equally well «that it is as impossible to rid the common people of superstition as it is to rid them of fear»; and finally, he knows that «the constancy of the common people is obstinacy, and that they are not governed by reason but swayed by impulse». Thus: «I do not therefore invite the common people and those who are afflicted with the same feelings as they are, to read these things»: «theologians», arrogant clerics who do not tolerate official dogmatic cults (of the Calvinist church but also of the Synagogues).

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Droetto-Giancotti 1972; the assumption (supported, among others, by Couchoud 1902) is that the preface shall be ascribed to Meyer rather than to Spinoza, stressing how the entire treatise is actually characterized by strong tones and belligerent expressions.

The book clearly selects its interlocutors, choosing and discarding them beforehand, solely addressing since the start the *others*, the «reliqui» who

would philosophize more freely were they able to surmount the obstacle of believing that reason should be subordinate to theology. I am confident that for this latter group of people this work will prove extremely useful.<sup>5</sup>

At the conceptual level, the dilemma of democracy versus tyranny lies on the polarity between reason and passion, which in turn presents itself as a real *anthropological* opposition wherein the «philosopher» and the «common people» face one another.

On the one hand, the «vulgus»: «rudis»<sup>6</sup>, who desire unusual and different things<sup>7</sup>, ready to feed themselves with prejudices and preconceptions<sup>8</sup>, only able to express themselves through «opinionones» and «modos imaginandi»<sup>9</sup>; fickle and inconstant («varius et incostans»)<sup>10</sup>, always «miserum», never in peace and yearning for everything that is new and has not yet disappointed them: an instability that often caused riots and atrocious wars.<sup>11</sup> Exposed to the forays of demagogues and schismatics<sup>12</sup>, the common people have to be controlled, as far as possible, like a horse with a bridle, promising those who abide by the laws the things that they most desire and threatening those who violate them with what they most fear.<sup>13</sup> The *TTP* addresses the «vulgus» with a

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<sup>5</sup> *TTP, Praef.*, p. 12 (G3, p. 12).

<sup>6</sup> *TTP*, XIII (G3, p. 158).

<sup>7</sup> *TTP*, I (G3, p. 15).

<sup>8</sup> *TTP*, XV (G3, p. 180).

<sup>9</sup> *EP XXX*, to Oldenburg (G4, p. 166); *Eth I*, app.

<sup>10</sup> *Eth IV*, pr. 58 schol.; *TTP*, XIV (G3, p. 173).

<sup>11</sup> *TTP, Praef.* (G3, p. 6).

<sup>12</sup> *Eth III*, pr. 29 schol.; *TTP*, XX (G3, pp. 243-245).

<sup>13</sup> *TTP*, IV (G3, p. 59).

derogatory tone and content, a negative emphasis which finds in erudite libertinism its closest reference, albeit within the context of a long tradition, able to permeate a large part of Western culture: at least from the recurring attack against the ignorance and incompleteness of the «multitude» (the «plethos»). The word «vulgus» does not indicate an economic condition (a modern class) or a legal «status» (a pre-modern class), but a mental and cultural habit, a sociological area, that generally does not necessarily correspond to the lowest strata of society, and nevertheless always has a strong negative connotation; a category of people who share inadequate or false knowledge, as well as a behaviour driven by passions that leads to a silent addiction, or to disrupting turmoil, to chaotic and degenerative conflicts. With these features they are very similar to the «plebs», as it is depicted in the *TTP*: «maxima pars» of mankind, inept «rebus sublimibus percipiendis», they are mentally and intellectually fragile, oppose principled and virtuous people, are not able to keep silent nor can they refrain from judgment (however, at least in this instance they can be associated with the «peritissimi»).<sup>14</sup> Political power takes advantage of their superstition and fear, and when it indulges them –when it listens to the insanity of its «ire», fighting opinions and oppressing free spirits– lacerations and devastating conflicts arise.<sup>15</sup> «Religio» remains the most effective means to govern and control them: in a positive way –as it happens to the Hebrews with Scripture– when it stimulates their devotion and manages to contain it, through faith, within the limits of virtue<sup>16</sup>; in a negative way, when priests supplant kings and religious power shatters political power: a nefarious role at which the Roman Church has always excelled, second only to Mohammedanism in deceiving the plebs.<sup>17</sup> The «vulgus» cannot be redeemed nor can they be educated.

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<sup>14</sup> *TTP*, V (G3, p. 69); *EP XIX*, to Blyenberg (G4, p. 92); *TTP*, IX, XVIII, XX (G3, pp. 137, 225, 242-243).

<sup>15</sup> *TTP*, XVIII and XX (G3, pp. 225-226, 240, 230).

<sup>16</sup> *EP XIX*, to Blyenberg (G4, p. 92); *TTP*, V, VI, XIII (G3, pp. 76-77, 91, 167, 171-172).

<sup>17</sup> *TTP*, *Praef.* and XVIII (G3, pp. 6 and 222-225); *EP XIX*, to Burgh (G4, p. 322).

On the one hand, the «vulgus» (or «plebs»). On the other, the «lector philosophus». But who is exactly the sole addressee of the *TTP*? Not the *accomplished*, so to say, man of wisdom, the sage, he who needs no myths and religions because he «knows», and follows a right rule of life by the natural light of reason<sup>18</sup>: undoubtedly «blessed», more blessed than the multitude, for in addition to having real opinions, he also possesses a clear and distinct conception thereof. This philosopher *lies behind* the treatise: he is the one who composes it, not its recipient; he is the *philosophical writer*, not the «philosophical reader». Nor does the *TTP* address the philosophers of the next centuries: it does not address the future «men of reasoning» who, reading «between the lines», will be secretly able to entertain a discussion across time with the person who wrote it. The only esoteric feature of the *TTP* is the mild anonymity of its author.<sup>19</sup> The «philosophical reader», a cultured and naturally rational and libertarian man, has to be liberated from the submission to the truths of faith he still ascribes to free thought. Involved in politics and economics, it is not a single individual, but rather a minority and yet important and significant group present in the Netherlands at the time.

## 2. A difficult transition

In the paroxysm of premodern and seventeenth-century Europe, it is very difficult to engage in metaphysics and theology without getting involved in the theoretical and practical dynamics of politics. The «free Dutch Republic» of the time, the powerful Netherlands of the «Golden Age», is no exception, as witnessed by the religious and state twists that characterize the two large opposing factions that throughout the seventeenth century enliven the country and find in their two main institutional figures their most significant and emblematic focal point: the «stathouder», prerogative of the House of Orange, halfway between

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<sup>18</sup> *TTP*, V (G3, pp. 76-77).

<sup>19</sup> On the *TTP* as an essay to be read in an esoteric way, naturally I think of Strauss 1948. On Strauss' reading of Spinoza cf. Caporali 2003.

monarch and head of the army, and the «representative» («raadpensionaris») of the province of Holland, by far the strongest and most influential among the States-General of the Netherlands.<sup>20</sup> The monarchist-Orangist faction—which prevailed until 1650, when William II suddenly died at the age of twenty-five, followed by a weak reign—largely owes its influence to the support of the Calvinist church and can also count on the rabbis' consensus. Its political aspirations for royal absolutism and for a centralised state are as one with the religious opposition to freedom of thought, to the Roman Catholic Church (the only one forbidden from publicly professing its faith) and to the proliferation of Christian denominations. The call to fight for independence from Spain, and more in general, the aggressive and belligerent behaviour of the monarchy, are absolutely complementary to traditional anti-papal resentment. At the economic and political level, the wide support for monopolies soon finds resonance in the numerous interests of the Jewish community (and of the Dutch Reformed Church) in the Dutch India Company. Thus, the monarchist party can count on the support of the army, of monopolistic interests, of the most powerful religious organizations, and of a large part of the population that empathizes with the crown for reasons of faith and social opposition to the *middle class*, the merchant bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the republican faction is characterized by a politics of containment and peace on the international scene, as well as by a commitment for a more decentralised organization of the State, and by an unwavering support for liberal economy able to break a concentration which is way too rigid and invasive. Led by Jan De Witt, who was for 20 years «raadpensionaris» of Holland, and along with it arbitrator of the political life of the entire country, republicans enjoyed the support of the liberal bourgeoisie—which, especially in the most powerful province, appears as a rich, educated and enlightened aristocracy—also awakening the interest and attention of several minority

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<sup>20</sup> On the history of the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Geyl 1951a, 1951b, 1964, and Huizinga 1941 are fundamental. On the institutional uncertainty in the Netherlands during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see Wilson 1968; Cf. also Droetto 1958. As for the political and cultural context of the *TTP*, cf. Nadler 2011.



cults, whose moving forces often are influential representatives of that same bourgeoisie: Arminianists (Remonstrants), Mennonites, Socinians and above all Collegiants, the most significant group in Holland in the mid-seventeenth century: «chrétiens sans église», who live in the shadow of the policy of tolerance basically practiced by republican authorities, but openly opposed and fought against by more structured and organized cults, either for their mysticism or for their rationalism, but in any case for their rejection of any ecclesiastical hierarchy in the name of natural religion and freedom of thought.<sup>21</sup> These are the plausible «philosophical readers» that the treatise addresses. Such a historical context is fundamental to understand the reason behind the *TTP*. Around 1665 Spinoza interrupts the *Ethics* and for the first time starts working on something that focuses directly on the political, cultural and religious confrontation going on in his country. The secluded philosopher, the apparently introverted and detached man of wisdom, exposes himself to the violent attack of theologians and politicians, with his shocking thesis on God, the Bible and democracy: on the impersonal and -non-subjective character of divine nature, lacking intellect and will – or, rather, free from the constraining angst of «intellectus» and «voluntas»; on Scripture as a work of emotions and overactive imagination, able to create helpful truths of faith but alien to any real truth of reason; on the «imperium democraticum» as the most complete solution to political problems; and on the mutual connections between that theological interpretation and this political proposal. The fact that the sage stays anonymous is not enough to place who wrote the essay within the aseptic framework of the isolated philosopher, alien to the passions and interests of his own time. It was not difficult in fact to predict that the author would be easily identified and violently berated, as it immediately happened; and, above all, the weak cover of anonymity

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<sup>21</sup>To mention just a few yet fundamental bibliographical references: as for the connections between theoretical processing and political and religious conflicts, as well as for the general historical reconstructions already cited, Solari 1974a is a very important read; for a general overview of the social situation at the time, cf. also Dunin-Borkowski 1933-1936 (in particular the third volume); On cults, Kolakowski 1969 is definitely a fundamental reference; on De Witt cf. at least Rowen 1978.

does not in any way explain why such a dangerous work is composed and published.<sup>22</sup> The physiognomy of the *TTP* becomes more definite if we think that during the years 1665-1670 the confrontation between Orangists and republicans is even more fierce, that the supremacy of the latter quickly crumbles under the pressure of the new conflicts with England and France, until the resignation and following assassination of De Witt, a crime that in 1672 brings an end to republican hegemony; and that such confrontation also unfolds on the theoretical level, with an exponential growth of volumes, articles, and «pamphlets» aimed at restating or reforming –when not at revolutionising– the relationship between reason and faith, religion and power, religious creeds and citizenship rights precisely in this crucial stage for the life of the country.<sup>23</sup> The intertwining of political emergencies and cultural assumptions, the mediations between political project and speculative analysis, give this work an indirect appeal that makes it unique among Spinoza's essays. Such a project also has a powerful pedagogical value, as a form of education to civil life.

### 3. Philosophy and theology

«Separandam Philosophia a Theologia», «fidem a Philosophia separare»: this is the announced «scopum», the «totius operis praecipuum intentum».<sup>24</sup> In fact, as we immediately perceive, such disarticulation does not imply any absolute equidistance, nor an authentic and mutual independence. The separation between philosophy and faith openly

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<sup>22</sup> After all, Spinoza himself claims authorship of the treatise in at least two letters: cf. *EPP* XLVI, to Leibniz (1671), and XLVIII, to Oldenburg (1675): G4, pp. 234 e 299.

<sup>23</sup> A political reading of the relationship between Spinoza and the De Witt brothers –the oldest testimony of said relation can be found in Lucas 1719– is the one by Gebhardt 1908, who was among the first to see the active dimension of the *TTP*. Gebhardt's theses have been reiterated, among others, by Jaspers 1986, (pp. 8ss. e *passim*); while Francès 1937 opposed them, calling into question the historical reliability of Spinoza's involvement with the De Witt brothers. The most important book on the *TTP* as a political project aimed at building a republican «historical bloc» (the author uses Gramsci's concept quite intentionally) is the one by Tosel, 1984.

<sup>24</sup>*TTP*, II and XIV (G3, pp. 44 and 174).

pursue, first and foremost, the theoretical and historical objective of the definitive liberation of «ratio» and «imperium» from any theological foundations or religious patronage. The way in which the treatise actively seeks this perspective outlines a dual and significant supremacy of reason: from the methodological viewpoint, from the side of a hermeneutical processing that is soon tuned on the frequency modulations of the «lumen naturae»; and from its final outcome, by virtue of which the separation of the traditional authoritative connection between theology and politics ends up quietening down in the cradle of a new aggregation, this time with a reverse hegemony and a mostly rational nature. It is a regrouping that seems to add little to the theory, and rather focuses on the risks and possibilities of practice, the anxieties and opportunities of the historical time. Essential elements in pursuance of the announced «intentio» are a new doctrine of revelation («de prophetia») and «de Interpretatione Scripturae», outlined in four chapters –chapter one, two, seven and fifteen–, that appear as the real architrave of the entire Spinozian exegesis, and of the first part of the book, while the others clearly have a complementary or subordinate function, serving as example and support.

All men are ready to say that Holy Scripture is the word of God that teaches us true happiness or the way of salvation, but their actions betray a quite different opinion<sup>25</sup>:

as a matter of fact, the «vulgus» does not care about living according to Scripture teachings at all and theologians do nothing more than extort their own «figmenta & placita» from it, only worrying about forcing other people «to agree with them» in the name of religion. Adding superstition, which «teaches people to despise reason, and nature, and revere and venerate only such things as conflict with these both» –, the outcome is that the spirit of «religio» no longer consists in charity but «under the false labels of holy devotion and ardent zeal, into the promotion of conflict and dissemination of senseless hatred».<sup>26</sup> To leave «ab his turbis» and free

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<sup>25</sup>*TTP*, VII, p. 97 (G3, p. 97).

<sup>26</sup>*TTP*, VII, p. 98 (G3, p. 97).

the mind from theological prejudices, it is first of all necessary to define a new «methodus interpretandi», in order to know with certainty what Scripture really teaches. Therefore:

I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture, does not differ from the method of interpreting nature, but rather is wholly consonant with it.<sup>27</sup>

Once inspiration is no longer apologetically accepted as a starting point, Scripture appears open to investigation, a field for critical research with no pre-established borders, but those of its own reliability. However, the reliability of research is no different than the reliability of reason: Scripture cannot be preliminarily accepted as a «legitimate» source, because in so doing the divine «auctoritas» would always and inevitably end up changing into too many and opposed human authorities. Therefore, it has to be adopted as a «text» to be studied, assessed and plumbed, like «nature», which is the ultimate field of rational investigation. From the methodological viewpoint, it is the first primacy of «ratio» that invites, first of all, to *stay on topic*, to adhere to the field of investigation: «Scriptura secundum Scripturam», «cognitio Scripturae ab eadem sola».<sup>28</sup> Essentially, approaching the Bible as «opus» means inspecting it, first and foremost, in terms of style, language, literary genre, and the vicissitudes it experienced over time.<sup>29</sup> The «lector philosophus» has to be educated to a new reading of the sacred text, not because he must abandon his faith—the same faith of which Spinoza’s essay feels no need—, but rather to be able to critically scrutinize its actual authors, doctrinal contents and political practices.

The paths of this critical examination—which naturally cannot be resumed here in an analytical way—produce completely subversive results

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<sup>27</sup> *TTP*, VII, p. 96 (G3, p. 98).

<sup>28</sup> *TTP*, VII (G3, 99; and cf. also p. 106).

<sup>29</sup> In general, on the modern nature of Spinoza’s biblical exegesis, cf. Pillon 1876, Biedermann 1903, Bonifas 1904, Zac 1965, Breton 1977, Moreau 1988 and 1991, Mignini 1995, Chamla 1996.

of consolidated dogmatic religions and their authoritative political projections. Starting from the prophetic revelation, which is attributed to «imaginatio» –the first kind of knowledge according to Spinoza–, and is by its own nature prone to error, and to its political function to achieve obedience. Such was the nature of the prophecy of Moses, intended to rebuild the Jewish state after its liberation from slavery. That was the most powerful prophecy, but not the only one, since each people had their own prophets and each people felt in their own way «chosen» by God, by their own god. That which in Spinoza's essay is the awareness that men, as «modus», modifications of Nature, are a more or less powerful expressions of it, in terms of prophetic imaginations becomes the idea of a text, of an order directly dictated by a personal and almighty God, with regal features, that appreciates and dislikes, chooses and rejects, rewards and condemns. Thus, the «certitudo prophetica» is not of a deductive and rational kind but solely «moral». Attention must be paid to prophets solely in relation to this specific end and to this particular content of the revelation.

Something intended to promote the practice of piety and religion is called sacred and divine and is sacred only so long as people use it religiously. If they cease to be pious, the thing in question likewise, at the same time, ceases to be sacred.<sup>30</sup>

Once the issue of divine «inspiratio» is set in the *emotional* terms of prophetic imagination, the entire exegetical process aims to show the *instrumental* sense, the purely human and incidental meaning of the «sacredness» that can be credited to Scripture. Only «usum» decides what is sacred:

words deployed in accordance with this usage in such a way that, on reading them, people are moved to devotion will be sacred words, and any book written with words so used will also be sacred.

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<sup>30</sup>TTP, XII, p. 165 (G3, p. 160).

When such usage is lost, so much so that «verba» lose their meaning and the text is completely neglected, «then both words and book will then likewise have neither use nor sanctity»: nothing more than «ink and paper».<sup>31</sup> The Bible is not «opus Dei» in the sense of a precise and particular divine «intentio»: an idea that, at a philosophical level, would push us towards the imaginary figures of God and man created in his image and likeness, and at the historical and philological level, would not explain, among other things, the randomness and diversity in the time frames for composing the text, or the need for four evangelists, or the incontrovertible fact that the sacredness of the volumes was decided through many human conflicts, by the authority of equally human councils.<sup>32</sup> Scrutinised through the «lumen naturale», and freed from the historical contingencies of the people of Israel and from the many superstitions and contradictions it contains –on the jealous and wrathful God of the Old Testament, on miracles, on the resurrection of Christ–, Scripture is the «word of God» only because it expresses, in the form of a moral precept, the «lex divina universalis»: «to love God above all things and one's neighbour as oneself».<sup>33</sup> This is the only certain and constant teaching of the Bible, which has remained intact, not consumed by the attrition of times nor corrupted by the malice of men. The «sacred codes» do not contain «the deeper points of philosophy that God revealed to them but only some very simple matters»<sup>34</sup>, that even the slowest minds can understand; by only demanding men's obedience, they condemn transgression but not ignorance.<sup>35</sup> The intellectual knowledge of God –his sameness with «Natura, sive Substantia»– does not concern «fides».<sup>36</sup> The evangelical doctrine imposes that we believe and worship God, that we obey him; all of its laws consist in «amor», the one commandment of

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<sup>31</sup> *TTP*, XII, pp. 165-166 (G3, pp. 160 and 161).

<sup>32</sup> *TTP*, XII (G3, p. 163).

<sup>33</sup> *TTP*, XII, p. 170 (G3, p. 165).

<sup>34</sup> *TTP*, XIII, p. 167 (G3, p. 167).

<sup>35</sup> *TTP*, XIII, p. 172 (G3, p. 168).

<sup>36</sup> *TTP*, XIII (G3, p. 171).

the only «*catholica religio*», the very simple and sole «*fundamentum*» of universal faith:

There is a God (that is, a supreme being) who is supremely just and merciful, or an exemplar of the true life.<sup>37</sup>

This sort of *moral axiom* can be articulated into a few more nuclear «*principia*» universally understandable and acceptable: that God exists and is just and merciful; that he is one; that he is present everywhere and manifest himself in all things; that he holds supreme *jus* above all things; that his cult only consists in the love of our neighbour; that those who follow him will be saved, while those who refuse him will be enslaved by passions; that he only forgives the sins of those who repent.<sup>38</sup> This is all faith needs, nothing more: not to determine «what God is» and if his «exemplarity» stems from him being «just and merciful or because from him and through him and to him are all things»; if he is «everywhere in essence or in potential»; if he directs everything «from liberty or from the necessity of nature»; if he orders «edicts like a prince or teaches them as eternal truths»; if man «obeys God of his own free will or by the necessity of the divine decree»; if the reward for good men and the penance for evil men «takes place naturally or supernaturally».<sup>39</sup> All of this is answered openly and directly –and by no means esoterically– by the «*ratio*», the one thing designated to know in a true and appropriate way the essence of God, the productive and expressive nature of God-Nature-Substance, outlined in the first part of the *Ethics*. So much so that he who does not «have faith» but «knows», who is able to know by the natural light of reason, «is truly happy» even though he ignores the revelation; in fact, he

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<sup>37</sup> *TTP*, XIV, p. 182; cf. also VII (G3, pp. 177 and 102).

<sup>38</sup> *TTP*, XIV (G3, pp. 177-178). As for the influence that Spinoza's «universal faith» could have exercised on the deism of Enlightenment thinkers (especially as regards the extraction from faith of a core which is not automatically rational but is compatible with rationality) cf. Vernière 1982, who considers Spinoza as a «contemporary» and common source of both French and English deism (often considered the sole and fundamental source of the first).

<sup>39</sup> *TTP*, XIV, p. 183 (G3, pp. 178-179).

is more blessed than the common people since he «nevertheless has salutary opinions and a true conception of living».<sup>40</sup>

But if this is the case: «*cur igitur id credimus?*».<sup>41</sup> If theology works to achieve obedience and only philosophy looks at science, what is the purpose in obeying and believing? The «dogma» of obedience cannot be directly erected upon «ratio», which is foreign to the logic of obedience; nevertheless, the reason of the philosopher –of the *philosophical writer*– is able to highlight the *mo-ral* positivity and *social* convenience of that dogma:

Everyone without exception can obey, not merely the very few –very few, that is, in comparison with the whole human race– who acquire the habit of virtue by the guidance of reason alone. Hence, if we did not possess this testimony of Scripture, we would have to consider the salvation of almost all men to be in doubt.<sup>42</sup>

Considering the «revelatio» as imagination-passion, there follows both its irreducibility, at least in part, and its inevitable subordination to adequate knowledge. Indeed, from here all of Spinoza's interpretations address the critical definition (rational reasoning and selection) of an essential and positive core of «fides», of its fundamental and universal content, different in its theoretical foundations and purpose from science yet somewhat similar to it in the effectiveness of its practice. The outcome is the «*catholica religio*», that welcomes in the genuine immediacy of obedience moral principles that are not incompatible with those of reason. «Universal faith» can become the deistically common base of the most rational and libertarian cults: within reach of the «philosophical reader». If obedience is a practical thing that looks at «opera» rather than at opinions,

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<sup>40</sup> *TTP*, V, p. 79 (G3, p. 78; cf. also pp. 111-112).

<sup>41</sup> *TTP*, XV (G3, 185).

<sup>42</sup> *TTP*, XV, p. 194 (G3, p. 188).



the true antichrists are those who persecute honest men and lovers of justice because they differ from them in doctrine and do not adhere to the same tenets of belief as themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Cult followers are not blasphemous because they adapt

the words of the Bible to their own beliefs. Just as it was once adapted to the understanding of the common people, so also anyone may adapt it to his own beliefs if he sees that in this way he can obey God with fuller mental assent in matters concerning justice and charity;

they have to be condemned because they refuse «to grant the same liberty to others» and persecute «all who do not think as they do as if they were enemies of God».<sup>44</sup> The articles of universal faith, which are the beating heart of Scripture, equate, in their extreme extension, all religious denominations and thus should permit liberty and freedom among all confessions, the rest being dispensable and secondary. The actual convergence of «ratio» and «fides», to which the *TTP* wishes to educate the «lector philosophus», also has a political purpose, a prerequisite for a precise political solution. Emancipated classes and more *rational* believers, intellectual aristocracy and more tolerant confessions, against those religious hierarchies and civil institutions that, supported by the «vulgus», constantly attack freedom.

#### 4. A democracy without the common people

It follows from all this, first, that either the whole of society (if this is possible) should hold power together, collegially, so that all are subject to themselves and nobody must serve their equal, or else a few men [hold power], or if one man alone holds power, he will need to have something above ordinary

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<sup>43</sup>*TTP*, XIV, p. 181 (G3, p. 176).

<sup>44</sup>*TTP*, XIV, pp. 178-179 (G3, p. 173).

human nature – or at least strive with all his resources to convince the common people that he has.<sup>45</sup>

Developed on the field of «libertas», the *heated* opposition between monarchy and democracy in the *TTP* stems from theoretical and political reasons that look at Spinoza's anthropology of the man-mode (determined expression of a power, of a «conatus» constitutively related and determined by the inescapable deity of the Nature-Substance), as well as, at the same time and under the same conditions, at the political turmoil taking place in the Netherlands at the time.

Monarchy appears to be the most highly tense solution, since it is founded on the most rigid and immovable separation of the collective natural power in the «auctoritas» of the «unius soli» and in the obedience of all the «others», in the complete submission of the «many». Monarchy tries to govern this division by adopting, more or less consciously, the strategy of the *theological and dogmatic* response, according to which those who have the power have to be able to make others believe that «aliquid supra communem humanam naturam». <sup>46</sup> Always a formidable «instrumentum regni», religion gives the «regimen monarchicum» its «summum arcanum», which is in fact nothing more than slavery passed off as salvation, in the collective sacrifice for the honour and glory of one single individual. <sup>47</sup> The difference of the «sacra maiestas» against the equality of the «hominum suffragium», the conviction that the «imperium» acts in God's stead (the God-king preached by theologians) and is preserved and protected «by a singular act of providence and by the help of God» represent the safest stronghold of the monarchy. <sup>48</sup>

The obscurity of royal authority is contrasted by the clear combination of democracy and «libertas»:

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<sup>45</sup> *TTP*, V, p. 73 (G3, p. 74).

<sup>46</sup> *TTP*, V (G3, p. 74).

<sup>47</sup> *TTP*, *Praef.* (G3, p. 7).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *TTP*, XVIII (G3, pp. 205 and 240).

Also, this is the only form of government that I want to discuss explicitly, since it is the most relevant to my design, my purpose being to discuss the advantage of liberty in a state.<sup>49</sup>

Democracy appears as the strongest political solution because it is the only one wherein the natural, relative and connective character of the «imperium» can be encompassed and made productive.<sup>50</sup> Unlike monarchy, in the «res publica libera» power is exercised collegially by everyone, or by the majority of the population. As a matter of fact, not even democracy can disregard the need for a functional separation between political and civil power, with the «im-perium» disappearing in a sort of perfect overlapping, of complete sameness with the «societas». Rather, democracy manages to assert the maximum circularity of the civil particular (of any civil particular) and of the political universal: indeed, in the democratic government,

no one transfers their natural right to another in such a way that they are not thereafter consulted but rather to the majority of the whole society of which they are a part.<sup>51</sup>

When all the forces that stir within the society access the political scene, what is flagrantly highlighted is the «arcanum imperii», that is the reciprocal nature of power relationships even in monarchy. But how is collective power achieved? How it is possible to build democracy *despite* and *against* the «vulgus» that are impulsive and fickle, passionate and ignorant?

In the *TTP* there are two emblematic «species» of democracy. In the ancient world, not Athens but Jerusalem, it is the result of the most powerful imagination of the most powerful among all prophets, that builds among the Jews a sort of *democratic theocracy*, the only possible solution for a rude and primitive people, just freed from slavery. Its essential ingredients are: equality in the absolute submission to God's commands; equal right

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<sup>49</sup> *TTP* XVI, p. 202 (G3, p. 195).

<sup>50</sup> *TTP*, V (G3, p. 74).

<sup>51</sup> *TTP*, XVI, p. 202 (G3, p. 195).

to consult God, and to receive and interpret his laws; participation of all tribes in the management of the State: an equal *taking part*, dividing the «imperium», the control and management of power into parts (it is not a representative State); the army of citizens, driven by a common sense that reduces war to a limited and incidental means to achieve peace; the foundation of the love of country, constantly solidified by usefulness, «driving force behind all human actions»: full right of ownership, equal distribution of lands and fields, and the periodic restoration of its original conditions, on occasion of the Jubilee.<sup>52</sup> The political theology of Moses feeds the feeling of «pietas» that encompasses every public function and every private duty, pervaded by the fear of God: the only way to ensure equal submission to the laws and equal political participation, connecting to the «ratio» of collective interest the passion of unthinking, impulsive, and undisciplined common people, under the strict direction of God (of his imaginative Prophet).

In the modern age, democracy is presented in the *TTP* as the outcome of a rational agreement, of a contract between *reasonable parties*. The problematic character of this statement has often been highlighted, given Spinoza's theoretical premises that regard the «imperium» as a natural expression of men's «conatus»: an absolutely natural determination, alien to the radical rationale of Hobbes's «pactum» (and to the idea of the social contract itself, reduced by Spinoza to the unstable and occasional logic of mere usefulness).<sup>53</sup> Upon closer inspection, however, the «pactum»

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, XVII (G3, pp. 215ff).

<sup>53</sup> On the origins of Spinoza's notion of «pactum» cf. Eckstein 1971. The judicial-rationalist readings of Spinoza's political thinking recognize its pivotal and positive function: cf., among others, Gierke 1902, Solari 1974b and many subsequent liberal reassessments for which cf. Feuer 1958. The *pactum* is instead underestimated at the level of rhetorical superfetation by naturalistic and utilitarian views: for the first group, Fischer 1909, Worm 1897, Carp 1921, Del Vecchio 1922; and Pollock 1880 and 1921, Vaughan, 1939/2, for the second one. Among the most recent scholars, Negri 2007 excludes that such a concept has a real impact on Spinoza's political philosophy, centred on the physical and metaphysical irreducibility of «power»; whereas Balibar 1985 stresses its «vicious circle», its logical inconsistency. Finally, those who recognize the consistency and importance of this idea, depriving it of its *artificial* character to reinterpret it as a genuine and needed outcome of natural impulses lay in the middle: cf. Prepositiet 1967, Matheron 1988, Tosel 1984, Giacotti 1990.

of the *TTP* institutes democracy, but it is not arguably established (executed, ratified) by all the beneficiaries of democracy. The democratic contract has an aristocratic origin. The agreement that puts democracy in place seems to involve *rational people*, but not the «vulgus», appearing as a rational gesture that imposes itself upon irrational people. The formulations that accompany it, seem to go in this direction, in the clear uncertainty between free compliance and forced intervention: «cedant, vel cedere cogantur»; «vel vi vel sponte».<sup>54</sup> Not necessarily inconsistent with the theoretical premises, (once it is regarded as a minor and limited part of the «res publica libera»), the contract appears to be the last point, the final outcome of the reconversion in libertarian and rationalising terms of theology and politics, which is the focus of the entire essay. In opposition and as an alternative to authoritarianism, which sees the supports of monarchy and official cults endeavouring to promote an absolutist standardization of the Dutch experience, Spinoza is convinced that in the Netherlands there is an articulation and development of forces, a deployment of reasons and feelings, of ideas and interest, so much so that tempering and refraining *passions* and prejudices under the control and dictate of reason, is practical and feasible. Starting from an adequate theological and political education, which is an alternative to the hierarchical and authoritarian one, the conditions of the Country would essentially allow for an agreement, an alliance of the most energetic and newest part of Dutch society in the name of the safeguard and enhancement of democracy, freedom and tolerance. Rather than a real theoretical architrave, a logical principle able to support and explain the essence of the «imperium», the idea of the contract seems to take a determined (defined, temporary) value of a metaphor-project, of a political and cultural code word, in view of a great pedagogical and political understanding between aristocracy, the bearer of an emancipated «ratio», and the less dogmatic and *most reasonable* confessions, which by their own nature can be better converted, in the political practice, to republican rationality, the most suitable for an evolved and developed society, by now able to

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<sup>54</sup> *TTP*, IV and XVI (G3, pp. 58 and 192).

demystify old power relations and ready to replace them with other new and «universal» powers. Hence, not only does the contract not give the «vulgus», easily manipulated by theologians and monarchists, a leading role but excludes them beforehand, in the implicit and moderate belief that it can possibly reform them in a functioning republican regime, cultivating as much as possible their intellect and interest in the new power structures and collective logic of the State. However, at a pivotal stage in its founding process, the equality of democracy splits in a vertical way, that is excluding the majority of the many: the «plerique» that should enliven any «imperium democraticum» and instead, at least during the challenges and conflicts of its establishment, remains the fuel of traditional cults and of the promoters of monarchy-tyranny.

Ultimately, the contract between rational people is the design of a defined *élite*, a political project conceptually presented yet actually destined to the minority and doomed to fail. The lynching of Jan De Witt (leading representative of the republican faction along with his brother Cornelius), marks the demise of a design *aimed at the political rationality* of theology. The most tenacious, the most worried of being involved in the scandal of the *TTP*, will be precisely the representatives of libertarian cults, afraid of repercussions and repression. It will be necessary to consider more thoroughly, both on a theoretical and historical viewpoint, the «vulgus» that engulfed the party of *rational people*. It will be necessary to make this change towards realism that recognizes the irresistible abundance of reality as compared to the ambitions of culture (and of political pedagogy): nothing more than a card among the others, played in the great game of power and history. It will be necessary to fully deal with the «*saeva multitudo*».

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1. Abbreviations of the titles of Spinoza's works, cited from the original in Latin:

a) *Tractatus theologico-politicus*: *TTP* (plus the Roman numeral, which indicates the chapter; e.g.: *TTP*, XVII);

b) *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*: *Eth*; e.g.: *Eth* IV, pr. 58 schol (part four, scholia of proposition 58);

c) *Tractatus politicus*: *TP*;

d) *Epistolae*: *EP*, plus the Roman numeral and the addressee; e.g.: *EP* XXX, to Oldenburg.

2. For the original texts in Latin I used B. Spinoza, *Opera*, im Auftrag der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, hrsg. von C. Gebhardt, Heidelberg 1924, reprint 1972, 4 vol.: cit. in brackets, with G, indication of the volume and of the page; e.g.: (G3, p. 120).

3. For the English version of the *TTP* I used the one by J. Israel M. Silverstone, Cambridge 2007. Cited with Arabic numerals, indicating the page, after the chapter and before the reference, in brackets, to the original in Latin; e.g.: *TTP*, XVI, p. 202 (G3, p. 195).

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