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Spinoza and philosophers today

Spinoza's rationalist philosophy was central to the "radical" Enlightenment of late seventeenth century Europe and a century later had a decisive impact on the development of German Idealism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, his critique of revealed religion was the focus of heated discussions among Jewish thinkers; and in the 1960s Marxist philosophers, including Althusser, saw Spinoza's understanding of the imagination as a forerunner to the concept of ideology. This strand of his thought was taken a step further by Hardt and Negri in their highly influential work *Empire*, while most recently António Damásio has argued that there are significant affinities between Spinoza's psychology and contemporary discoveries in neurophysiology. In the following interview, leading Spinoza experts discuss the seventeenth-century philosopher's relevance today.

Kritika & Kontext: To what extent is Spinoza's interpretation of scriptures and revealed religion relevant today?

Steven B. Smith: Spinoza's critique of Scripture is exceptionally relevant today. Not only have we seen the rise of religious fundamentalisms, but we have also witnessed the publication of several books by, for example, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, arguing against traditional religion and sometimes even citing Spinoza in defence of atheism. The thing I cannot help but notice is how generally impoverished the whole debate is today in comparison with the immense learning and erudition that Spinoza brought to the topic. He was a philosopher and a philologist and this combination is certainly lacking in today's polemicists.

Herman De Dijn: Spinoza was one of the very first people to see the Bible as a text with human origins, i.e. to be studied as to its meaning in the same way as any other text: with the help of knowledge of the language (grammar, semantics), context of origin, intentions of the writers and so on. Yet the result of his interpretation, what Spinoza calls the determination of the kernel message of the Bible, is not decided only by exegesis and hermeneutics, but also by some philosophical presuppositions, for example his conception of the difference between reason and imagination, and his conviction that the moral message of the prophets and of Christ was for some reason (which he thinks he knows with moral certainty) in agreement with the moral teaching of his philosophy.¹

Moira Gatens: Spinoza's reflections on scripture and religion in the *Tractatus Theologico–Politicus* (TTP) remain relevant today because they offer an account of the constitution of society. The study of biblical narratives and language, Spinoza says, "can be very profitable in the matter of social relations" insofar as they reveal "the ways and manners of men" (TTP, chap.

5). What the study of historical narratives shows is that the prophets and scripture appeal to the imagination in order to convey simple ideas and to encourage obedience to the authority that serves to bind together the collective body. Scripture is not concerned with philosophy (or an adequate knowledge of Nature), but rather "teaches only what men can imitate by a definite code of conduct" (TTP, chap. 12). Some read the TTP as a condemnation of the Bible, theology and faith, on the grounds that these promote false beliefs (God is a judge) and sad passions (fear and hope). But on Spinoza's own account, imagination is a power, not a defect, of the human being and the knowledge to which it gives rise — though partial or inadequate — is of enormous social utility. Spinoza's tirade against theologians who wish to legislate over speculative matters, and so turn disagreements into crimes (TTP, pref. 3), should not be allowed to overshadow his conviction that much good has come from religion. Even though religious beliefs, when judged from a philosophical perspective, are false, they can nevertheless promote the attainment of important human goods. Religion aims for obedience and piety that, in turn, promote the peace and security of the state. It should not aim for axiomatic knowledge of nature in general; rather, the variable rules, customs and knowledge that constitute a given religion will be tailored to fit particular peoples at particular times and places. In my view, the TTP contains two important insights: first, the central role that is played by the imagination in religion, sociability and politics; and second, the idea that the "imaginary" dimension of human sociability, although permanent, is open to reformation over time.

Gábor Boros: There are different layers to be distinguished in Spinoza's interpretation of (Holy) Scriptures and revealed religion(s). (1) Basically, he urges us to part with the tradition of interpreting Scripture in a purely internal–religious way: the Bible cannot be seen as an unmediated exchange between God and human beings, nor as an exchange mediated solely by the institution(s) of the church(es). (2) He turns our attention to a certain alliance of the "spiritual" and the worldly powers whose aim is to develop a theory that is able to make people obey both powers without any reflection. At the same time he offers an interpretation of the weakness of man's mind — its being imaginative in character rather than purely rational or intellectual — that refuses to treat it as a consequence of the original sin of the first human creatures. Finally, Spinoza offers a special hermeneutics of Scripture, one that is based on descriptive–scientific investigations of its main tenets. This method, he claims, differs both from the internal–religious way of looking at it, and from a method that uses secular philosophy as an external criterion of its interpretation. Fourthly, he thinks there are considerable differences among religions that claim to be based on revelation; he treats separately the Hebrew, the Christian and the Muslim religions. He maintains that the Hebrew prophetic religion was based on the lively imagination of the prophets — even if there were several wise men among the Hebrews: for example, Solomon; at the same time this religion proved to be successful as a means of strengthening the coherence among the members of the community. He does not seem to be very interested in a detailed analysis of the Muslim religion; he only observes that this was by far the most successful in making people ready to surrender themselves totally to a power the worldly and religious aspects of which could hardly be separated. Concerning Christianity, its main merit seemed for him to stem from his own peculiar way of interpreting Jesus as the unique person who exchanged with God in an absolutely unmediated way independent of the senses (*de mente ad mentem*).

Drawing our attention to the political aspects of all religious thinking is certainly one of the main merits of Spinoza's thought that will have a lasting effect. On the other hand, if one mentions the expression "political theology" today, one will hardly think of Spinoza in the first place; for it was the highly influential German political thinker Carl Schmitt who gave a decisive, non-Spinozistic, turn to this concept in the twentieth century.

Considering the strength and weakness of human beings as something to be understood without referring to the revelations of a transcendent Creator of the world, is a basic assumption of today's natural, human and social sciences.

Concerning hermeneutics of the Bible, Spinoza's own hermeneutics is a highly interesting one; his suggestion is that the meaning of Scripture must be collected from its own history. Freeing Scripture from philosophy is for him nothing else than attaching it to sciences such as ethnology, archaeology, linguistics, and so on — a tenet that is hardly contested nowadays even among the scholars of religious studies.

The differentiated picture Spinoza makes of the different revealed religions does not seem to be a matter of much interest today except for secularized Jewish intellectuals who try to save Spinoza from the consequences of the ban in order to be able to draw some lessons from his works on modern Jewish identity.

Teodor Münz: Yes, they are still relevant today, for several reasons: Spinoza's was the first critical, scientific, study of the scriptures and of revealed religions. The novelty of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* was that it combined historical, linguistic, psychological and, mainly, philosophical insights in its approach to sacred texts — primarily those of the Old Testament. His own conception of God as impersonal infinite nature coloured his views of Biblical authors whom — especially the Hebrew prophets — he found to rely more on their imagination than on reason; thereby giving rise to fantastic, and even contradictory views of God. His views on the New Testament were more favourable because he felt that the way Christ communicated with God (mind-to-mind) was closer to his own conception. Today, Bible critique is an independent scientific discipline that owes much to Spinoza, who could be considered as one of its founders.

Warren Montag: I would say that there is perhaps nothing in Spinoza's work more relevant today than his critical examination of scripture. In saying this I do not refer simply or even primarily to the emergence in the last thirty years of the phenomena whose diversity and complexity is often reduced to the single term "fundamentalism", phenomena whose existence cannot be confined to a realm of "faith" or "belief" but which have taken on a practical, institutional and thus political existence. It should be absolutely clear that by invoking the term, "fundamentalism" I am not speaking only about "Islamic fundamentalism", a phrase that more often than not incites the suspension of rational thought, at least in the West, but about Jewish and above all Christian fundamentalisms. Spinoza's critique of "superstition" (transcendence, teleology/providence, the systematic devaluation of body and pleasure) would appear more relevant than anytime since the Middle Ages. According to a certain reading of his work, Spinoza belongs to the tradition of the Enlightenment, as if he were the complex original of which Voltaire and Diderot represented popular versions. Spinoza would thus represent an Enlightenment that not only remains unfinished, but which faces new and unprecedented challenges from the formidable armies of Faith. To further

establish his contemporaneity, could we not say that as the first "secular Jew", to use Strauss's problematic and perhaps oxymoronic phrase, the singular case of a man who, expelled from the Jewish community into which he had been born, neither sought to return to it (as had so many others before him, including Uriel da Costa), nor accepted Christianity in any of the myriad forms extant in the Amsterdam of his time, Spinoza was the first great thinker of secularism?

I am afraid, and this is the point at which the excellence and difficulty of his work most nearly coincide, that Spinoza is far more insidious and subversive than this. Althusser was right to assert that he is a heretic in our time, as well as his own, which means not only that he remains relevant, but that his work retains its capacity to disturb and offend, even the most enlightened and secular among us, those who, unable to bury it once again, attempt to annex it to their own projects, just as those thinkers Althusser describes who, unable to defeat Marxism, ended up taking it over to empty it of its content.

Why would Spinoza spend so much time on a detailed examination not of the Bible (he excused himself from the task of interpreting the "New Testament", citing his lack of expertise in Greek), but the Hebrew Scriptures? Further, why would Spinoza, who read, in addition to Hebrew, both Aramaic and Syriac, devote significant effort to the composition of a manual of Hebrew grammar, going so far as to develop a new theory of the Hebrew verb? Certainly not merely to negate it, to declare it a "fake", as one says of a painting, written by imposters, in order to diminish its authority and appeal. All men, Spinoza says in the preface to the TTP, "are liable to superstition." It is perhaps the most effective content of the universal existence of humanity: in no way is it localized in Jews, Muslims or Christians or any of their writings. In fact, Spinoza goes out of his way to denounce the intrusion of philosophy in religion, in that philosophy in its dominant forms is every bit as much the bearer of superstition as "religion" itself.

To translate this into contemporary terms would be to question the opposition of the religious and the secular, of faith and enlightenment. As Althusser has shown, Spinoza's critique of Biblical interpretation applies with equal force to the most militantly secular practices of reading as well as the secular texts to which they are directed, in the same way that his critique of providence calls into question the notion of "the economy," and reveals it to be the secularization of ideas often associated with Christianity, but which also have their Jewish equivalents, up to and including the moral values of acquiescence and sacrifice. Spinoza seeks to deconstruct the interpretive practices that dematerialize the Hebrew Scriptures and distort them into an allegorical anticipation of the truth that will succeed them and render their statements in their literal existence null and void.

Thus, it is not the "resurgence" of religion that confers such importance on Spinoza's project, for such a notion implies that "religion" disappeared or was largely diminished in the face of the secular culture that issued from the European Enlightenment. In my view nothing could be more naive than to think we have finished with Christianity or even religion simply because our discourse does not contain references to the Bible as divine authority, God or Christ the King. On the contrary, it is clear that the most malignant characteristics of two millennia of Christian missions and the holy wars, crusades and inquisitions they necessitate, persist in various perfectly secular, even "scientific" forms. The modern form of universalism, which seeks to convert the other into itself and regards the other who remains other as enemy,

is strikingly Christian even without a single reference to God: how do we begin to free ourselves from superstition in both its religious and secular forms. It is this that makes it imperative to study scripture.

Kritika & Kontext: Could Spinoza be called a reductive naturalist?

Steven B. Smith: Is there any other kind?

Herman De Dijn: No, not in the usual sense(s), for several reasons. Nature for him is not just matter, but its essence consists of infinite attributes, each perfect in their own kind; mind is not reducible to body or brain; a human being, although not the centre of the universe, but only a part of Nature, yet with a much more complex nature than that of animals, is capable even of *Amor intellectualis Dei*, and is in a (special) sense immortal.

Moira Gatens: It follows from Spinoza's substance monism that the human mind is not an individual substance. Rather, mind and body are conceived as modifications of the attributes - thought and extension — of the unique Substance (God or Nature). Far from taking the attributes to be creations of an omnipotent God, they are better understood as "aspects" or "essences" of God. In some sense, God is Nature. Some have seen this part of Spinoza's philosophy as the "divinising" of Nature (or pantheism) but it may just as well be interpreted as the "naturalising" of God. This interpretation is consistent with Spinoza's assertion that we "acquire a greater and more perfect knowledge of God as we gain more knowledge of natural phenomena" (TTP, chap. 4). Is this reductive naturalism? I don't think so. Thought cannot be reduced to extension. It expresses an aspect of reality that is irreducible to passive nature, or matter.

Gábor Boros: I don't think so. First of all, his concept of nature itself is not reductionist. As is well known, he distinguishes between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, and the later can in no sense be reduced to the former. The place of human beings within nature, their relations to the productive and the produced aspect of nature is, of course a delicate issue that cannot be answered without detailed analyses of the relevant texts. My idea is that however strongly Spinoza might have emphasized that humans are rooted in, and are not above, the order of nature, the self-consciousness he conceptualizes as the idea *ideae* does mean a sort of gap between human beings and other finite modes.

Teodor Münz: It is not entirely clear to me in what sense Spinoza could be thought of as a "reductive naturalist". According to his philosophy God is all of nature, which also included human nature – not as an exception, but as its equal and integral part. While he believed that no special laws were required to explain human nature, he was not a "reductive materialist". On the contrary, he held that mind and body were parallel expressions (modes) of two (among infinitely many) equal attributes of one God. And, neither of these attributes (or of their modes) could be reduced to the other. Still, human beings, who are themselves equally minds and bodies, are different from the rest of nature in that they are also aware — mostly in a confused way — of this union.

Kritika & Kontext: What do you think about the attention Spinoza's theory of emotions is receiving today from psychologists and cognitive scientists?

Steven B. Smith: To my mind, Spinoza's greatest contribution has always been, not as a metaphysician, but as a moral psychologist. His account of the

affects or emotions plays a central part in his understanding of human psychology. I am not so well-versed in contemporary cognitive science, but there is much new work being done on the "history of the passions" and the way in which philosophers have understood the power of the emotions and the relation of reason to the passions. Spinoza always writes as an ethical physician, viewing the passions as a sort of doctor to the soul. His great equals are probably only Plato and Freud.

Moira Gatens: Authors such as Antonio Damasio and Heidi Ravven applaud Spinoza's prescience in proposing an integrated, network model of the mind, cognition and emotion, rather than a modular model that tends to compartmentalize judgments, beliefs and desires. His theory of the affects challenges triumphalist accounts of free will that praise those who enjoy privilege and good fortune while blaming the unfortunate for their circumstances. Spinoza's theory of the emotions presages some aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis insofar as it associates freedom (but not free will) with the ability to understand the causal links that determine behaviour. Placed in a socio-political context (human life is always embodied in particular places and times, and embedded in specific historical practices, as the TTP shows), this account of the emotions draws attention away from praising or blaming individuals and onto systemic causes of the features of human societies that cause misery (e.g., poverty, poor health, lack of education).

Syliane Malinowski-Charles: Contemporary psychologists and cognitive scientists such as Antonio Damasio have credited Spinoza with being "right" about the emotions. Spinoza's unitary view of human beings enables him to explain the emotions, called "affects" in his terminology, as manifestations of one's power of being both in the mental and in the physical realm. Traditionally, the emotions were seen as the effects of the body on the mind. Spinoza breaks with this view by saying that there is only one reality expressed in two ways, and that it is wrong to believe that the body causes the mind's emotion. This is, I think, one of the main reasons why Spinoza's analysis of emotional life is so appealing to contemporary — mostly materialistic — psychologists. There is, in sum, no need for two different entities acting one on the other; everything that takes place in the attribute of extension is sufficient in order to explain emotional life. Spinoza's theory offers an ontological support to the study of the role played by the different physiological factors, such as endocrinal glands, hormones and cerebral zones, in the determination of emotions. In addition, Spinoza's powerful understanding of the way elaborate emotions are constructed out of simple (he calls them "primitive") emotions, namely, desire, joy and sadness, provides an important contribution to understanding them. Spinoza analyses with subtlety and depth the diverse mechanisms (such as the desire of imitation, or the love of whatever resembles us) that explain the birth of complex attitudes towards objects and beings in a totally mechanical — hence both universal and objective — way. I personally regret that contemporary specialists, who study emotions, largely in ignorance of the history of ideas, cut Spinoza's theory of the emotions off from the rest of his ethics, seeing it only as it fits into their own purposes. All too often, they study only those intuitions of Spinoza that are forerunners to contemporary theories, without understanding the specific role that they play in Spinoza's system as a whole. However, it can only be good for the study of this author to show that in many respects he was, indeed, "right".

Kritika & Kontext: What do you take to be the advantages and disadvantages of Spinoza's separation of political and religious authorities?

Herman De Dijn: No democratic state is possible without this separation, so it seems Spinoza is right. Yet his view on religion as basically an inner attitude is one-sided: religion is probably intrinsically related to ritual and ceremony (i.e. external actions). This may mean that it will be not so easy to have a peaceful coexistence of good-willing believers and the state.

Moira Gatens: Does he advocate the complete separation of political and religious authorities? One might rather say that he denies the legitimacy of the theologians' claim to political authority and describes the limits the religious authority of the sovereign. The seven dogmas of universal faith presented in Chapter 14 of the TTP represent a basic creed that persons of all persuasions should be able to endorse. These dogmas are: God exists; he is one; he is omnipresent; he has supreme right; worship of God consists only in love towards one's neighbour; only those who worship God are saved; and, finally, god forgives the repentant. These dogmas encourage people to act charitably towards each other. The most important thing to note about the dogmas is that they should be acceptable to all because each individual should be free to interpret them according to his or her own understanding. This is crucial, because in Spinoza's view the power to think is the inalienable natural right of every individual. We are determined by nature to think, that is, to imagine, to judge, and to try to understand ourselves, others and Nature. Just as fish are determined to swim — and do so by sovereign natural right — human beings are determined to think and this we do by a sovereign natural right that cannot be transferred or surrendered (TTP, chaps 19 and 20). Each interpretation of the dogmas will then reflect the type of power and the kind of knowledge possessed by an individual: does he have a simple, an imaginative, or a philosophical mind? Of course, it is preferable that as many as possible will come to understand God or Nature philosophically. However, this understanding cannot be compelled (TTP, chap. 7) and, as the Ethics indicates, philosophical understanding is a rare achievement that requires both ability and time to study and reflect, privileges that few enjoy. Meanwhile, the security and peace of the state must be protected from internal conflict — such as religious wars — and morality must be able to harness self-interest to the common good. The multiplicity of ways in which the seven dogmas may be "adapted" or "interpreted" acknowledges the power of the sovereign to dogmatically determine what shall count as "right and wrong" action at the same time that they accommodate the different kinds of powers and the different types of knowledge possessed by citizens. Without a stable state and an effective moral community, the development of human powers and knowledge is impossible.

Kritika & Kontext: Do you think that Spinoza's denial of free choice makes morality impossible?

Steven B. Smith: I don't believe this. For reasons that I have discussed in my *Spinoza's Book of Life*, Spinoza does not deny choice. What he denies is that our choices are somehow freestanding or uncaused, the result of some mysterious quality called the "will". Our choices are just like any other happening, that is, an event with its antecedent causes and conditions. To say that our choices have been caused is not for Spinoza to deny morality, because once we understand the causes of our decisions, we are in a position to alter them. Our reason becomes a force in the causal chain of events that can allow us to choose more wisely, more self-consciously, and ultimately more freely. Far from being at odds with morality, Spinoza wants to show how morality is possible.

Herman De Dijn: Many philosophers think that determinism and morality can go together (see also Hume). Spinoza clearly thinks so, and probably with good reason in view of his conception of morality.² Furthermore even if one has a more Human understanding of morality, compatibilism seems perfectly defensible, as is clear from Strawson's famous paper "Freedom and Resentment".³

Moira Gatens: Spinoza's notion of freedom is not opposed to power, nor is freedom opposed to necessity. Rather, necessity is the condition of the possibility of becoming conscious of our power, or put differently: "Freedom does not remove the necessity of action, but imposes it" (TP, chap. 2). There is no place in Spinoza's deterministic philosophy to pose the problem of free will; this is one of the fictions produced by the imagination because of its partial grasp on reality: the imagination experiences affects without understanding their causes. Perhaps surprisingly, the rejection of free will does not entail the denial of freedom. Spinoza defines freedom as self-caused activity. Strictly speaking, only Substance (God or Nature) is truly free because nothing external to it exists. Hence, no external cause exists that could affect it. The distinct freedom, or power, of human being lies in our capacity to form adequate ideas and enhance our understanding of nature: "I call him free who is led by reason alone" (*Ethics*, IV, Prop. 68, Dem.). Freedom, put differently, is not the capacity to will whatever I desire but rather the ability to understand the causes that determine all things, including my desires. Spinoza's account of how we come to be reasonable is both developmental and dynamic.

Spinoza dissolves a number of dichotomies that have dominated western philosophy: he does not oppose mind to body, reason to emotion, or freedom to necessity. Rather, his fundamental contrast is between passivity and activity, and it is our position on the passivity–activity spectrum that will determine the shape of our ethical lives. Far from freedom being opposed to necessity, it is the very condition of our liberty. The more we understand necessity, the more active we become, and the more active we become the more we express our freedom, or power, or essence. Our power, our freedom, our virtue and our *conatus* all begin to converge, and by Part V of the *Ethics*, these terms are all but indistinguishable. The more complex a body is then the more complex will be its mind. Spinoza's account of the human mind–body yields a non–judgemental ethical stance. Virtue, for Spinoza, cannot be about mind disciplining the body and passion. Rather, virtue concerns the power of the individual to act, to understand, and to flourish. However, human flourishing is never simply a matter of individual striving. Human flourishing necessarily assumes a social and political context that does not thwart the reasonable striving of each to increase her or his powers of action. Different forms of sociability and different kinds of body politic may act to constrain or enable the development of the capacities of their constituent members. Spinoza's theologico–political theory makes clear that the qualities, attributes and capacities of subjects or citizens are determined, in large part, by the laws and customs of the social body in which these capacities develop.

Gábor Boros: To be sure, Spinoza is not the first and only philosopher who has denied free choice, while maintaining that morality is possible. On the other hand, morality is, in my view, a descriptive term that refers to the prevailing persuasions within a given community concerning how to live virtuously, and this has not much to do with what a given philosopher thinks about free choice. Real people's communities seldom care about the proposals made by philosophers. I think if there lurks any problem here, it is the problem of consistency: how to harmonize metaphysics based on a God without

personality with an ethics that gives suggestions concerning how to live, for highly personal human beings. But theoretically this problem does not seem to me more difficult to solve than the problems that pop up when we set out the other way round: Do you think that the Christian philosophers' unsuccessful attempts to harmonize free choice with divine foreknowledge makes morality impossible?

Teodor Münz: I do not think that the denial of free choice makes morality impossible. While human beings are an integral part of God–nature, and are determined to act in a certain way (being subject to God's eternal laws) they do have a certain degree of freedom. I will try to explain this more fully because it is an important point, one that Spinoza has not explained sufficiently clearly. We could use the analogy of a state and one of its components — say, a municipality. Such a municipality could legislate within the limited area of its competence, provided it respected the laws and constitutions of the state. In the same way, a human being is a finite modification of the infinite power of God and also enjoys a certain amount of autonomy within the limits of God's necessary and universal laws.

Kritika & Kontext: What do you make of Spinoza's favourable comments on democratic regimes? What do you think Spinoza thought of the multitude? Why do you think so many Marxist philosophers have found inspiration in Spinoza?

Steven B. Smith: Spinoza's views on democracy are far more problematic than is often suggested, in part because his view of the multitude is not a flattering one. He believed the multitude was prone to superstition and this was the core of intolerance and bigotry. It also made the multitude susceptible to manipulation by ambitious political leaders whether these be secular or religious. On the whole Marxist readers have been reluctant to address this problem. Although I am great admirer of Althusser and Balibar as Marxist readers of Spinoza, neither has convinced me as to why we should think of Spinoza as a democrat.

Moira Gatens: Even in the early "Emendation of the Intellect", Spinoza linked the achievement of our "highest good" with the collective human endeavour to form the kind of society that would allow "as many as possible" to perfect the intellect and to attain this good. In the TTP, as well as in the Ethics, this "highest good" consists in the increase in our knowledge of God or Nature. The best and most powerful kind of state then is one that recognises the human power of thought and that constitutes itself in a way that facilitates the fullest expression and development of this power by the greatest possible number. Democracy "comes closest to the natural state" (TTP, chap. 20) because it recognises and promotes "that freedom which nature grants to every man" (TTP, chap. 16). While it is true that Nature does not forbid "strife, or hatred, or anger, or deceit" (TTP, chap. 16), parts IV and V of the Ethics present an argument for why a philosophical understanding of God or Nature, and the nested place of human nature within it, necessarily entails the desire for mutual aid, friendship and justice.

Spinoza's low opinion of the *vulgus*, (the multitude, or the common people, or the uneducated), derives from their imaginative and superstitious disposition. This disposition is not peculiar to the *vulgus*: on Spinoza's account, it is the natural condition of all human beings. "All men are by nature liable to superstition", he writes, and it is the passion of fear that "engenders, preserves, and fosters superstition" (TTP, preface). Superstition is fertile ground for the

development of religion and tyrants will try to take advantage of the gullibility of the multitude. In a scathing attack on despotism, Spinoza wrote that the tyrant aims "to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check, so that they will fight for their servitude as if for salvation" (TTP, preface).

Reasonable states, no more or less than reasonable persons, can emerge only through time and experimentation. Spinoza does not propose a radical rupture between the "state of nature" and theologico-political life. Rather, organised forms of political collective life, based on (more or less) reasonable principles, can emerge only gradually and will retain elements of the earlier historical, theological forms that always lie at their origin. Spinoza's philosophy is attractive to Marxists for at least three reasons: his account of human society is both historical and naturalistic, he offers a critique of religion and the role of the imagination which became the models for Marxist theories of ideology, and he saw that *homo homini Deus est* (man is God to man, Ethics, IV, Prop 35, Schol.).

Gábor Boros: These are actually three different questions. As for the first, not much comment is needed. Spinoza argues for an — ideal — democratic regime, even if he acknowledges that as yet no existing government could be seen as an example of such a democratic regime. So he is eager to create rules for choosing the representative leaders of all sort of government. In this way he thinks he is able to prevent the deterioration of any existing government. As for the second question, one has to be aware of the distinction between two levels of consideration: the one is a strictly philosophical way of considering things; the other is a practical-political one. On the philosophical level Spinoza stresses relentlessly the importance of guiding as many people as is possible to the state of ideal happiness — which, he thinks, consists in our acknowledging the unity of the mind with the whole of nature. On the practical-political level, however, he is far from any utopian idealism. He knows most people will always be led mostly by their inadequate ideas and passive affects. That is the reason why he quotes Tacitus' saying: *terret vulgus nisi metuat* ("The mob is terrifying, if unafraid" [Curley's rendering]). The predilection of Marxists philosophers for Spinoza has at least two sources. Firstly, there are several statements in the *Ethics* that can be read as advocating a sort of hidden materialist view. And secondly, the community of free people led by reason alone, described by Spinoza in the propositions 67–73 of Book 4 of the *Ethics*, can be seen as a pre-figuration of a self-conscious working class. But I myself am far from being convinced that either of the two interpretations is correct.

Teodor Münz: I agree with them. Spinoza advocated democracy. He considered it to be superior to monarchy and to aristocracy. He was one of the harbingers of democracy in Europe. Holland of his time was the first European state with a modern democratic system of government. When it comes to the multitude (the masses), Spinoza was able to differentiate: on the one hand, the multitude was quite uneducated, enslaved in its interests, passions, superstitions and prejudices, devoted to a personal God, yet knowing nothing about the true God-nature. On the other hand, the multitude lived more or less according to the Decalogue which had contributed to social harmony within the state. In this sense the multitude actually supported the state, and that was praiseworthy according to Spinoza. He saw the multitude as the sovereign power in a democratic state, where "society wields its power as a whole" (TPT, 205).

In my opinion, the prominence of Spinoza as an inspiration for many Marxist authors rested on their view of him as a materialist. If Spinoza divinized nature (and nature is material according to materialism), then Spinoza was a materialist according to their view. (It was also helpful that Marx and Engels had a high regard for Spinoza, even though they did not take him to be a materialist.) It was Plekhanov who first made Spinoza a champion of Marxist materialism. He even thought of Marx and Engels as Spinozist materialists. But, although Engels perceived Spinoza as one of the "brilliant representatives of dialectics", he did not see him as a materialist. A number of Soviet authors also talked about Spinoza's nature only in the material sense. However, several others held a correct view on Spinoza's nature.

Syliane Malinowski–Charles: Spinoza was the first advocate of democracy in the early modern period, and probably in philosophy since the Ancient democracy of Athens was born. However, his defence of this regime is more grounded in a contempt for, and distrust in, the multitude, than in a faith in it. Contrary to what one may expect, it is Spinoza's very pessimistic conception of the multitude (*multitudo*) that leads him to ask for a democratic regime. Before anything else, the people are an unstable, ignorant and passion-oriented mass. It is precisely because people's passions are in conflict that a middle-ground will be found when they decide on their own laws. For it is one of Spinoza's most important intuitions that what is truly common to all is precisely what is rational. In order to satisfy the greatest possible number of people, the law will have to take into account what is common to all, i.e., that which is truly in everyone's interest as a human being. Thus, in politics just as in any other field of his thought, the norm of rationality arises in an immanent way. Were his conception of reason, or of the common good, different, Spinoza would surely not have been a democrat, for he has the same negative view of the people as do defenders of monarchy or aristocracy such as Plato and Aristotle. Spinoza's appeal to Marxists has, I think, a different source. In my view, what materialists such as Marxists like above all in Spinoza is his capacity to offer an internal understanding of social mechanisms as being the result of the interaction of human passions. Their anthropologies are different, though.

Kritika & Kontext: What do you make of Spinoza's claim that the right of individuals is limited only by the extent of their power to be, to think and to act? In particular, how do you reconcile his equating power and right with his conception of political sovereignty?

Herman De Dijn: The right of individuals is limited only by their power: outside the state this means they are completely powerless (so again, human rights mean nothing on their own, outside the state). Only within the state do individuals get real rights, i.e. guaranteed by the sovereign. The same for the sovereign: his right is only real insofar as he has power over the citizens; the best kind of power is the one which can rely on the loyalty of the citizens, for whatever reason.

Moira Gatens: Spinoza's political and ethical writings present multiple possible forms of sociability: associations built on superstition, tyrannies grounded in fear and hope, communities of rational individuals, and societies bound by the ties of friendship. None of these forms of sociability contradict his deceptively simple claim that the right "of every individual is coextensive with its power" (TTP, chap. 2). The coextension of right and power applies to bodies politic as well as to individuals. From a contemporary perspective this may seem to be an unlikely starting point for a philosopher whose major work is titled *Ethics* because if "right" and "power" are coextensive what, if

anything, can justify the normative claim that a community of rational beings is superior to a tyrannical state?

In Chapter 16 of the TTP we find the thesis that the right of an individual extends as far as its power does. It follows from this — since the state counts as a kind of individual — that each state, or sovereign, has the right to do as it pleases provided it has the power to do as it pleases. The thesis that right extends as far as power can be understood in both descriptive and normative terms. Although it is not always easy to distinguish the descriptive from the normative in Spinoza's philosophy, for present purposes I take the descriptive to be that which relates to the laws of Nature, whereas the normative always relates to human interests and preservation, to which broader Nature is completely indifferent. Evil things are not evil when judged from nature's laws alone "but only in respect of the laws of our own nature" (TTP, chap. 16). If we are to understand how a specific kind of state emerges in history, then in addition to knowledge about the actual peoples, and the times and places in which they dwell, we require knowledge of the universally valid axioms by which every state is determined. Historical records about the kinds of states that actually have existed (Spinoza mentions Rome, the Hebrew state, "the Turks", and so on) are valuable because they provide empirical materials about past experiences that reveal the interactions between Nature and the struggles of particular human collectives. History, in this sense, is the experimental laboratory in which are tested the various forms that human societies may take. As such, history is a valuable source of knowledge about human capacities and limits.

Gábor Boros: In this respect those people are to be blamed, who refer to Spinoza in order to get their might–is–right–concept legitimized by Spinoza's authority. Spinoza himself thinks there is a basic limit to one's power, namely the very nature of that species to which the individual belongs. The essence of any individual is its striving to keep and operate on the basis of its proper being. A horse would be destroyed if it continued its life as a person, and a person gets destroyed — at least in a metaphorical sense — if she ignores her reflective–rational being, of which the ethics of the *Ethics* is the most important evidence.

¹ See: Herman De Dijn, "Over de interpretatie van de Schrift volgens Spinoza", *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 29 (1967), 667–704; and Herman De Dijn, "Spinoza and Revealed Religion", *Studia Spinozana* 11 (1995), 39–52.

² See: Herman De Dijn, "The Possibility of an Ethic in a Deterministic System like Spinoza's" in Jon Wetlesen (ed.), *Spinoza's Philosophy of Man. Proceedings of the Scandinavian Spinoza Symposium 1977*. Oslo–Bergen–Tromsø, Universitetsforlaget, 1978, 27–35.

³ See Herman De Dijn, "The Compatibility of Determinism and Moral Attitudes" in E. Giancotti (ed.), *Spinoza nel 350 Anniversario della Nascita. Atti del Congresso (Urbino 4–8 ottobre 1982)* — Proceedings of the First Italian International Congress on Spinoza. Napoli, Bibliopolis, 1985, 205–219.

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