



Spinoza's Radical Theology

The Metaphysics of the Infinite



Charlie Huenemann

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*Dedicated to my theological uncles:
Ruben, Edward, Lorenz, Robert, and William*

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction: Spinoza's theological project	1
1. Reading scripture rightly	11
2. God, as known by reason	31
3. The genesis of all things	59
4. Our place in the world	81
5. Spinoza's republic	109
Conclusion: Spinoza vs Nietzsche	131
<i>Notes</i>	143
<i>Bibliography</i>	149
<i>Index</i>	153

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Abbreviations

- Curley Various works by Spinoza, as found in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, volume I, E. Curley (ed. and trans.) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). These include *Korte Verhandling van God, de Mensch en des Zelfs Welstand* (*Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*) (c. 1660); *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*) (c. 1662, unfinished); *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae* (*Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*), along with its appendix “*Cogitata Metaphysica*” (“*Metaphysical Thoughts*”) (1663).
- Ethics* Spinoza, *Ethica Ordina Geometrico Demonstrata* (1677), as found in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, volume I, E. Curley (ed. and trans.) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). Passages are cited by part, proposition, scholium and so on, so that “*Ethics* IP20c2” refers to part I, proposition 20, second corollary.
- Leibniz/Loemker Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, L. Loemker (trans.), 2nd edn/second printing (Dordrecht: Kluwer, [1666–1716] 1989).
- Letters* Spinoza’s letters (1661–76), as found in *The Letters*, S. Shirley (trans.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995). Passages are cited by number of the letter, and the name of the correspondent.

Political Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus* (1676, unfinished), as found in *Political Treatise*, S. Shirley (trans.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000). Passages are cited by chapter and section.

Theological-Political Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), as found in *Theological-Political Treatise*, M. Silverthorne & J. Israel (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Passages are cited by chapter and section.

References to the Bible are to the Revised Standard Version.



Preface

Does that man, pray, renounce all religion, who declares that God must be acknowledged as the highest good, and that he must be loved as such in a free spirit? And that in this alone does our supreme happiness and our highest freedom consist? And further, that the reward of virtue is virtue itself, while the punishment of folly and weakness is folly itself? And lastly, that everyone is in duty bound to love his neighbor and obey the commands of the sovereign power? I not only said this explicitly, but also proved it with the strongest arguments.

(*Letters* 43, to Velthuysen)

It is tempting to read Spinoza as a philosopher who tried to distance himself from religion. After all, although he argues for the existence of an immutable and eternal substance he calls “God”, this substance has no personal features and no concern for the welfare of humanity. And although he argues for the eternity of the mind, this eternity is nothing like an afterlife in which the just are rewarded and the unjust punished. He argues against even the possibility of miracles, and he regards scripture as “erroneous, mutilated, corrupt and inconsistent” (*Theological-Political* 12.1). If he had founded a church it is hard to see what the parishioners

would do in it, apart from learning geometry, metaphysics and the natural and social sciences.

But, of course, it is also true that Spinoza did not distance himself from religion as much as he might have. He could have come right out and said:

In truth, God does not exist. There is a deep unity in nature, which has some features that match ones traditionally ascribed to God, but this deep unity is so impersonal that we would be better off not calling it “God” at all, so as to avoid unnecessary confusion.

Spinoza, that is, could have been an outright and plain-spoken atheist who found a thrilling but non-divine unity in the natural world. Indeed, that daring position would not have been much more problematic than the one he did espouse. But instead – as I hope to show – he consistently sought to salvage as much as he possibly could from ancient religion, and to *correct* our notion of God rather than abandon it.

Now some scholars might maintain that this was some kind of failure on Spinoza’s part: he did not think through to the genuine consequences of his philosophy, or he was, for whatever reason, unable to bring himself to face those consequences. No less a Spinoza scholar than the great H. A. Wolfson thought this:

That Spinoza himself was not fully conscious of his own radical departure, that he speaks of the opposition to his views as due to “the prejudices of the theologians” and of the “atheism” with which the common people accused him as an untrue accusation, that he continues to consider himself a successor of the religious thinkers of the past who tried to discover the truth that lay hidden in the pages of Scripture, and that he occasionally speaks of his God in the pious phrases of tradition – all this is due to the inherent tendency of men to rationalize and accommodate old beliefs to their own thought. His reputed God-intoxication was really nothing but a hang-over of an earlier religious jag. ([1934] 1962: II, 348)¹

But Wolfson's appraisal can be turned on its head: *given* that Spinoza did consistently reject the accusation of atheism, and *given* that he saw himself as a successor to the religious thinkers of the past, and *given* that he occasionally – no, very frequently, and with poetic elegance – speaks of God in pious phrases of tradition: given all this, is it not more reasonable to see Spinoza as presenting not an alternative to religion, but a further rationalistic reform of religion? Rather than seeing him as continuing to suffer from a hangover he was unable to shake, shouldn't we see him as someone trying to elucidate the truth he saw at the core of the tradition in which he was raised?

Within the last generation or so, several scholars have begun to read Spinoza in this way, namely as a religious reformer rather than as one presenting a complete rejection of religion.² This book shares this approach, and offers an interpretation of Spinoza's whole philosophy – including his reading of scripture (Chapter 1), his metaphysics (Chapter 2), his view of nature and science (Chapter 3), his psychology (Chapter 4) and his politics (Chapter 5) – as a radical theology. Spinoza had a conception of God and an account of how God is responsible for the existence of all things; he had a view of human morality, and politics, that was grounded in his theology; and he advanced this theology not merely as an atheistic metaphysics that could be slyly promoted to the masses through duplicitous usages of religious terms, but as a *genuine* theology. He thought his philosophy was bringing into clarity ancient insights that were distorted through prejudices, ignorance and superstition. Spinoza believed the ancient prophets somehow glimpsed, "as if through a cloud", as he writes (*Ethics* IIP7S), many important truths: that there is a divine agency at work in the world, that love of God is our highest good, that we are in God and God in us, that we should love one another, and so on. It is just that the ancient prophets were in no position to see *why* any of this should be true. And that, in the end, is the virtue of scripture: it is able to impart truths without a complete understanding of them. The virtue of philosophy lies in its ability to provide a complete understanding, which Spinoza took himself to have done.

Thus, according to this book's perspective, Spinoza should not be portrayed as "an enemy from without", or the atheistic Jew of

Amsterdam who attacks the rationality of religion overall, but instead as a philosopher attempting to reform religion from within, bringing his readers or students to see in it deeper truths that are consonant with modern philosophical naturalism. Spinoza's goal, in other words, is to find something divine in the world, and even in scripture, that good modernists can still believe in.

This ambition should be of philosophical interest today. For our religious debates are typically framed as a choice between naturalism and religion. Spinoza saw the divine in nature; indeed, it is not too much to say that he did not think nature could be understood completely without grasping its divinity. This is not to say there are ever any miracles, or anything cloaked in the inscrutable nature of God. It is to say that the study of nature, understood to its clear depths, will reveal something divine. That is, to say the least, an interesting possibility. In the conclusion I shall pit Spinoza's divine naturalism against the robust atheistic naturalism of Nietzsche, which is the kind of naturalism subscribed to by the naturalists of today, whether they are willing to see it or not!

I should say something here at the start about why I am concerned to present this reading of Spinoza. Spinoza's philosophy is one of the greatest ever conceived, and I have devoted large portions of my adult life to understanding it (among other things); and I think reading his philosophy as an overall attempt at constructing a theology is the best way of reading him. I hope this book advances that understanding. Alongside this, I have the belief that contemporary philosophical naturalists need to think carefully about all they are abandoning, and should proceed with greater caution. I hope this book contributes in a small way to this cautionary note by providing an accurate portrait of another variety of naturalism that does not abandon quite so much. The naturalists among us face a critical decision about how to regard nature. Is it as an arbitrary lodging or a kind of sanctuary? That is a question as alive for us as it was for Spinoza. It is perhaps, in the end, the deepest question anyone can ask.

Introduction



Spinoza's theological project

Then I prove that the revealed word of God is not a certain number of books but a pure conception of the divine mind which was revealed by the prophets, namely, to obey God with all one's mind by practising justice and charity.

(Theological-Political preface 10)

A PARABLE

Imagine one day encountering a civilization foreign to ours, with advanced technology and a seemingly accurate grasp of nature. Its citizens engage in public discourse, debating over the way their society should run and what policies should be enacted. They have a good understanding of their own bodies and their own psychologies, advanced enough for them to know their own strengths and many of their own blind spots and weaknesses. They are careful not to waste or spoil their natural resources, and live in a kind of harmony with their environment. They are, in almost every respect, what we might call an "enlightened" citizenry, in the sense that they try to behave reasonably and they try to sort out what they should believe in intelligent and impartial ways, all against a common backdrop of mutual concern for one another and goodwill.

But one feature of this civilization is especially striking. In the centre of their major city is a small cave, which is widely regarded by the citizens as sacred. The city's major buildings form a ring around it, and its principal streets lead to it from the four compass points. In the cave are found ancient writings scratched into the wall. No one knows exactly when they were made, or who made them, or for what reason and in what set of circumstances. The language of the scratchings has been deciphered for the most part, although there remain many ambiguities and uncertainties. The scratchings record many ancient stories, some of them wildly fantastic, some of them perhaps rooted in some historical fact and many of them simply bizarre and baffling. There are also portions of the cave text that prescribe rules to human beings, ranging from "Be kind to your offspring" to "Never feed a goat on a moonless night".

As it turns out, many Cavenians (for we may as well give them a name) try to orient their lives around the prescriptions found in the cave, and they devote a portion of their time to studying the cave-scratchings and venerating the characters described in the stories. Some of them profess to believe every story recounted in the cave, even when the stories seem to contradict one another or the proper understanding of nature. There are deep and developed controversies over how to interpret the scratchings, and it is here that the normally civil discourse of this advanced civilization has sometimes broken down. For there is a history of Cavenians attacking one another and even murdering one another over matters of interpretation. Even today polite conversation tends to avoid certain topics lest the old tempers flare once again. Only recently has it been possible to confess publicly that one does not believe the cave is at all sacred without fearing some sort of reprisal.

The Cavenians' devotion to the cave is hard for us to understand. They ought to know, given their understanding of history and human psychology, that people who lived long ago did not have an accurate understanding of the world around them, and often invented mythological stories to help them feel as if they did understand. (Indeed, this is precisely how the Cavenians themselves describe the ancient religions of *other* cultures.) They ought to know that a moral teaching does not become more authoritative in virtue of being scratched into stone. And, when it comes to the violence associated with

interpretations, they ought to know that writings – and especially ancient ones, in languages not fully understood – can bear multiple interpretations, and those who disagree are not necessarily lesser human beings on that account. Just why the Cavenians revere the cave is a mystery to us since it seems to be so much at odds with the otherwise quite reasonable and intelligent ways they conduct themselves in their advanced civilization.

When we ask them about their devotion, they tell us that they believe the writings are not simply ancient scratchings. The writings, they believe, are messages that come from the Source of All Good Things. This Source put order into the world, which makes their advanced civilization possible. The Source imparted its message to the Cavenians because it has concern for them and wants them to live full and rich lives. Moreover, the Source has promised that there is some sort of immortal existence for anyone who properly heeds the message. When we ask the Cavenians how they know all this, they begin to recite passages from the cave-scratchings. The scratchings, it turns out, say a great deal about the Source although little of it is clear and not all of it is consistent. We point out that what is said in the scratchings cannot possibly serve as *reason* for believing in the truth of the scratchings – that a text cannot lift itself up by its own bootstraps, as it were, and prove itself to be true – but they dismiss this objection. Many of them feel in their hearts that what is in the cave is true, and they also feel that their lives are better when lived according to the cave’s teachings than when they try to ignore those teachings.

As we examine the cave’s teachings in greater detail, we find that we must admit that there is a good deal of sensible advice in them. There is the occasional strange teaching (such as the one about not feeding goats), but many of the teachings offer good rules to live by: be honest in all your dealings; help out those in need; revere every natural thing as a gift from the Source; do not let the sun set without a kind deed done to your neighbour; listen to your neighbour with a cool brow; and so on. And, it seems, the Cavenians on the whole have established a decent community (apart from the history of violent and murderous disagreements over interpretation, of course; but contemporary Cavenians now also disapprove of those violent acts).

Perhaps, we will admit, there is a sense in which the cave-scratchings have provided the Cavenians with something that is true: not "true" in any straightforward sense, since to us it is obvious that the scratchings must have been written by ancient people who were ignorant of many things and more prone to invent fantasies than to attain scientific understanding. But, amazingly enough, these ancient people managed to discover rules well worth following if one wants to live in a supportive and peaceful community. The rules have paid off and they have brought the Cavenians into a praiseworthy lifestyle, despite the fact that they arise out of a primitive ignorance. The teachings are "true" in the sense that they recommend the same sort of lifestyle that would be recommended by a more accurate understanding of humans and the world. The teachings effectively promote a lifestyle that we find praiseworthy on independent, more knowledgeable grounds. And, so far as the teachings do this, we admire them.

Let us add one last feature to this story. Suppose we meet an intelligent young Cavenian who wants to express all this to his fellow citizens, that is, he wants to explain to them their own beliefs about the cave, and the usefulness of their own beliefs, from the perspective of a detached, rational outsider. He wants to convince them that there is nothing to fear in gaining a detached and rational understanding through science, psychology and history. Of course, it will turn out on his account that many of the Cavenian teachings and stories will be revealed to be untenable artefacts from ages long past. But, he insists, the moral *substance* of those stories and teachings will remain undisturbed, since the moral teachings of the cave are in fact quite sound and sensible. In short, he wants to convince his fellow citizens that even if the cave's teachings are nothing but myth, they can be known as such without endangering the wholesome fruits of their civilization. This bright young Cavenian, let us suppose, has a plan to publish these ideas, and he wants to know whether we think this is a good idea.

If we are at all sympathetic to him, and if we ourselves know anything about human beings, our reply should be that *he should tread most carefully*.

OUR OWN CAVE

It is not hard to see where this parable is pointing, of course. The Cavenians' devotion to their cave-scratchings mirrors the Western world's devotion to the Bible. And, as with the Cavenians, our religious devotion does not fit easily with our scientific understanding of humans and the world; nor does it square with our understanding of anthropology and history, and the tendencies of ancient peoples to invent myths as they try to explain the world.¹ Our attachment to the Bible seems to be a stubborn ideological relic from our primitive past, just as we would understand the Cavenians' attachment to be.

Indeed, modern scholarship of the Bible supports the opinion of Spinoza's that prefaces Chapter 1: that "the word of God is erroneous, mutilated, corrupt and inconsistent, [and] we have only fragments of it". The broad consensus among careful scholars is that the Bible is a haphazard compilation of works from several different sources, coming from different places and times, and with different agendas. We see multiple presentations of the same story, sometimes with a change in characters and setting, and many of the great stories of scripture seem to have been meant originally only as *aetiological myths*, that is, stories invented to explain how a certain place got its name, or why there exists a rivalry between groups, or how a common phrase came about. Early interpreters of the Bible then provided layer upon layer of interpretation on the text until the whole work came to have a sense of its own, a sense utterly divorced from the original ones its various writers intended. The Bible, frankly, is a textual mess, and we shall never get an entirely clear picture of all of the ingredients that went into its making.²

But – for all that – we could also point out that the teachings that emerge from the Bible, like those from the cave, on the whole recommend a sensible and wholesome lifestyle. Love your neighbour as yourself, and love the Creator above all else; do not kill, murder, steal or cheat; do justice, love mercy and walk with humility; and so on. There are many other injunctions we wonder about and should argue over, to be sure, but it is not any oversimplification to insist that the main thrust of biblical teachings, as it has

come to be understood through the ages, is commendable, in light of what we know about ourselves and one another. A person living in accordance with the core teachings of the Bible seems to be a person living a life that is in no obvious way unhealthy or foolish (setting aside for now the critique Nietzsche will bring to bear on Christian morality). It would not be surprising to discover – through some branch of evolutionary biology, perhaps – that a community that followed the Bible's core teaching would fare well in competition against other societies organized around principles in conflict with the Bible's core moral teachings. Certainly a society that recommended harming one's neighbour, stealing, murdering and general dishonesty would have a hard time maintaining itself. But at the same time, no believer in the Bible would want to be told that this (alleged) evolutionary advantage is the *main* reason for wanting to live in accordance with the Bible's teaching. No, the principal virtue of such a life is its *piety*, or its expression of one's devotion to God. For the believer, that is a good thing, regardless of its worldly pay-offs.

In at least one way, the situation of the Cavenians is better than ours in relation to the Bible. They have the original writings – scratched into stone, no less! – so they do not have to deal with lost manuscripts and with the corruptions that inevitably creep into texts that are copied and passed along from generation to generation. We have not divulged any details pertaining to the original language of the scratchings, so we do not know what sort of ambiguities it has, but it is difficult to imagine any functional language that is *more* ambiguous than ancient written Hebrew. With regard to the (human) authorship, the circumstances under which the texts were created, and what other sources they drew on, we and the Cavenians are pretty much in the same position: totally in the dark.

Yet many citizens of industrial nations continue to revere the Bible, and not merely as a fascinating ancient text that manages to give good advice about living. Take the population of the United States, for example. As of 2007, almost one third of all Americans believed the Bible is “the actual word of God, to be taken literally”. Nearly half agree to a weaker claim, that the Bible is “inspired” by God. And only about a fifth see it as a purely human record of ancient history, fables and legends (see Newport 2007). So there

really can exist an advanced civilization – one with broad public education, that is a well-functioning democracy with very little censorship, and with only the mildest official endorsement of any religious ideas – with a heavy portion of its populace still believing that an ancient text is, in fact, a relevant, spiritually authoritative message from a transcendent being. That fact is striking, and perhaps more than anything else illustrates our puzzling, composite nature as human beings: we are capable of simultaneously upholding Enlightenment ideals alongside Iron Age superstitions. We surely are no less puzzling than the Cavenians.

Yet those of us who champion reason, and who loftily dismiss the Bible as mere superstition, should not be quite so smug. For the civilization we live and work within, and rely on for our security and survival, has a long history; and almost all of it, moral notions included, is built around that old text. All of the “compass points” of our culture lead out from it: it gives us our north, south, east and west. As Voltaire once said, “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.”³ Who is willing to predict the consequences of tearing it out from the fabric of our culture, or (which amounts to the same thing) devaluing it as mere superstition? Nietzsche was willing to do so, and what he predicted will happen when the old moral superstitions are abandoned was both thrilling and dangerous:

The dangerous and uncanny point has been reached when the greatest, most diverse, most comprehensive life *lives past* the old morality. The “individual” is left standing there, forced to give himself laws, forced to rely on his own arts and wiles of self-preservation, self-enhancement, self-redemption. ... Danger has returned, the mother of morals, great danger, displaced onto the individual this time, onto the neighbor or friend, onto the street, onto your own child, onto your own heart, onto all your own-most, secret-most wishes and wills. (Nietzsche [1886] 2002: 159)

That all is a *good* thing, according to Nietzsche. But many of us are (as he well knew) both timid and mediocre, and unwilling to lose the safety rails our culture places around itself.⁴ We worry over

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