

Becoming Spinoza: On the Failure of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

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The anonymous publication in 1670 in Amsterdam of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (*TTP*) was a disaster. The book was immediately attributed to Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) and severely criticized by all major philosophical and theological factions in the Dutch Republic. It ruined Spinoza’s reputation as a philosopher, and, of course, it could not prevent the collapse in 1672 of the Dutch regime of “true liberty” it aimed to support. It probably also prevented his book from having a lasting impact on the Dutch republican tradition. In his correspondence, Spinoza tried to put on a brave face, commenting dismissively and even contemptuously about his critics. Although he wrote a number of “Notes” clarifying his intentions, he never composed a rejoinder. It would seem, however, that the *Opera posthuma* (1677) – in particular the fourth part of the *Ethics* but also the unfinished *Tractatus politicus* – contain a number of remarks on the way in which “free men” should cope with “outrageous fortune” and reflecting Spinoza’s more intimate response to the calamitous effects of having published the *TTP*. This chapter sketches the purpose of the *TTP* and the reasons Spinoza may have had to turn to politics in the first place, and then shows that the *Ethics* contains an attempt to come to terms with the hostility provoked by the *TTP*. In the end, that is in the *Tractatus politicus*, Spinoza goes even further, arguing each and every citizen is bound to obey the “Commonwealth”.

1 The Purpose of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

According to Spinoza’s *Ethics* (1677), IV, Pref.:

If someone has decided to make something, and has finished it, then he will call this thing perfect – and so will anyone who rightly knows, or thinks he knows, the mind and purpose of the Author of the work.¹

1 Benedict de Spinoza, *The Collected Works*, 2 vols, ed. and trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985–2016), I, 543.

What was Spinoza's "mind and purpose" in writing and publishing his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670)? We have two texts at our disposal revealing the author's intentions. First, there are the famous lines Spinoza wrote at Voorburg in October 1665 to Henri Oldenburg – Letter 30 –, in which he first announced "a treatise on my opinion about scripture," adding his "considerations" for doing so:

1. The prejudices of the theologians, for I know that they are the greatest obstacle to men's being able to apply their minds to philosophy; so I am busy exposing them and removing them from the minds of the more prudent;
2. the opinion the common people have of me; they never stop accusing me of atheism, and I am forced to rebut this accusation as well as I can; and
3. the freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think, which I want to defend in every way; here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness.²

It would seem Spinoza felt compelled to clarify his intentions following Oldenburg's Letter 29, from September 1665, which referred to yet another letter from Spinoza, now lost. Oldenburg had been slightly bemused: "I see You are not so much philosophizing as (if it is permissible to speak thus) Theologizing; for you are recording your thoughts about Angels, prophecy and miracles. But perhaps you are doing this Philosophically"³ So apparently, Spinoza's original aim had both a public and a more private aspect: (a) reducing the hold of theologians over the public domain by advocating the superiority of philosophy; and (b) demonstrating that he, Spinoza, was no atheist.

In this chapter, I will argue that Spinoza failed on both counts, but that his *Ethics*, completed in 1675 but published only after his death in 1677 as well as the *Tractatus politicus*, left unfinished when he died, contain a number of observations on the fragility of life and politics, from which his response to this failure may be gathered. It would seem this response testifies to the close connection which to Spinoza's mind exists between philosophical and more strictly personal considerations. Facing failure actually allowed Spinoza to demonstrate the extent to which he was a Spinozist. But before we are able to assess the way in which he appears to have coped with the outcome of having published the *TTP*, we must first take a close look at the circumstances that propelled him to publish his treatise in the first place.

We know, or like to think we know, what Spinoza was referring to in his letter to Oldenburg. It would seem he was out to undermine the cause of the

² Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 14–15.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

strict Calvinists who were looking for a swift re-installment of the stadtholde-rate that had been suspended in 1650 following the sudden demise of William II. During the 1660s the opposition between *Orangisten* and *Staatsgezinden* that had reached its first climax at the Synod of Dordrecht (1619) was becoming ever more intense.⁴ William III was reaching adolescence, and in October 1665 the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665–67), lamented by Spinoza in his Letters 30 and 32 to Oldenburg, had just got under way with a crushing defeat for the Dutch in June 1665 at the Battle of Lowestoft. As far as the more personal element of Spinoza's announcement is concerned, we know for a fact that at Voorburg dangerous rumors about his "atheism" had begun to spread.⁵

Not that long ago, Theo Verbeek, in a very ingenious book on the *TTP*, challenged the usual interpretation according to which the work contains an argument in favor of intellectual toleration in general. Instead, Verbeek argued, it is essentially an *oratio pro domo* on behalf of his *own* philosophy, and it is first of all a continuing discussion with Hobbes.⁶ We should not be naive in our reading of Spinoza's correspondence, but as much as there is to admire in Verbeek's book – the chapter on The Impossibility of Theology is especially valuable – it seems hazardous to dispense with Spinoza's own comments on his "considerations" leading up to the publication of the *TTP*, the more so as we have a second source in which Spinoza tells us why he wrote the *TTP*, namely its Preface, which presumably was composed after its completion. Having achieved what he had set out to accomplish in the *TTP*, Spinoza in his Preface summarizes what will follow, but he does so by immediately launching an attack on superstition and pointing out the dangers it poses for religion, on the one hand, and for politics, on the other.

Apparently, "true religion" and "a free republic" both suffer from the proliferation of superstition, as is evident most clearly from the example set by "[t]he Turks," whose regime serves as the exact opposite to the Dutch Republic, which allows "complete freedom of judgement." According to Spinoza, however, "*the main thing I resolved to demonstrate in this treatise* (my italics)" is "that this freedom can be granted without harm to piety and the peace of the Republic" – by which he basically rephrases the subtitle of the *TTP*. In order

4 Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477–1806* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 739–95. See also Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153–200 and Arthur Weststeijn, *Commercial Republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age: The Political Thought of Johan and Pieter de La Court* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 284–344.

5 Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 245–46.

6 Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

to achieve this aim, Spinoza continues, two kinds of “prejudices” need to be discarded, again: “regarding religion” and “regarding the right of the supreme power.”⁷ As far as religion is concerned, “the temple itself became a Theater”: “nothing has remained of the Old Religion but its external ceremony,”⁸ with disastrous consequences not only for our understanding of what true religion amounts to, but also with regard to Philosophy *and* to Scripture. In order to gain a true perspective on religion, philosophy, and Scripture, or so Spinoza argues, we should return to what Scripture is actually telling us. This requires the construction of a method for interpreting Scripture, allowing us to reconsider such issues as prophecy, divine election, divine law, and miracles.⁹ By now, of course, Spinoza is outlining the various chapters of the *TTP* and clarifying the logic of its composition, and there is nothing to suggest the arguments involved merely pertain to his own philosophy.¹⁰

It has often been remarked that there is something odd about this logic, in that the famous chapter 7 on the method for interpreting Scripture is situated after this very method had already been put to use in chapters 1 to 6.¹¹ But it could well be argued, of course, that, inversely, Spinoza’s view on the status of Scripture is crucially dependent on his views regarding prophecy, election, law, and miracles: whatever else Scripture might be, it cannot possibly be a miraculous “gift” to a “chosen” people, whose “prophets” were awarded privileged access to the truth – or as the opening lines of chapter 12 have it “a Letter God has sent men from heaven.”¹² According to the Preface of the *TTP*, it is at this stage already that a major blow has been delivered to the cause of anyone bent on curbing the freedom to philosophize, for even before chapter 7 it has been established, or so Spinoza avers, “that Scripture leaves reason absolutely free, and that is has nothing in common with Philosophy.”¹³ In fact, it would seem that by now Spinoza could have claimed to have achieved the purposes

7 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 68–69.

8 *Ibid.*, 70.

9 *Ibid.*, 72.

10 Cf. Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), esp. 17–35 and 200–14. See also for instance Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (London: Routledge, 2008), 206–53; Justin Steinberg, “Spinoza’s Curious Defense of Toleration,” in *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Yitzhak Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 210–30.

11 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 73 note 29.

12 *Ibid.*, 248.

13 *Ibid.*, 72.

put forward in his letter to Oldenburg. For at this stage, both “the prejudices of the theologians” and the need for “the freedom of philosophizing” have been established, and in chapter 6 the conclusion has been reached that it is not the denial of miracles that “would lead to Atheism,” but rather belief in the possibility that things happen against “the order of nature.”¹⁴ Whatever may have been the occasion for the rumors concerning Spinoza’s atheism, his denial of miracles should not be held against him in any way, or so the *TTP* implies.

Chapters 8 to 10 on the editorial history of the Old Testament and 11 on the authority of the Apostles appear to be largely supplemental support to the closing argument developed in 12–15 regarding the nature of Scripture (12–13) and faith (14), and, finally to the conclusion reached in chapter 15, “that Theology should not be the handmaid of reason, nor Reason the handmaid of Theology.”¹⁵ The opening lines of chapter 13, summarizing the results achieved so far, actually skip the chapters 8 to 12. Having briefly referred to chapters 2, 5, 6, and 7, they conclude: “From all this it follows that the doctrine of Scripture does not contain lofty speculations, or philosophical matters, but only the simplest things, which anyone, no matter how slow, can perceive.”¹⁶ The final comments of chapter 14 point in the same direction. Having established that “[f]aith [...] grants everyone the greatest freedom to philosophize,” Spinoza concludes “the things we have shown here are the main points I have been aiming at in this treatise.”¹⁷ It is tempting to assume that considerable parts from chapter 8 onwards originated in an earlier text composed by Spinoza, that is: the “Justification” he was reported to have prepared following the 1656 *herem*. The Dordrecht minister Salomon van Til in 1694 claimed that parts of this text had found their way into the *TTP*.¹⁸ The start of chapter 12, the fourth paragraph in particular, seems to confirm that the previous parts carry additional information supporting Spinoza’s interpretation of the concept “Word of God,” according to which it is the divine law “inscribed in our hearts,”¹⁹ with which Spinoza means to say: universal principles enabling us to display religious or pious behavior.

14 Ibid., 159.

15 Ibid., 272.

16 Ibid., 257.

17 Ibid., 271.

18 Jakob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinozas*, vol. I, ed. by Manfred Walther and Michael Czelinski (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Fromann-Holzboog, 2006), 399; Piet Steenbakkens, “The Text of Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus*,” in *Spinoza’s Tractatus theologico-politicus*, ed. by Melamed and Rosenthal, 29–40.

19 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 249.

2 From Theology to Politics

So why did Spinoza not stop after having completed chapter 7 or, for that matter, 11? Spinoza's text suggests two reasons. First because he appears to have felt that the largely negative conclusions reached so far simply had to be completed by a positive account of what faith, religion, and theology did amount to – for that's the subject matter of the chapters 12 to 15. Second, the political chapters 16 to 20 meet the challenge Spinoza set himself by announcing in the subtitle of the *TTP* not only "that the Republic Can Grant Freedom of Philosophizing without Harming its Peace or Piety," but also that it "Cannot Deny it without Destroying its Peace and Piety." To all intents and purposes, this particular objective goes beyond the essentially defensive text of Letter 30. In fact, it is this additional objective which propels him into developing a political philosophy: peace and piety require the freedom to philosophize. This raises the question to what extent the ambition revealed in the latter half of the subtitle was actually the product of Spinoza's work on the claim expressed in the first half. Should we perhaps conclude that, again, as he went along, Spinoza felt the negative conclusion reached in the first fifteen chapters did not suffice and had to be supplemented with a positive account, demonstrating that the freedom to philosophize should be allowed not only because it will not hurt theology, but also because it is beneficial as such – that is to say, from a political perspective? "Now it's time for us," Spinoza writes in the opening lines of chapter 16, "to ask how far this freedom of thought, and of saying what you think, extends in the best Republic."²⁰

This much seems certain: having completed an early draft of the *Ethics*, Spinoza in 1665 was about to further explore the moral psychology that he ultimately developed in *Ethics* Parts Four and Five. In Letter 28, written in June 1665, and addressed to Johannes Bouwmeester, he is referring to a manuscript of the *Ethics*, as it must have looked at the time he started writing the *TTP*:

As for the third part of our philosophy, I shall soon send some of it either to you (if you wish to be its translator) or to friend De Vries. Although I had decided to send nothing until I finished it, nevertheless, because it is turning out to be longer than I thought, I don't want to hold you back too long. I shall send up to about the 80th proposition.²¹

Since the third part of the *Ethics* as it was completed in the summer of 1675 – evidenced by Letter 68 – includes only 59 propositions, it would seem Spinoza,

²⁰ Ibid., 282.

²¹ Ibid., I, 396.

somewhere in the decade leading up to its final composition, decided to add two more parts and use some of the material destined for Part Three for what would become Part Four and possibly Part Five. As it happens, the social anthropology contained in the final version of the *Ethics* starts to come into its own from Part Four, proposition 32 onwards: "Insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to agree in nature." It would seem Spinoza's interest in the social and societal dimension of human existence was a relatively late development in his thought. Neither the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* nor the *Korte Verhandeling*, both dating from about 1660, let alone the *Cogitata Metaphysica* of 1663, has much to say on the subject.

Jetze Touber has recently argued quite convincingly that the essentially *external* critique of Scripture and theology popular among increasingly radical Dutch Cartesians active during the 1650s and 1660s represented only part of the background to Spinoza's exegetical intervention, as scholars from Scaliger to Vossius, formulating internal critiques of a philological nature, had actually preceded the introduction of Cartesianism in the Dutch Republic.²² Touber is absolutely right, as was Eric Jorink earlier, emphasizing the largely autonomous dynamic of seventeenth-century Dutch philology.²³ Yet the reality of a significant, critical tradition in Dutch biblical scholarship only further confirms the fact that for Spinoza the publication of the *TTP* turned into a disaster. Over the past few years the early Dutch reception of the *TTP* has been studied in considerable detail. Soon it was common knowledge Spinoza was indeed the author of the anonymous treatise, purportedly printed in Hamburg, and within the Dutch Reformed Church a campaign got under way to have it banned. What is more, a considerable series of refutations of the *TTP* were issued, both in Latin and in Dutch, while no one rose to its defense. The argument put forward by Jonathan Israel that after Spinoza's death the *TTP* was also to receive considerable praise abroad does not alter the fact that during his lifetime, Spinoza saw his reputation crumble.²⁴

22 Jetze Touber, *Spinoza and Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1660–1710* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

23 Eric Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age, 1575–1715* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

24 Wiep van Bunge, "On the Early Dutch Reception of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*," *Studia Spinozana* 5 (1989): 225–51; J.J.V.M. de Vet, "On Account of the Sacrosanctity of the Scriptures: Johannes Melchior Against the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*," *Lias* 18 (1991): 229–61; Ernestine van der Wall, "The *Tractatus theologico-politicus* and Dutch Calvinism, 1670–1700," *Studia Spinozana* 11 (1995): 201–26; Jonathan Israel, "The Banning of Spinoza's Works in the Dutch Republic (1670–1678)," in *Disguised and Overt Spinozism around 1700*, ed. by Wiep van Bunge and Wim Klever (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3–14 and idem, "The Early Dutch and German Reaction to the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*: Foreshadowing the Enlightenment's More General Spinoza Reception?," in *Spinoza's Theological-Political*

What does seem clear is that well before the publication of the *Ethics* Spinoza was repeatedly accused of ridiculing Scripture and theology, and of skillfully promoting an atheistic and fatalistic metaphysics. Turning prophets into imaginative politicians, denying the reality and even the possibility of miracles, scoffing at the so-called election of the Jews, turning Scripture into an essentially chaotic assemblage of ancient chronicles packed with absurdities, portraying ministers as dangerous spin doctors, and reducing the professional competence of theology to promoting mere “moral certainty” concerning “obedience,” while waxing lyrical about the “mathematical certainty” produced by philosophy – to Spinoza’s many critics it all pointed in the same direction: the *TTP* ended up destroying the very foundations of the Reformed creed. It must have been particularly disappointing to Spinoza that the most detailed and most voluminous refutations of the *TTP* had been delivered precisely by representatives of those intellectual and religious factions, from which he may have expected to receive at least some support. For both the Remonstrants and the academic Dutch Cartesians, two parties intimately interested in the cause of liberty and toleration, produced scathingly polemical reactions to the *TTP*, and we now know that both books were very much the outcome of collective efforts. The Remonstrant minister Jacobus Batelier’s *Vindiciae miraculorum* of 1673 was written with the assistance of the Remonstrant professor Philippus van Limborch, while Regnerus van Mansvelt’s *Adversus Anonymum* (1674) was equally very much the “official reply” formulated by the Cartesian academics, especially at Utrecht.²⁵ In Letter 68, to Oldenburg, Spinoza specifically complains about “the stupid Cartesians” who continue “denouncing my opinions and writings everywhere. Even now they’re still at it.”²⁶ To make matters worse, even the Collegiant movement, arguably the most liberal faction of Dutch Protestantism and the spiritual home of some of Spinoza’s most intimate Amsterdam friends, including Jarich Jelles and Pieter Balling, came up with two highly critical assessments as both Johannes Bredenburg and Frans Kuyper joined the fray in 1675 and 1676, respectively.²⁷ As will be only too familiar, the *TTP* was

Treatise, ed. Melamed and Rosenthal, 72–100; Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 215–40; Henri Krop, *Spinoza. Een paradoxale icoon van Nederland* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2014), 147–75; Albert Gootjes, “Le réseau cartésien d’Utrecht face au *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Esquisses d’une campagne anti-spinoziste,” *Bulletin annuel de l’Institut d’histoire de la Réformation* 36 (2015): 49–54; Touber, *Spinoza and Biblical Philology*, 76–123.

25 Jacobus Batelier, *Vindiciae miraculorum per quae divinae Religions et fidei Christianae veritas olim confirmata fuit* (Amsterdam: Johannes van Waesberge, 1673); Regnerus van Mansvelt, *Adversus Anonymum Theologo Politicum Liber singularis* (Amsterdam: Abraham Wolfgang, 1674).

26 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 459.

27 Johannes Bredenburg, *Enervatio Tractatus theologico-politici, una cum Demonstratione, geometrico ordine disposita, Naturam non esse Deum* (Rotterdam: Isaac Naeranus, 1675);

actually censored by the States of Holland in 1674, and indications are that in university cities such as Utrecht and Leiden it became indeed difficult to purchase a copy.

Arguably most frustrating of all is the fact that the outrage over Spinoza's intervention prevented him from publishing the *Ethics*. In a lost letter of July 5, 1675 to Oldenburg he had apparently announced his intention to publish his "Five-part Treatise."²⁸ In Letter 68, however, from late September, early October, he told Oldenburg how by the end of July he had "set out for Amsterdam, intending to commit to the press the book I wrote to you about," only to find out that since

the Theologians were setting traps for me everywhere, I decided to put off the publication I was planning, until I saw how the matter would turn out. And I resolved to let you know what plan I would then pursue. But every day the matter seems to get worse, and I don't know what I should do.²⁹

In the end, or so it would seem, the *furor theologicus* unleashed following its publication prevented the *TTP* from playing a substantial part in the Dutch republican tradition, brilliantly analyzed by Wyger Velema: Spinoza was virtually absent from eighteenth-century Dutch republican discourse from Lieven de Beaufort (1675–1730) to the violent disputes raging between Patriots and Orangists during the 1780s.³⁰ It may well have also served to caution Dutch republican authors to stay away from theology as much as possible. As the Dutch Enlightenment was overwhelmingly Protestant and during the eighteenth century the focus of debate shifted from theology to politics, its main representatives did not convey any ambition to take up Spinoza's lead.

3 Facing Failure

Spinoza tried to put on a brave face. In Letter 50 to Jarich Jelles, June 1674, we find a unique comment on his part, revealing rare bitterness and even some uncharacteristically dismissive resentment:

Frans Kuyper, *Arcana Atheismi revelata Philosophice et Paradoxe refutata* (Rotterdam: Isaac Naeranus, 1676).

28 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 435.

29 *Ibid.*, 459.

30 Wyger Velema, *Republicans: Essays on Eighteenth-Century Dutch Political Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

I've seen in a Bookseller's window the book the Utrecht Professor wrote against mine, which was published after his death. From the few things I read at that time, I decided it was not worth reading, much less answering. So I left the book lying there, along with its author. I smiled to myself that the most ignorant are generally the boldest and the readiest to write.³¹

Spinoza had displayed similar anger in his reply to Lambert van Velthuysen's comments to Jacob Ostens on the *TTP*: "I could hardly bring myself to reply to that man's pamphlet."³² By the autumn of 1675, however, having completed the *Ethics* and having decided to at least postpone its publication, Spinoza appears to have changed his mind. By this time he was in direct correspondence with Van Velthuysen, and as he was considering adding a number of notes to the *TTP*, "to clarify some more obscure passages," he now assured Van Velthuysen that he would love to include his new-found friend's critical comments: "For there is no one whose arguments I would be more pleased to weigh carefully."³³ The text of these *Adnotationes* was never published during Spinoza's life.³⁴

Clearly, as Steven Nadler put it, it would be "an unfair judgement based on a shortsighted perspective" to conclude from Spinoza's inability to raise public support for his views and have the *libertas philosophandi* expanded that the *TTP as such* was a failure, since it "is one of most important and influential books in the history of philosophy, in religious and political thought, and even in Bible studies."³⁵ What is more, although the rumors concerning his atheism were now only growing stronger, the fact that during the 1670s the Dutch public domain lost much of its former opportunity to criticize reformed theology was, of course, the result not of any philosophical or theological development at all. Instead, the temporary suspension of the "true liberty" characteristic of the first stadtholderless age was due to William III's crackdown on the liberal elites ruling Holland following the French invasion and general chaos of 1672.

In a very real sense, Spinoza came to experience at first hand the radical contingency of everyday life – that is, the consequences of being a finite mode, existing in duration.³⁶ To Spinoza, it was axiomatic that "[t]here is no singular

31 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 407.

32 *Ibid.*, 385.

33 *Ibid.*, 460.

34 Spinoza, *Oeuvres*, vol. III, *Tractatus theologico-politicus/Traité theologico-politique*, ed. by Fokke Akkerman. trans. by Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 655–95.

35 Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 240.

36 Wiep van Bunge, *Spinoza Past and Present: Essays on Spinoza, Spinozism, and Spinoza Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 101–18.

thing in nature than which there is another more powerful and stronger" (*E*, IV, ax. 1) and he next demonstrated that "the power of man is limited by the power of another thing and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes" (*E* IV, 3 dem.), from which he next deduces "that man is necessarily always subject to passions, that he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires." (*E*, IV, cor.)³⁷ So on a metaphysical level Spinoza must have been fully prepared for the possibility that he would *not* be applauded, not to mention the potentially devastating effects on his affective constitution by the violence of his critics, despite his equally natural inclination to have been content with having completed the *TTP* in the first place. Faced with the question of Spinoza's personal reaction to the general dismissal of the *TTP* by the Dutch reading public, it is tempting to consult the *Ethics* in order to explore some of the terms in which he may have responded affectively. We know that much of Spinoza's moral psychology had been well prepared by the time he returned to the completion of the *Ethics*, for many of the terms involved already figure in the second part of the *Short Treatise*.

As a rule, experts have considered the moral psychology contained in the *Ethics* as a further development of the *TTP*, but why not consider the *Ethics* also as containing a further reflection on the fate of the *TTP* itself? There appears to be a special reason to turn to the *Ethics*, since we know that his friends were impressed most of all by the extent to which his life demonstrated his ability to practice what he preached. This is in fact the main message instilled by the short biography composed by Jelles and added to his *Opera posthuma*, published in 1677.³⁸ It would seem Spinoza was hardly inclined to humility, that is, the sadness of the mind imagining its own lack of power, "accompanied by the idea of our own weakness" (*E*, III, 55 schol.).³⁹ But then again, according to Spinoza, humility is no virtue (*E*, IV, 53), and neither for that matter is repentance (*E*, IV, 54). Yet initially at least he appears to have been genuinely angry, as he had turned into a man "who imagines he is hated by someone, and believes he has given no cause for hate," and who "will hate the other in return." (*E*, III, 40) We know Spinoza had something of a temper. Just recall the way he reacted to the assassination of the brothers De Witt in August 1672. According

37 Cf. *Tractatus politicus* II, 5: "Whether a man is wise or ignorant, he's a part of nature" Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 509.

38 Wiep van Bunge, *From Bayle to the Batavian Revolution: Essays on Philosophy in the Eighteenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 273–90.

39 In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza was more positive about humility: "Humility exists when someone knows his own imperfection." Spinoza, *Collected Works*, I, 111.

to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Spinoza had informed him that his landlord in The Hague barely managed to prevent him from taking to the street, carrying a placard reading *Ultimi barbarorum*.⁴⁰ In the summer of 1672 Spinoza must have been beside himself with anger.

Perhaps after a while, however, Spinoza was prepared to recognize that his *pride* had been hurt. According to the *Ethics*, pride “is Joy born of the fact that a man thinks more highly of himself than is just.” Perhaps he had come to realize that he had been mistaken in thinking he could singlehandedly turn the tide. “Pride,” the *Ethics* reiterates, “is a species of Madness, because the man dreams, with open eyes, that he can do all these things which he achieves only in his imagination ...” (*E*, III, 26 schol.). Perhaps Spinoza, in the end, came to realize that he had been too ambitious, ambition being “[t]his striving to bring it about that everyone should approve his love and hate.” Being ambitious, however, is natural: “each of us, by his nature, wants the others to live according to his temperament” (*E*, III, 31 schol.).⁴¹ And perhaps the *Ethics* can explain *how* Spinoza managed to come to terms with the anger besieging him as a result of the scathing reviews the *TTP* had provoked, including its official prohibition, if only because “(h)ate can never be good” (*E*, IV, 45) and that “[h]e who lives according to the guidance of reason strives, as far as can, to repay the other’s Hate, Anger, and Disdain toward him, with Love, or Nobility.” (*E*, IV, 46)

If the *Ethics* can indeed be read as also containing an attempt to make sense of the poor fate of the *TTP*, it would seem *Ethics* IV, proposition 20 ff provide us with a clue: in a very real sense, Spinoza succeeded in coping with “outrageous fortune” precisely by becoming more of a Spinozist than he had ever been. From *E* IV, 20 onwards, Spinoza demonstrates the extent to which preserving one’s being is tantamount to being virtuous, and that “[a]cting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving [...] by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one’s own advantage.” (*E*, IV, 24). The guidance of reason is quite unequivocal in its objective: “understanding,” and (*E*, IV, 26) nothing but understanding (*E*, IV, 27). In the final proposition of the Appendix to *Ethics* IV it is as if we are presented with a Portrait of the Philosopher as a Young Man Coping with Failure:

But human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes. So we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which

⁴⁰ Nadler, *Spinoza*, 302. See Van Bunge, *Spinoza Past and Present*, 87–100.

⁴¹ See also *E* III, 39 schol.: “The ambitious man desires nothing so much as Esteem and dreads nothing so much as Shame.”

happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power that we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow. If we understand this clearly and distinctly, that part of us which is defined by understanding, i.e. the better part of us, will be entirely satisfied with this, and will strive to persevere in this satisfaction. For insofar as we understand, we can want nothing except what is necessary, nor absolutely be satisfied with anything except what is true.

Returning to Spinoza's biography and in particular to his efforts of the early 1670s, when he had just moved to The Hague, where he was to witness at close quarters the downfall of the De Witts, we know exactly what those efforts amounted to. He managed to complete the one book he had been working on ever since the early 1660s, realizing and demonstrating to himself in a very literal sense *E* IV, 28: "Knowledge of God is the Mind's greatest good; its virtue is to know God." In short, the achievement of the *TTP* should perhaps be sought not just in the material insights it delivers, that is to say, in what it contributed to any particular debate raging during the 1660s and beyond, nor in the extent to which it forced him to further explore the social and ultimately political dimensions of man, but rather in the way in which its author succeeded in not being overcome by the negative affects resulting from its publication. Recall *E* V, 9 dem.: "An affect is only evil, or harmful insofar as it prevents the Mind from being able to think."⁴² From this perspective the real triumph of the *TTP*, to put it differently, consisted in Spinoza's ability to come to terms with its failure, for its extremely hostile reception only further enhanced Spinoza's "nature" as a rational being, a philosopher that is, to whom understanding constitutes man's *nec plus ultra*.

It would seem, then, Spinoza's exploration of what a life under the guidance of reason looks like actually contains a reflection on the uproar caused by the publication of the *TTP* and its consequences for the author involved. It remains to be seen what to make in this context of *E*, IV, 35 dem.: "insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, they must always agree amongst themselves." Are we really to assume Spinoza felt his opponents were *all* "torn by affects which are passions," and that he was the *only* genuine philosopher

42 So, this would be a special instance of the issue dealt with in Susan James, "Spinoza on the Passionate Dimension of Philosophical Reasoning," in *Emotional Minds: The Passions and the Limits of Pure Inquiry in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 71–89.

involved? The *Ethics* tells us that “very great Pride” indicates “very great weakness of mind.” (*E*, IV, 56) Or does he take a meta-stance involving his own position as well? In the second scholium to *E*, IV, 37 Spinoza addresses the difference between “man’s natural state and his civil state.” By doing so, he returns in fact to chapter 16 of the *TTP*, on the foundations of a republic and the difference between natural and civil rights.⁴³ To all intents and purposes, the way in which he describes man’s natural state reads very much like a portrayal of Spinoza-publishing-the-*Tractatus theologico-politicus*:

Everyone exists by the highest right of nature, and consequently everyone, by the highest right of nature, judges what is good and evil, considers his own advantage according to his own temperament [...], avenges himself [...], and strives to preserve what he loves and destroys what he hates. [...]. If men lived according to the guidance of reason, everyone would possess this right of his [...] without injury to anyone else.

But because men are subject to affects, “it is necessary for them to give up their natural right,” and live in societies, ruled by laws, restraining the affects. It is only in civil states that men are bound to obey to laws made up “by common agreement.” and that “obedience is considered a merit in a Citizen” (*E*, IV, 37 schol. 2).⁴⁴ And the “free man” is best advised to avoid dangers rather than overcome them (*E*, IV, 69), and to join “a state where he lives according to a common decision” instead of living in solitude, obeying only himself (*E*, IV, 73).

This looks very much like a philosophical justification of Spinoza’s repeated assurance, at the end of the Preface of the *TTP* and reiterated in the final lines of chapter 20:

that I do write nothing which I do not most willingly submit to the examination and judgment of the supreme Powers of my Country. For if they judge that any of the things I say are in conflict with the laws of my country, or harmful to the general welfare, I wish to withdraw it. I know that I am a man and may have erred.⁴⁵

43 See esp. Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 233–60.

44 Cf. *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Chapter 17: “It’s obedience which makes the subject, not the reason for the obedience.” Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 297.

45 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 76. Cf. 353–54.

Coping with the effects of virtually being outlawed by the regime of the Republic he purported to support turned Spinoza into the philosopher *par excellence*, since it invited him to realize the attitude his philosophy aimed to instill. Looking back, Spinoza may well have smiled about his former anger, for why should the fate of the *TTP* have been a source of surprise? He must have been intimately acquainted with the horrific fate of Adriaan Koerbagh, prominent member of his Amsterdam circle of friends, whose books were also banned and who died in jail in 1669, after the aborted attempt to publish his semi-Spinozist *A Light Shining in Dark Places*.⁴⁶ It has often been remarked that the memory of Koerbagh renders Spinoza's praise for his native country – “we happen to have that rare good fortune that we live in a Republic in which everyone is granted complete freedom of judgment ...”⁴⁷ – highly ironic, if not downright cynical.

4 Conclusion

In the end, it would seem Spinoza conquered despair, overcame his anger as well as his pride, and completed the *Ethics*, and subsequently decided to elaborate on the final, political chapters of the *TTP*, enabling his editors to include in his *Opera Posthuma* ten new chapters and the start of an eleventh, together entitled *Tractatus politicus*. Some commentators have argued it represents a definite further development of Spinoza's political thought and a departure from some of his former views, for instance regarding the “social contract” from which society originates.⁴⁸ Instead of exploring this issue, however, we should look for traces left by the political events of the 1670s, including the prohibition of his *TTP* in 1674. It has often been remarked that to Spinoza's mind the Art of Politics essentially is a balancing act: how to create a state powerful enough to allow its citizens as much freedom as possible?⁴⁹ This much seems

46 Adriaan Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark Places to Illuminate the Main Questions of Theology and Religion*, ed. and trans. by Michiel Wielema, introd. by Wiep van Bunge (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 185–96; Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, 36–51; Bart Leeuwenburgh, *Het noodlot van een ketter. Adriaan Koerbagh (1633–1669)* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013).

47 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 69.

48 See most notably Alexandre Matheron, “Le problème de l'évolution de Spinoza *du Traité théologico-politique au Traité politique*,” in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, ed. by Edwin Curley and Pierre-François Moreau (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 258–70.

49 See for instance Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 214.

certain, that after 1672, having faced the vulnerability of the Republic he inhabited and cherished as well as its miraculous survival, in part due to William III's intervention, Spinoza tended to emphasize the necessity of powerful government.⁵⁰ As a rule, this is presented as illustrating Spinoza's Machiavellian "realism," famously expressed on the first page of the *Tractatus politicus*, where he chastises philosophers conceiving "men not as they are, but as they want them to be."⁵¹ The results are clear:

[N]o citizen is his own master. Each is subject to the control of the Commonwealth, and bound to carry out all its demands. He has no right to decide what's fair or unfair, pious or impious [...] So, the more a man is led by reason, i.e. [...] the more free he is, the more steadfastly he will observe the laws of the Commonwealth and carry out the commands of the supreme power to whom he is subject [...] If a man who is guided by reason sometimes, by the command of the commonwealth, has to do something he knows is incompatible with reason, that harm is far outweighed by the good he derives from the civic order itself. For it is a law of reason that we should choose the lesser of two evils.⁵²

So here we have an author of a radical plea in favor of *libertas philosophandi*, prohibited by the very Republic he aimed to support, subsequently arguing in favor of the right of the state to curb the political initiatives of its citizens. In conclusion, it would seem there is every reason to assume that by the time Spinoza was writing the *Tractatus politicus* he had indeed triumphed over the failure of his own *TTP*.

50 Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza et la politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), 63–90.

51 Spinoza, *Collected Works*, II, 503.

52 Ibid., 518–19. On the limits of Spinoza's plea in favor of freedom of expression, see also Daniel Garber, "Should Spinoza Have Published His Philosophy?" In *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. by Charles Huenemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 166–87.