

# Spinoza's Moral Religion And Political Morality\*

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**S**pinoza is the first philosopher to have written a systematic defense of democracy. This defense emerges as a necessary consequence of his reflections on the nature of the universe, on human psychology and on the way individuals might achieve blessedness. His explicit repudiation of traditional morality and traditional political philosophy allowed him to formulate a new way of achieving harmony among basically selfish individuals.

For reasons of persuasion, Spinoza accepts initially the divine origins of Scripture. He moves, however, on a path from a conventional beginning to an unconventional end. Scripture must be studied in a way analogous to nature. In contrast to the position of Maimonides - one of Spinoza's main medieval Jewish sources - the principles for the interpretation of Scripture must be drawn from Scripture itself, and not from a prior philosophical position. When we approach the Bible without bias, he claims, we find that the speculative views uttered by the prophets are like the contradictory and

inadequate opinions of other non-philosophers. A scientific analysis of Scripture, based upon historical, linguistic, and biographical data; and detailed study of internal contradictions and errors in the Scriptural compilations themselves, free us from the notion that the book has authority in speculative matters. But the moral teaching of Scripture is everywhere the same and is easily understood. The prophets disagree on speculative matters, but they are in complete harmony as regards the Divine Law of morality. In this respect they prefigure the citizens of the best republic. The Divine Law, as the evident universal teaching of Scripture, must be the foundation of our understanding of Holy Writ.

True religion has authority solely over action; any religion which claims to exercise theoretical authority is superstition: "The end of philosophy is nothing but truth; of faith, however, as we have abundantly shown, the end is nothing other than obedience and piety." Since "obedience" means obedience to God's law, the

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content of obedience is determined by the definition of piety. What is piety? The answer, as derived from Scripture, is clear, distinct, and simple. First, piety requires assent in a minimal number of theoretical propositions, as for example that an omnipotent God exists, upon whom our salvation depends. Second, true virtue consists entirely in love of God and neighbor. Love of God is expressed by love of one's neighbor (and by conforming to the public modes of worship). To love one's neighbour is to respect his rights. Since his rights are determined by positive law, piety not only demands that we obey the laws of the state, but consists in such obedience.

The true teaching of Scripture has been interpreted to make piety virtually identical with law-abidingness and patriotism. By restricting the authority of religion to morality (the precise rules of which are defined by the political order), Spinoza has freed reason from the dangers of superstition without destroying the beneficial results of faith. Reason and revelation are shown to agree, both with respect to the content of morality or religion, and also concerning the sense in which they are independent of each other and the sense in which they are related. The universal covenant, which replaced the special covenant between God and the Jews, is the means by which we have innate knowledge of God as the source of morality. This covenant is, in other words, the religious manifestation of those innate ideas from which reason deduces the principles of morality. Finally, revelation alone provides man with the proof that salvation rests upon his obedience to these principles. Since the principles of

morality are most adequately expressed, according to Spinoza's political argument, in the laws of the best regime, religion in effect furnishes proof that piety consists strictly in obedience to the right political order, and more generally to one's legally constituted government.

In the closing chapters of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* Spinoza demonstrates that the political teaching of natural religion is in harmony with revealed moral-

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ity, as has just been noted. Natural reason teaches us the *jus naturale*, which pertains to every finite being. Activity originates in the struggle for self-preservation. For example, fish use the water and eat smaller fish by a natural right which is simply an expression of their determinate being. As Spinoza says, "nature, taken absolutely, has absolute right to all things it can get or do. In other words, natural right is co-extensive with power." Thus, in the state of nature, wrongdoing is impossible: noth-

ing which one can do is prohibited, for all occurrences are natural. Wrongdoing becomes possible only within a society, as the violation of the law. Wrongdoing is a violation of the fundamental desire for self-preservation. That is, man is by nature a political animal, because political society is necessary for human survival and perfection. Society is created by reason and is the instrument whereby reason perfects itself. The perfection of reason is the perfection of man as such: the perfection of his power. In order to perfect his power, man is led, not merely into society, but to an effort to understand, and to actualize, the best society.

It is rational to moderate one's behavior according to circumstances. Men have a variety of natures, and this, together with the fact that so few are philosophers, requires that the best society be accommodated to the nature of the majority. A fundamental accommodation of this sort is the recognition that all men are moved by their calculation of goods (pleasures) and evils (pains), but that few are capable of making such calculations accurately. The social compact on which the best regime is based can be preserved only by an appeal to self-interest: "everyone has by nature the right to act with guile, nor is he required to observe his pacts, unless in the hope of a greater good or in fear of a greater evil." Spinoza must demonstrate, both to the few and (in a sense) to the many, that his best regime is a greater

guarantor of goods as to make disobedience to it a contradiction of self-interest

In accord with the primacy of self-interest Spinoza formulates his preference for a democracy. The state exists for the sake of the individual but it is for individual's sake that he subordinates individuality to the common power. Each individual cedes to the state all of his power, so that the democracy is "a collective assemblage of men which has collectively the highest right to all things within its power." Whether "from free spirit or in fear of the highest punishment," each citizen will thereafter be required to obey the sovereign authority. If all people agree to transfer all of their power to the government which expresses the will of all, then all are participating in self-government. This is nothing other than seeing to one's self-preservation. Since democracy gratifies this natural desire by being compatible with the variety of natures having a common general goal, democracy is preferable to other regimes.

The political philosophy of Spinoza is of special interest today because it combines the acceptance of modern science with the traditional conception of the normative function of philosophy. Spinoza's version of democracy, apart from its historical importance, reminds us of the difficulties which must be faced by all those who love freedom. Also, it alerts us to the great difficulty of preserving freedom unless the love of speculation is kept alive.

# A Spinozism For Our Times

## Gilles Deleuze

Excerpts from: *Spinoza and Us*

*On the Difference between the Ethics and a Morality*

### Spinoza and Us:

“Writers, poets, musicians, filmmakers – painters too, even chance readers – may find that they are Spinozists; indeed, such a thing is more likely for them than for professional philosophers. It is a matter of one’s practical conception of the “plan”. [Deleuze makes a distinction between what he calls a “plan/plane” of *transcendence* – an organization or development coming from above; and a plan/plane of *immanence* that is not an organization from above, but whose “process of composition must be apprehended for itself, through that which it gives, in that which it gives” B.E.] It is not that one may be a Spinozist without knowing it. Rather, there is a strange privilege that Spinoza enjoys, something that seems to have been accomplished by him and no one else. He is a philosopher who commands an extraordinary conceptual apparatus, one that is highly developed, systematic, and scholarly; and yet he is the quintessential object of an immediate, unprecedented encounter, such that a non-philosopher, or even someone without any formal education, can receive a sudden illumination from him, a “flash”. Then it is as if one discovers that one is a Spinozist; one arrives in the middle of Spinoza, one is sucked

up, drawn into the system or the composition....There is a double of reading of Spinoza: on the one hand, a systematic reading in pursuit of the general idea and the unity of parts; but on the other hand and at the same time, the affective reading, without an idea of the whole, where one is carried along or set down, put in motion or at rest, shaken or calmed according to the velocity of this or that part. Who is a Spinozist? Sometimes, certainly, the individual who works “on” Spinoza, on Spinoza’s concepts, provided this is done with enough gratitude and admiration. But also the individual who, without being a philosopher, receives from Spinoza an affect, a set of affects, a kinetic determination, an impulse, and makes Spinoza an encounter, a passion. What is unique about Spinoza is that he, the most philosophic of philosophers...teaches the philosopher how to become a non-philosopher.”

### On the Difference between the Ethics and a Morality:

If Ethics and Morality merely interpret the same concepts in a different way, the distinction between them would only be theoretical. This is not the case.

Throughout his work, Spinoza does not cease to denounce three kinds of personages: the man with sad passions; the man who exploits these passions, who needs them in order to establish his power; and the man who is saddened by the human condition and by human passions in general (he may make fun of these as much as he disdains them, but his mockery is a bad laughter): the slave, the tyrant, and the priest ... the moralist trinity. Since Epicurus and Lucretius, the deep implicit connection between tyrants and slaves has never been more clearly shown: "In despotic statecraft, the supreme and essential mystery is to hoodwink the subject, and to mask the fear, which keeps them down, with the specious garb of religion, so that men may fight as bravely for slavery as for safety, and count it not shame but highest honour to risk their blood and lives for the vainglory of a tyrant." (*TPT*: Appendix) This is possible because the sad passion is a complex that joins desire's boundlessness to the mind's confusion, cupidity to superstition. "Those who most ardently embrace every sort of superstition cannot help but be those who most inordinately desire external advantages." The tyrant needs sad spirits in order to succeed, just as sad spirits need a tyrant in order to be content and to multiply. In any case, what unites them is their hatred of life, their resentment against life. The *Ethics* draws the portrait of the *resentful man*, for whom all happiness is an offense, and who makes wretchedness or impotence his only passion. "But those who know how to break men's minds rather

than strengthen them are burdensome both to themselves and to others. That is why many, from too great an impatience of mind, and a false zeal for religion, have preferred to live among the lower animals rather than among men. They are like boys or young men who cannot bear calmly the scolding of their parents, and take refuge in the army. They choose the inconveniences of war and the discipline of an absolute commander in preference to the conveniences of home and the admonition of a father; and while they take vengeance on their parents, they allow all sorts of burdens to be placed upon them." (*Ethics* IV, Appendix, Ch.13)

There is, then, a philosophy of "life" in Spinoza, it consists precisely in denouncing all that separates us from life, all these transcendent values that are turned against life, these values that are tied to the conditions and illusions of consciousness. Life is poisoned by the categories of Good and Evil, of blame and merit, of sin and redemption. What poisons life is hatred, including the hatred that is turned back against oneself in the form of guilt. Spinoza traces, step by step, the dreadful concatenation of sad passions; first sadness itself, then hatred, aversion, mockery, fear, despair, *morsus conscientiae*, pity, indignation, envy, humility, repentance, self-abasement, shame, regret, anger, vengeance, cruelty.... The true city offers citizens the love of freedom instead of the hope of rewards or even the security of possessions; for "it is slaves, not free men who are given rewards for virtue."