

When Does Truth Matter? Spinoza on the Relation between Theology and Philosophy

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Abstract: One of the aims of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is to vindicate the view that philosophy and theology are separate forms of enquiry, neither of which has any authority over the other. However, many commentators have objected that this aspect of his project fails. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Spinoza implicitly gives epistemological precedence to philosophy. I argue that this objection misunderstands the nature of Spinoza's position and wrongly charges him with inconsistency. To show how he can coherently allow both that theology and philosophy employ independent epistemological standards, and that philosophy is epistemologically superior to theology, we need to step back from the immediate disputes to which the *Tractatus* is a response and examine a Ciceronian distinction on which Spinoza indirectly draws. As well as enabling us to vindicate Spinoza's position, it places his alleged naturalism in a new light and portrays philosophizing as a form of piety.

I

One of the central aims of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is to vindicate the view that philosophy and theology are separate forms of enquiry, each with its own domain of knowledge. The two domains do not conflict, and neither has any authority over the other. Spinoza has pressing political reasons for defending this conclusion; it plays a central part in his attempt to establish that theologians can safely leave philosophers alone to get on with their studies, and *vice versa*. But many commentators have objected that his argument for it is unsatisfactory. Despite his protestations, they have claimed, he does not succeed in showing that philosophy and theology are mutually independent, but gives epistemological precedence to philosophy. I shall argue that this objection fails to understand the nature of Spinoza's position and wrongly charges him with inconsistency. However, in order to appreciate the coherence of his view, and see what Spinoza is doing when he develops it as he does, we need to take account of an aspect of the historical context of his work that has not been much explored. By looking beyond the immediate disputes to which the *Tractatus* responds and getting a richer sense of the classical debates and traditions on which Spinoza draws, we can not only gain a better understanding of how, in his view, theology and philosophy are related; we can also appreciate the broader lineaments of his position and question the commonly-held opinion that he pioneers a naturalistic conception of philosophy. Far from separating

philosophy and religion, as contemporary naturalists do, Spinoza regards philosophizing as a form of religious activity and an exercise in piety.

II

Nowadays, the relationship between theology and philosophy is not on the whole a pressing issue; but in seventeenth-century Holland it was deeply contested. Throughout a long-running dispute, a broadly Aristotelian division of labour between the two forms of enquiry was challenged by Cartesian philosophers, whose investigations trenched on areas over which theologians had habitually exercised authority. By crossing the traditional boundaries around their own discipline, the Cartesians posed an intellectual problem: what topics was their own approach capable, and incapable, of dealing with? But they also precipitated a practical and highly politicized struggle over the proper extent of the freedom to philosophize. On one side, the more orthodox theologians of the Calvinist Reformed Church held that philosophical enquiry should be guided by the conception of God and nature revealed to the prophets and recorded in the Bible. On the other side, Cartesians argued for a self-legitimizing philosophy grounded on reason. Roughly speaking, the philosophers claimed that they should be allowed to pursue their enquiries independently of the theologians, while the orthodox theologians viewed the philosophers as a threat to true religion and the institutions of the Church (Verbeek 1992).

A tempestuous debate between these two groups was initially carried on in the universities, where Cartesians fought for permission to teach Descartes' philosophy alongside the established Aristotelian curriculum. But the conflict gradually became more widespread and intense, until, in 1656, the States of Holland felt the need to promulgate a decree directing professors to refrain from all invectives and abstain from all odious and insidious suggestions. They were 'to present the truth simply, and avoid drawing hateful consequences that could be expected to give offence to others' (Rowen 1978: 407). The States' attempt to broker a compromise was, however, only a partial success. At regular intervals, one or other side would overstep the boundaries imposed by the decree, provoking their opponents and destabilizing a fragile liberty to express a range of philosophical opinions.

It was at one of these uneasy moments, when the freedom to philosophize seemed to be under threat from the Reformed Church, that Spinoza composed the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.¹ Written in the second half of the 1660s and published in 1670, the work is among other things a political intervention on behalf of a form of philosophizing unrestricted by theological prescriptions, and is directed against the convictions and political aspirations of orthodox Dutch Calvinism. By the time Spinoza sat down to write, a number of other authors had already attempted to pour oil on troubled waters by arguing that theology and philosophy are distinct forms of enquiry and can peacefully co-exist.² Following the same strategy, Spinoza accordingly explains that the main purpose

of the *Tractatus* is to separate faith from philosophy (*TTP* III/174).³ If there is one thing he is trying to do, he insists, it is to show that philosophical investigation is distinct from the theological enquiries on which faith is grounded, and that the two domains are not in competition with each other. Theologians do not need to fear that the work done by philosophers threatens their knowledge or status, any more than philosophers need to worry that theologians are in a position to impose limits on the conclusions they can legitimately defend.

Spinoza clearly has political and personal reasons for defending this position; but given that it is one of the main claims that he seeks to establish in the *Tractatus*, it is vital to the overall success of his project that his argument for it should also be philosophically compelling. Summing up his achievement, he certainly seems to think that it is. 'I have shown how philosophy is to be separated from theology, what each of these principally consists in, that neither should be the handmaid of the other, but that each remains in charge of its own domain, without coming into conflict with the other' (*TTP* III/188). Or again, 'We conclude unconditionally that Scripture is not to be accommodated to reason, nor reason to Scripture' (*TTP* III/185). However, ever since the work was published, commentators have criticized or puzzled over an apparent tension between these conclusions and the case that Spinoza makes for them. Despite his confident tone, there are moments at which he seems to undermine his avowed position by giving philosophy the upper hand, awarding it an asymmetrical authority to stand in judgement over the conclusions reached by theologians.

Since this tension lies on the surface of Spinoza's text, he could hardly have failed to be aware of it; and since his book is addressed to philosophical readers who could presumably recognize an inconsistency when they saw one, he would surely have expected them to be sensitive to it (*TTP* III/2). What, then, are we to make of it? Responding to this problem, some commentators have been tempted by the thought that Spinoza is masking his true convictions. He himself believes that philosophy is stronger than theology and is capable of assessing at least some of theology's claims, while the reverse is not the case; but because he is trying to engineer a truce between philosophers and theologians, he represents their endeavours as mutually independent. By making his argument equivocal he allows his philosophically-minded readers to appreciate the true scope of philosophical enquiry, but he also hopes to buy off potentially troublesome theologians with the reassurance that theology operates in a distinct domain (Strauss 1988: 142–201). Other commentators, standing back from so pragmatic an interpretation, have acquitted Spinoza of political cynicism, but have nevertheless dwelt on the insufficiency of his argument. Whatever his intentions, they observe, he does not in fact put theology and philosophy on an equal footing, and in this respect his project is a failure.⁴

While each of these readings can garner some textual support, neither is wholly persuasive. The first is hard to credit because it obviously and radically underestimates the theologians of the Reformed Church, who were hardly likely to fall for such a transparent ruse. They wanted a fully convincing assurance that

their authority was not subject to the judgements of self-styled philosophers, and on this account Spinoza had not provided one. The second, more cautious interpretation escapes this criticism; but it nevertheless fails to do justice to the fierce drive towards philosophical coherence that is such a pronounced feature of Spinoza's works. Given his overarching commitment to consistency, it would be extremely surprising if he were to have settled for an evidently unstable position. So before concluding that his account of the relation between theology and philosophy is slack or hypocritical, it is worth asking whether the apparent tension to which it gives rise can be resolved in Spinoza's own terms, and indeed, whether he himself resolves it. I shall argue that he does. While his critics are right to point out that theology, as Spinoza represents it, is not entirely on an equal footing with philosophy, this does not undermine his claim to have established that the two forms of enquiry are in a relevant sense distinct. They are to be seen as both separate and overlapping, and as simultaneously independent and dependent.

III

The defining difference between theology and philosophy is not, according to the *Tractatus*, one of content. There is no specific subject matter that is essentially the preserve of one form of enquiry rather than the other, although each may in practice focus on certain distinctive topics. Instead, the two are distinguished by their methods and goals. The method that theology uses is rooted in a kind of thinking that Spinoza calls imagining, which starts from the experience of particular things that we gain through words and images (*TTP* III/21). Our perceptions, memories, passions and fantasies all belong in this domain. So do the everyday forms of inductive and means–end reasoning that we bring to bear on them, and the bodies of historical or inductively-grounded knowledge that we construct from these materials. Knowledge deriving from imagination in turn possesses an epistemological status that Spinoza characterizes as moral certainty, and which he contrasts with the philosophical certainty attaching to clear and distinct ideas: 'unlike a clear and distinct idea, the simple imagination [of a thing] does not, of its nature, involve certainty' (*TTP* III/30; 185–6). Moral certainty guides most of our activities and is quite sufficient for many human purposes; but it is not indubitable and—at least in principle, though not always in practice—leaves space for disagreement and revision.

Working with these resources, theology brings historical or inductively grounded forms of reasoning to bear on Scripture in order to identify the commands of the divine law revealed to the prophets. It then encourages communities to live as the law dictates, by exploiting the persuasive force of biblical narratives and exemplars. Its overall aim is the practical one of cultivating obedience to the divine law, which amounts, in Spinoza's minimalist interpretation, to the injunction to love your neighbour (*TTP* III/165; III/174). Although this fundamental tenet is morally rather than philosophically certain,

its truth is so firmly guaranteed by the history and style of the Bible that it is not in practice open to question. As Spinoza assures his readers, 'we can easily grasp the intention of scripture concerning moral teaching from the history we have of it, and can be certain of its true meaning. For, since the teachings of true piety are very ordinary and no less simple and easy to understand, they are expressed in the most familiar words' (*TTP* III/111). Theology's task is thus to teach the divine law, and to help people live together in the harmonious manner that it dictates. As the etymology of the term 'religion' suggests, its defining aim is to bind people together.

Philosophy, by contrast, is an exercise in a more abstract species of reasoning. It relies on a demonstrative method to uncover the relations between types of things—particularly the most universal features of nature (*TTP* III/185)—and its goal is truth (*TTP* III/179). Moreover, the truths at which it arrives constitute a type of knowledge that is indubitable and, in Spinoza's view, exceptionally empowering. In principle, this kind of knowledge is open to anyone, since all human beings have some of the adequate or absolutely certain ideas from which philosophizing begins. In practice, however, few people possess the skills and level of application needed to demonstrate the consequences of these accessible premises. Whereas the obedience at which theology aims is grounded on imaginative ways of thinking that are part and parcel of everyday life and lie within the reach of ordinary folk, the quest for the philosophical goals of truth and wisdom is a more rarefied business (*TTP* III/184). Philosophy therefore does not have such a widespread or immediate impact as theology, and one should not expect its conclusions to be generally understood.

Straightforward as it may seem, Spinoza's account of the division between philosophy and theology radically diverges from the conception of theology upheld by orthodox theologians within the Reformed Church, and in doing so challenges their conception of the basis and scope of their own authority. Perhaps the most central point of contention lies in a topic that Spinoza discusses at length, namely the epistemological status of the tenets of faith around which Calvinist religious practice was organized. According to the Reformed Church, the central commitments of a religious life are revealed in Scripture and set out in the Church's *Belgic Confession*.⁵ The fact that these tenets of faith have been revealed by God is a guarantee of their incontrovertible truth, and truly religious people will unhesitatingly subscribe to them. Faith, in short, requires one to hold certain specific and utterly certain beliefs about God and the duties he imposes, and at least part of the job of theologians is to show that these beliefs are confirmed by the highest available epistemological standards.

Filling out the implications of his contrasting conception of theology, Spinoza is quite prepared to allow that tenets of faith play a vital role in enabling people to live in an obedient or pious fashion. He is also happy to admit that the tenets of faith contain a number of claims about the deity—for example that God exists, and that God is just. But as we have seen, he does not agree that theology is capable of providing an indubitable defence of their veracity, or even that it should attempt to do so. Its task is not to arrive at certain truths, but to

encourage conformity to the divine law, 'Love your neighbour'. Theology 'determines the tenets of faith only insofar as is sufficient for obedience; but precisely how they are to be understood, with respect to their truth, it leaves to be determined by reason, which is really the light of the mind' (*TTP* III/185). Rather than setting out a sequence of claims that satisfy the philosophical standard of truth, tenets of faith identify beliefs that serve the purpose of encouraging people to cooperate with one another, and thus support the goal of theology. Their function is to identify ideas and outlooks that are likely, as a matter of logical or psychological fact, to motivate individuals to live in accordance with biblical doctrine (*TTP* III/178).

Putting this view into practice, Spinoza rejects the Calvinist account of the role played by tenets of faith. According to his view, a claim such as 'God is just' has the status of a tenet because, humans being as they are, people can only steadily obey laws that they regard as equitable. In order to conform to what theology represents as the divine command to love your neighbour, individuals need to conceive of God as a just deity who will apply the law fairly and consistently, and will not cheat or betray them. What should be of concern to theology, then, is not the philosophical truth or falsehood of a tenet, but its motivating power; and in order to achieve their proper goal, theologians should focus on the question of how belief in a tenet can be used to encourage a community to live obediently in accordance with the divine law. To achieve this end, a community must of course have a sufficient belief in the given tenet for it to guide their behaviour, and part of the theologian's task is to make tenets of faith highly credible, judged by appropriate standards of moral certainty. But neither they nor their audiences need to be able to vindicate their beliefs by the mathematically-certain standards of philosophical reasoning. So long as theologians achieve their goal of encouraging a co-operative way of life, their divergences from philosophically vindicated truths are of no theological significance and do not detract from the integrity of their enterprise.

By differentiating philosophy and theology and setting the two practices to attain distinct ends, Spinoza claims to establish that each is independent of the other, and yields a valuable form of knowledge that the other cannot provide.⁶ However, despite these efforts at even-handedness, there remains an epistemological sense in which theology occupies second place. Suppose, for example, that a morally certain tenet of faith were to be disproved by means of a philosophical demonstration. Given the superior level of certainty that philosophy provides, theologians would surely be required to bow to philosophical authority. To be sure, the knowledge that the tenet was false need not immediately undermine its theological function of promoting co-operation, or prevent religious people from appealing to it. But a philosophically-minded theologian who cared about the highest standards of truth would be constrained by the force of the relevant demonstration to revise his views, and to subordinate the authority of Scripture to that of philosophy.

Spinoza does not confront this possibility directly, but he nevertheless gives philosophy the upper hand. As he explains in the *Tractatus*, philosophy teaches

us that our greatest good consists in a kind of intellectual knowledge that ultimately depends on, and consists in, knowledge of God or nature. The more we learn about types of natural things, and above all about ourselves, the better we come to understand the causal processes that constitute God's essence. Furthermore, because this kind of knowledge is profoundly empowering, the most effective way to empower ourselves is to concentrate on knowing God or, as Spinoza also puts it, loving God. Showing how this goal can best be achieved is part of the task of a complete ethics (*TTP* III/59–60); and as Spinoza's own *Ethics* reveals, it turns out to depend on co-operation. In the first place, rationality requires us to live in the state rather than in solitude, and thus to cultivate shared ways of life (*E* IV P73; II/264–5; *E* IV P40; II/241).⁷ In addition, if one is to make any significant progress in extending one's philosophical understanding, one must co-operate with people who are already bent on the same end, while simultaneously doing one's best to persuade those who are not yet committed to the project of understanding to join in. 'It is especially useful to men to form associations, to bind themselves by those bonds most apt to make one people of them, and absolutely, to do those things that strengthen friendships' (*E* IV Appendix xii; II/269). The injunction to live co-operatively therefore falls within the purview of philosophy as well as theology, and the central doctrine that theology teaches 'agrees with reason' (*TTP* III/185). But because, as the *Tractatus* confirms, it does not matter how the injunction to live co-operatively is reached, 'provided that it obtains the supreme right, and is the supreme law for men' (*TTP* III/229), philosophers can derive and legitimate it for themselves. At least to this extent, they have no need to rely on theological instruction, but possess their own route to moral knowledge; and here again, the epistemological superiority of philosophy threatens to undercut the independence of theology. When philosophers and theologians disagree, it is the philosophers who will have the final say.

This *sotto voce* asymmetry presents a challenge to orthodox Calvinism, and indeed to any theological outlook that regards its own epistemological standards as the best available. Although Spinoza reassuringly contends that theology and philosophy will proceed on roughly parallel tracks, never diverging over theology's most fundamental commitments, a theologian's claim to know that these commitments are true nevertheless remains ultimately subordinate to the judgement of philosophy. By itself this may not seem very worrying—after all, Spinoza is adamant that moral certainty is more than adequate in most areas of life. But as well as undercutting the purportedly 'equal but distinct' status of the two practices, the asymmetry implicit in Spinoza's account questions a further aspect of Calvinism by casting doubt on its assessment of theology's moral significance. According to the Dutch Reformed Church, the moral core of theology revolves around the notion of eternal salvation, conceived as the final end of human existence. In order to be saved, one must conform to the doctrines taught in the Bible as these are interpreted by the Church; and as the Church's *Confession* asserts, salvation depends on faith rather than on works. To count among the faithful, and thus to be a candidate for salvation, it is not

enough to live in an obedient or co-operative fashion; one must also sincerely assent to the relevant tenets of faith.⁸

Among the things that Spinoza is trying to achieve by defining theology as he does is to subvert this Calvinist outlook. Contrary to the Church's position, he argues, theology's goal is not to prescribe a given set of beliefs, but to help people live in a certain way. As we have seen, its aim is to encourage obedience or co-operation, and tenets of faith are merely functional props in this process, to be assessed in terms of their effectiveness rather than their truth. So in order to tell whether someone is living religiously in the manner that theology recommends, we do not need to probe their convictions. All we need to consider is their works, that is to say, their way of life. 'If the works are good, they are faithful, however much they may disagree with other faithful people in their tenets' (*TTP* III/175).

Spinoza is here attacking the Church's picture of the role of salvation within a religious life. At one level, he does not disagree with the Calvinist position. As he freely acknowledges, the promise of salvation plays a vital practical role in promoting co-operation since, if people did not believe that those who live co-operatively will be saved, they would be less strongly motivated to obey the divine law (*TTP* III/178). At another level, however, there is a deep disparity between Church doctrine and the view articulated in the *Tractatus*. According to the latter, as we have by now come to expect, theological tenets relating to salvation derive their status from their motivating power rather than their philosophical truth. It therefore does not matter, from a theological point of view, whether the Church gives a philosophically correct explication of the nature and force of salvation as long as it succeeds in encouraging people to practise obedience. Thus, where Calvinism presents a religious life as a means to, or a sign of, salvation, Spinoza reverses the causal order. A belief in salvation is for him a means to a religious life, insofar as it sustains the desire to live in a co-operative fashion. Furthermore, this view has a radical impact on the way that salvation is conceived. Since it is the final goal of religious existence, and the goal of religious existence is simply obedience or co-operation, salvation of the kind that religion extols no longer figures as an exalted end, lying beyond our earthly life.

For a Calvinist, then, one of the most discomfiting features of Spinoza's account of theology is that it transforms an ambitious, theological conception of salvation as eternal life into a comparatively mundane goal that does not even presuppose a knowledge of doctrine, let alone the intervention of divine grace. The saving faith offered by religion consists simply in the advantages of a co-operative or obedient existence (*TTP* III/175). To make matters worse, it is clear to a careful reader of the *Tractatus*, and even clearer to a reader of the *Ethics*, that the benefits of a life lived in accordance with the religious requirement to love your neighbour fall far short of those that flow from a life devoted to philosophical understanding. The kind of imaginatively based co-operation that theology helps to sustain is undoubtedly valuable, and constitutes a form of salvation for which everyone has reason to strive. But it cannot compete with the

empowerment generated by a philosophically-grounded love of God, which, as Spinoza observes at the end of the *Ethics*, constitutes our true salvation (*E V P36c*; II/303). Where Calvinism gives pre-eminence to religious salvation and condemns the benefits of philosophy as morally negligible, Spinoza turns this order on its head. It is philosophy that holds the key to moral liberation and reveals the ultimate standards of the good against which those of theology can be measured. In moral as well as epistemological matters, it has the upper hand.

As his critics have pointed out, these interconnected asymmetries seem to vitiate Spinoza's project. Rather than presenting theology and philosophy as independent practices, each with its own method and telos, he seems to represent them as overlapping and unequal. Philosophy, the stronger party, is capable of assessing claims made by theology, the weaker party, which has no reciprocal authority to judge the results of philosophical enquiry. So despite Spinoza's protestations to the contrary, philosophy and theology are neither independent nor equal, and his argument fails. While I shall claim that this conclusion does not fully capture the position defended in the *Tractatus*, there is evidently something right about it. Spinoza clearly does think that philosophy is ultimately more powerful than theology, and can in some respects encompass and surpass it. But the remaining problem is to see how he can hold this view while also maintaining that theology and philosophy are distinct, so that neither is the handmaid of the other.

IV

To resolve this difficulty, it is helpful to shift one's attention from the dispute about the relation between theology and philosophy to another of the historical debates in which Spinoza intervenes, this time concerning the ancestry of the Calvinist interpretation of salvation that the *Tractatus* opposes. Like many other features of his outlook, Calvin's conception of salvation as an other-worldly condition is deeply indebted to Saint Augustine who, in his *City of God*, pits himself against a group of pagan philosophers. These thinkers, of whom Cicero is among the most prominent, have in Augustine's view failed to confront the depths of human depravity, and have consequently misunderstood the nature of the good. 'With wondrous vanity, [they] have wished to be happy here and now, and to achieve blessedness by their own efforts'.⁹ But because human virtue can never be free from the struggle against vice, the supreme good cannot be attained in this world and lies only in eternal life (Saint Augustine 1998: xix.4.918, 924).

In Spinoza's lifetime, this debate about what human beings can hope for remained very much alive. On the one hand, an Augustinian outlook continued to inform the theology of Calvinism, and was propagated by the Reformed Church. On the other hand, the philosophical orientation that Augustine repudiates had been revived by the Erasmian humanists of the northern Renaissance and was firmly entrenched in the humanist educational curriculum that had

become standard across northern Europe (Grafton and Jardine 1986; Black 2001; Charlton 1965). This pattern of instruction culminated in the study of moral philosophy; and perhaps the most ubiquitous of the texts used to teach the subject was Cicero's *De Officiis*.¹⁰ Since one of the aims of Cicero's work is to defend the very position that Augustine had attacked (namely that perfect virtue lies within human reach), educated Dutchmen who had not forgotten what they learned at school would have been familiar with two competing outlooks: the other-worldly notion of the good life upheld by the Reformed Church, and its more optimistic Ciceronian counterpart.

Spinoza himself had received a humanist training at the school in Amsterdam run by Franciscus Van Enden,¹¹ and there is consequently every reason to think that he would have been familiar with the Ciceronian analysis of virtue. Like his contemporaries, he would have rehearsed its features, recognizing it both as a philosophical alternative to Calvinism, and as a means of contesting the Church's notion of salvation. Revived and rewritten, it could form the basis of an anti-Calvinist position, and this, I shall argue, is part of the strategy employed in the *Tractatus*. The account of the relationship between theology and philosophy that Spinoza articulates is modelled on a Ciceronian analysis of virtue; and by viewing it in this light we shall be able to see how it is that Spinoza can conceive of the two practices as independent, while also giving philosophy the upper hand. His solution to the problem we have identified is historically informed, insofar as it exploits an influential Ciceronian view that would have been well known to many of his readers. But by recasting the latter in his own terms, he arrives at a position that coheres with his own philosophical commitments.

In *De Officiis* Cicero distinguishes two levels of virtue. People who are perfectly virtuous blend and reconcile duties arising from the individual virtues, and in doing so manifest the overarching quality of *honestum* (*DO* I.v.15). From their point of view, being wise, just, temperate and courageous are not distinct skills directed at distinct ends, but are aspects of a comprehensive capacity to respond virtuously to all situations, however complex and multi-faceted they may be. At the same time, perfect *honestum* brings with it a way of life. Virtuous people are drawn to one another, and the bonds of friendship uniting them are so strong that each loves the other as himself and they become as one (*DO* I.xvii.55–6). Contrasted with perfect *honestum*, however, is what Cicero, following the Stoics, describes as second-level or second-grade *honestum* (*honesta secunda*), which provides what he calls a likeness or *similitudo* of its perfect counterpart (*DO* III.iii.13–15; III.iv.16) and constitutes a moral standard to which ordinary people can aspire (*DO* III.iv.18).¹² Those who possess it are familiar with the duties that each virtue imposes, and are in general able to fulfil them (*DO* III. lii–iv); but while they largely behave as they would if their *honestum* were perfect, there is nevertheless something they lack. Their grasp of how to live a virtuous life does not obliterate tradeoffs between one virtue and another, so that they are sometimes forced to choose between, say, courage and prudence. Nor are they always capable of seeing how virtue resolves apparent conflicts between right action and utility (*utilitas*) (*DO* I.iv.12–13; I.xlii.52). Working at the level of

second-level *honestum* their conception of what it would be virtuous to do will sometimes conflict with their conception of what would be most advantageous.

It is possible, in Cicero's view, to progress from second-level *honestum* towards its perfect counterpart by extending one's philosophical understanding of what true virtue consists in. But while sages who reach these heights are rare, second-level *honestum* is much easier to achieve. This level of virtue is suited to ordinary people living in ordinary political circumstances, and Cicero's analysis of it is accordingly developed in the course of a discussion of life in the state (*DO* I.vii.20). 'The men we live with,' he remarks, 'are not perfect and ideally wise, but do very well if they possess semblances of virtue (*simulacra virtutis*)' (*DO* I.xv.46). Among such people, the key virtue to be cultivated is justice. To sustain the benefits of a civil order, the members of a community must be able to live together under the law; and this condition in turn rests on the ability of a ruler to encourage individuals who only possess second-level *honestum* to act justly. Citizens must learn to identify their individual utility with that of the community as a whole, even when doing so is onerous or compromising (*DO* III.vi.26).

How, though, should rulers set about such a difficult project? One of the means that political authorities can use to teach ordinary people what political life requires of them is to exploit a range of narratives and anecdotes, illustrating the advantages of living equitably and the troubles that are liable to arise when justice is flouted. The many historical incidents recounted in Cicero's own works are an instance of this technique, and serve to indicate in concrete terms what a just way of life involves. At the same time, they are designed to arouse the desire to live justly, and to motivate both rulers and citizens to do their best to sustain an equitable way of life (*DO* II.xi.42). The fact that Cicero employs this technique makes it clear that he is addressing individuals who have only attained second-level *honestum*. (If their *honestum* were already perfect they would know how to act virtuously in all situations and would not need to be taught.) So there is a link within his theory between second-level *honestum* and a set of tools for inculcating virtue which appeal to histories and fictions.

In the *Tractatus*, Spinoza replicates both these central features of Cicero's architecture, while partially reconstructing them with his own materials. Like Cicero, he distinguishes two levels of virtue, and associates the higher with the kind of rational understanding that philosophy yields. Only philosophically-grounded knowledge can enable one to steer an unswervingly virtuous course through the exigencies of life, and show one how to reconcile its many demands. However, again like Cicero, Spinoza identifies less exalted ways of life that are grounded on the workings of imagination and answer to the requirements of second-level *honestum*. The resources of imaginative thinking can be used to make the demands of a virtuous life accessible, and to motivate people to act much as they would if their *honestum* were more perfect. This, moreover, is where theology comes into play. Its aim is to cultivate a form of second-level *honestum* that falls short of a way of life grounded on understanding, but nevertheless emulates it as far as possible.

In spelling out the nature and role of theology, Spinoza draws on Cicero's discussion of political life as the principal arena in which second-level *honestum* is cultivated. As we have seen, theology's goal is to encourage people to achieve piety by obeying the divine law, 'Love your neighbour'. But as Spinoza now adds, obeying the divine law 'consists in the exercise of loving kindness (*charitas*) and justice', and is fundamentally a matter of living equitably with others (*TTP* III/226). Here, then, is a first continuity: according to the *Tractatus*, the theological virtue of obedience coincides with justice, the virtue that is for both Cicero and Spinoza the key to a successful political order, so that theology helps to sustain the goals of the state. Next, and still following Cicero's lead, Spinoza takes up the view that narratives and exemplars can be used to sustain political authority. Since rulers cannot expect their subjects to exhibit philosophical rationality, they need to work on the passions that dominate the imaginative thinking of ordinary people. They must persuade their subjects to obey the law by representing political co-operation as beneficial and desirable; and they need to rely on a repertoire of imaginative devices such as narratives and exemplars in order to do so. For Spinoza, however, these tools are also the mainstay of theology. Much as a ruler may, for example, appeal to a national history to generate enthusiasm for the law, so theologians appeal to the Bible to illustrate what obedience or justice requires, and to inspire people to emulate the models it provides.

By merging the methods and goals of politics with those of theology, Spinoza creates, as the title of the *Tractatus* indicates, a theologico-politics, in which our duty to God coincides with our duty to the state. Both require us to live justly, and the imaginative means by which religious authorities instil this message blend with those that states employ to achieve the same end. To put the point another way, theology becomes an aspect of the Ciceronian political project of maintaining just co-operation under the law, and to this extent the goals and methods of politics and theology largely coincide. Where people possess only second-level *honestum*, their grasp of individual virtues can be shaped by a repertoire of theological exemplars and narratives that show them how to behave in certain types of situation, and inspire them to live up to a theologico-political ideal in which justice, obedience and piety are combined.

Although exemplars can play a part in cultivating a social ethos, and can be applied to particular circumstances, the guidance they offer is bound to be less than comprehensive. For one thing, narratives deal with some types of situation rather than others, and may not throw any light on a given predicament. For another, no particular exemplar can be expected to weigh with everyone; to be effective, it must resonate with an individual's experience, character and situation (*TTP* III/32; III/171–2). To overcome these limitations, an imaginatively-based practice such as theology will need to be pluralist. As Spinoza explains, its exemplars must be sufficiently diverse to appeal to people of many different kinds and must as far as possible allow individuals to hold and express beliefs that sustain their ability to co-operate, whatever these may be (*TTP* III/176–7). Nevertheless, given the imperfect virtue of the people it is dealing with, and the

incompleteness of the guidance it offers, theology cannot be expected to produce a form of co-operation immune from conflict. Strong as its motivating power may be, the kind of harmony at which it aims can only be consistently sustained when it is backed up by the political power of the state. This implies, in Spinoza's view, that ultimate authority to interpret the religious duty of obedience must lie not with the officials of the Church, but with the political ruler or sovereign. Conflict can only be kept in check if 'every exercise of religious duty [is] accommodated to the peace and preservation of the state', and the supreme duty imposed by religion consists in piety or obedience to one's country. So, for example, if a man demands my shirt, piety may require me to give him my coat; but when this action would damage or threaten the republic, piety requires me to hand him over to the law, even if this may result in his death (*TTP* III/232).

Theology and politics thus operate together to generate second-level *honestum*. But the co-operative existence that they promote is still only a simulacrum of the perfect virtue that flows from philosophical understanding. According to the *Ethics*, people who have acquired a certain amount of philosophical insight will recognize that understanding is the most empowering goal they can pursue, and will appreciate that, in order to acquire it, they must create a common way of life directed to this end. As their understanding grows, they will become increasingly capable of creating and sustaining a community whose members are comprehensively committed to co-operating with one another for the sake of further understanding, and want understanding for others as much as for themselves (*E* IVP37; II/235). The foremost aim of this type of community of the wise is undoubtedly understanding itself: 'For understanding is the first and only foundation of virtue, nor do we strive to understand things for the sake of some end' (*E* IVP26; II/227). But its members will also recognize that, in order to enlarge their understanding as effectively as possible, they must co-operate by practising the full range of virtues (*E* IVP37s1; II/236). The individual virtues that second-level *honestum* upholds therefore do not disappear; rather, each emerges as a necessary component of the philosophical quest for understanding, and plays a unique and irreplaceable role in this process. Furthermore, once a wise person sees how the individual virtues contribute to the overall goal of understanding, they will, in Spinoza's view, be able to overcome the limitations of second-level *honestum* that Cicero identifies. They will see how to reconcile the demands of individual virtues and achieve the unified moral outlook that Cicero identifies with perfect *honestum*. In addition, they will appreciate that sacrificing a virtuous course of action to the demands of utility or self-interest amounts to sacrificing the pursuit of understanding, and consequently has no place in a life devoted to philosophical knowledge (*E* IVp72; II/264).

Spinoza thus incorporates the central aspects of perfect *honestum* into his conception of understanding; but he does not take over Cicero's account in its entirety. Instead, he adapts it to his own already complex system, and in doing so introduces a number of modifications. Two of these are especially striking. In the first place, Spinoza's alignment of imagination with passivity and understanding

with activity, together with his account of the adequate and inadequate ideas in which activity and passivity consist, yields a distinctive interpretation of the Ciceronian claim that second-level *honestum* is a *similitudo* of its perfect counterpart. When theologico-politics inculcates second-level *honestum* into the members of a community, instilling in them the habits of justice and obedience, their actions will largely mirror those of a community of wise persons whose co-operation is grounded on understanding. However, the members of the first group will remain passive, and will lack the active control over their actions that understanding provides (*E* III P1; II/140). What theologico-politics can achieve, then, is a passive enactment of active understanding, and Spinoza provides a systematic analysis of what the relevant kinds of passivity and activity amount to.

A still more telling shift concerns the proper description of a perfectly virtuous way of life. As we have seen, Cicero describes the capacity to live in a maximally virtuous fashion as perfect *honestum*, whereas Spinoza identifies the fulcrum of a virtuous life with understanding or *intelligentia*. Following out the implications of his claim that one is active only insofar as one understands, Spinoza goes on to assert that anything we do on the basis of understanding relates to *fortitudo* or strength of character. This in turn encompasses *animositas*—the desire to live solely in accordance with reason (*E* III P59; II/188). It also incorporates *honestum*—the desire by which a man who lives according to the guidance of reason is bound to join himself to others in friendship (*E* IVP37s1; II/236). Here, *honestum* figures as one rational virtue among others, but as the one most immediately manifested in co-operation among the wise, and most closely linked to harmony and justice. ‘The things that beget harmony are those related to justice (*iustitia*), fairness (*aequitas*) and *honestum*’ (*E* IV Appendix XV; III/270). *Honestum* is thus the capacity to promote and sustain the form of rational friendship integral to a fully virtuous way of life, and is an aspect of perfect virtue. It corresponds, at the rational level, to the theological virtues of obedience and piety, together with the civil virtue of justice, which contribute to the imaginatively based form of co-operation that is a mark of second-level *honestum*. So while Cicero uses the notion of perfect *honestum* to designate a capacity for perfect virtue (*DO* I.xx.66; I.xliv.157), Spinoza’s use of the term is more specific, and more closely associated with social co-operation. In his conception of a perfectly virtuous life, the social virtue of *honestum* has to be integrated with *animositas*, the determination to live as reason or understanding recommends.

These features of Spinoza’s argument reorganize and revise the position that Cicero lays out; but they do not undermine the structural isomorphism with which we have been concerned. Both writers rely on a two-tier conception of virtue, and both conceive its levels along basically similar lines. With this conclusion in hand, we can now return to our original question and ask how Spinoza’s adoption of a two-tier model provides him with the means to resolve the tensions that have been held to mar his analysis of the relation between theology and philosophy. How might such a model enable him to reconcile his claim that each of these enquiries has a separate end, with philosophy’s evident capacity to encompass and outdo theology?

V

When, in the *Tractatus*, Spinoza speaks of the goal of theology as distinct from that of philosophy, he speaks in the imaginative terms that belong to everyday life and are the currency of second-level *honestum*. Taking up Cicero's reminder that, when he separates the virtues, he is not speaking with philosophical precision, but talking in popular or everyday terms (*DO* II.x.35), Spinoza presents the theological goal of obedience as distinct from the philosophical goal of understanding or wisdom. In doing so, he adopts the outlook of people whose grasp of themselves and the world is mainly informed by their imaginative experience, and whose understanding of virtue remains at the second level. The practice of theology, he confirms, is separate from that of philosophy in the sense that it does not depend on philosophical skills or knowledge, so that one does not need to be a philosopher in order to live in an obedient or co-operative fashion. 'As everyone agrees, Scripture was not written and published for the wise alone, but for people of every age and kind', so that anyone can use it for theological ends (*TTP* III/174). At this level, one can be obedient without being wise (*TTP* III/172), and there is a clear sense in which these two virtues, along with the practices in which they are embedded, are distinct. The imaginative domain of second-level *honestum* does not show how these virtues can be integrated, but for ordinary purposes this does not matter. People can live without philosophizing, and as long as they are collectively able to make use of the resources of theologico-politics, they can sustain a co-operative existence and enjoy the benefits it brings.

Once a community begins to philosophize, however, this second-level view ceases to constitute its entire outlook, and gradually gives way to a form of life in which the virtues no longer appear to be distinct, but are seen to be inextricably united. Moreover, it is only from this perspective that wise men can fully grasp what virtue is, and become capable of leading a truly virtuous life. Looking back on the second-level *honestum* they formerly possessed, they can appreciate the incompleteness of the understanding on which it was based, and the weakness of the bonds that sustained their obedience or co-operation. Although they can still see why they used to regard the virtues as distinct and liable to conflict, they now appreciate what their earlier view lacked, and can correct its practical limitations. The goal of theology has become absorbed into that of philosophy, and the pursuit of co-operation has become integral to the pursuit of wisdom. More generally, the viewpoint of second-level *honestum* has been replaced by one in which it is impossible to be fully co-operative without being wise, or fully wise without being co-operative. In one sense, then, philosophy has replaced religion; but in another sense it has itself become a form of religion. It shares religion's capacity to bind and, as the *Ethics* makes abundantly clear, brings with it a form of rational piety. 'The desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason, I call piety', Spinoza tells us (*E* IVp37s1; II/236). And again, 'especially necessary to bring people together in love are the things which concern religion and piety' (*E* IV Appendix XV; II/270).¹³

It is true that, in the *Tractatus*, the nature of the relationship between the two levels of *honestum* is not entirely clear. This is partly because Spinoza tends to shift from one perspective to the other, creating an impression of inconsistency or even sleight of hand. Although he is for the most part content to inhabit the viewpoint of imagination and to present theology as distinct from philosophy, he also wants to remind his readers that there is more to life than an imaginative outlook, and allows the terms of philosophical understanding to enter his discussion. In addition, confusion is created by the fact that, in this text, Spinoza says relatively little about the content of philosophical understanding, and its relation to theology. Only in other works does he offer a sketch of the rational way of life that is consonant with perfect virtue, and show how this both mirrors and contrasts with the co-operation that theologico-politics sustains.

However, once we recognize that the *Tractatus* implicitly adopts a two-tier Ciceronian conception of virtue, we can begin to see how Spinoza's argument possesses an overall consistency. And when we read it in the light of the more comprehensive analysis of philosophical virtue set out in the *Ethics*, the character of his position becomes clear. There is no inconsistency in Spinoza's claim that the ends of theology and philosophy are distinct. Instead, each practice represents a different stage in a process of moral empowerment, and as communities or their members progress from one stage to the next, their outlooks change. Virtues that once seemed separate come to be seen as necessarily connected. Claims that used to qualify as tenets of faith cease to serve their previous function.

Recognising Spinoza's debt to a Ciceronian conception of *honestum*, and thus to the legacy of classical humanism, attunes us to a model of moral knowledge that allows him to reconcile the separateness with the convergence of obedience and understanding. At the same time, it helps us to appreciate what he is trying to achieve. Despite initial appearances, his aim is not to isolate philosophy from theological intrusion, in a manner that one might be tempted to see as an anticipation of Enlightenment secularism.¹⁴ Nor is it to defend a philosophical approach that is naturalist in the contemporary sense of the term.¹⁵ Rather, he is employing a classical model in order to present a religious or theological way of life as an anticipation or likeness of the higher form of virtue and piety that philosophy engenders. By adopting a recognizably pagan stance to which Calvinism is historically opposed, Spinoza challenges the intellectual antecedents as well as the doctrines of orthodox Calvinism. Theology, he contends, is not the means to true salvation. Rather, it is a serviceable but transcendable aspect of everyday life.¹⁶

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NOTES

¹ The *TTP* was written between 1665 and 1670 when the Dutch Reformed Church's consistories successfully opposed the publication of several theologically challenging works. See van Bunge 2001; Nadler 1999: 263–70; Israel 2001: 185–205.

² On earlier exponents of this approach see van Bunge 1989: 52–4, Verbeek 1992; 1993; 1999; 2003: 95–7.

³ All page references to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* are to Spinoza 1924b, and cite the volume and page number of Gebhardt's edition. All translations are by Edwin Curley, who has generously allowed me to use a draft of the translation forthcoming in his *Philosophical Works of Spinoza*, Vol. II, to be published by Princeton University Press.

⁴ This objection is implicit in Lambert Van Velthuysen's critique of the *TTP* in the letter to wrote to Jacob Ostens in 1671. See Spinoza 1966: Letter XLII. For a broader discussion of the objection see Verbeek 2003: 28–37.

⁵ 'The Belgic Confession' in Schaff 2007, Articles II, III VII.

⁶ Spinoza emphasises this last claim at *TTP* III/185.

⁷ Spinoza 1924b vol. II. All references give part and proposition numbers, followed by the volume and page numbers of Gebhardt. All translations are from Curley (Spinoza 1985).

⁸ 'The Belgic Confession' in Schaff 2007, Article XVI.

⁹ Saint Augustine 1998: xix.4.919. On Augustine's conception of wisdom see Menn 1998: 130–44.

¹⁰ Cicero 1913. All references follow the standard form used in this edition.

¹¹ On Spinoza's use of classical sources see Proietti 1985. On what Spinoza may have read at Van Enden's school, see Frijhoff and Spies 2004: ch. 4; Klever 1991; Nadler 1999: 109.

¹² On Dutch discussions of the use of *simulacra*, see Blom 1995: 171.

¹³ On this point see Lemmens forthcoming.

¹⁴ For a notable example of this stance, see Israel 2001.

¹⁵ Among many recent commentators who have interpreted Spinoza as a naturalist in one or more modern senses of the term see Della Rocca 2008; Hampshire 2005; Morrison Ravven 2003: 70–4; Garrett 2008: 4–25.

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