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Article

Of Prophecy and Piety: Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* between al-Farabî and Erasmus

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Abstract: In this contribution, I discuss some less well-known premodern and early modern antecedents of Spinoza's concepts and claims in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. On the one hand, I will argue, Spinoza's notion of prophecy owes more to Moses Maimonides than to any Christian author; and through Maimonides, Spinoza may be linked to the discussion of prophecy in *The Virtuous City* by the tenth-century Islamic philosopher al-Farabî. Spinoza's concern with prophecy as a popular formulation of the Divine Law may be fruitfully seen in the light of these two authors. On the other hand, Spinoza's notion of *pietas* has arguably been shaped by a number of early modern authors from the Low Countries, including Thomas a Kempis and Erasmus: it does not consist in merely obeying the law, but also has a clear devotional and theist dimension of love for God and for one's neighbors. As such, it may be associated with recent ideas on philosophy and spiritual exercises. These findings have a number of non-trivial implications for Spinoza's place in the rise of modern, academic Western philosophy. I will discuss these implications in the context of Pierre Hadot's influential views on philosophy as a way of life and Michel Foucault's notion of spirituality.

Keywords: Spinoza; Jewish philosophy; Islamic philosophy; prophecy; spiritual exercises



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1. Introduction

It is tempting to read Spinoza's attempt to separate philosophy from theology in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth *TTP*) as on a par with the separation of modern science from Medieval scholasticism, and of rational knowledge expressed in purely literal language from the imagination and its illusions, and from the seductive and misleading beauty of rhetoric [1]. And sure enough, in his characterization of the imagination as by definition unable to yield 'adequate knowledge,' rather than a legitimate if imperfect source of knowledge, he appears to follow Descartes, who was equally vocal in rejecting scholasticism, the imagination, and rhetorical language use.

Yet, one should beware of overstating the modern and/or Cartesian aspects of Spinoza's epistemology—and perhaps of even seeing him as part of the epistemological tradition of modern philosophy at all. Famously, Richard Rorty has argued in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that this modern philosophical tradition starts with Descartes and is marked by the shift to seeing knowledge in terms of representation, by the emergence of skepticism as a major philosophical challenge, and by the rise of epistemology as the main philosophical subdiscipline [2]. This development, according to Rorty, is paired with the gradual professionalization of philosophy as an academic discipline that generates its own questions rather than engaging with wider cultural or societal problems.

The problem with this analysis is that Spinoza does not fit in well with the new focus on skepticism and epistemological concerns that Rorty finds in philosophers like Descartes and Kant. Although he pays lip service to the notion of 'clear and distinct ideas,' Spinoza nowhere makes epistemological skepticism into the starting point of his philosophy in the way Descartes does. Put differently, he does not appear to be concerned primarily, as Descartes is, with the question of what enables the self or the subject to have true knowledge; nor does he appear to reflect or anticipate what Rorty calls the

‘professionalization’—and, one may perhaps add, depoliticization—of modern philosophy into an academic discipline.

Likewise, and more recently, Jonathan Israel’s influential history of the Radical Enlightenment may force us to rethink the history of early modern and modern Western philosophy, but perhaps in ways other than those imagined by Israel himself. Israel claims that Spinoza is the first truly modern philosopher: unlike Descartes and other thinkers of what he calls the ‘moderate Enlightenment.’ Spinoza and the Spinozists, he argues, are the backbone of a transnational ‘radical Enlightenment,’ which rejected the Cartesian dualism of substance, and which refused to compromise with either absolute rule or clerical authority, shaping the Enlightenment’s alleged rejection of all “monarchy, aristocracy, woman’s subordination to man, ecclesiastical authority and slavery” ([3], p. vi, 12).

This account has been criticized on various points; for example, in interpreting Spinoza’s substance monism as amounting to “non-providential deism, if not outright materialism and atheism” ([3], p. 12), Israel in fact reproduces the labels of Spinoza’s opponents; moreover, some of these labels were explicitly rejected by Spinoza himself. Israel’s reading not only makes Spinoza rather more ‘modern’ than Descartes and Hobbes; it also, and unlike Rorty’s account of the professionalization and depoliticization of modern philosophy, calls attention to the political dimensions of Spinoza’s work. Against such modernizing readings of Spinoza, however, I would like to argue that we should pay more systematic attention to some of the premodern and early modern sources of both character and content of Spinoza’s thought. Since these sources appear more clearly in the *TTP* than in the *Ethics*, my discussion will focus on the former work (I generally quote from the Silverthorne/Israel translation of the *TTP* [1], but have modified it where I thought it necessary; for the Latin text, I have relied on the Gawlick/Niewöhner edition). On the one hand, I will argue, Spinoza leans heavily on Medieval Jewish philosophers, in particular Maimonides, and through the latter—at one remove, so to speak—on Islamic political philosophers like al-Farabî; on the other hand, Spinoza’s notion of *pietas* appears to reflect late Medieval and Renaissance spiritual concerns rather than early modern republican and liberal political theory. For this reason, I hope to argue, one may get a better understanding of Spinoza by seeing him as emerging from a tradition that sees philosophy as a way of life rather than an academic discipline, as recently (and influentially) discussed by the French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot.

2. Prophecy: Spinoza between Al-Farabî and Maimonides

Spinoza has with some justification been called a ‘Jewish philosopher;’ not, of course, in the sense of engaging with philosophical questions as a believing or professing Jew, but in the sense of engaging with a specifically Jewish philosophical tradition [4–6]. More specifically, he is connected with this tradition in particular through Moses Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalâlat al-hâ’irîn*), a book he possessed in Hebrew translation [7]. To the extent that he does, however, he may also be argued to be engaging, at one remove, with the Islamic philosophical tradition from which Medieval Jewish philosophy had emerged [8,9]. These Islamic roots are quite clear in Maimonides’s philosophical work. Indeed, the *Guide* is literally unthinkable without its Islamic philosophical background: it was originally written in Arabic, and its philosophical and theological vocabulary is largely the same as that of Maimonides’s Arabic Islamic predecessors. I will try to make the case for Spinoza’s Jewish and Islamic philosophical backgrounds by briefly discussing, first, his affinities with Maimonides, and second, his similarities with al-Farabî.

At first blush, it may seem overstated or misguided to credit Maimonides with any serious influence on Spinoza. After all, he comes in for harsh criticism in the *TTP*, where the latter rejects the very project of proving the philosophical respectability of Jewish Scripture as ‘ridiculous,’ and qualifying the attempt to derive ‘Aristotelian trifles’ (*nugas Aristotelicas*) from Scripture as ‘nonsense’ (I. 4). Despite these criticisms, however, Spinoza’s indebtedness to the *Guide* is obvious: it supplies, for example, both the thematic and the vocabulary for his own discussion of the relation between prophecy and philosophy. In

fact, the opposition between philosophy as the realm of indubitable knowledge acquired by the intellect and prophecy as the realm of the law and the imagination appears to owe rather more to Maimonides, and more generally to the Jewish and Islamic traditions, than to Christian theology or philosophy. In the latter, prophecy and the law play a rather less central role than in the former two, for the obvious reason that the New Testament characterizes Christ not as a prophet but as the son of God; moreover, his teachings are said not so much to present or reaffirm the law as to ‘fulfill’ it (cf. Rom. 3.18).

Spinoza’s views on Christ do in fact bring him closer to Judaic and Islamic views than to Christianity. Thus, he surreptitiously characterizes Christ not as the son of God but as a prophet, albeit one with a vastly superior, perfect mind, “to whom the decrees of God . . . were revealed not by words or visions but directly” (*Christum, cui Dei placita . . . sine verbis aut visionibus, sed immediate revelata sunt*, 2.18; *emph. added*). Like Moses, that is, Christ is characterized here as a prophet who communicated *with* God, rather than as an incarnation or hypostasis *of* God. In one crucial respect, though, he is superior in prophecy even to Moses: like Maimonides, Spinoza reads the Old Testament as asserting that, whereas most prophets communicated with God indirectly (notably, as mediated by an angel), Moses directly heard the word of God himself; but to this he adds that the prophecy revealed to Christ was not mediated even by words, even if they were the words of God. Whereas Moses, unlike other prophets, “spoke with God face to face,” Spinoza elaborates, Christ “communicated with God mind to mind,” that is, not mediated by language. In other words, he represents Christ as a prophet who *receives* God’s truth, albeit immediately, rather than as a hypostasis of God who *embodies* that truth (*TTP*, 1.18–19).¹

To this, it might be objected that in 4.10, Spinoza appears to distinguish Christ from the prophets, adding that he was, much like the angels through whose mediation God had revealed things to mankind, “not so much a prophet as a mouth-piece of God” (*Christus not tam propheta, quam os Dei fuit*). By this, however, Spinoza appears to mean only that God has only revealed himself “to Christ or his soul” directly rather than by means of words, and that Christ’s mind was adapted to general and true notions valid for all humanity rather than only for the Jews (*ibid.*). Spinoza, that is, distinguishes Christ from the Biblical prophets not in ontological or soteriological terms, but only by the superiority of his understanding.

Further, Spinoza castigates Maimonides’s attempts to associate (some forms of) prophecy with the intellect rather than the imagination, and accordingly with philosophical knowledge: for him, prophetic revelation works through the imagination alone; and a man with a strong imagination inevitably has a weak intellect, and vice versa (I.4). In this respect, he turns out to stand rather closer to al-Farabî (d. 945CE), who in his main work, the *Virtuous City* (*al-madîna al-fâdila*), likewise defines prophecy as working through the imagination rather than the intellect (For an English translation and a (barely legible) Arabic text edition of the *Virtuous City* see [10]).

It may sound odd to associate Spinoza with an Islamic thinker from the tenth century of our era. There are no indications that Spinoza was familiar with any work of Islamic philosophy, with the possible exception of Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (This work, however, was published in Latin translation by Edward Pococke only in 1671 and in an anonymous Dutch translation in 1672, that is, after the completion and publication of the *TTP*). Nevertheless, at one remove and mediated by Maimonides, Spinoza clearly rekindles the concepts and themes discussed by al-Farabî and other Islamic political philosophers. Maimonides held al-Farabî in the highest esteem, praising his works as “finer than sieved flour;” accordingly, the *Guide* is clearly indebted to al-Farabî’s analyses of the relation between philosophy and prophecy, and between mass and elite, even if it nowhere explicitly refers to the latter’s political writings (nor, incidentally, to those of any other Islamic philosopher).

¹ In 1.20, Spinoza seems to suggest that Christ, unlike the other prophets, received his prophecies through his intellect rather than his imagination; but in the light of 1.19, this paragraph is more plausibly read as seeing Christ’s prophecy as received directly from mind to mind (*de mente ad mentem*), rather than by the effort of the imagination (*imaginatiois ope*), that is, mediated by words or images; cf. 4.10.

Maimonides's aims are not the same as al-Farabî's, however; unlike the latter, who develops a Platonist political philosophy in a monotheistic setting, he defends a particular monotheistic faith against the temptations of philosophy. The 'perplexity' alluded to in his title is the apparent contradiction between (Judaic) Scripture and the philosophical insights yielded by the intellect and by demonstrative argument. The *Guide* attempts to present Scripture as philosophically respectable, and to resolve its apparent contradictions with philosophical knowledge. Rather more than al-Farabî, Maimonides thus appears keen to defend one particular revelation against the perplexing influence of philosophy.

Although Spinoza rejects Maimonides's attempts to extract philosophical truths from Scripture, he agrees with the latter's view that prophetic revelation is formulated in a simple and visual language that is accessible to the masses and easily understood, and that the abstract and learned discourse of philosophy is the exclusive preserve of a literate and educated elite. This distinction, too, can be found in al-Farabî—even more clearly, in fact, than in Maimonides. In chapter 14 of the *Virtuous City*, al-Farabî discusses the imaginative faculty (*al-quwwa al-mutakhayyila*). This faculty, he argues, imitates the rational faculty (*al-quwwa al-nâtiqa*) and the intelligibles (*ma'qûlât*), by creating perceptual and pleasant images of abstract concepts (§14.6). According to this analysis, divination is comparable to dreaming, if on a higher level, since prophecy "is the most perfect rank which the imaginative faculty can reach" (§14.9).

Al-Farabî gives an almost completely naturalist account of prophecy, according to which prophecy is a feature of the imaginative faculty that all humans have, and argues that the prophet, i.e., the man endowed with the most perfect imagination, receives images from the active intellect, whether during sleep or while awake. This account is not entirely naturalist in so far as it is formulated in terms of emanation from, or actualization by, an active intellect that is external to the human soul; but it is not religious in a theist sense either, since it is (mostly) not formulated in terms of revelation (*wahy*) by a personal divinity or angel either. Thus, both al-Farabî and Maimonides talk about human knowledge, or rather intellection (that is, the actual thinking by the human intellect), in terms of emanation, or actualization, by an Active Intellect that is itself external to the human soul. Spinoza's epistemology, of course, rejects these emanationist accounts; but despite appearances, it is not quite Cartesian either: for him, the nature of the human mind itself is the primary source of revelation, as it participates in God's nature: "everything that we understand clearly and distinctly, is dictated to us . . . by the idea of God and by nature" (*omnia, quae clare et distincte intelligimus, Dei idea . . . et natura nobis dictat*, 1.4). Skeptical doubt, as noted, does not emerge as a serious problem in this characterization of knowledge of God.

In several respects, Spinoza stands closer to Maimonides than to al-Farabî; like the former but quite unlike the latter, he freely quotes from biblical Scripture in support of his arguments. The *TTP* has been called a work of 'applied' or 'practical' philosophy [1] (p. VIII); but its line of argumentation is generally based on Scriptural quotations rather than syllogistic arguments, and may accordingly be called theological rather than philosophical. 'Theological' is of course an unsatisfactory term here, given Spinoza's stated aims of separating theology from philosophy, and of subordinating religion to the authority of the sovereign. Hence, we should return below to the question of what exactly is the character of the 'philosophy' espoused in the *TTP*.

In fact, when we contrast him with Maimonides and Spinoza, it becomes clearer just how radical al-Farabî really is: nowhere in the *Virtuous City* does he quote the Qur'an even a single time in support of his argument, and nowhere does he mention Muhammad as the prophet of Islam. Instead, he generically speaks of prophets in the plural, and of the 'first principle' (*al-sabab al-awwal*) and of 'divinity' (*ilâh*) rather than the specifically Islamic God referred to by the proper name *Allâh*. In fact, that word appears only twice in the entire book (§15.19).

In chapter 17, the radical political implications of al-Farabî's account become clearer. To begin with, al-Farabî makes the Platonist claim that philosophers should rule in the virtuous city, a claim both Spinoza and Maimonides stop short of. Even more daringly,

he argues that in an ideal city, the ruler (*ra'îs*) is both a philosopher, who has received the emanations from the active intellect through his intellect, and a prophet, who has received these emanations through his imaginative faculty (§15.10–11). Hence, for him, the philosopher has a superior kind of knowledge: whereas philosophers know things as they are, he continues, prophets only know them by imitation (*tamthîl*); hence, unlike philosophers, who know things by means of demonstrative reasoning that leaves no room for doubt or debate, prophetic imitations do not yield certainty, that is, indubitable knowledge. Moreover, the one universally valid philosophical truth may be imitated by different symbols and images. That is, al-Farabî not only argues that prophetic imaginings are inferior to demonstrative philosophical knowledge, but also that *different* rhetorical imitations of the same universally valid philosophical truths may exist, and hence that 'it is possible that excellent nations and cities exist whose religions differ, although they all have as their goal one and the same felicity' (§17.2). Put differently, he openly states that a virtuous or excellent city does not even need the specifically Islamic revelation. Spinoza, like Maimonides, falls far short of such an overtly non-religious² and non-confessional political philosophy that overtly—not to say defiantly—qualifies religious revelation as an inferior imitation of philosophical insights.

3. Piety: Spinoza between Thomas a Kempis and Erasmus

These differences between al-Farabî and Spinoza lead us to explore the political contents of the *TTP* anew. It has long been customary to read this work against the background of the canonical Western political thinkers who preceded him, in particular Hobbes, whose *De Cive* Spinoza is known to have read, and Machiavelli, whose *Il Principe* figures especially prominently in the posthumously published *Tractatus Politicus*. Here, however, I would like to draw attention to a number of antecedents and sources of inspiration that stem from other traditions.

To begin with, it has been argued by a number of authors that Spinoza's work, in particular the *TTP*, should be understood against the very specific political, religious, and intellectual background of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, which has been characterized as an unintended consequence of the revolt against the Habsburg empire ([11], p. 49). The Republic was also something of an exception to the general trend towards centralized states and absolute rulers that could be witnessed in early modern Western Europe. Instead, the idea of a decentralized republic of autonomous provinces was both a political reality and a normative ideal, especially during the 'stadholderless' era (1650–1672). Partly as a result of this decentralization, it also knew a religious pluralism that was exceptional by seventeenth-century Western European standards, though not necessarily by those of premodern polities. It did have censorship laws, but these were not enforced very strictly, consistently, or even centrally. Nonetheless, the risks of publishing unorthodox views on religion were very real. As is well known, Spinoza had already run afoul of the Jewish Talmud Torah community in 1656; and when the *TTP* was published—clandestinely and anonymously—in 1670, it caused such an uproar that Spinoza abstained from publishing anything else in his lifetime. In 1674, the book was banned by the states of Holland and by the Dutch States General. Subsequently, all of Spinoza's writings would also be placed on the Inquisition's list of prohibited books.³

Over the years, it has become increasingly clear that Spinoza's philosophy, and in particular his political thought, is very much the result of this republican and relatively tolerant, but still dangerous, religious climate. Spinoza is even qualified a 'Cartesian republican' by Van Bunge because of his rejection of the Aristotelianism that constituted the school philosophy of his age [11] (p. 36–37). Van Bunge readily acknowledges the oddity of this term, since Descartes consciously and deliberately abstained from developing any

² One is tempted to call al-Farabî's ideas 'secularist'; but this term may be anachronistic here.

³ Interestingly, there are no hints in al-Farabî's writings nor reports in contemporary sources that the even more radical ideas developed in the *Virtuous City* ever brought him into serious problems with the theologians (*mutakallimîn*) of his age, or with religious scholars (*ulamâ*) more generally. More generally, the early 'Abbâsîd period appears to have been remarkably tolerant of religious freethinking.

political philosophy. In the seventeenth-century Low Countries, however, Cartesianism had acquired a particular, and politicized, quality, not so much as the result of the ‘academic Cartesianism’ that was gradually gaining a foothold in the Dutch universities, but in the ‘lay Cartesianism’ expressed in the Dutch-language writings of authors like the De la Court brothers [11] (p. 45). Below, it will appear that the question of the relation between the professionalized or school philosophy practiced by academic theologians and what—for want of a better term—one might call the ‘lay philosophy’ used by political pamphleteers is of particular relevance for Spinoza (cf. [12]).

Famously, Spinoza argues in the *TTP* that ‘the aim of the state is freedom’ (*Finis ergo Reipublicae revera libertas est*, 20.6), and that there should be a ‘freedom to philosophize’ (*libertas philosophandi*), because this freedom is not a threat to piety (*pietas*) or political stability. However, what exactly do *pietas*, *libertas*, and *libertas philosophandi* (and, for that matter, *philosophia*) mean for him? He does not clearly define or describe any of these notions. Consequently, much ink has been spilled on the question of whether Spinoza’s notion of *libertas* amounts to a form of ‘negative liberty,’ or ‘freedom-from,’ or rather to ‘positive liberty,’ or ‘freedom-to,’ as Isaiah Berlin calls it, or to a form of ‘republican liberty,’ as identified by Quentin Skinner [13–15].⁴ To the extent that Spinoza characterizes liberty in the *TTP*, however, his notion appears to be closer to what today would be called ‘freedom of conscience,’ that is, the freedom of philosophical thought and religious belief, rather than any more political notion of freedom of action. Moreover, Theo Verbeek argues that Spinoza does not really demand freedom for philosophical activity in general, but more specifically for his *own* philosophy [16] (pp. 6–8).

Moreover, liberty in any political sense is difficult to square with Spinoza’s other key notion in the *TTP*, that of *pietas*, which—although no more defined precisely than *libertas*—is generally characterized in terms of obedience, whether to a law or to a sovereign. Oddly, detailed discussion of *pietas* is largely absent even from studies of the *TTP*; to the extent that it is discussed, it is often linked to pagan and early Christian Roman thinkers, in particular, Stoics like Seneca. Thus, Melamed and Rosenthal do not discuss *pietas* at all [17]; Bagley largely identifies it with ‘faith’ or ‘faithfulness,’ but does not discuss it in detail [18] (pp. 114–116); Nadler sees Spinoza’s ‘true piety,’ or the ‘inward worship of God,’ as an entirely personal matter, contrasting with the laws, which govern outward behavior [19] (pp. 201–202); and Verbeek argues that we should take Spinoza’s *pietas* in a practical sense, equivalent to the seventeenth-century Dutch ‘godzaligheid,’ adding that *pietas* “is the Calvinist notion of ‘good works’” [16] (p. 7).⁵

These characterizations, however, have two problems: on the one hand, they miss the overtly political dimension of Spinoza’s *pietas*; on the other, they misconstrue its background in the early modern forms of Christianity in the Low Countries. As I will argue below, it seems to have devotional rather than strictly Calvinist connotations. The political dimension of revealed faiths becomes clear from Spinoza’s remark that the laws revealed to particular prophets are not specific to particular peoples or cultures but to particular *states* (Preface, §10), and his notion of political sovereignty appears remarkably absolutist. Superficially, it may seem that for Spinoza, religious authority is textual rather than personal; on closer inspection, however, he appears to subordinate any *religious* authority to the *political* power of the sovereign, given his claims that “divine law depends solely upon the decree of the sovereign authorities” and “sovereign authorities are the [sole] interpreters of religion and piety” (19.9).

This association of piety with both political and religious obedience is rather problematic; at best, it shows an idealized concept of what true religion and true piety *should* amount to, not what it *in fact* is. Most importantly, it wrongly suggests that religious revolt and spiritual protest movements are *only* the result of oppression by the state. It is therefore no coincidence that Spinoza is cautious not to mention any revolts against

⁴ Remarkably, however, Spinoza is almost entirely absent in Quentin Skinner’s numerous discussions of republican liberty.

⁵ For some discussion of the Christian backgrounds of Spinoza’s *pietas*, see [20].

religious authority, schismatic authors, or seditious movements of the recent past (Luther, Calvin, and the Reformation, for example, are conspicuously absent), let alone contemporary freethinkers like Koerbagh and Van den Enden. Thus, the *TTP* contains rather more examples from Biblical Hebrew and pagan Latin antiquity than from contemporary history; and it only briefly mentions the Dutch revolt against the Spanish king Philip II, the civil war in England, and the Remonstrant controversy that eventually led to the 1618 Orangist coup. Spinoza's staunchly anti-revolutionary attitude even leads him to radically reinterpret recent Dutch history: since the States of Holland (*Ordines Hollandiae*) have never had a king, he argues, the revolt against king Philip was not an act of sedition or revolution against a legitimate monarch, but a legitimate move to recover the States' original power (*pristinum imperium*) against the attempt by the 'last count' (*ultimus comes*, i.e., Philip) to usurp sovereignty (18.10; cf. 18.8, 20.15).

The second point concerns the general characteristics of early modern Dutch spiritual life. It may be tempting to seek the antecedents of Spinoza's use of *pietas* in the Reformation, and specifically in the Calvinism that dominated religious life in the seventeenth-century Republic; but one should not overemphasize these Calvinist influences. There are certainly affinities between some of Spinoza's views and different aspects of the reformation, witness, for example, his own (dare I say Lutheran?) method of 'Scripture alone' (*sola scriptura* I.6), i.e., of basing arguments and interpretations only on what is found in, or clearly derived from, Scripture (Preface, §10). It should be noted that this is also the argumentative style of the countless Protestant pamphlets that were published in the seventeenth-century Netherlands.⁶ Against such readings, however, I would like to suggest that Spinoza's view of religion, and in particular his conception of *pietas*, is devotional and humanist rather than Calvinist. The ultimate source of this devotionalism, both in Spinoza and in the Dutch Reformation at large, is undoubtedly Thomas a Kempis (1380–1471), who had emerged out of the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer and their the 'modern devotion' (*devotio moderna*). In fact, it is difficult to overestimate Thomas's importance for early modern Dutch spirituality at large, among both Catholics and Protestants, and even among Calvinists: thus, Jonathan Israel argues that Thomas "more than any other figure of the Dutch-Speaking lands of the Middle Ages remained an inspiration for the Dutch Reformed church of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, even among its most rigidly Calvinist spokesmen" [22] (p. 42). In the seventeenth century, this devotionalist spirituality acted as a counterweight to the strict, severe, and law-oriented Calvinism of the theologians.⁷

In fact, Thomas a Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*; is undoubtedly the historically most influential formulation of these devotional ideas: directly and indirectly, this text exerted a tremendous influence not only in the Low Countries but in Western Europe at large. Although Thomas's inward-devotional piety does not contain any criticism of either the worldly authority of rulers or the spiritual authority of the Catholic church, it does react or protest against the late-Medieval Catholic high culture of scholastic learning, and against the professionalized philosophy of the scholastic theologians. Thus, in its emphasis on everyday spirituality and devotion, on poverty and simplicity, and on obedience out of love, the *Imitatio* explicitly contrasts the virtuous life of humility and devotion (*caritas*) with the scholastic study of the Bible and its concern with abstractions like genus and species and with cleverness (*cauillacio*) in debates (I.3.3–5). The latter, Thomas argues, is a 'vain science' (*vana sciencia*): it is not in itself wrong, but it is inferior to a virtuous life, and to the 'highest study,' which is meditating on the life of Christ (*Summum igitur studium noster sit: in vita ihesu christi meditari*, I.1.3). Although meditating on Christ is obviously less central to his concerns, Spinoza, too, rejects the pursuit of wealth, and contrasts the simple teaching

⁶ Unlike Spinoza, however, these pamphleteers explicitly addressed themselves to the 'simple folk' (*eenvoudighe luyden*) and to the 'common man' (*den ghemeenen man*); cf. [21] (p. 305).

⁷ Van Deursen notes the differences between Catholic and Calvinist piety in the Republic: the former, he writes, involved retreat, rites, and ritual objects, whereas the latter emphasized reading the Bible and obeying God's commands in everyday life [21] (p. 301).

of love (*caritas*) and justice in Scripture with scholastic attempts to turn religion into *scientia* (see esp. 13.2).

Thus, the *Imitatio* involves a devotional rather than law-oriented conception of faith much like Spinoza's. This convergence becomes even clearer in Thomas's conceptualization of obedience and submission. Throughout the *Imitatio*, the importance of obedience is emphasized, in particular the obedience to a spiritual authority (*prelatus*); but the core of this obedience is devotional love (*caritas* or *amor*), in particular for Jesus (cf. II.7). Hence, Thomas contrasts obedience out of necessity and obedience out of love; only the latter, he writes, yields inner quiet, and even freedom: only by subjecting oneself with all one's heart and for the sake of God, he writes, does one acquire liberty of mind (*Nec libertatem mentis acquirunt: nisi ex toto corde propter deum se subiciant*, I.9.3-4). That is, Thomas's obedience involves not simply obeying out of necessity to a law, but obeying out of devotional love for a personalized God. Spinoza likewise emphasizes that obedience to God consists solely in justice and love, or love of one's neighbor (*obedientiam in sola Justitia et charitate sive amore erga proximum consistere*, 14.10). Thus, the *Imitatio* may be said to have provided the broadly devotional background for Spinoza's view of religion and piety.

Next, a devotional and humanist notion of *pietas* appears explicitly, and quite frequently, in Erasmus, who from 1478 to 1485 had studied in the Latin school run by the Brethren in Deventer. Although Erasmus is critical of various aspects of the modern devotion as preached by his former teachers, preferring a more worldly devotional engagement (*pietas*) to the latter's inward-looking devotion of *Innlichkeit*, he likewise recommends a life of humility and devotional love, free from vanity and jealousy. In his 1523 catalogue of his writings, he even lists his works promoting piety as a separate category.⁸ The key term here, however, even more central than that of *pietas*, is the notion of the 'philosophy of Christ' (*philosophia Christi*), which is explicitly and systematically contrasted with the professionalized scholastic philosophy and theology. In works like the *Encheiridion* and the *Paraclesis*, not to mention the *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus argues that this philosophy of Christ is simple, easy to understand, and formulated in the vernacular language; as such, it favorably contrasts with the scholastic *disputationes* and verbal quibbles in Latin of philosophers like Ockham, Duns Scotus, and St Thomas.

Finally, in the Low Countries of Spinoza's own age, there were various pietist movements, which likewise rejected (by now, predominantly Protestant) theological debate for a life of simple piety and devotion. This Protestant pietism had come to the Netherlands from England the late sixteenth century; the first to develop it for a specifically Dutch setting was the Middelburg-born Reformist pastor Willem Teellinck (1579–1629), whom the later pietist Gisbertus Voetius has called "a second, but Reformist, Thomas a Kempis."⁹

As a work of spiritual guidance for the laity, the *Imitatio Christi* enjoyed a tremendous popularity, both in handwritten and in printed forms, and both in Latin and in vernacular versions, and has rightly been called 'early modern bestseller.' In fact, its influence is so pervasive in early modern Dutch culture, and beyond, that it may be difficult to pinpoint or identify. To mention but one channel of such indirect influence: Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, is reported to have been particularly fond of the *Imitatio*; and in fact, in his *Spiritual exercises*, he explicitly recommends studying this work [25] (p. 45).¹⁰ It is an open question to what extent the Jesuit society appropriated and institutionalized the spirituality of the *Imitatio*, for example in the *docta pietas* (learned piety) as part of its 1599 plan of studies (*ratio studiorum*)—a plan that Descartes, too, is likely to have followed in the years of his Jesuit education. It is equally uncertain whether Spinoza learned about the *Imitatio Christi*, Erasmus and Jesuit *docta pietas* through his teacher, the former Jesuit

⁸ "Quintus attribuitur hiis quae instituunt ad pietatem," Letter to Johann von Botzheim, January 1523 (1341A); published separately as *Catalogus novus omnium Erasmi Roterdami lucubrationum* (1524, n.p.). In turn, Erasmus's notion of the philosophy of Christ, which identifies *pietas* and *caritas*, owes much to Stoic conceptions of *pietas* as can be found in—in particular—Cicero and Seneca [23].

⁹ "Soo dat hy met recht eenen tweeden Thomas a Kempis (doch ghereformeerden) van onse eeuwte mochte ghehouden werden" [24] (p. 154). Discussion of early modern Dutch piety is oddly absent from Israel's studies on the Dutch republic and on radical Enlightenment.

¹⁰ On the popularity of the *Imitatio Christi*, and on its profound effect on Ignatius of Loyola, see [26] (ch. 10).

Franciscus van den Enden.¹¹ What is certain, however, is that there were various channels through which the *askēsis* or spiritual exercise elaborated in the *Imitatio* may have reached Spinoza, whether directly or indirectly.

Thus, some form of early modern Dutch devotionalism is more than likely to have been known to Spinoza, even if there is no direct evidence of him having read Thomas a Kempis any more than of his being familiar with al-Farabî. This background in devotionalism and humanism also gives Spinoza's rejection of scholasticism a rather different flavor. Often, the reaction against scholasticism (and specifically against Aristotle's philosophy) that we find in early modern philosophers like Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza has been characterized in primarily metaphysical and epistemological terms, whether in the guise of a reaction against final causes in the realm of nature, or against abstract essences or substantial forms; this, of course, fits within the narrative of the gradual professionalization of philosophy. However, in late Medieval and early modern Northern Europe, one witnesses another and rather wider reaction against scholasticism, or more precisely against the academic theological learning shaped by Aristotelianism and the high culture of Latinity that was developed in the institutions of the Catholic church and in the universities. As has long been known, the popular devotional mysticism of authors like Jan van Ruusbroec, the 'modern devotion' of the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer, Luther's translation of the Bible into the vernacular, and in a sense, the Reformation at large, may all be seen as more or less overt criticisms of this dominant Church culture, which was formulated in Latin rather than in a language the commoners (and especially women) could understand, and elaborated in a philosophical jargon that was increasingly exclusive to a small group of educated scholars eager to show off their cleverness in disputations.

Concerning the intellectual character of this devotion, however, Spinoza appears to mark a significant difference with respect to Thomas and Erasmus. He appears to agree with both in his claim that the only knowledge of God we need 'is knowledge of His divine justice and love, that is, those attributes of God we imitate by a sound rationale of life' (*cognitionem divinae suae justitiae et charitatis; hoc est, talia Dei attributa, quae homines certa vivendi ratione imitari possunt*, 13.8).¹² Spinoza also appears to share Erasmus's idea that the teachings of Scripture contain a simple message of devotional love. Erasmus's expression *philosophia Christi*, however, seems to suggest the opposite of what Spinoza is arguing, in so far as the latter precisely tries to *separate* faith and theology from philosophy. Unlike Spinoza, Erasmus also recommends Biblical study and the acquisition of what he calls *docta pietas* even for the uneducated masses and for women. He emphatically, indeed almost defiantly, calls the philosophy of Christ an 'illiterate philosophy' (*illiterata philosophia*) or 'vulgar' philosophy (*philosophia plebeia*), and argues that this philosophy is more effective than all the philosophical learning of sophisticated thinkers like Aristotle. Although Spinoza would agree with characterizing *pietas* in terms of a simple practical ethics rather than scholastic cleverness, he resists the suggestion that the illiterate masses should be guided by devotional love; instead, for the *vulgus*, he only preaches the strict obedience to the law—not so much the universal law of *pietas* as the laws of specific states.¹³ Like Thomas and Erasmus, Spinoza sees 'philosophy' as a way of life; but unlike them, he does not write for the edification of the common man (let alone woman). Thus, the 'reader-philosopher' he addresses in the Preface (*philosophe lector*, §15) is emphatically not a commoner. Like Maimonides and al-Farabî, Spinoza maintains a strict distinction between the illiterate mass (Latin *vulgus*, Arabic *'amma*) and educated elite (Ar. *khâssa*), adding that the masses can be no more rid of their superstitions than of their irrational fear (*ibid.*). In

¹¹ Nadler already notes that Spinoza may well have learned about humanists like Erasmus from his teacher, the Jesuit-educated Franciscus van den Enden, whose humanist and democratic ideas found little favor with local Calvinists; more generally, he argues that being educated at Van den Enden's school was a decisive influence on Spinoza's intellectual and personal development [19] (pp. 125–129).

¹² Unlike Thomas, Spinoza recommends we do not imitate Christ but rather the justice and devotional love of God Himself; but like Thomas, he emphasizes that the knowledge needed for leading a pious life involves devotional simplicity rather than scholastic sophistication.

¹³ This reading would seem to make of Spinoza a more authoritarian and conservative, and a less liberal and democratic, thinker than is often thought. Cf. [27].

this context, his 1671 letter to Jarig Jelles warning against translating the *TTP* from Latin into Dutch, the language of the masses, gains in significance.

There is also a major political difference between Spinoza and his devotionalist predecessors. To the extent that the early vernacular devotional movements embody a protest against scholastic theology, and more generally against the Latin-based theological high culture of the late-Medieval Catholic church, this popular spirituality also had an obvious political dimension: it involved a redefinition, or renegotiation, of the relation between the church and the laity, and between the illiterate mass and the educated elite. Oddly, however, Spinoza entirely ignores this popular protest implicit (or explicit) in various forms of devotional *pietas*; instead, he emphatically argues that piety is identical to obedience and charity—albeit obedience to the laws of states and to the universal law of an abstract *religio catholica*, rather than to a church or to a prelate. Is he merely being disingenuous here, choosing to conveniently overlook the oppositional element in the various religious and devotional movements of the recent past, not least the very Reformation out of which the Dutch Republic had emerged? Or is he really a conservative, if not an outright authoritarian, thinker, who actually believes that all religious and other sedition should be avoided, and that revealed religion is a useful and legitimate tool for controlling the masses? This point has recently been argued forcefully and provocatively by Kal [27]; but whatever the answers to these questions, it is clear that Spinoza, with his strict and unbridgeable separation between philosophical elite and irrational religious mass, and with his downplaying of the potential for resistance in spirituality, marks a significant step *back* with respect to the ideals of popular education, emancipation, and protest that had emerged in the early modern period.

These considerations finally allow for a differentiated answer to the question of Spinoza's philosophical modernity. If the above argument concerning Spinoza's indirect and implicit links to Islamic–Judaic philosophy and to early modern spirituality has any validity, his modernity is rather more ambivalent than some recent readings would have us believe. His emphasis on the distinction between mass and elite, and on prophetic revelation in terms of laws, correlates with Maimonides and al-Farabî; and his suggestion that the inner meaning of the law is devotional resonates with Thomas and Erasmus. We may therefore qualify Spinoza's thought as a philosophy of *askêsis* as much as a philosophy of *mathêsis*—where *askêsis* is used not, of course, in the sense of austerity and self-renunciation, but in the ancient sense of training, practice, or exercise. It centers less around intellectual theoretical activity than around practical or spiritual exercise; it aims at making humans free not from doubt but from fear, and free in so far as they are guided by devotional love (*caritas*) and piety (*pietas*) rather than duty and obedience.

When looked at as a way of life to be achieved by spiritual exercises, Spinoza's philosophy may appear to have more in common with devotional predecessors like Thomas a Kempis and Erasmus than with philosophical successors like Kant and Hegel. It also fits in better with the 'lay Cartesianism' preached by the popularizing pamphleteers of the Dutch Republic, some of whom were personal acquaintances of Spinoza's. His strict elitism, however, is rather difficult to square with the ideals of these early modern predecessors, and in fact brings Spinoza rather closer to his Medieval sources of inspiration, Maimonides and al-Farabî.

4. Philosophy and Pietas as a Way of Life?

These considerations, finally, bring us to Pierre Hadot's influential writings on philosophy as a way of life [28,29]. Famously, starting from obvious examples like Marcus Aurelius and Seneca and generalizing to thinkers like Socrates and Plato, Hadot argues that ancient philosophy was generally not an academic discipline but a form of spiritual exercise; it aimed not at creating a technical jargon for specialists, but at an art of living for all humans. It was only in the twelfth century, Hadot continues, that the idea of philosophy as a way of life was replaced by the idea of philosophy as an academic discipline. The setting for this professionalization of philosophy, of course, was the new institution of the university,

where learned *disputatio* replaced spiritual guidance. After this development, he argues, spiritual practices became the domain of Christian religion rather than professionalized philosophy; but even in early modern philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza, one can still see traces of the ancient conception. On these grounds, Hadot also criticizes what he sees as Foucault's analysis of the rise of modern, academic, and/or scholastic philosophy. He reads the latter as arguing that, starting with Descartes, philosophy refocused from the spiritual practice of *askèsis*, or care of the self (interpreted as a transformation of the subject), to the theoretical questioning of the evidence given to the subject, which itself is presumed to be given as well. Against this view, Hadot objects that both Descartes and Spinoza 'remained faithful to the ancient definition: for them, philosophy was 'the practice of wisdom' [29] (p. 272).¹⁴ In his 1982 lectures on the hermeneutics of the subject, however, Foucault rather more cautiously speaks of a 'Cartesian moment' rather than a historical development starting with Descartes, recognizing that the *Meditations* may also qualify as a form of spiritual exercise or 'care of the self.' More pertinent to our discussion, however, Foucault actually contrasts Spinoza with this Cartesian moment, in an off-the-cuff remark that, characteristically, is as suggestive as it is terse. For Descartes, he writes, knowledge alone is the condition for the subject's access to the truth; but Spinoza's *Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect* discusses how one has to transform one's being as a subject in order to have such access [31] (pp. 17; 27–28). In other words, Foucault argues that even an early modern thinker like Spinoza sees philosophy in terms of spirituality rather than epistemology, and of *askèsis* rather than evidence. Especially in the first nine paragraphs of the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect*, he elaborates, Spinoza proceeds from the 'properly spiritual question' of how the subject should be transformed for it to have access to the truth. Put in these terms, the opposition between what one might call—in Foucault's wake—the 'Cartesian' and the 'Spinozian moment' involves not so much a temporal or chronological development as a confrontation between what one may call a philosophy of knowledge, or *mathèsis*, and a philosophy of spiritual exercise, or *askèsis*.¹⁵

In fact, the idea of philosophy as a way of life is even more explicit in the *Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect* than Foucault suggests. In the very first paragraph, Spinoza openly describes his search for a new 'way of life' (*novum institutum*) that will give one a lasting and highest joy in all eternity (*continua ac summa in aeternum laetitia*, §1). Arguing that the aims we pursue in our everyday lives, like wealth, honor, and sensual pleasures, are 'vain and futile' (*vana et futilia*), Spinoza argues that the highest good we can aim for is to transform our own and others' human nature into a state of 'knowledge of the unity that the mind has with the whole of nature' (*cognitionem unionis, quam mens cum tota Natura habet*, §13). Thus, the human perfection that results from the spiritual (or, more precisely, intellectual) exercise of improving one's understanding involves not so much correct or indubitable knowledge in itself as the 'highest happiness' (*summa felicitas*) that results from this knowledge. The certainty Spinoza aims for, that is, is ethical rather than epistemological, and Stoic rather than Cartesian; most importantly, it involves the transformation of, rather than a foundation in, one's subjectivity.

Foucault's claims are based exclusively on the early *Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect*; but they find corroboration in the *TTP*, and in the *Ethics*. In the latter, Spinoza briefly discusses the best 'way of living' or 'plan of living' (*vivendi institutum*) that agrees both with his ethical principles and with common practice (*communi praxi*); in the former, as noted above, he speaks of the imitation of God as a 'way of living' or 'rationale of life' (*ratio vivendi*). Moreover, in the *TTP*, he explicitly states that the cultivation of piety is a

¹⁴ On philosophy as spiritual exercise in the later Middle Ages and the early modern period, see also [30] (ch. IV).

¹⁵ In a 1979 interview published in 2018, Foucault characterizes 'spirituality' rather more explicitly in terms of resistance to particular forms of power, describing it as the desire to transform one's subjectivity, as opposed to 'religion', which imposes a subjectivity from the outside (Eric Aeschmann, 'Michel Foucault, l'Iran et le pouvoir du spirituel: l'entretien inédit de 1979' *Le nouvel observateur*, 7 February 2018; available at <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idees/20180207.OBS1864/michel-foucault-l-iran-et-le-pouvoir-du-spirituel-l-entretien-inedit-de-1979.html> (accessed on 15 February 2021)). This would put Foucault's analysis in a rather better position to account for the oppositional aspects of spirituality than Hadot's; but I leave discussion of these matters for another occasion.

precondition for access to (prophetic) truth: since the imagination does not involve clear and distinct ideas, he argues, it does not yield indubitable knowledge; instead, all prophetic certainty is founded upon the vividness of the imagining; upon a divine sign that confirms the receiver as a prophet; and, ‘most importantly’ (*praecipuo*), upon the fact ‘that they had only . . . their minds exclusively to what is right and good’ (*quod animus ad solum aequum et bonum inclinatum habebant*, 2.5). Put differently, Spinoza explicitly characterizes *pietas* as the most important precondition for prophetic certainty: ‘God . . . revealed things as they were to a pious man and did not forbid him to tell the truth’ (*pio . . . rem, ut erat, revelavit, et vera praedicere non prohibuit*, 2.4).

The exercise of piety, in other words, is a precondition for access to the truth. This implies that *pietas* as characterized in the *TTP* does indeed seem to amount to what Foucault means by spirituality, and to what Hadot means by spiritual exercises: it involves the attempt to change one’s own subjectivity in the hope of gaining access to the truth. We are far removed indeed here from cartesian epistemological concerns with evidence and skepticism.¹⁶

5. Conclusions

In the *TTP* and elsewhere, Spinoza appears to proclaim a philosophy of *askēsis* rather than a philosophy of *mathēsis*. Hence, we should interpret his rejection of scholasticism not in primarily epistemological or metaphysical terms, as Descartes’s rejection of Aristotelianism is usually read, but rather in terms of practical ethics. To the extent that it involves a form of spiritual exercise or amounts to a way of life, Spinoza’s notion of *philosophia* not only echoes Stoics like Seneca and Cicero, but also—and at least as importantly—late Medieval and Renaissance devotionalists and humanists like Thomas a Kempis and Erasmus. Spinoza shows no trace of concern with the education of the commoners, however, but only worries about their obedience to the revealed laws. In this strict separation of philosophical elite and incurably irrational mass, he appears to be rather closer to medieval thinkers like al-Farabī and Maimonides. Although he appears to promote philosophy as a way of life rather than a professional academic activity, he strictly reserves this way for the educated few who can use and develop their intellect to liberate themselves from the fear that informs popular revealed religion. Moreover, in emphasizing that *pietas* involves not only devotional love but also strict obedience to the law, Spinoza entirely glosses over the late Medieval and early modern forms of spiritual protest that would culminate in the Reformation and the Dutch revolt.

In conclusion, it may be noted that a closer reading of the *TTP* also reveals a number of points where Hadot’s claims about philosophy as the practice of wisdom should be modified, or at least deserve further critical scrutiny. First, Spinoza openly, though not entirely consistently, discusses the political dimension of this philosophical way of life—a dimension almost completely overlooked by Hadot. Second, Spinoza’s strict distinction between rationally thinking and therefore free elites and irredeemably fearful and irrational, and therefore unfree, masses may resonate with premodern philosophers like al-Farabī and Maimonides; but it clashes with the ideas of early modern authors like Erasmus and Thomas a Kempis. This opens up the social (or political) question of exactly what is the appropriate audience for philosophical writing, or target for spiritual guidance. On both accounts, there appears to be room for a further exploration of the politics of Spinoza’s *pietas*—and of the political aspects of spiritual exercises and philosophy as a way of life more generally.

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¹⁶ Intriguingly, the late Medieval pious movements, and figures like Thomas a Kempis and Erasmus are largely absent from Foucault’s published analyses of Medieval spirituality, which he mostly characterizes in rather generic terms as a ‘religious crisis’ or a ‘crisis in government.’

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