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## **Spinoza's Conception of Political Liberty and the Dutch Republic, 1650-1677**

by

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## *Foreword*

The first building blocks that led to this thesis were laid at the research master seminar ‘State of the Art’ taught by professor Ido de Haan at Utrecht University in the Autumn of 2008. I had to read an article in which Spinoza was mentioned in relation to political liberty. I did not know much about Spinoza nor about his views on liberty at that time. But since then both Spinoza and the historical and theoretical discussion about political liberty became something of an obsession to me (sometimes to the despair and surprise of my girlfriend and friends who wondered that after almost two years I was still ‘busy with Spinoza’).

In the bachelor thesis I wrote for my philosophy degree at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, I set out to rethink Spinoza and his conception of political liberty in relation to the historical traditions of republican and liberal political thought. After a while I realized that the academic quarrels about ‘-isms’, about negative and positive liberty, and so on, can be quite disappointing from a historical point of view. These debates are mainly about twentieth-century concepts that are more often invoked to capture this or that thinker for a certain tradition, than that it really helps us to understand and appreciate the peculiarities and thought-provoking aspects of the writings of such thinkers as Spinoza. In this master thesis I have tried to approach Spinoza’s thinking about liberty by examining the debates about liberty that were going on in the seventeenth century. In doing so, I hope not only to deepen our historical knowledge of what Spinoza intended to do by propounding his conception of political liberty, but also to enrich our current thinking about liberty.

I would like to thank Angela Roothaan from the Vrije Universiteit for her advice and helpful criticisms of my earliest articulated thoughts on Spinoza. I also want to thank my tutor Frans Willem Lantink, who encouraged me to study at Heidelberg University during my history master’s programme. I had a great time there. This was very much due to the stimulating academic environment professor Thomas Maissen had created, but also to the friendships I made there. I want to thank Thomas, Urte Weeber, Elisabeth Natour and Christine Zabel for their helpful suggestions and questions, and moreover for kindly inviting me to the conference ‘Liberalism and Republicanism: Past and Present’ at Haifa University, Israel. At Utrecht University I would like to thank professor Maarten Prak for his help with my PhD-proposal, Josine Blok for the stimulating lectures and conversations about Aristotle and ancient Greek citizenship, and Joris van Eijnatten for helping me with the ins and outs of seventeenth-century theology.

Ido de Haan has been a great supervisor as I felt that he always put his finger on the most pressing problems in the structure and arguments of my writings. Moreover, I am very happy he showed me that interesting interdisciplinary research that combines history, political theory and philosophy is not only something that happens outside of The Netherlands. Piet Steenbakkers, the second reader of this thesis, went beyond the call of duty to help me, not only with my thesis, but also with an earlier PhD-proposal. I am grateful that he helped me to improve my writings.

To my friends, the ‘Henrick de Keijser’ – Koen, Martijn, Simon, Wessel – to Christiaan, to Miles, I just want to say that I am very thankful for their friendship (humour, discussions, and late night conversations included), especially in a period when my life was full of grief and sadness, as the unthinkable happened and my life was brutally interrupted by the sudden loss of my father.

The greatest support to finish my master’s degree and thesis, and more generally, to follow my ambitions and passions around the world, I have received from my mother Annie and sister Sanneke. We have gone through an immensely sad period as a family, but they were always there for me. Their encouragements and love mattered and still matter a lot to me, whether I went to Heidelberg, Southeast Asia, or when I am going to Cambridge next year.

For more than seven years I am the lucky man to call Fedja my girlfriend. Philosophy and history may have captured me, but she really conquered me. With her love, affection, jokes, intelligence, and companionship, in many, many spheres of life, she shows me the richness of life and love. Without her support, I probably could not have written this thesis.

Lastly, I want to thank Flip, my father, to whom I owe the greatest and inexpressible debt for his enthusiasm about, and encouragement of, so many things I have been able to do in my life, but mostly just for who he was. I know he would be proud of me. This thesis is dedicated to him.

## ***Abbreviations***

References in the *Ethics* (*Ethica*):

<i>E</i>	<i>Ethics</i>
I, II, etc.	part number
p	proposition
d	demonstration
s	scholium
c	corollary
def	definition
ap	appendix
pref	preface
def.aff.	definition of the affects

Quotations from the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect) and *Ethica* in English are taken from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

Quotations from the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in English are taken from *Theologico-Political Treatise*, edited by Jonathan Israel and translated by Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Quotations from the *Tractatus Politicus* are taken from *Political Treatise*, in: Spinoza, *The Complete Works*, translated by Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Freedom and Spinoza in the Dutch Republic

Without a doubt, freedom was one of the most hotly contested issues in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth-century.<sup>1</sup> The concept of freedom, however, had many meanings, in different debates, to different people. The theological debate about free will and predestination in the first two decades of the seventeenth century is such a debate. Although not as intensely as in the 1610s, theological disputes in the 1650s and 1660s again developed into highly politicized matters affecting much broader segments of Dutch society than just the academia and the church. Since the Dutch Republic never established a state church, the final authority of who was to decide what theological doctrine should be socially enforced was a topic deeply entangled with what might seem to be only scholarly issues of biblical interpretation. In the 1650s orthodox Calvinists, or ‘Voetians’, demanded that the Dutch political authorities should support them in their attempts to purify society, while refusing the same worldly authorities every right of say in their internal affairs. The remonstrants, or ‘Coccejans’, and their political allies Grand Pensionary Johan De Witt (1618-1672) and many regents, on the other hand, wanted to prevent the Voetian wing of the public church from becoming too influential in politics and society. What was at stake were not merely theological issues, but the question whether ecclesiastical authorities have a justified claim to (the support of) the political power of the civil authorities to implement their conception of the pious life.

Next to these severe theological and political differences of opinion, the mechanistic philosophy of Descartes, that was increasingly winning ground in Dutch universities by the 1650s, proved to be another ground for vituperative rhetoric. In particular from the side of orthodox Calvinists, who foresaw in Cartesianism a new threat to scriptural authority, voices for strict censorship of radical ideas grew stronger. The trial of freethinker Adriaan Koerbagh

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<sup>1</sup> In the seventeenth century the term Dutch ‘Republic’ was, in fact, not widely used. Usually the terms ‘*Vereenighde Nederlantsche Provintien*’ (United Dutch Provinces), ‘*Vereenighde Nederlanden*’ (United Netherlands) or ‘*Geunieerde Provincien*’ (United Provinces) were used by Dutch diplomacy to designate the seven Dutch provinces united by the Union of Utrecht (1579). For the sake of convenience and since it is now common usage, I will use the term Dutch ‘Republic’ to refer to the union of seven Dutch provinces. See also E.H. Kossmann, ‘Freedom in seventeenth-century Dutch thought and practice’ in: J.I. Israel (ed.) *The Anglo-Dutch Moment: Essays on the Glorious Revolution and its World Impact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p. 288.

(1632-1669) in 1668 and his subsequent death in prison in 1669 can be considered as probably one of the harshest examples of this development.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in Dutch society in the third quarter of the seventeenth-century several ‘realms’ of debate where some kind of freedom was involved can be identified: the free will of human beings, freedom of religion and (religious) life-style, and the freedom to engage oneself in philosophy and intellectual thought, including freedom of speech and writing.

However, on a more strictly political level, it is important to realize that the Dutch had not long before liberated themselves from the Spanish monarchy and were still in a process of understanding themselves self-consciously as a free republic, that is to say, as an independent sovereign state. The historian E.H. Kossmann accurately noted that, next to the notions that were traditionally connected with political freedom before 1650 – independence, provincial sovereignty and religious tolerance – a fourth element gradually arose in the 1650s and 1660s: namely ‘the conviction that the independent, federal, and tolerant state should have a clearly defined republican form of government if it wished to be truly free’.<sup>3</sup> It was only during the First Stadholderless Period (1650-1672) that a number of authors, most prominently the brothers Johan (1622-1660) and Pieter (1618-1685) de la Court, tried to justify an unmixed republican state without a stadholder as the ultimate safeguard for liberty.<sup>4</sup> Closely related to these novel visions of the best type of government was the additional everlasting question of how much freedom or autonomy the provinces – Holland in particular – should maintain in relation to the States General, and, subsequently, how much autonomy the cities should be allowed to hold in relation to the provinces. In other words, should the Dutch Republic remain a ‘*respublicae foederatae*, in plural’ as Johan de Witt held, or should it become a ‘*Vereenight Nederlant*’ (singular) with a more centralized type of governance, one army and one religious policy, which unavoidably would mean a sacrifice on the part of the autonomy of the provinces, as for example the orthodox minister Abraham van de Velde (1614-1677) argued?<sup>5</sup>

The seventeenth-century Dutch-Jewish philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677) grew up in the middle of these struggles. He more or less dealt with all the abovementioned

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<sup>2</sup> M.R. Wielema, ‘Koerbagh, Adriaan (1632-1669)’ in: W. van Bunge, et. al. (eds.) *Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003) p. 571-574.

<sup>3</sup> Kossmann, ‘Freedom in seventeenth-century Dutch thought and practice’, p. 286.

<sup>4</sup> W.R.E. Velema, ‘That a Republic is Better than a Monarchy’: Anti-monarchism in Early Modern Dutch Political Thought’, in: Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (eds.) *Republicanism: A shared European Heritage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) vol. 1, p. 12-19.

<sup>5</sup> De Witt to [Schaep?], May 10, 1652, *Brieven van Johan de Witt*, I, 61-62. As quoted in: Rowen, *John de Witt*, p. 58.; A. van de Velde, *Wonder des Alder-Hoogsten* (Middelburg, 1668).

issues on what kind, how much and to whom liberty should be granted. But unlike most of his contemporaries who took part in these debates and only touched elements of freedom separately and unsystematically, Spinoza's voice was exceptionally wide-ranging and profound, as he linked to each other in a systematic way apparently unrelated realms of human existence in which some kind of freedom was involved. In his writings Spinoza was able to bring together a strict philosophical determinism and a full-blown theory of human affections with urgent practical questions about the nature of and rationale behind civil and political liberties.<sup>6</sup> If it is true that 'it was generally speaking not the logic of a principle but the force of a situation which brought about the freedom prevailing in the Netherlands', but that the various freedoms nonetheless came to be regarded as a 'coherent whole' that 'resulted from practice rather than principle', then Spinoza certainly did something extraordinary.<sup>7</sup> It is this aspect of Spinoza's thought, that is, that it simultaneously addressed a wide range of divergent aspects of freedom that were at the front line of Dutch public debate, in one comprehensive philosophy, which makes it so hard to penetrate and fascinating at the same time. This thesis is about this fascinating interaction between the Dutch Republic and its most famous philosopher.

## 1.2 The problem stated

Spinoza's reputation as an obscure and complex philosopher, known for his rationalism and writings about mainly metaphysics and human psychology, has recently been replaced by that of a thinker who deeply cared about, and made important contributions to philosophical reflection on social and political problems.<sup>8</sup> Spinoza's political thought has also been interpreted as an important contribution to the history of republican political thought, whether it be Dutch, naturalistic, democratic or liberal republicanism.<sup>9</sup> Others have placed Spinoza

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<sup>6</sup> In this thesis I use the words 'freedom' and 'liberty' interchangeably.

<sup>7</sup> Kossmann, 'Freedom in seventeenth-century Dutch thought and practice', p. 297.

<sup>8</sup> Most notable are J.I. Israel's *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1650-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also S. Smith's *Spinoza, Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New York: Yale University Press, 1997) and *idem, Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> For the view that Spinoza represents something that can be called 'Dutch' or 'naturalistic' republicanism see H.W. Blom. *Causality and Morality in Politics. The Rise of Naturalism in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Political Thought* (Dissertation, Utrecht, 1995) p. 217-239, and R. Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) p. 154-191. Israel suggests the term 'democratic republicanism' in 'The Intellectual Origins of



within an emerging tradition of liberal political ideas.<sup>10</sup> All these characterizations, based on valuable genealogical reconstructions, have much to recommend themselves about where to situate Spinoza in the history of political thought. But this thesis suggests that labelling Spinoza one way or another neither helps us much further in understanding the point of his writings in relation to the historical context, nor in comprehending the distinct nature of Spinoza's conception of political liberty in relation to its philosophical underpinnings.

Fully acknowledging the profound philosophical origins of Spinoza's views on liberty, this thesis, however, will primarily focus on Spinoza's writings on civil and political liberties in relation to the political controversies and debates in the Dutch Republic in the period 1650-1677. That does not mean that I feel that there is no need for a systematic enquiry into the relationship between Spinoza's fundamental thoughts on liberty, i.e. on a metaphysical and personal (internal) level, and the more practical purposes he had in writing the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) and the *Tractatus politicus* (1677). In fact, I believe there is much need for a study that transcends one-sided (political) philosophical interpretation on the one hand and historical contextualisation on the other.<sup>11</sup> As Matheron and Blom already showed, ignoring Spinoza's fundamental discussion of the absolute self-determining liberty of God, of human freedom, and of man's passions and 'sociability' in the *Ethics*, seems to be a major

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Modern Democratic Republicanism (1660–1720)' in: *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 3, no. 7, p. 7-36; Smith calls it 'liberal republicanism', *Spinoza, Liberalism*, p. 119-144.

<sup>10</sup> D. Den Uyl, *Power, State and Freedom: An interpretation of Spinoza's Political Philosophy* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1983); L. Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) ; G.M. Mara, 'Liberal Politics and Moral Excellence in Spinoza's Political Philosophy' in: V. Chappell (ed.) *Baruch de Spinoza* (New York: Garland, 1992) p. 191-212; R.J. McShea, *The Political Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism*, p. 119-144, 197.

<sup>11</sup> Interpretations of Spinoza's political thought skipping over (almost) any historical context are, for instance, E. Curley, 'Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan, in: Garret, D. (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 315-34, although Curley does contrast Spinoza with Hobbes and Machiavelli on a theoretical level.; M. Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (Londen: Routledge, 2008); Den Uyl, *Power, State and Freedom*; S. James, 'Power and Difference: Spinoza's Conception of Freedom' in: *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 4 (1996), p. 207-228. M. LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom. Spinoza on Human Excellence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); S. Smith, 'What kind of democrat was Spinoza?' in: *Political Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 6, p. 6-27. Valuable contextual accounts of Spinoza's political thought by scholars such as Haitsma Mulier, Kossmann, and Prokhovnik more or less disregard Spinoza's profoundest and most foundational work, the *Ethics*. See E.O.G. Haitsma Mulier *The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1980); idem, 'The language of seventeenth-century republicanism in the United Provinces: Dutch or European?', in: A.R. Pagden (ed.) *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe (Ideas in Context)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 179-195; E.H. Kossmann, *Political Thought in the Dutch Republic: Three Studies* (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2000) and Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*. See also G.P. Baldwin's critical discussion of this last book 'Review *Spinoza and Republicanism*' in: *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 38 (2008) p. 504-505.

omission and undermines an adequate understanding of the systematic character and various layers of Spinoza's conception of political liberty.<sup>12</sup> In this thesis priority will be given to the historical context in which Spinoza lived and wrote. I will analyse the internal philosophical connections of his philosophy as only one of the several contexts of Spinoza's conception of political liberty.<sup>13</sup> This thesis assumes that a historical and a systematic philosophical analysis are not mutually exclusive, but can be used supplementary. Spinoza was thoroughly influenced by his historical and intellectual context, but his philosophy was not completely determined by them. Spinoza's ideas on political liberty partly grew out of his wide-ranging systematic philosophy. In order to understand the meaning of his ideas it is therefore necessary to grasp how his systematic philosophy and his political ideas relate to each other.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, this thesis has a somewhat interdisciplinary character, although emphasis is placed on historical contextualization.

Illuminating (intellectual) contextual accounts of Spinoza, such as Hans Blom's *Causality and Morality in Politics. The Rise of Naturalism in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Political Thought*, in which he presents Spinoza as being part or outcome of a Dutch naturalistic tradition, and Jonathan Israel's monumental *Radical Enlightenment*, in which he situates Spinoza within a circle of radical freethinkers, responding to, and drawing on intellectual debates in the Republic, have contributed much to our understanding of Spinoza's thinking.<sup>15</sup> But their narratives are mainly about Spinoza's intellectual *allies*, not about his intellectual *opponents*. To the extent that Spinoza's intellectual opponents are discussed, their views are generally presented sketchily, as being incoherent, traditional or backward. Thus Israel presents the views of prominent Calvinists such as Voetius as 'resistance' against a supposedly unstoppable rise of 'the New Philosophy'. They are more or less reduced to the phrase 'fundamentalist, hard-line confessional orthodoxy'.<sup>16</sup> Blom hardly even discusses

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<sup>12</sup> See A. Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969) and Blom, *Causality and Morality*.

<sup>13</sup> In the future I hope to pursue a research project which is more balanced in the sense that it contains a more equal partition between philosophical and a historical analysis.

<sup>14</sup> Methodologically I am, of course, indebted here to Quentin Skinner's contextual approach to the history of political thought. However, I reject Skinner's exclusive focus on the conventionalist nature of intention and meaning of a text. Intentional considerations internal to a philosopher's corpus of texts and ideas are to that extent underestimated in his method. Q. Skinner *Visions of Politics: Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See also M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 157-285; Blom, *Causality and Morality*.

<sup>16</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 25.

Calvinist orthodoxy.<sup>17</sup> Such a presentation, however, obscures our understanding of the ideological landscape at that time. This thesis intends to fill a little bit of this lacuna by presenting Spinoza as responding to an influential and fierce group of orthodox Calvinist and Orangist writers, who constituted a powerful voice in Dutch political discourse.

Étienne Balibar's *Spinoza and Politics* is in this respect more attentive to Spinoza's attempts to respond to *practical* political problems. And rightly so. Although Balibar's interpretation is thought-provoking for its critical philosophical and practical engagement with Spinoza's arguments, I will challenge some of his basic claims. Most importantly his depiction of a simplified ideological landscape that was divided between the 'freedom party' and the orthodox Calvinists, and his subsequent contention that Spinoza was more or less on the side of this freedom party.<sup>18</sup> In this thesis it will be argued not only that, from a socio-political and religious perspective, Dutch society was more complicated, but that Spinoza was in a way an exponent of a new political culture of citizen activism that took root in the late 1640s and whose development can be observed throughout the First Stadholderless Period.<sup>19</sup> Another recent contextual study of Spinoza by the Rotterdam historian of philosophy Wiep van Bunge discusses the general characteristics of Spinoza's philosophy in the context of the development of Dutch philosophy. But, as with Blom's and Israel's accounts, his interpretation still glosses over Spinoza's attempts to respond to the powerful voices of orthodox Calvinist ministers and Orangist pamphleteers, and only provides a very basic outline of Spinoza's political ideas.<sup>20</sup> Thus, as I will point out in following section, this study endeavours to add and in some cases improve and revise our understanding of a number of contextual perspectives which will help to clarify what Spinoza was up to in propounding his conception of political liberty.

### **1.3 Main question, structure and outline of the argument**

The political circumstances, including the religious and socio-political circumstances, as well as the public disputes about liberty in the Dutch Republic in the period between roughly 1650

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<sup>17</sup> Blom mentions the Further Reformation in a footnote and writes two sentences about the views of Puritan theologians. Blom, *Causality and Morality*, p. 171, 200.

<sup>18</sup> E. Balibar's *Spinoza and Politics* (London: Verso Books, 1998), p. 1-24.

<sup>19</sup> See 2.3 and 2.4.

<sup>20</sup> W. van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

and 1677, are this thesis' central concern in order to arrive at an understanding of Spinoza's conception of political liberty. The main question this thesis aims to answer is:

- How did the debates and controversies about liberty in the Dutch Republic in the period 1650-1677 led Spinoza to his distinct conception of political liberty?

In order to answer this main question the following issues will be addressed:

- Which debates about liberty can be identified; what was the context in which these debates took place; and what was at stake in these debates?
- How are these debates reflected in Spinoza's conception of political liberty?
- What was Spinoza's socio-political standing in the Dutch Republic and how did this influence his thinking about political liberty?
- What is the philosophical underpinning of Spinoza's conception of political liberty?
- What were Spinoza's intentions – both theoretically and practically – in developing his theory of political liberty?
- In what way was Spinoza's conception of political liberty an answer to the controversies and debates about liberty in the Dutch Republic?

The answers to these questions are divided as follows. In chapter two I will discuss the controversies about liberty in Dutch society and how they are to be understood against the political context of the Dutch Republic. These controversies will be situated within a broader historical context which includes an analysis of concrete political events, political thought and political practice, but also more structural and socio-political aspects, as well as church-state relations and the interplay between politics and the public sphere. In section 2.1 I will first ask how liberty was discussed in terms of political sovereignty, the unity of the Republic, and the type of government, that is, with or without a stadholder. Section 2.2 will elaborate on debates about liberty that had to do with the complex relationship between religious and political authorities in the Republic. Attention will be given to the theological dispute about predestination, the debate about the freedom to question church doctrine and religion in general, and what authority or independence religious and political authorities were to have in relation to each other. Section 2.3 will zoom in on Spinoza's socio-political standing and ask what Spinoza's position was in this arena of political and religious powers. What were his possibilities as Dutch-Jewish *ingezetene* (inhabitant), which liberties did he, his friends and

intellectual companions enjoy? How did these aspects influence his intellectual development and political thinking? In addition it will be argued that Spinoza made a deliberate ‘turn to the political’. What triggered his decision to turn from mainly metaphysical and epistemological issues to practical political problems? However, even while Spinoza was triggered by practical events to write the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, he also had theoretical purposes in writing it. One of Spinoza’s most important theoretical purposes, I will argue, was to refute Hobbes, who had a strong influence on political thinkers (mainly outside of the academia) in the Republic in the 1660s.

The main goal of chapter three is to point out Spinoza’s conception of political liberty. Section 3.1 will deal with the metaphysical and psychological aspects of Spinoza’s thinking about liberty and his intellectual development before he made his turn to the political. In section 3.2 I will argue that Spinoza’s defence of the free use of reason basically consists of two arguments, one concerned with the common liberty of the Republic, the other with the individual liberty to use one’s reason freely. In 3.3 Spinoza’s theoretical argument for a more democratic, collective form of political self-determination will be presented. Spinoza’s views on natural right, liberty, obligation and sovereignty will be put in contrast to Hobbes’s account of these themes, not only to make clear what Spinoza’s refutation of Hobbes consisted of – which, I hold, is one of Spinoza’s theoretical purposes in chapter sixteen of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* – but also in order to elucidate the distinct character of Spinoza’s views on political liberty. At last, section 3.4 will deal with the *Tractatus politicus* and the question whether Spinoza really changed his mind in this work on important aspects of his political thought, as is sometimes suggested. On the basis of new insights about the events during and after 1672, the so-called ‘Year of Disaster’, and the subsequent restoration of the House of Orange in the person of Prince William III, the view that Spinoza in the *Tractatus politicus* moved away from his preference for democracy will be reconsidered. In addition to this contextual reconsideration, I also hold there are textual and substantial reasons why we should believe that Spinoza did not fundamentally modify his views on political liberty. My choice not to integrate the *Tractatus politicus* in earlier sections is a deliberate one. First, I believe that Spinoza did not fundamentally alter his views on political liberty in the *Tractatus politicus*. Second, whereas the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is a polemical intervention that was finished and published by Spinoza during his lifetime, the *Tractatus politicus* was left unfinished and was only published after his death in 1677. Since I focus on

what moved Spinoza to put forward his views on political liberty as a deliberate intervention in the public controversies, it would be confusing to discuss the works as if they are one.

Finally, in the conclusion I will summarize and assess Spinoza's conception of political liberty by enquiring what exactly made Spinoza's voice so unique in the political and theological debates in the Dutch Republic in which the concept of freedom was of central importance.

## 2 Political Context

### 2.1 True Freedom

The development of Spinoza's political thinking took place in the, at times, turbulent First Stadholderless Period (1650-1672). It was an extraordinary political situation in comparison with the rest of mainly monarchical and princely ruled Europe, as the Dutch Republic was dominated by Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt's republican politics of the so-called 'True Freedom' (*Ware Vryheit*). The six years between the Peace of Münster of 1648 and the year 1654, in which the First English Sea War ended and Johan de Witt published his *Deduction* – the quintessential political manifest of the First Stadholderless Period – had a decisive impact on public debate and the political culture in the Dutch Republic. In this period the Republic acquired formal independence (1648); stadholder Prince William II of Orange executed a military attack on Amsterdam (July 1650); the same William II passed away three months later (October 1650); the Great Assembly (*Grote Vergadering*), summoned by the States of Holland, decided to leave the office of stadholder vacant<sup>21</sup> (1651); and lastly, De Witt accepted the Act of Seclusion (*Akte van Seclusie*), and defended this decision in his *Deduction*, thereby justifying the new political order (1654). The following section will analyze these key moments and how they fundamentally shaped the parameters of the political controversies and debates in which Spinoza would develop his political thought.

The Peace of Münster, part of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, entailed the formal independence of the Republic from the Holy Roman Empire. From then on the Dutch Republic was a sovereign state. The peace treaty left the Dutch Republic, however, in an identity crisis, and moreover, in an internal political crisis. For, although the Republic was now considered an independent state in the new system of international relations, internally it was in practice all but clear where or with whom the sovereignty reposed.

In the middle of the seventeenth century there was hardly a notion of the sovereignty of the 'Dutch people'. To the extent that there was such a notion, it did not refer to the actual mass of individuals, but to the representative bodies – the cities, states and councils – and in the second place, to those who filled the official positions in these bodies. Moreover, in the late sixteenth century the 'sovereign' was replaced by the stadholder, who represented the

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<sup>21</sup> With the exception of Friesland and Groningen (*Stad en Lande*), who did appoint a stadholder.

king of Spain. The stadholder was instituted in order to maintain and secure existing right and order, not to create new laws. Fundamentally, this conception of sovereignty, even after the outbreak of the rebellion in the late sixties and seventies of the sixteenth century, remained unrevised. The views of Jean Bodin (1530-1596) that sovereignty was absolute and undividable, and that to be sovereign is to have the authority to create law, were rejected. It was only in 1586, about twenty years after the rebellion against Spain started, that the States General for the first time declared that the provincial states – the non-permanent assemblies composed of nobles and representatives of the towns within a province – were the bodies *bij denwelcken nu de souveraineté van den lande was* (in which the sovereignty over the land was vested).<sup>22</sup> Thus, until late in the sixteenth century to be at liberty did not necessarily entail political sovereignty. Moreover, the tension between the provinces, reluctant to agree to their own political authority, on the one hand, and a single sovereign – whether it be the stadholder or States General – as an ordering principle and safeguard of unity, but vested with only limited sovereignty, on the other, would determine the political dynamic of the Republic until far into the eighteenth century. Spinoza, as we will see, would formulate his own answer, not only to this fundamental political friction at the heart of the Republic, but also to the underlying blurred theoretical conception of political sovereignty. The ultimate question was what kind of sovereignty is most conducive to the liberty of the Republic and its citizens.

Nonetheless, it was the States General, the permanent assembly of representatives of the seven provinces that, formally at least, had control over the defence and finances of the whole Republic, the Generality Lands (southern territories of the Republic without a voice in the States General) and the colonies. Furthermore, the States General was the political body that represented the provinces in foreign affairs. Internally its sovereignty was only considered as the sum of the delegates of the seven provinces, a whole that was ‘certainly not more than the sum of its parts’.<sup>23</sup> Yet the separate provinces were united in a loose, but what proved to be a viable ‘confederal’ state construction, of which its founding document was the Union of Utrecht of 1579.

Political power in the Republic was even more fragmented as a consequence of the way the princes of the House of Orange carried out the office of stadholder since William ‘the Silent’ of Orange (1533-1584) had taken up this position in 1572. The princes of the House of

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<sup>22</sup> E.H. Kossmann, ‘Soevereiniteit in de Zeven Verenigde Provinciën’, in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1991) p. 418.

<sup>23</sup> Kossmann, ‘Soevereiniteit in de Zeven Verenigde Provinciën’, p. 418.



Orange, the most prominent Dutch noble family, acquired a leading role in the Revolt against Spanish rule and were considered among broad segments of the Dutch people as the symbolic 'patrons' of the freedom, unity and prosperity of the Republic, as is beautifully represented in the allegorical painting of Prince Maurice (1567-1625), successor of William of Orange, by Jan Tegnagel (picture 1). 'Freedom' is represented by the Dutch Maiden of Freedom sitting in the middle. She holds a lance with the liberty hat together with Prince Maurice. Freedom is literally in the hands of the Prince, who displays military prestige (notice also the two paintings in the corners depicting battles of the navy and land army) and prosperity (the sack with coins next to the lion).



(picture 1) Jan Tegnagel, Allegory of the Prosperity of the Republic under Maurice of Orange. Panel, 130 x 180 cm. Delft, Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof. Presumably about 1618.

Freedom is also closely associated with religion, which is represented by the woman sitting on the left holding a closed book in her hands entitled 'holy law' (*heyliche wet*). Notice that the Dutch lion, lying on the seven arrows which represent the provinces, is held down by her foot.

The painting suggests that the unity of 'stadholder-liberty-religion' precedes the plurality of the provinces.<sup>24</sup>

The success of the princes of Orange was due to the military leadership they could demonstrate in the war against Spain in their position of stadholder and captain general of the Dutch navy and land army. The election of a stadholder was formally a provincial, not a national affair, and on paper the stadholder was subordinate to the monarch and later the provincial states. Yet the office acquired an enormous prestige when William of Orange launched the Revolt against Spain in his position as stadholder of Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht. Under Maurice of Orange and his successor Prince Frederick Hendrick (1584-1647), the political power and prestige of the stadholder extended far beyond that of a subordinate civil servant of the provincial States. Instead, stadholder Frederick Hendrick increasingly assumed a quasi-monarchical status, by building palaces, changing his title to *Hoogheid* (highness), and marrying off his son William II to Mary Stuart, the daughter of King Charles I of England, thereby assuring the House of Orange a place among the highest royal circles of Europe.<sup>25</sup>

The crisis after the Peace of Münster must be seen against this background, as it was the culmination of a built up tension between on the one hand the House of Orange, and on the other hand the wealthiest, most urbanized, and most powerful province in the Republic: Holland. Holland's ability to play a leading role in the Republic was completely dependent on the unity of its voting towns. Whereas the States of Holland were largely controlled by the most important voting towns, the towns were by and large controlled by the town councils (*vroedschappen*), the members of which were the 'regents' – the oligarchic governors, or local holders of political power.<sup>26</sup> Holland, during the 1640s economically stronger than ever and less divided than in the 1630s, was increasingly acting on its own by taking the lead in the peace negotiations and by its decision to reduce the number of soldiers in the army – to the frustration of the other provinces and the stadholder.<sup>27</sup> William II's military attack on Amsterdam in July 1650 and the subsequent imprisonment of six prominent regents in *slot Loevestein* was an attempt to subject the States of Holland (in particular Amsterdam) to his

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<sup>24</sup> The woman standing, in the white dress, with an opened book represents vigilance. The woman and man on the outermost left and right represent respectively agriculture and fishery.

<sup>25</sup> J.I. Israel, *De Republiek, 1477-1806* (Franeker: Uitgeverij van Wijnen, 1996), p. 594.

<sup>26</sup> J.L. Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Politics of Particularism* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1994), p. 32. For a detailed discussion of the nature of the regents see idem, p. 32-56.

<sup>27</sup> Israel, *De Republiek*, p. 587, 598-599.

authority and to bring them back in line again. To some extent William II succeeded in this objective, but in October 1650 he suddenly died of smallpox, unable to pursue his ambitions to expand the Republic's territory southwards and continue the war with Spain. With William II's death, not only the stadholder as cornerstone of the Republic's unity disappeared, but any prospect of continuing the war as unifying interest of the separate provinces fell away as well.

It became clear to the States of Holland and those who supported a republican government without a stadholder that the Republic could not survive without some kind of unifying bonds, symbols and principles. Paradoxically, Holland would partially provide for this unity, even though it was the province that insisted most fervently on the principle of provincial sovereignty. Characteristic of the ambiguous new situation was the Great Assembly in the Knight's Hall (*Ridderzaal*) in The Hague in 1651. It would be the first meeting since 1579 in which the provinces would debate the type of government and structure of the state. Representatives of all provinces came together in Holland to discuss the question how the union of the Republic could be maintained. Although William III was born about one week after William II's death, the attempted *coup d'état* of stadholder William II in 1650 turned out to be a major blow to Orangist sentiment in particular in the States of Holland. Already before the Great Assembly the States of Holland had made up their mind that they did not want to appoint a temporary 'substitute-stadholder' until William III was old enough to take up his 'legitimate' hereditary position, as Zeeland and Friesland suggested. But let there be no misunderstanding, Jacob Cats (1577-1660), poet, jurist and Grand Pensionary of Holland at that moment, made clear in his opening speech of the Great Assembly: even God Almighty himself is eager to 'continue the state for centuries'.<sup>28</sup> It was clear that Holland, taking the initiative in convening and commencing the assembly in the person of Cats, and with its wealth, international prestige, trade, colonies, military and maritime power, was the unrivalled leader and unifying basis of the Republic as a whole. Not the stadholder, but Holland and the States General (completely dominated by Holland) had to secure – and give a new meaning to the idea of – political freedom. Claes Jansz. Visscher's (1587-1652) engraving *Bijeenkomst van de Grote Vergadering* captures the spirit of the new political situation: the stadholder has disappeared from the scene, while the Dutch lion is now firmly standing with the seven arrows in his claws (instead of lying submissively).

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<sup>28</sup> 'Staet van eeuwe tot eeuwe te willen continueren' Lieuwe van Aitsema, *Saken van Staet en Oorlogh*, Vol. 3. (1669-1672) p. 499. <http://www.inghist.nl/retroboeken/aitsema/>, Date of access: 30 May 2010.



(picture 2) C. Visscher, *Bijeenkomst van de Grote Vergadering*, 1651, gravure, Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam, nr. 15997, AVS 2165.

The upper half of the engraving is directly linked with the Assembly in the Knight's Hall – what De Witt called *de fondamenten van onsterflijke vergaderingen ende collegien* (the fundamentals of immortal meetings and colleges) – underwritten with the words *Concordia res parvae crescunt*, ‘unity makes strength’ (literally: ‘through unity small things flourish’).

However, the new government was not given a moment of rest. Immediately it had to face an almost inevitable sea war with England, because of the English structural thwarting of the Republic's international trade. The Dutch, however, were no match for England and domestically anti-regent and pro-orangist sentiment ran rampant. De Witt, appointed as Grand Pensionary in 1653, could only aspire to accept defeat at the lowest price possible. He therefore signed a separate act as part of the peace conditions set by the English Lord protector Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), which decreed that Holland would never choose a prince as captain-general nor as stadholder of Holland. This act is also better known as the Act of Seclusion. Upon Holland's solo action Zeeland presented an extensive statement to the States General condemning this behaviour. De Witt's *Deduction* of 1654 is essentially a defence of the Act of Seclusion, but actually it was way more than that. It can arguably be seen as the defining texts of De Witt's politics of ‘True Freedom’.

Already in 1651 De Witt concluded that

these provinces are not together *una respublica*, but every province apart is a *souveraine respublica*, and thus the United Provinces, should not be referred with the name *respublica* (in singular), but rather with the name *respublicae foederatae* or *unitae*, in plural.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Deduction* De Witt were to restate this central thought, but its main point was about the office of stadholder: in a free republic this office – in fact, any political office (*eenige digniteyten*) – ought not to be hereditary. Furthermore he tried to detach the symbolic bond of Prince and the Republic's freedom by arguing that the exclusion of the Prince of Orange is not ‘*strydich tegens de Vryheyt*’ (not in conflict with freedom).<sup>30</sup> De Witt was all too aware that much ground for concord between the provinces was lost without a stadholder, without a

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<sup>29</sup> ‘dese provinciën niet en sijn tesamen *una respublica*, maer yder provincie *apart* een *souveraine respublica* is, ende dat sulx dese Vereenichde Provinciën niet met den naem van *respublica* (in singulari numero), maer veeleer met den naem *respublicae foederatae* ofte *unitae*, in plurali numero, genoemt souden moeten worden’. De Witt to [Schaep?], May 10, 1652, *Brieven van Johan de Witt*, I, 61-62., As quoted in: Rowen, *John de Witt*, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> De Witt, *Deductie*, p. 70, 125.

common enemy, and with Holland acting on his own. Thus he sought to re-conceptualize the unity of the provinces in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

Do not the seven United Provinces have one and the same interest in their survival? Do they not have the same fear for foreign powers? Are they not attached to each other, yes, interwoven with each other through agreements and marriages, of both regents and inhabitants, through associations, companies, fraternities, both for commerce and other interests, through customs, and mutual possessions, in such a way that it is almost impossible, but through excessive violence, that does not happen without eminent heads, to be tear apart? Do they not have a permanent meeting or gathering of delegates or deputies, the States General, in which all important matters of war on water and land, are decided in close harmony... And are, above all, the hearts and souls not bound together by a spiritual and divine bond of one and the same religion?’

These are according to the judgment of the noble high states [of Holland and West-Friesland] the righteous bonds that hold together the seven arrows in the hand of the same lion (...) Thus we will undoubtedly find out, under God’s blessing, that the union rests firmer and securer on the foundations of immortal assemblies and colleges than on the outward appearance and authority of mortal human beings; and that the liberty and freedom is better to be trusted in the keeping of very good regents, who originally and according to the privileges have been ordered to supervise the country<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Hebben niet de jegenwoordighe seven Vereenichde Provincien een ende het selve interest in haere eygen conservatie? een ende de selve vreesse voor alle Uitheemsche Machten? zijn sy niet door onderlinghe alliancien / ende huwelijcken / soo van regenten / als van inghesetenen / door ghemeenschappen / compaignien / confreryen / soo van Commercie / als van andere interesten / conversatien / reciprorque possessien van goederen / ghewoonten / ende andersints soodanich aen den anderen ghehecht / jae door malkanderen geknoopt / ende gevlochten / dat het by naer onmogelijck is deselve / buyten excessive violentie / die sonder eminente hoofden niet en valt / van den anderen te scheuren? hebben sy niet eene continuele by-een-komste / ofte versamenlinghe van Gesanten / ofte Gemachtichden / die wy noemen de Vergaderinghe van de Staten Generael / door de welcke alle gewichtighe saecken van Oorloge te water ende te lande / met onderlinge harmonie beleydt / confoederatien / ende verbonden met andere coninghen / republijquen / princen / ende potentaten ghemaect werden? Hebben sy niet ghemeene collegien van subalterne directien / soo over de sacken vander zee / als vande ghemeen conquesten / ende andersints? Ende werden boven al haere herten ende zielen niet vereenicht ende t’ samen-gebonden door den geestelijcken / ende goddelijcken bandt van eene / ende deselve religie?’

Dese sijn naer ’t oordeel van haer Ed. Groot. Mo. de rechte banden die de seven pylen t’samen knoopen / ende inde klauwe van een ende deselve leeuw moeten vast houden; Dese forme wel ende verplichlijck gheconserveert werdende / ende een yder naer sijn plicht ende vermoghen het sijne toe-brengende omme die meer ende meer te bevestighen Soo sullen wy ontwijffelijck onder Godes zegen bevinden dat de Unie vry vaster ende seeckerder rust op de fondamenten van onsterflijcke vergaderingen ende collegien als op de ytterlijcke splendeur ende auctoriteit van sterflijcke menschen ende dat de liberteyt ende vryheydt vry veyliger vertrouwt werd inde bewaeringhe van hele goede regenten den welcken originelijck ende volgende de privilegien vanden

De Witt thus made abundantly clear that the liberty of the Republic was to be secured by an elite of ‘good’ regents who would look after the country.

Now, what were the implications of the developments I have sketched so far for the public debate about political liberty in 1660s? What were to be main issues and what were the arguments against De Witt’s stadholderless republicanism? First, attention must be drawn to the fact that William II’s attack on Amsterdam added up to the general feeling of the States of Holland, the individual towns, and the regents that the stadholder was a direct threat to the traditional political liberties of provincial and urban self-government. As Grand Pensionary Cats mentioned in his opening speech of the Great Assembly, the provinces themselves consisted of ‘free and privileged members and cities’.<sup>32</sup> The freedom of these cities, members, and provinces, were framed in terms of an old constitution (the Union of Utrecht) and ancient or special privileges. The Great Assembly resulted in a number of shifts in the balance of existing powers. Certain cities regained the privilege to choose their own political officials. In a number of cities this used to be the prerogative of the stadholder. Here the power of the regents to influence local politics increased significantly. The First Stadholderless Period was in that respect a period of decentralization.<sup>33</sup>

But this development created its own problem. Not in the least conceptually. Could the unity and thereby the hard-won freedom of the Republic be secured by De Witt’s type of republican government? Crucial aspects of a widely held conception of the Republic’s political liberty – born in the struggle against Spain, defended by the stadholder and united by the House of Orange and a common Calvinist religion – were now (partially) missing. The relationship between De Witt and *staatsgezinde* (‘favouring the states’) regents and the Reformed Church was problematic. Moreover, the regents nor the ‘immortal assemblies’ could replace the powerful unifying symbol of the Princes of Orange. For many outspoken *staatsgezinde* opinion makers and regents ‘provincial sovereignty’ simply meant the freedom of Holland to go its own way – undisturbed by either foreign countries, the stadholder, the other provinces, or ecclesiastical authorities. In short, it meant an anti-Orangist, anti-war, anti-

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lande daer over d’opsicht bevolen is’. *Manifest van de ware vrijheid. De Deductie van Johan de Witt uit 1654*. Ingeleid en hertaald door Serge ter Braake (Arnhem: Sonsbeek Publishers, 2009) p. 161.

<sup>32</sup> ‘vrye en gepriviligeerde leden en steden’ in: [Jacob Cats], *Naerder unie, geslooten in 'sGravenhage op de groote zael van't Hoff van Hollandt den 21. augusti 1651* (Leeuwarden, 1651; Knuttel 7035) p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Although this term should be used with caution. As Huizinga pointed out, the constituting principle of the Dutch Republic was not so much ‘decentralisation’, but rather ‘particularism’, for there was no real centre from which to decentralize. J. Huizinga, *Nederlands beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw* (Haarlem: Contact, 1998 [1941]) p. 34.

expansionist, and pro-trade and commerce attitude. Although De Witt suggested governance of the ‘best regents’ – aristocracy in the real sense – the distribution of political power in the Republic under his regime was one of cooptation, patronage and nepotism.<sup>34</sup> Instead of the term aristocratic republicanism, it would be more accurate to describe the Dutch Republic in the First Stadholderless Period as an oligarchic republic. Political liberty, so it seemed, was the liberty of powerful regents to look after their own interests. This situation gave room to other and more in depth theories and justifications of political freedom.

Theorizing about political freedom became especially acute and critical as the potential return of a stadholder of the House of Orange was kept alive among Orangist pamphleteers and supporters.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising therefore that De Witt’s politics of ‘True Freedom’ would be heavily criticized, especially after the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660. The Restoration of the monarchy in England heightened the expectation that Prince William III would one day return to the Republic. The supporters of the house of Orange and the orthodox clergy – who were almost without exception supporters of the return of an Orangist stadholder – got in a more confident position to put more pressure on the regents. Thus the public discussion about politics during the 1660s entered a new phase as the tensions grew between on the one hand *staatsgezinde* republicans who supported De Witt’s regime, and on the other hand Orangist republicans. Fierce anti-Orangist writings appeared, as the need to defend the stadholderless republican government became more urgent in the light of these Orangist challenges. The writings of the brothers De la Court are no doubt the most prominent examples of this polemic against those who argued for the return of the Prince as stadholder. But the arguments of the Orangists in favour of a stadholder were actually quite strong. Theoretically, Orangist authors presented the stadholder as the monarchical element of a mixed constitution. Hardly any of the Orangists, however, argued for a plain monarchy, nor suggested that the provincial States had to give up their sovereignty. The strength and attractiveness of the Orangist arguments, it might be argued, was perhaps precisely due to this moderate and traditional outlook: sovereignty would remain with provincial States and the stadholder was not to be an absolute monarch, but rather an eminent head in service of the

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<sup>34</sup> Rowen, *John de Witt*, p. 154.

<sup>35</sup> P. Geyl, *Het stadhouderschap in de partij-literatuur onder De Witt* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij 1947); G.O. van de Klashorst, ‘Metten schijn van monarchie getempert. De verdediging van het stadhouderschap in de partijliteratuur (1650-1686)’, in: H.W. Blom en I.W. Wildenberg (eds.) *Pieter de la Court in zijn tijd. Aspecten van een veelzijdig publicist (1618-1685)* (Amsterdam-Maarssen, 1986) p. 93-137; J. Stern, ‘The rhetoric of popular Orangism, 1650–72’, in: *Historical Research*, vol. 77, no. 196 (2004), p. 202-224.



States General.<sup>36</sup> Whereas the brothers De la Court and De Witt could be said to defend an anti-stadholder type of republican government, Orangist political thought was actually republican too: Orangists were generally no monarchists. The *staatsgezinde* republicans, as we recall De Witt's words, opted for an aristocracy of 'the best regents'.<sup>37</sup> Orangist republicans rather followed a tradition of Aristotelian and Polybian political theory: the best constitution was one that contained monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements.<sup>38</sup> The stadholder was needed in order to check the uncontrolled power of the oligarchic regents. According to Orangist pamphlets, the aristocratic Republic had fallen into an oligarchic tyranny and a strong stadholder was needed to restore the balance, since the stadholder would have the power and status to appease the quarrelling regent factions who were only looking after their own interests. Moreover, they argued, the stadholder represented the unity and organic harmony of the Republic.<sup>39</sup> The freedom of the Republic was in their eyes dependent on a proper balance between private interests and the common good. The stadholder were to restore this balance and to prevent the Republic from falling into internal discord that would endanger the Republic's hard-won liberty.<sup>40</sup>

At this point Spinoza would step in, as he felt too that an alternative type and defence of republican governance was needed. The unchecked oligarchic republican regime of De Witt and his allied regents was in his view untenable and unjustifiable. Moreover, it looked like as if an alliance was being shaped between ordinary discontent burghers, the more powerful supporters of the House of Orange, and orthodox Calvinists who supported the return of a stadholder. Spinoza observed that the potential power of citizens against the oligarchic patriciate was threatening the stability of the state. This potential power of citizens, common people, and the church was pointed towards the civil authorities, i.e. the regents and De Witt. Spinoza, I believe, intended his writings about democracy as a warning to De Witt and the *staatsgezinde* regents that, if they would not take action and widen the circle of those in the possession of political power, they would risk their own position.

Lastly, to anticipate Spinoza's insistence on the danger of civil war, it is important to

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<sup>36</sup> Van de Klashorst, 'Metten schijn van monarchie getempert', p. 93-136.

<sup>37</sup> The early writings of Johan de la Court were, however, more democratic and critical towards the De Witt regime.

<sup>38</sup> Van de Klashorst, 'Metten schijn van monarchie getempert', p. 101-102.

<sup>39</sup> Van de Klashorst, 'Metten schijn van monarchie getempert', p. 121-123.

<sup>40</sup> Van de Klashorst, 'Metten schijn van monarchie getempert', p. 134-135. According to Pieter Geyl the Orangist 'party' did not have an outspoken ideology. See, Geyl, *Het Stadhouderschap in de Partij-literatuur*, p. 36-37. But Van de Klashorst is I think right that a fairly coherent defence of the stadholder can be distilled from a number of Orangist pamphlets.

recognize the extremely insecure situation of the Dutch Republic in the period 1665-1670. To begin with, Münster invaded the Republic in the northeast in 1665. Two years later the French invaded the Spanish Netherlands. The relations with England had already gotten worse before 1665 and the war that broke out in that year – better known as the Second Anglo-Dutch War – would last until 1667. The Republic now had to face two mighty enemies: one with Europe’s greatest navy, England, and one with Europe’s greatest land army, France. Internal stability and the loyalty of Dutch citizens to the Republic was obviously deemed vital by the regents and the De Witt regime in this period. The unity of the Republic was more important than ever, especially since many people had the dangerous situation during the Truce, when the Republic was at the brink of a civil war, in the back of their minds. In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza insistently tries to make clear how the stability, peace and piety are to be saved, a rhetorical strategy that resonates the anxieties of the political rulers in the Republic.

But how were the self-interested regents to be checked, if not by a stadholder? Spinoza rejected both *staatsgezinde* and *prinsgezinde* theories of republicanism and would take up the challenge to propound his own vision of a more democratic republic.<sup>41</sup> However, the message Spinoza wanted to convey in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* contained more. To understand that message we now turn to the position of the church, the clergy and the controversies about theology within Dutch society.

## **2.1 Theology, politics and the Further Reformation**

In the former section we traced the debates about political liberty on the level of political sovereignty, the unity of the Dutch Republic, and the most desirable type of government. In the present section I will analyse the debates about freedom that arose from the entanglement of, and tensions between (Calvinist) religious authorities and civil authorities in the Republic, a topic that is at the heart of Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. We will also scrutinize the theological dispute in the first two decades of the seventeenth century about individual responsibility in securing one’s own (religious) salvation. This was essentially a debate about the free will of human beings in relation to the absolute sovereignty of God – a debate that reverberates in both Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus* as well as in his *Ethics*. Deviating remonstrants in the early seventeenth century also unleashed disputes about the

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<sup>41</sup> See section 3.3.

freedom of thought, expression and publication within the Reformed church. The question to what extent the state was allowed to intervene in supposed church matters became an extremely acute and inflammable political issue. The issue of putting limitations on the freedom of speech within the church was no less pertinent in the 1650s and 1660s, but in these decades the debate about freedom of thought, expression and publication broadened to the universities and the public sphere. The pietistic movement of orthodox Calvinist ministers and theologians, also known as the Further Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*), turned against this development. It will be argued that Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was in many ways a direct response to phenomena that were associated with this movement, most notably the call for strict censorship, the focus on practical piety in daily life (*praxis pietatis*) and the insistence on doctrinal purity. These aspects of liberty, that is, aspects concerned with the liberty to choose one's lifestyle, to read and publish books, to debate and discuss freely, are an important part of Spinoza's conception of political liberty.

The agenda of the Great Assembly of 1651 consisted of three core issues: the union, the military, and religion. The official standpoint with regard to the last of these three topics was remarkably clear: the 'true Christian reformed religion' as confirmed by the Synod of Dort (Dordrecht, 1618-1619), had to be preached everywhere in the public churches and supported by the power and authority of the States. The triumph of orthodox Calvinism as the doctrine of the Dutch public church was a hard-won victory. In the early tens and twenties the debate about the nature and place of the church in relation to the state got entangled with a theological dispute about the doctrine of predestination. In 1610 a group of forty-four ministers, all followers of the liberal (*rekkelijke*) theologian Jacobus Arminius (1559-1609), issued a remonstrance (*Remonstrantie*) in which they rejected the strict Calvinist doctrines concerning predestination and divine grace. According to orthodox Calvinists, most prominently the Leiden theologian Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641), God had decided before creation who was predestined for damnation and who was predestined for his grace. Man's election, in their view, was absolute and unconditional. Nothing could be done about it. In the remonstrance the followers of Arminius argued that human beings did have a responsibility for their own grace. Even though man had lost his absolute free will after the Fall of Adam, he still had a certain degree of autonomy in the sense that he can, at least

partially, determine his own destiny and influence his own salvation.<sup>42</sup> As the Dutch historian A.Th. Van Deursen put it succinctly, ‘for the Arminians election was the fruit of faith, for the Gomarists faith was the fruit of election’.<sup>43</sup> In a sense the doctrinal controversy can be interpreted as being concerned with two kinds of freedom. First, it was about God’s sovereignty. The Arminian suggestion that human beings have some autonomy in securing their own grace, that their election is conditional on faith, must imply – according to their orthodox adversaries – that God’s omnipotence and sovereignty over the universe is somehow limited. If that is the case, God would not be *absolutely* free. Second, the controversy was about man’s freedom. According to Arminius, the human will is free from necessity, though not free from sin.<sup>44</sup> After the Fall man is in a state of total deprivation (*in statu corruptione*), but Christ’s atonement is intended for all, instead of only for a predestined selection of people as the orthodox doctrine stated. A human being is free to accept or refuse God’s grace and his or her election is conditional on faith. The orthodox doctrine rejected these ideas and denied man this kind of freedom. Spinoza’s philosophy, in which both God’s and man’s freedom – themes that were fiercely debated in theological circles, as we have now seen – are radically redefined, as will be elaborated in section 3.1. Spinoza’s conception of freedom and man’s highest good can be read as his ‘secular’ response to these kind of religious themes.

But the issuing of the remonstrance had more consequences that would have a lasting impact on debates about liberty in the Dutch Republic. Above all, by issuing the remonstrance the Arminians went against the grain of the Belgic Confession (*Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*, 1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the two documents that defined Dutch Calvinist doctrine. The Arminian question, therefore, not only touched the question of predestination but also the point of *libertas prophetandi*: the right to interpret and expound Scripture at private meetings and in sermons.<sup>45</sup> Arminius’ plea was that to some extent differences of opinion should be tolerated and doctrines open to revision and discussion, a view that made most orthodox members of the church shiver. This disagreement about the freedom to hold different opinions in matters of church doctrine got entangled with

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<sup>42</sup> For a more detailed and nuanced view of Arminius’ theology, see E. Dekker, *Rijker dan Midas. Vrijheid, genade en predestinatie in de theologie van Jacobus Arminius (1559-1609)* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> as cited in W. M.T. Frijhoff, ‘Religious Toleration in the United Provinces: from ‘case’ to ‘model’ in: R. Po-Chia Hsia and H. van Nierop (eds.) *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> E. Dekker, ‘Theologische en filosofische vrijheid in de vroege zeventiende eeuw’, in: Haitsma Mulier en Velema, *Vrijheid*, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> P. White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic. Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation of the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 24.

a third issue the Arminians addressed: the relation between state and church. Put simply, the Arminians maintained that the state had '*summa potestas*', the highest authority in a society. It followed that the state had authority over the church. In their view 'a state within the state cannot be accepted'.<sup>46</sup> According to orthodox Calvinists (or counter-remonstrants, as they issued a counter-remonstrance in 1611) the state was also sovereign and had its own terrain, but so did the church. The church had its own ecclesiastical authorities and its own terrain of jurisdiction. Ultimately the state had to serve the purpose of the (one true) church. As one commentator put it: 'Contra-remonstrant theory was not a theory of church and state, but church and ruler (...) It was possible to consider church and state as distinct institutions, and the state as the supreme institution. The Christian ruler, however, was a member of the church and subject to its authority.'<sup>47</sup> Orthodox theory thus claimed a greater degree of autonomy for the church in relation to the state. Precisely this was at stake when the doctrinal and political views of the Arminians were vehemently opposed by Gomarus and his followers.<sup>48</sup>

At the root of this conflict were also two opposing visions of the church. Whereas the ideal church for many local magistrates and moderate Calvinists was a 'people's church' (*volkskerk*) or national church with broad boundaries so as to include as many people as possible, orthodox clergymen saw the church as 'the Body of Christ, the purity of which would need to be guaranteed through the exercise of church discipline'.<sup>49</sup> The orthodox view, implied that the secular powers as members of the church had to cooperate with the efforts of the church in order to enforce ecclesiastical discipline.<sup>50</sup>

Initially a doctrinal dispute within the walls of the Reformed Church and Leiden University, the conflict about predestination took on a political dimension when the remonstrant ministers appealed to the States of Holland to protect them and secure their right to propound their dissentious theological position. Now the question was who had the authority to decide over a theological dispute. It would greatly intensify the tensions within Dutch society. The involvement of the States of Holland and *Landsadvocaat* (Land's

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<sup>46</sup> H.A. Enno van Gelder, *Getemperde vrijheid. Een verhandeling over de verhouding van Kerk en Staat in de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden en de vrijheid van meningsuiting in zake godsdienst, drukpers en onderwijs, gedurende de 17<sup>e</sup> eeuw* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff 1972), p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> D. Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration. A Study of the Disputes in Dutch Calvinism from 1600 to 1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed discussion see Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration*, p. 1-107.

<sup>49</sup> F. van Lieburg, 'From Pure Church to Pious Culture: The Further Reformation in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic', in: W. Graham (ed.) *Later calvinism. International perspectives* (Kirkville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publisher, 1994) p. 410.

<sup>50</sup> Nobbs, *Theocracy and Toleration*, p. 19-23.

advocate) Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547-1619) in the conflict happened during a precarious political situation in the Republic. Like most orthodox ministers, stadholder Prince Maurice was against the Truce (1609-1621) Oldenbarnevelt had bargained for. In short, Prince Maurice chose the side of the counter-remonstrants in 1617, a decision that was clearly politically motivated, as he disliked Oldenbarnevelt's political influence and opposed his peace-minded policies against Spain. The Synod in the end decided to expel the remonstrants from the Reformed Church and condemned them as heretical. On several levels the church was cleared from the remonstrant enemies. On top of that, the remonstrant's protagonist Oldenbarnevelt was charged with high treason and beheaded on the scaffold. Thus the *suyverheydt der leere* (purity of doctrine) was restored and civil war was averted. For the moment it seemed that an unofficial pact was concluded between the orthodox Calvinists (Gomarists, counter-remonstrants, *preciezen*) and the House of Orange on the one hand, and the remonstrants (Arminians, *rekkelijken*) and the *staatsgezinde* regents on the other. The distinction between these two 'camps' was, however, all but straight-forward in the decades following the Synod. Especially when we call to mind the declaration of the Great Assembly – which was after all dominated by regents from Holland – that the public church was to be the orthodox Calvinist church.<sup>51</sup> At first sight this statement seems hardly innovative. Since the Revolt was – at least partially – undertaken under the sign of religious dissent against Catholic Spain, and the position of the Reformed church was reconfirmed after the Union of 1579 and in the Synod of Dort (Dordrecht, 1618-1619), the Assembly's standpoint was perfectly in line with the traditional position the Reformed church had acquired. Historically, however, the relation between state and church in the Republic was more complicated. The Revolt, it has been rightly argued, was rather a struggle for political liberty – self-government – and on the personal level, *vryheit der consciëntien* (freedom of conscience), than a rebellion only for the sake of Calvinism.<sup>52</sup> The orthodox interpretation of Calvinism was determined as

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<sup>51</sup> Another example of blurred dividing lines between the remonstrants and contra-remonstrants is the Arminian minister Johannes Uytenbogaert (1557-1644), one of the most influential ministers in the Arminian movement. He was the former court minister of Prince Maurice. When Maurice chose for the side of the contra-remonstrants his position was untenable. Later he was, however, on good terms with Prince Frederick Hendrick. See S. Groenveld and H. Leeuwenberg, *De Tachtigjarige Oorlog. Opstand en Consolidatie (ca. 1560-1650)* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2008) p. 209.

<sup>52</sup> The Union of 1579 itself declared precisely this 'minimal' principle of freedom of conscience (Article 13), leaving the decision to the provinces to choose their own religious policies. The Synod of Dort that settled the theological conflict over predestination equally left the provincial autonomy to choose their own religious policies untouched. W. Frijhoff, 'Was the Dutch Republic a Calvinist Community? The State, the Confessions, and Culture in the Early Modern Netherlands', in: A. Holenstein, T. Maissen, and M. Prak (eds.) *The Republican*

the exclusive creed *within* the Reformed Church, but it could never become a ‘national’ confession. The civil authorities did not want to take the risk of a small group of Calvinist hardliners causing civil unrest and thwarting their beloved stability, or worse. Thus, although the Reformed church was a public church, it was never a state church. No-one, for example, was obliged to be a member of the church, even though membership did entail considerable advantages: in general only members of the public church were appointed to (high) political functions.

In 1651 the Great Assembly reaffirmed the doctrines of the Synod of Dort as the foundation of the public church and declared the true Reformed religion as the only publicly recognized religion. In contrast to the Union, which emphasized the provincial autonomy in matters of religion, and in contrast to the Synod, which was ultimately a church meeting to settle a conflict within the church, the standpoint of the Great Assembly was that of a political body endorsing a national policy of maintaining and supporting the orthodox Calvinist confession, and calling a halt to other religious groups. This can be seen as part of a process of ‘confessionalization’, that, as in other countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, can be observed in the Republic as well.<sup>53</sup> A growing group of educated clergymen and theologians tried to distinguish one confession from the other more strictly, communicate their more narrowly defined religious ideas through sermons and teaching to the common people in order to strengthen their religious understanding, and to create more unity within their particular confession. In order to achieve these goals secular authorities and law were invoked.<sup>54</sup> But in the Republic the fact of religious pluralism – orthodox Calvinists only made up half of the Dutch people at most – forced an attitude of pragmatic, and passive toleration from the side of city and state councils towards other confessions and small religious communities. This attitude was not an ‘active legal’ form of toleration, but rather, as one specialist described it, ‘the non-application of legally described practice’ – ‘connivance with what was not allowed (*conniventie* or *toelating*)’.<sup>55</sup> Even though many regents’ lenience in

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*Alternative. The Netherlands and Switzerland compared* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008) p. 103-104; M. van Gelderen, ‘De Nederlandse Opstand (1555-1610): van “vrijheden” naar “oude vrijheid” en de “vrijheid der conscientien”, in: Haitsma Mulier and Velema, *Vrijheid*, p. 27-52.

<sup>53</sup> For critical discussion of confessionalization, see J.M. Headly et al. (eds.) *Confessionalization in Europe, 1555-1700: essays in honor and memory of Bodo Nischan* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), and U. Lotz-Heumann, ‘Confessionalization’, in: D.M. Whitford (ed.) *Reformation and Early Modern Europe: A Guide to Research* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2008) p. 136-160.

<sup>54</sup> M. Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p.151-152, 366-68.

<sup>55</sup> Frijhoff, ‘Religious toleration in the United Provinces’, p. 28.

implementing the official policy of the States undoubtedly sprung from practical considerations, the deep-rooted tradition of a more intellectual defence of freedom of conscience and religion among non-orthodox Dutch theologians, intellectuals and regents should not be underestimated either. This tradition of thought lacked a theoretically consistent body of thought, but was rather richly variegated. William of Orange's practical ideal of 'religious peace' (*religievrede*), Dirck Volckertsz. Coornhert (1522-1590) defence of freedom of conscience, and even Desiderius Erasmus's (1466-1536) insistence on tolerance, were all to a greater or lesser extent embedded in Dutch seventeenth-century political thinking.<sup>56</sup>

At any rate, the lax attitude of the States of Holland in implementing the official standpoint decided upon at the Great Assembly is a case in point that the civil authorities often did not live up to the policies they agreed to as to please the clergy. The way the different provinces dealt with religious worship and organization of other denominations than the orthodox Calvinist one – including Catholics, Arminians, Jews, Lutherans, Socinians, Mennonites, Anabaptists, Collegiants, and so on – continued to diverge greatly, in spite of the promises of the Assembly. On the whole, therefore, the Reformed Church remained quite incoherent seen from a national perspective. Its affairs were usually based on locally and provincially embedded common practice.

Still, civil authorities for their part were more than willing to uphold a public privileged church as a safeguard for civil order and a symbol of unity.<sup>57</sup> For the majority of the regents, as historian Enno van Gelder phrased it, the church was considered a kind of 'department of public worship'.<sup>58</sup> Civic life and public culture in the Republic were in that respect shaped by Calvinism.<sup>59</sup> Recall, for example, De Witt's deliberately broad and vague words in his *Deduction* 'that the hearts and souls' of the Dutch were 'bound together by a spiritual and divine bond of one and the same religion'.<sup>60</sup> Like De Witt, most regents had a moderate outlook on the public church, that is to say, an outlook that was less dogmatic – in any case in practice – and consequently more open to differences of opinion within one and the same organization. Furthermore, they were keen to keep the church fully dependent on the civil authorities: they paid their salaries, had a say in most ecclesiastical appointments,

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<sup>56</sup> Frijhoff, , 'Religious toleration in the United Provinces', p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> Although there are a number of cases in which non-members were appointed to lower public offices. Groenveld and Leeuwenberg, *De Tachtigjarige Oorlog*, p. 81.

<sup>58</sup> Van Gelder, *Getemperde Vrijheid*, p.16.

<sup>59</sup> Frijhoff, 'Was the Dutch Republic a Calvinist Community?', p. 99-122.

<sup>60</sup> De Witt, *Manifest van de ware vrijheid*, p. 161.



decided about church buildings and property, and were the ones who authorized synods. Orthodox Calvinist ministers and theologians, who opposed the view that the church was dependent on the state, were often painfully reminded of that reality .

The laxity on the part of the States General, the provincial States and the city councils to combat dissenting protestant groups, Catholics, Jews and sects aroused enormous frustration and heavy criticisms from orthodox clergymen in the 1650s and 1660s. Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), a learned professor of theology and dean of the University of Utrecht was at the front of the rise of a renewed orthodox bigotry among reformed ministers concerned with *praxis pietatis*, ‘the pious walk of life’. Since the nineteenth century this movement is better known as the Further Reformation. While initially directed at the subjective experience of faith, the Dutch historian of religion Fred van Lieburg distinguishes four dimensions in the movement: (1) a pietistic (spiritual, mystical, experiential), (2) a social-cultural (moral), (3) an ecclesiastical, and (4) a political (societal, theocratic) dimension. This ‘bibliocratic civilizing offensive’ expressed itself in attempts to bring an end to all kinds of ‘sinful’ aspects of daily life such as gambling, drinking, luxury, prostitution, but also the way people dressed, theatre and dancing.<sup>61</sup> Voetius and his followers such as Jodocus van Lodenstein (1620-1677), Hermannus Witsius (1636-1708) and Abraham van de Velde (1614-1677), felt an urgent sense of moral decay. In their view the growing toleration under Prince Frederick Hendrick, and even more so under the stadholderless regime, had to be reversed.

The protagonists of the Further Reformation tried to strengthen their grip on society by focusing on such specific issues as Sunday observance. Especially Johannes Coccejus (1603-1669), the liberal professor of theology at the University of Leiden, was heavily attacked for his outlook on this issue. The polemic between the two sides – sometimes referred to as Coccejans and Voetians – was essentially about the question to what extent biblical commandments ought to be literally applied to aspects of everyday life. The debates on these practical issues were part of a larger controversy about the status of the Bible as such, a debate to which Spinoza gave a monumental impetus in 1670 with the publication of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. By the middle of the seventeenth century the sacrosanct status of the Bible was undermined by two developments: the radicalization of biblical hermeneutics

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<sup>61</sup> Van Lieburg, ‘From Pure Church to Pious Culture’, p. 414-415.

and the rise of ‘new philosophy’.<sup>62</sup> We should keep in mind, however, that this general view of the decline of biblical authority is disputed. The fierce attacks by a minority of orthodox Calvinists on the new science and biblical hermeneutics may not be that representative. Moreover, Descartes’ philosophy was arguably only a threat to Scripture in an indirect way. Admittedly it undermined Aristotelian metaphysics and introduced an alternative source to enquire reality other than the Bible, namely human reason, but Descartes left theology as such untouched.<sup>63</sup> It is now widely recognized among Spinoza scholars that these two developments – the radicalization of biblical hermeneutics and the rise of Cartesianism – in the Dutch Republic in the first half of seventeenth century are pertinent backgrounds against which Spinoza’s writings must be understood.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, I will be mainly concerned with the question what the political implications were of the ‘desacralization’ of the Bible, that is to say, the assigning of a non-sacral, secular status to the Bible. And secondly, how the debates *about* Cartesian philosophy influenced Spinoza’s thinking about civil liberty.

The debate about the meaning of biblical passages and the authority of the Bible as it was backed by Aristotelian (meta)physics, broke out as a consequence of scientific discoveries concerning the heliocentric picture of the world done by notorious ‘natural philosophers’ such as Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642).

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<sup>62</sup> W. van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, p. 37; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 3-13; E. Jorink, ‘Horrible and blasphemous’. Isaac la Peyrère, Isaac Vossius and the emergence of radical biblical criticism in the Dutch Republic’ in: J. van der Meer en S. Mandelbrote (eds.) *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic religions: Up to 1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 429-450.

<sup>63</sup> H.J.M. Nellen, ‘Growing Tension between Church Doctrines and Critical Exegesis of the Old Testament’, in: M. Saebø (ed.) *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, Vol. 2: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) p. 823-826.

<sup>64</sup> On radical biblical criticism, see: R. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford, University Press: 2003) ch. 14-15, and idem, *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) ch. 7. E. Jorink, ‘Horrible and blasphemous’. Isaac la Peyrère, Isaac Vossius and the emergence of radical biblical criticism in the Dutch Republic’ in: J. van der Meer en S. Mandelbrote (eds.) *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic religions: Up to 1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) 429-450. T.L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 2006). S. Nadler, S., ‘The Bible Hermeneutics of Baruch de Spinoza.’ In: *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament – The History of its Interpretation*, ed. M. Saebø, vol. 2, *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*. (Göttingen 2008, p. 826-836). J.S. Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). There are now two NWO-funded projects concerned with philology, bible criticism and seventeenth century Dutch political thought: Nellen en Steenbakkens, *Biblical Criticism and Secularization in the Seventeenth Century* (2008) and Nauta, L., *Humanist criticism and the making of ‘modernity’. Language, philosophy and politics between the Renaissance and the Dutch Golden Age* (2010). On Spinoza and Cartesianism see among others: Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*; Th. Verbeek, *Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise, Exploring the Will of God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) ch. 6; T. Nyden-Bullock, *Spinoza’s Radical Cartesian Mind* (London: Continuum, 2007).

Their findings, Voetius argued, discredited the Bible as a source of scientific truths.<sup>65</sup> Another frontal attack on Scripture came from philologists working in the humanistic tradition. On the basis of philological research, chronological calculations and historical sources the French Calvinist Isaac la Peyrère (1596-1676) in his *Prae-Adamitae* (1655), of which Spinoza owned a copy, drew radical conclusions such as that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, that no accurate text of the Bible was actually available, that before Adam humans beings existed, and that the Bible is only the history of the Jews, not the history of mankind.<sup>66</sup> Orthodox theologians under the leadership of Voetius were at times very effective in getting the civil authorities to prohibit these kind of dangerous books. Only a few weeks after publication the Utrecht city magistrate, followed by the *Hof van Holland* (court of Holland) and the States General all banned La Peyrère's *Prae-Adamitae*, at the urgent request of the theological faculty of Utrecht. The States General judged that the 'horrible and blasphemous' *Prae-Adamitae* 'could easily divert from Christianity both the citizens of the State and all other people'.<sup>67</sup> Earlier a restraint was put on the further spread of Cartesianism at the universities of Utrecht and Leiden in respectively 1642 and 1647. But these measures could not prevent the *Corpus Aristotelicum*, the 'old' philosophy, from losing more and more ground to the 'new' philosophical and methodological principles of Cartesianism. In the 1640s a venomous debate raged between defenders of Cartesian philosophy, including Descartes himself on the one hand, and counter-remonstrant professors on the other. Whereas in 1636 Voetius described the Bible as '*het Boek van alle wetenschap, de Zee van alle wijsheid, de Academie der academiën*' ('the book of all sciences, the sea of all wisdom, the academy of academies),'<sup>68</sup> the orthodox professor of philosophy Martinus Schoock (1614-1669) remarked in one his writings that philosophy must remain the *dienstmaagd* (maidservant) of theology.'<sup>69</sup> The point with regard to Spinoza's later defence of *libertas philosophandi* here was not whether Cartesianism should replace the Biblical-Aristotelian way of doing theology, philosophy and science (Spinoza rejected some of the basic philosophical views of Descartes), but rather what the boundaries were of the free exchange of (philosophical) opinions. A majority of Cartesian philosophers, scientists and theologians

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<sup>65</sup> W. Frijhoff, W. and M. Spies (1999) *1650: Bevochten eendracht. Nederlandse cultuur in Europese context* (Den Haag: SDU) p. 290, 297-298.

<sup>66</sup> Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, p. 221-223.

<sup>67</sup> Jorink, 'Horrible and blasphemous', p. 430.

<sup>68</sup> Voetius, *Sermoen van de nutticheydt der Academiën ende Scholen* (1636) p. 15-16.

<sup>69</sup> Frijhoff and Spies, *1650*, p. 300.

were perfectly happy with a debate about the merits of Cartesian philosophy *within* the realm of philosophy, mathematics, medicine and physics. It was on the level of theology and politics where Cartesianism and radical biblical hermeneutics became topics of heated public debate. It was no longer merely an academic discussion about theology and its relation to philosophy.

In particular Lambert van Velthuysen (1622-1685) was a catalyst agent for public outcries against radical thinkers, since he wrote pamphlets about Cartesianism and the right of the church and the position of ministers in the vernacular. In the eyes of Voetian ministers Van Velthuysen – a member of the Utrecht regent class – embodied the danger of an alliance of *staatsgezinde* republican political ideals and Cartesian philosophy. This alliance was in their view a right-out threat for their own position and credibility, and moreover for the entire civil order. Thus in 1656 several churches in Holland asked the States to call the further spread of Cartesianism to a halt. Grand Pensionary De Witt saw to it that the States of Holland issued a decree which stated that philosophy and theology ought not to be mixed and that *libertas philosophandi* ought not to be abused. However, without strict implementation by the States, this decree was more something to keep Voetius and his colleagues down, than that it halted the Leiden professors from exploring the applications of Cartesian methodology.

Obviously, radical writings published in the 1650s and 1660s did not further the cause of orthodox ministers to make Dutch society a ‘godly society’.<sup>70</sup> But the position of orthodox ministers should not be underestimated. As Huizinga strikingly described it, ‘the servants of the word always remained ministers more than shepherds’. Their task was in the first place to ‘address, admonish, and convince’. It led the office automatically to the judging, and all too often the condemning ‘of all things of government and society.’<sup>71</sup> It is important to realize that the Calvinist ministers were in close contact with the ‘people’ (*volk*) and had the opportunity to stir up the people by putting forward political views that brought the regents, the States of Holland, and De Witt into disrepute, as often happened at critical moments.

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<sup>70</sup> Notorious radical writings published in the 1660s are among others: Gerard van Wassenaer, *Bedekte konsten in regeringen en heerschappien* (1657), reprinted as [Pieter de la Court] *Naeuwkeurige consideratie van staet* (1662); Pieter Balling (?-1669), *Het Licht opden Kandelaer* (Amsterdam, 1662); Lucius Antistius Constans [pseudonym], *De Iure Ecclesiasticorum* (Amsterdam, 1665); [Franciscus van den Enden] (1602-1674) *Vrije Politijke Stellingen* (1665); [Lodewijk Meyer] (1629-1681), *Philosophia S[acrae] Scripturae Interpres* (1666), a translation appeared under the name *De Philosophie d'Uytlegghster der H. Schrifture. Een wonderspreukigh Tractaet.* (1667); Adriaan Koerbagh (1632-1669), Vrederyck Waermont: *'t Samen-Spraeck Tusschen een Gereformeerden Hollander en Zeeuw* (1664); idem, *'t Nieuw Woorden-Boeck der Regten* (1664); idem, *Een Bloemhof van allerley lieflijkheyd* (1668), idem, *Een Ligt schynende in Duystere Plaatsen, om te verlighten de voornaamste saaken der Godsgeleerdtheyd en Godsdienst* (1668).

<sup>71</sup> Huizinga, *Nederlandse beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw*, p. 69-70.

Accordingly, they could exert great influence on their audiences and on society in general.

In chapter three we will see how Spinoza's attack on the status of the ministers will address both spheres of influence of religious authorities, that is, influence on both political officials as well as in a more direct relation to the normal people. Clergymen sought to bring the regents, as members of the Reformed church, under their *religious* authority. Their claim to be the only righteous interpreters of the word of God was one of Spinoza's principal targets in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. The point is whether civil authorities ought to exercise their political power independently from religious authorities. In other words, is the state free to act independently? The church not only threatened the independence of the state but was also directed towards the daily life of people. The pious walk of life was in the Further Reformation based on a literal reading of the Bible and on the 'truth' of orthodox doctrines. What was at stake according to Spinoza was 'the authority to interpret religion and make judgments about it'. This authority, he would argue, lies 'with each individual man'. What is more, it is a 'question of individual right'.<sup>72</sup> The efforts of the Further Reformation were a direct threat to what Spinoza conceived as an individual sphere of liberty that was not be entrenched by religious authorities. But before we turn to Spinoza's intervention in the debates discussed so far, we have to zoom in on Spinoza's social and intellectual life within the Republic.

## **2.2 Spinoza the 'inhabitant' and his turn to the political**

So far I have presented a number of debates in which some kind of liberty was discussed. We have seen how liberty was discussed on a strictly political level. The pivotal question was how the freedom of the now independent Republic were to be maintained? However, there was also a fundamental friction between the unity and the stadholder on the one hand, and the particularism of the provinces and cities on the other. The distribution of political power and the fragmentation of political sovereignty were therefore at the heart of this controversy. In the former section we turned to another realm of debate: the liberty to question religious doctrine and to freely discuss and exchange (philosophical) opinions. In this context we also saw how freedom was theologically disputed. But what also became clear is that the continuous tensions between religious and political authorities of how to deal with these kind of problems raised the fundamental question of the relation between church and state. Who

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<sup>72</sup> *TTP*, p. 116.

were the legitimate interpreters of religion? Ought the church to have a domain, i.e. religion, in which it was to be sovereign? And were the civil authorities to obey the church in these matters? Or were the churches to obey the civil authorities? In other words, what was the extent of their independence – their liberty – in relation to each other?

This section deals with Spinoza socio-political standing and how this perspective may have influenced his thinking about political liberty. What is political liberty, one might ask, if not in any case some kind of opportunity or means to influence politics? It is sometimes forgotten, or at least not given due attention in contextual accounts of Spinoza's political thought, that Spinoza was an 'ordinary' political subject in the political world of the Dutch Republic.<sup>73</sup> What was Spinoza's experience in the Republic with regard to politics on an urban scale? Political power in the towns and cities of Holland was in the hands of a limited number of oligarchic families. Although Spinoza was in many respects an extra-ordinary figure, seen from a socio-political perspective he was not even a full-fledged citizen (*burgher*), but merely an inhabitant (*ingezetene*). Furthermore, this section we will zoom in on some specific issues in the 1660s. In combination with the discussion of Spinoza's position in Dutch society we will be able to see what direct events and circumstances triggered Spinoza to start writing the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. In doing so, we will also find out how Spinoza was directly related to the issues that were debated, as I have identified in the former sections and what moved him to intervene in these debates.

Citizenship was a key feature – 'a core institution' – of political life in the Dutch Republic.<sup>74</sup> In the seventeenth century it was also essentially a local issue. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century that a national Dutch citizenship was established.<sup>75</sup> In the 1650s and 1660s towns had their own citizenship arrangements and requirements mostly stemming from a 'medieval legacy of local privileges and bylaws.'<sup>76</sup> To have full citizenship status meant that

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<sup>73</sup> This way of looking at Spinoza is partly inspired by W. Te Brake's, *Shaping History. Ordinary People in European Politics, 1500-1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Te Brake defines ordinary people as 'those who were excluded from the realm of officialdom', Te Brake, *Shaping History*, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> J. Luiten van Zanden and M. Prak, 'Towards an economic interpretation of citizenship: The Dutch Republic between medieval communes and modern nation-states', in: *European Review of Economic History*, 10 (2006), p. 111-145.

<sup>75</sup> M. Prak, 'Burghers into Citizens: Urban and National Citizenship in the Netherlands during the Revolutionary Era (c.1800)', in: M. Hanagan and C. Tilly (eds.) *Extending Citizenship, Reconferring States* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

<sup>76</sup> M. Prak, 'The politics of intolerance: citizenship and religion in the Dutch Republic (17th-18th C.)', in: Po-chia Hsia and Van Nierop *Calvinism and Religious Toleration*, p. p. 161.

one had a right of say in municipal affairs, including administration and jurisdiction, although actual practice differed from town to town.<sup>77</sup> Another crucial facet was that only citizens were allowed to become member of a guild, the central corporative institution in many branches of the Dutch economy. Civic militias too were normally constituted by only citizens. Other advantages of citizenship, such as entitlements to social welfare schemes and protection by the law, were to a large extent also enjoyed by those who were not formally citizens.<sup>78</sup>

Spinoza, born and raised in Amsterdam as son of a relatively successful Portuguese-Jewish merchant, Michael d’Espinoza, was like all Jews in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic merely an inhabitant, or at best, a second-class citizen. In 1598 it was decided in Amsterdam that Portuguese merchants could take a ‘burghers-oath’ (*Poorterseid*). In 1657 the States General declared Jewish inhabitants to be entitled to the same rights and protection as all other Dutch inhabitants in relation with foreign countries. Nonetheless, Jews never had full citizenship rights and privileges.<sup>79</sup> Yet the community of Sephardic Jews to whom the Spinoza’s family belonged was not an isolated community, but quite well ‘integrated’ in Dutch society (to use a modern term). They were also generally well off, as many Jews were in the trading business with Spain, Portugal and the colonies.<sup>80</sup> Spinoza’s father Michael had a respectable status within the Jewish community as he took up various leading positions in the community’s councils and institutions.<sup>81</sup> Although the Sephardic community was to some extent well respected, as can be inferred from visits to the most important synagogue at the Houtgracht by stadholder Frederick Hendrick and several burgomasters and magistrates in respectively 1642 and 1648, Jews can hardly be said to have had any influence in Dutch politics.<sup>82</sup> It must be remarked, however, that the interests of the Jewish community as a whole – as many of them were successful merchants – and as a religious community that was largely tolerated as long as they did not draw too much attention, were not neglected by the Amsterdam regents. This observation points us to two other aspects of political life and Spinoza’s position in the First Stadholderless Period. As I noted before, in the 1650s in a number of cities the power of the regents to influence local politics increased significantly.

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<sup>77</sup> The nature and extent of these entitlements varied from town to town. Frijhoff and Spies, *1650*, p. 183.

<sup>78</sup> Luiten van Zanden and Prak, ‘Towards an economic interpretation of citizenship’, p. 124.

<sup>79</sup> R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, *De Sefardim in Amsterdam tot 1795. Aspecten van een joodse minderheid in een Hollandse stad* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 1989) p. 39-40, 69; S. Nadler, *Spinoza* (Amsterdam: Olympus, 2007) p. 22-23.

<sup>80</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza*, p. 39-40, 44-45.

<sup>81</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza*, p. 57-61.

<sup>82</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza*, p. 102-104.

Only members of the highest families of those who had full citizenship could become regents. But the regents did not possess absolute power. Ordinary citizens had a ‘relatively strong bargaining position’ in relation to the regents, but only within the context of an interest group. Generally civic militias and guilds were ‘vehicles of political mobilization’.<sup>83</sup> Whereas in provinces such as Groningen and Gelderland citizens indirectly (sometimes directly) chose the members of the city councils, and in smaller towns more middle class citizens were member of city councils than in larger towns, this cannot be said for most towns in Holland.<sup>84</sup> Here (as elsewhere) burghers could utter their grievances and complaints to local governors in petitions or write pamphlets. Ordinary individual citizens, let alone inhabitants, were devoid of any political power, apart from the possibility that maybe their pen could be a mighty sword.

This is what Spinoza most of his adult life was: an individual inhabitant. In 1656, on the age of twenty-four, Spinoza got expelled from the Jewish community because of his ‘wrong opinions and behaviour’.<sup>85</sup> Thus Spinoza was neither member of an institutionalized interest group, nor even inhabitant of one town in his adult life for one long uninterrupted period, since he moved from Amsterdam to Rijnsburg (1661), then to Voorburg (1663) and finally to The Hague (1669). Nonetheless, apart from being banned from the synagogue – which did not make such a huge impression on him, we might conjecture, as he did not even mention it once in all of his writings that are left to us – Spinoza was at considerable liberty to follow and employ his intellectual interests as much as he liked. Contrary to some earlier characterizations made by some commentators, he was not a solitary figure.<sup>86</sup> Spinoza was in a position to be educated at Franciscus van den Enden’s respectable Latin school, where he might even had a part in this school’s performance of Terentius’ *Eunuchus* in the *Stadsschouwburg* (city theatre) of Amsterdam. There are indications that he visited lectures at the university of Leiden (although conclusive evidence is lacking).<sup>87</sup> He probably partook in

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<sup>83</sup> M. Prak, ‘Challenges for the Republic: Coordination and Loyalty in the Dutch Republic’, in: M. Prak, Th. Maissen and A. Holenstein (eds.) *The Republican Alternative. The Netherlands and Switzerland compared* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008) p. 61, 65.

<sup>84</sup> Groenveld and Leeuwenberg, *De Tachtigjarige Oorlog*, p. 356.

<sup>85</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza*, p. 140. Numerous views have been propounded about the reason why Spinoza was expelled, some more convincing than others. There are no primary sources, however, that can give us a definitive answer. One of the better cases is made by Steven Nadler in his *Spinoza’s Heresy. Immortality in the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>86</sup> Frijhoff and Spies, *1650*, p. 337-338; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 163-174;

<sup>87</sup> W. Klever, ‘Spinoza’s life and works’, D. Garret (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 22.



discussions of collegiants in Rijnsburg and was in contact with the great scientists of his time. In other words, this is hardly a picture of a helpless and oppressed inhabitant who was at the mercy of the powers of hostile regents and orthodox ministers. At the same time these aspects of Spinoza's life should not gloss over his extremely limited political opportunities. Whereas Spinoza within the context of the Sephardic community and as merchant (he took over the business of his father) could pressure regents to look after his interests as a group member, as an individual Jewish philosopher he was devoid of such potential influence.

Spinoza also witnessed a society in which his friends and intellectual companions – most of them well-off, some well educated, others autodidact intellectuals – were at the margins of political decision making processes. Partly this had to do with their backgrounds: Pieter Balling (d. 1669) and Simon Joosten de Vries (c. 1633-1667) were merchants with an Anabaptist background. Jarig Jelles (c. 1620-1683) was born in a rich Amsterdam merchant family and belonged to the liberal wing of the Mennonite community in Amsterdam, just like Jan Glazemaker (c. 1619-1682) and Jan Riewertsz (c. 1617-1687). Lodewijk Meyer (1629-1681) was the only one of the 'Spinoza circle' with a Reformed background, but was certainly not member of a regent family. In fact, none of Spinoza's friends and intellectual companions belonged to the regent class. All were well-to-do intellectual to whom the world of the political elite was more or less closed. Moreover, in the political and religious climate of the 1660s they continually had to act carefully in publishing their writings and expressing their opinions. Spinoza was all too aware of this socio-political incongruence as I will suggest in my reading of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

Nonetheless, it has been argued time and again that Spinoza was a defender of De Witt and his politics of True Freedom. Feuer even regards De Witt as a disguised democrat who 'had no conception of how a democratic republic, under the conditions of time could be founded. (...) There was no alternative to De Witt's mind but the continued rule of the enlightened middle class.' Feuer's assessment of De Witt's disposition towards democracy is unfounded and implausible. Nonetheless, he continues, 'Spinoza could subscribe wholeheartedly to John de Witt's theory of a republic'.<sup>88</sup> Historian of religion Peter van Rooden also holds that the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is 'a defense of the existing order'.<sup>89</sup> And Balibar purports that Spinoza was 'closely associated' with the 'governing elite' that

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<sup>88</sup> Feuer, *Spinoza and the rise of liberalism*, p. 78.

<sup>89</sup> Peter van Rooden, 'Spinoza's bijbeluitleg', in: *Studia Rosenthaliana* 18 (1984), 122.

‘described itself as a ‘freedom party’.<sup>90</sup> The *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, in his view, was a ‘manifesto for the Republican party’.<sup>91</sup> The views of these authors seem to be misinformed by the assumption of a stark dichotomy between the Orangist and anti-Orangist ‘parties’, and the subsequent reasoning that, since Spinoza was surely not an Orangist, he must have been on the side of the anti-Orangist, that is, De Witt’s *staatsgezinde* party. There are three problems with this interpretation. Firstly, Spinoza’s socio-political position was not within the ruling political elite.<sup>92</sup> Secondly, these commentators downplay Spinoza’s elaborate and sustained plea for a democratic reform of the political system dominated by an impenetrable oligarchic patriciate. An alternative interpretation will be suggested in section 3.3. And thirdly, they disregard the impact of the harsh way radical voices like those of Meyer and Koerbagh were put down in the period 1665-1670.

It is more plausible to interpret Spinoza from the perspective of an independent and largely (politically) powerless inhabitant. We have determined that, although the regents were in power during the 1660s, they continually had to take into consideration the interests of various groups in society, whereas ordinary *individual* citizens and inhabitants were easier to neglect. Yet this is not the whole story. Around 1660 about two-third of the men and probably about one-third of the women could read in the Dutch Republic. These figures are exceptionally high in comparison with the rest of Europe at that time.<sup>93</sup> Accordingly there was a rich reading and writing culture, and more importantly, a rich pamphlet culture in which citizens and inhabitants could be ‘politically active’.<sup>94</sup> In this public realm individuals could voice their opinions – often unanimously or under a pseudonym. The cheap and easy produced medium of a pamphlet occasionally evoked a dynamic of answers and replies. Everything was discussed, from hair dresses and the Sea War with England, to Cartesianism and the (future) position of Prince William III. In times of crisis or after sensational events the

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<sup>90</sup> Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 24.

<sup>92</sup> See W. Klever, ‘A New Document on De Witt’s Attitude towards Spinoza’, in: *Studia Spinozana* 9 (1993) p. 379-388; See also Nadler, *Spinoza*, p. 325-331, although I think Nadler also mistakenly portrays Spinoza too much as a supporter of De Witt.

<sup>93</sup> Frijhoff and Spies, *1650*, p. 238.

<sup>94</sup> H. van Nierop, ‘Popular participation in politics in the Dutch Republic’ in: P. Blicke (ed.) *Resistance, Representation, and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) p. 279-284; M. Reinders, ‘Burghers, Orangists and ‘good government’: Popular Political Opposition during the ‘Year of Disaster’ 1672 in Dutch Pamphlets’, in: *The Seventeenth Century*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2008) p. 315-346.

printing presses worked overtime.<sup>95</sup> According to Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies the pamphlet culture was part of a larger ‘discussion culture’:

Conversation, small talk, debate, council, meeting, consultation, voting, gathering, conventicle – all of these terms point to what could be called the essence of the social culture of 1650: the fundamental obligation and often eagerness as well to participate in discussion, to take note of another person’s opinion before making a decision; and the need to weigh all the pros and cons, from whatever quarter they might come, when forming opinions in every area of life and culture.

Moreover, they point out that:

Popular printed media was ... an essential element of cultural life in the seventeenth-century Republic. It was pamphlets that brought about an osmosis in the public sphere between the theoretical concepts of the political thinkers, the propaganda of the administrative doers, and the broad debate of the middle groups. Popular publications thus became the breeding ground of new ideas, which were almost immediately further circulated, tested and possibly adjusted or rejected (...) Even though the intellectual level of such publications suggests that they circulated mainly among the broad middle groups, no one was actually excluded from participation in the debate.<sup>96</sup>

Both regents as well as orthodox ministers, all were fully aware of the power of the public sphere and were themselves consequently engaged in the formal and informal exchange of opinions, or in taking action to contain undesired elements of this exchange. The public sphere, consisting of all these forms of communication, was in a sense neutral ground. At the same time it was always closely watched by both civil as well as ecclesiastical authorities. In 1663, for instance, the States of Holland tried to restrict and decide how ministers should commence their public sermons. They ordained that the ministers in their public sermons would pray for the ‘*Staten van Hollandt ende West-Vrieslandt, sijnde onse wettige overheyd*’ (and for the States General only in a secondary way and not at all for the Prince).<sup>97</sup> This

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<sup>95</sup> C.E. Harline, *Pamphlets, Printing and Political Culture in the Early Dutch Republic* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987).

<sup>96</sup> Frijhoff and Spies, *1650*, p. 217-219.

<sup>97</sup> M. Th. Uit den Bogaard, *De Gereformeerden en Oranje tijdens het Stadhouderloze Tijdperk* (Groningen: Wolters, 1954) p. 206.

ordination was followed by fierce pamphlets filled with complaints about the interference of the worldly authorities in church matters.<sup>98</sup> From their side, orthodox clergymen endeavoured to get pamphlets and treatises prohibited. Thus Lodewijk Meyer's *Philosophia Sacrae Scripturae Interpres* (1666), in which he argued that only by means of philosophy Scripture could be interpreted correctly, was widely condemned.<sup>99</sup> Adriaan Koerbagh, writer of the radical *Bloemhof van allerley Lieflijkheyd sonder verdriet* (A Garden of all Kinds of Loveliness without Sorrow, 1668) was convicted for heresy and died in the Amsterdam *Rasphuis*.<sup>100</sup> These works and their relationship to Spinoza's writings have been given much scholarly attention in the last two decades.<sup>101</sup> For the purposes of this thesis it is not necessary to thoroughly discuss these works here. It is, however, important to remark that the controversies between orthodox ministers and radical authors entered a new phase: radical books and pamphlets such as those of Meyer and Koerbagh, as well as Van den Enden's *Politijke Stellingen*, were written or immediately translated in the vernacular. Moreover, whereas in the 1640s and 1650s the extent of Cartesian philosophy was mainly an internal academic discussion (in Latin), now it seemed as if theology, the Bible, and thus the religious and social authority of the church and its clergy were openly challenged on the streets. Furthermore, Koerbagh's trial was a reminder that it were in the end the civil authorities – city councils and State assemblies – who had the final decision to prohibit pamphlets, have people arrested, and so on. Any protest against censorship had to appeal to these authorities. After all, the regents were the ones who sought to prevent unrest and keep the clergy satisfied.

Thus on the one hand, the convictions and condemnations of befriended radical authors in the 1660s made evident to Spinoza that the open and neutral character of the public sphere – the only place where he and kindred spirits could exert political influence – was under great pressure and maybe even in acute danger. On the other hand, Spinoza felt it was time for a more democratic form of republican governance, as he rejected both Orangist republicanism and the republicanism of De Witt. However, in order to fully understand

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<sup>98</sup> Uit den Bogaard, *De Gereformeerden en Oranje*, p. 207-212.

<sup>99</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 197-205.

<sup>100</sup> For an informative overview of censorship in the Republic, see S. Groenveld, 'The Mecca of Authors? States Assemblies and Censorship in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic', in: *Literature and Political Censorship*, 63-86.

<sup>101</sup> Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*; Van Bunge et al., *Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Dutch Philosophers*; W. Klever, *Mannen rond Spinoza, 1650-1700: presentatie van een emanciperende generatie* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 1997); Nyden-Bullock, *Spinoza's Radical Cartesian Mind*.

Spinoza's 'turn to the political' we have to examine Spinoza's intellectual activities before he started to write his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

Before Spinoza set out to write his elaborate critique of the political and religious situation in the Republic, he had been working for years on an exposition of a philosophical system that ultimately resulted and came to us in the definite version of the *Ethics*. Spinoza's earliest work that survived is (most probably) his *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect). It was most likely written in the late fifties, but Spinoza never finished it. This is not the place to discuss this 'discourse on method', as Ed Curley termed it, but two aspects are important to mention.<sup>102</sup> In the first paragraphs Spinoza made clear that he was at a moment in his life that he wanted to dedicate himself to philosophical reflection. He intended to explore such topics as man's highest good, the nature of knowledge and understanding, and the working of the mind, as he deemed the 'things of ordinary life' only 'empty and futile'.<sup>103</sup> Practical matters, including politics and social problems, were clearly second-order concerns for Spinoza at that moment. The second point that is important to make is that Spinoza's understanding of the highest attainable good for human beings is in this work intimately connected with the improvement of understanding. This basic connection of understanding and man's highest good would be fundamental to all his later work.

Spinoza's second work we know of is the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being*, a Dutch copy of which was only discovered in 1851 known as the *Korte Verhandeling*. Like the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* this work, written in the early 1660s, must be considered at that time as a work in progress. It is generally considered a precursor of the *Ethics*, in which some of the main themes that would return in the *Ethics* are stated, but not yet geometrically demonstrated.<sup>104</sup> Another work by Spinoza, published in 1663 and demonstrated in geometrical manner like the *Ethics*, was his *Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I et II*. As the title states, this work is principally concerned with Descartes' philosophy, although it also includes an 'Appendix containing Metaphysical Thoughts', a sort of introduction to late-scholastic metaphysical questions. Finally, we know from Spinoza's letters and a remark in Meyer's *Philosophia Sacrae Scripturae Interpres*

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<sup>102</sup> Curley, 'Editorial Preface to *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*', in: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, p. 7

<sup>104</sup> P. Steenbakkers, 'The Textual History of Spinoza's *Ethics*', in: O. Koistinen (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 26-28.

(1666) that roughly between 1662 and 1665 Spinoza had been writing substantial parts of his *Ethics*.<sup>105</sup> Thus, when Spinoza in 1665 commenced to write a treatise that would be published five years later under the title *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, his decision to do so signified a great turn in his philosophical focus. Until about 1665 Spinoza did not seem to be very much interested in political issues at all, which makes it all the more significant why he made a turn to the political.<sup>106</sup>

It is sometimes suggested that in the late fifties Spinoza had worked on a sketch of ‘a theological-political treatise.’ These early writings are even said to have been part of a reaction, an *Apología*, to his banishment from the Sephardic community.<sup>107</sup> But much remains speculation on this issue, as the actual documents have never been found.<sup>108</sup> We do know, however, that Spinoza already in early 1662 expressed his concerns in a letter about publishing a ‘short work’ (most probably the *Short Treatise*), since ‘the theologians of our time may be offended and with their usual hatred attack me, who absolutely dread quarrels.’<sup>109</sup> Some years later Spinoza made clear that his concerns and frustrations about publishing his work were even more pressing. In a letter of October 1665 to his friend Henry Oldenburgh (c. 1620-1677), Secretary of the Royal Society in London, he told him:

I am now writing a treatise on my views regarding Scripture. The reasons that move me to do so are these: 1. The prejudices of theologians. For I know that these are the main obstacles which prevent men from giving their minds to philosophy. So I apply myself to exposing such prejudices and removing them from the minds of sensible people. 2. The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert accusation, too, as far as I can. 3. The freedom to philosophize and to say what we think. This I want to

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<sup>105</sup> Steenbakkens, ‘The Textual History of Spinoza’s Ethics’, p. 29-35.

<sup>106</sup> Admittedly, in chapter 18 of the second part of the *Korte Verhandelng* Spinoza at some point hints at what advantage the propositions of his book could bring not only to man in relation to other men, but also to the commonwealth (*t gemeen Best*). See Steenbakkens, ‘The Textual History of Spinoza’s Ethics’, p. 31-33. But to infer that this flimsy passage shows Spinoza’s interest in politics, as P.F. Moreau argued, is in my view exaggerated. See P.F. Moreau ‘Concorde et sociabilité dans la Korte Verhandelng’, in: F. Mignini (ed.) *Dio, l'uomo, la libertà. Studi sul Breve Trattato di Spinoza* (l'Aquilà: Japadre, 1990) p. 375-379.

<sup>107</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza*, p. 170-174

<sup>108</sup> H.W. Blom and J.M. Kerkhoven, ‘A letter concerning an Early Draft of Spinoza’s Treatise on Religion and Politics?’, *Studia Spinozana* 1 (1981) p. 371-377; P. Steenbakkens, ‘The text of Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus*’, in: Y.Y. Melamed and M.A. Rosenthal (eds.) *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise. A Critical Guide* (forthcoming).

<sup>109</sup> Spinoza, ‘Letter 6’ (April 1662), in: E. Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University press, 1985) p. 188.

vindicate completely, for here it is in every way suppressed by the excessive authority and egotism of preachers<sup>110</sup>

Clearly, Spinoza's own statements with regard to his intentions to write the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* must be taken seriously. At the same time an interpretation of Spinoza's motivation to write the things he wrote in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* should not be exclusively based on the letter to Oldenburgh. Such an approach suggests an account of Spinoza's intentions as static and unchanged over a period of roughly five years and ignores the dynamic and turbulent nature of the period 1665-1670. Moreover, by simply relying on the letter it is hard to explain why Spinoza elaborated so extensively on the nature of the state and other purely political (theoretical) issues.

With regard to Spinoza's theoretical purposes it is crucial to note that the most important development in the field of political theory in the 1660s was arguably the introduction of Hobbes's writings among circles of readers in Dutch society, some of whom were closely related to Spinoza.<sup>111</sup> That Hobbes was generally discussed can also be inferred from Spinoza's letter to Jarig Jelles (albeit some time later in 1674) in which he explains what the difference is between his theory and Hobbes's (see 3.3). Spinoza himself actually had a copy of Hobbes's *De Cive* (On the Citizen) in his library and probably read his most famous work *Leviathan* too. *De Cive* was published first in England in 1642 and later in 1647 in the Republic by the famous Elsevier Company in Amsterdam. A Dutch translation of *Leviathan* – translated by Abraham van Berckel (1639-1686), an acquaintance of Spinoza – appeared in 1667, followed by a Latin version of a collection of Hobbes's writings, including *Leviathan*, in 1668.<sup>112</sup>

I will argue in section 3.3 that one of Spinoza's most important (political) theoretical purposes of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was to refute Hobbes. But why would this be so important for Spinoza? My suggestion is that *staatsgezinde*, but also more radical political thinkers in the Republic were in need of a theoretically convincing justification of a

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<sup>110</sup> Spinoza, 'Brief 30' (October 1665), in: Spinoza, *Briefwisseling*. Vertaald door Akkermam, F., Hubbeling, H.G., and Westerbrink, A.G. (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2002 [1977]), p.226.

<sup>111</sup> Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, p. 85-93; N. Malcolm, 'Hobbes and Spinoza' in: J.H. Burns and M. Goldie (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 545-557.

<sup>112</sup> C.W. Schoneveld, *Intertraffic of the mind: studies in seventeenth-century Anglo-Dutch translation with a checklist of books translated from English into Dutch, 1600-1700* (Leiden: Brill, 1983) p. 46-62.; A.J. Gelderblom. 'The publisher of Hobbes's Dutch *Leviathan*'. In: S. Roach (ed.). *Across the narrow seas. Studies in the history and bibliography of Britain and the Low Countries* (London: British Library, 1991), p. 163-166.

republican political order without a stadholder. De Witt's traditionalist arguments and his reliance on oligarchic 'good' regents were not that strong. The reception of Hobbes in the Dutch Republic in the fifties and sixties of the seventeenth century is in that respect remarkable. At first sight a vision of an absolute sovereign does not seem to be really attractive for *staatsgezinde* republicans such as Lambert van Velthuysen (1622-1685) and the brothers De la Court.<sup>113</sup> The need for one absolute centre of political power was after all not a vision that could be easily transposed to the Dutch situation. Still, Hobbes's political philosophy was to some extent an attractive radical new way of thinking about politics. What made Hobbes's view attractive in their eyes was his contention that political authority ought to be supreme and thus ought to control religion. Moreover, if with the political sovereign the States of Holland is meant, then this view of sovereignty might serve so as to exclude the stadholder of political power. Furthermore, as enthusiastic adherents of Cartesian philosophy the mechanistic rigour and objective 'amoral' method of Hobbes's argument must have been quite appealing. Undoubtedly, Spinoza was also influenced by Hobbes, but rather than interpreting Spinoza as an 'Hobbesian', my claim is that Spinoza actually rejected Hobbes's views on political liberty. In doing so, Spinoza aimed to present an alternative to Hobbes's political theory and convince his readers that in his philosophy civil and political liberties were in better hands.

Thus Spinoza had, apart from his defence of the major point of *libertas philosophandi*, other political purposes in writing the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* as well.<sup>114</sup> These other political purposes, it is important to emphasize, were not tied to the 'De Witt camp'. The public sphere was not simply divided in two 'camps'. For one thing, pro-Orangist pamphleteers were not necessarily repressive towards other religious groups (than the Reformed church) in society, as some orthodox Calvinist hardliners were. Regents who

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<sup>113</sup> On Van Velthuysen's interpretation of Hobbes, see Blom, *Causality and Morality*, p. 101-128.

<sup>114</sup> It is unquestionable that Spinoza had multiple purposes in writing the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Some practical, other theoretical. The difficulty of interpreting the work is, as Theo Verbeek rightly noted, 'to see how things combine; how particular arguments fit into a comprehensive argument'. Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 1. My interpretation obviously downplays some elements, such as specific interpretations of the Bible and Spinoza's relation to Jewish philosophy, and highlights others, that is, mainly his discussion of political and civil liberties. This is not to deny that Spinoza intended to make other (philological, hermeneutical, philosophical, etc.) points as well. My study therefore must be seen as complementary, highlighting aspects that in my view have not been given due attention. Interesting studies that approach Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* from less political angles are Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible*; Preus, *Spinoza and the irrelevance of biblical authority*; Graeme Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005); Y. Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics. Vol. 1: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).



favoured De Witt on the other hand, were not always that tolerant as is sometimes suggested.<sup>115</sup> But more importantly, like so many other citizens and inhabitants in the Republic, Spinoza had his *own* considerations and interests. Spinoza was never really a permanent member of an institutionalized interest group that could utter their grievances to the regents in the form of petitions. It is not surprising, therefore, that an important argument in Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is concerned with individual liberty. There was no 'Spinoza Party', as Balibar wrongly insinuates.<sup>116</sup> Rather, Spinoza was an exponent of a political culture of 'citizen activism', in which pamphlets played a pivotal role.<sup>117</sup> The advantage of conceiving Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* from this perspective is that Spinoza's was just one among many citizens' and inhabitants' voices, people who had their own grievances and own demands. Secondly, this perspective brings Spinoza a little bit 'down to earth'. Whereas Israel portrays Spinoza as being part of a 'clandestine philosophical sect', and as someone who in the end 'shaped a tradition of radical thinking which eventually spanned the whole continent (...) and shook western civilization to its foundations', the argument of this thesis emphasizes Spinoza's status as an ordinary 'political subject', who reckoned that the most efficient way to bring about social and political change in the Republic was by publishing a treatise like the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.<sup>118</sup> After all, what other 'political opportunities' did political subjects like Spinoza enjoy?<sup>119</sup>

To be sure, by qualifying Spinoza as an exponent of a culture of citizen activism in which the pamphlet was of central importance, we must immediately call attention to the fact that the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was in many ways anything but a pamphlet: it has the length of a book, it was written and published in Latin, and its content is wide-ranging and difficult to understand. Who then did Spinoza try to reach with such a work – certainly not the common people who accused him of being an atheist, as Spinoza originally wrote to Oldenburgh? And why did he choose this particular form? To these and other questions we turn now.

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<sup>115</sup> For a staunch supporter of the House of Orange and freethinker at the same time, and for the more general argument that among Orangists opinions on the religious settlement in the Dutch Republic varied greatly, see J. Stern, 'Religion and the Orangists', in: *Dutch Crossing*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2006) p. 181-196.

<sup>116</sup> Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Reinders, 'Burghers, Orangists and "Good Government"', p. 318.

<sup>118</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 159.

<sup>119</sup> Te Brake, *Shaping History*, p. 13.

### 3 Democratic politics and the free use of reason

#### 3.1 Before politics: the freedom of God, the freedom of man

A major argument of this thesis is that Spinoza's conception of political liberty is so extraordinarily rich and wide-ranging because it deals with various levels of freedom. In order to understand the multi-layered and systematic nature of his conception of liberty my approach is to examine how it was informed by a number of debates and controversies about liberty that were at the front line of Dutch public debate in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. Moreover, this thesis argues that Spinoza's conception of liberty has its unique character because it was based on a profound philosophical system. In the first two sections of chapter two we identified the debates that are relevant for our discussion of Spinoza's conception of political liberty. In section 2.3 we zoomed in on Spinoza's position in Dutch society and how Spinoza was personally affected by the issues that were discussed in these debates. Lastly, we took notice of Spinoza's own intellectual development and argued that his decision to write the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* signified a turn to practical and political problems in Dutch society. In this section I will examine Spinoza's notions of metaphysical and inner personal liberty and argue that they underpin his civil and political conceptions of liberty. Spinoza realized that personal liberty can only be attained in a society in which civil and political liberties are secured.

The *Tractatus theologico-politicus* resonates much of Spinoza's systematic philosophy. In it one can find fragments of his metaphysics, epistemology, theory of human affections, and ethics. On these topics he had been working intensively for quite a number of years. Surprisingly, the intriguing course of affairs in the 1660s, the sequence of Spinoza's two major works, and the fact that the two books are so completely different in content, style, and aims, did not induce many scholars to investigate the relationship between the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* and the *Ethics* systematically.<sup>120</sup> To be sure, the main question of this thesis is how Spinoza's thinking about political liberty was informed by, and a response to, controversies and debates about liberty within the historical context of the Dutch Republic. But in light of the textual history of both the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* the

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<sup>120</sup> See, however, Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*; Blom, *Causality and Morality*. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*; A. Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, translated by Michael Hardt. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

relationship between Spinoza's discussions of freedom as put forward in the *Ethics*, and those as put forward in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (and the *Tractatus politicus*) must be taken into consideration. Only then we are able to understand why and how Spinoza intended to change the way people thought about political liberty. This chapter will therefore first deal with Spinoza's notion of metaphysical freedom and enquire in what way it serves as a 'horizon' or 'model' for human freedom. The depth and multilayered character of Spinoza's conception of political liberty originates from a specific theory of liberty on an individual level that is based on his model of the freedom of God. Freedom is understood as a process of enlarging one's power to act (*potentia agendi*) through an understanding of one's surrounding and one's own affective nature. On the most elementary level, I hold, this notion of personal liberty is based on the metaphysical freedom of God understood as absolute self-determination. One important argument this thesis hopes to establish is that when Spinoza in book I of the *Ethics* writes that 'that thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone' he formulates an understanding of freedom as self-determination that serves as the foundation for his subsequent expositions of freedom.<sup>121</sup>

In section 2.2 we have seen how the theological debate between remonstrants and contra-remonstrants in the first two decades of the seventeenth century turned on God's absolute sovereignty and the freedom of human beings to secure their own salvation. Certainly the *Ethics* is not a *direct* response to this debate, but Spinoza knew what the schism was about, as this historical epoch in Dutch history was still well known among Dutch people in the 1660s. Spinoza also explicitly refers to it in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.<sup>122</sup> Spinoza's *Ethics* offers both a novel way to look at the basic philosophical and theological problem of how to reconcile (human) freedom and necessity,<sup>123</sup> as well as a proposal of a secular path to salvation, a path some commentators dubbed Spinoza's 'philosophical religion' or 'naturalized theology'.<sup>124</sup> It is disputable whether Spinoza would accept these phrases as accurate characterizations of his philosophy, but in any case does Spinoza allow in

<sup>121</sup> *EI*def7.

<sup>122</sup> *TTP*, p. 257-258.

<sup>123</sup> In part one proposition 29 Spinoza describes necessity as follows: 'In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.' *EIp*29. For a recent discussion of Spinoza's views on necessity, see C. Jarret, 'Spinoza on Necessity', in: Koistinen, *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 118-139.

<sup>124</sup> H. de Dijn, 'Spinoza on Knowledge and Religion', in: P. Losonczi, A. Szigeti, and M. Vassanyi (eds.) *Religio Academici: Essays on Scepticism, Religion and the Pursuit of Knowledge* (Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2009) p. 126; A. Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

his philosophy a possibility of human ‘blessedness’ (*beatitudo*) that consists in the love of God and ensures an eternity – understood as timelessness, not as immortality – of the human mind. This thesis however, is not concerned with the details of this discussion. Still, the *individualistic* character of this difficult path to salvation is worth noting. Spinozistic salvation is to a large extent a process of individual self-determination and only attainable by those few who are willing and able to make this effort. During the 1660s Spinoza came to realize that civil and political liberties are prerequisites to the advancement of man’s *summum bonum*.<sup>125</sup> Before we turn to the details of his arguments for civil and political liberties we first have to turn to Spinoza’s most basic notion of freedom.

Spinoza’s metaphysical definition of freedom is highly exclusive. Nothing but God, or nature, itself, which Spinoza equates with an absolutely infinite being, is capable of being free in this sense: *solum deum esse causam liberam*.<sup>126</sup> The view that God is the only free cause, follows, according to Spinoza, from his contention that God is the only one unique substance. Everything is in God, or nature, and since God is compelled by no one – that is to say, there is nothing outside God – it necessarily follows that God acts from the laws of its own nature alone. Furthermore, since ‘a substance cannot be produced by anything else’, and since Spinoza thinks God is the one and unique substance, God has to exist from the necessity of its nature alone.<sup>127</sup> To put it differently, God, or nature, is cause of itself (*causa sui*), by which Spinoza understands ‘that whose essence involves existence’.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, God is the only thing that exists from the necessity of its nature alone. In other words, only God is free according to *E1def7*: ‘that thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone’. God, or nature, to summarize Spinoza’s views, is the absolutely first (*prima*) cause, a cause of itself (*sui*), and therefore, the only free (*libera*) cause.

At this point we can already discern how Spinoza tries to get rid of the notion that freedom involves something like ‘freedom to choose’, or ‘having a free will’. On the absolutely most general level of existence, namely on the level of God, or nature, freedom is equated with *not* being determined by something external to one’s own nature. In Spinoza’s words:

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<sup>125</sup> See 3.3.

<sup>126</sup> *E1p17c2*.

<sup>127</sup> *E1p6c*.

<sup>128</sup> *E1def1*.

All things have been predetermined by God, not from freedom of the will *or* absolute good pleasure, but from God's absolute nature, *or* infinite power.<sup>129</sup>

Thus, according to Spinoza, God should be thought of not as a creator, like the Biblical God, but as the immanent cause of everything. God, or nature, therefore neither produces 'any effect by the free will' nor did (or does) it have a *choice* to be the cause of everything – it follows necessarily from the laws of its own nature.<sup>130</sup>

What Spinoza exactly points to when he uses the term freedom of God, or nature, can be elucidated by looking at the third axiom and propositions 27 and 28 of part one of the *Ethics*. There Spinoza unfolds a logic of causality that underpins his deterministic world view:

From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow<sup>131</sup>

A thing which has been determined by God to produce an effect, cannot render itself undetermined<sup>132</sup>

Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity<sup>133</sup>

To put it bluntly: every finite being, whether it be a mental or a bodily phenomenon, is caused by something else (or by itself in so far as one is free). Nothing is undetermined. That does not imply that God, being the first and only free cause, is itself *undetermined* or not caused by anything. God is caused by itself. And this is in Spinoza's view precisely what freedom, also human freedom, essentially consists of.

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<sup>129</sup> *E1app.*

<sup>130</sup> *E1p32c1.*

<sup>131</sup> *E1a3.*

<sup>132</sup> *E1p27.*

<sup>133</sup> *E1p28.*

God thus appears to be a model or way of conceiving freedom. However, Spinoza also explicitly introduces a model of a free man in the preface to part four of the *Ethics* and describes at length the maxims this hypothetical free man follows. Spinoza introduces this model because human beings ‘desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to’.<sup>134</sup> This model also allows Spinoza to retain the notions of good and evil. This is important for in his philosophical system nothing is in itself good or evil. Yet by way of this model of human nature, Spinoza understands by good ‘what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model.’<sup>135</sup> There is an ongoing discussion among philosophers about the status of Spinoza’s model of human nature.<sup>136</sup> Was Spinoza after all not the philosopher most fiercely rejecting all teleology in nature? And is Spinoza’s model of the free man therefore not a product of the imagination, an inadequate idea? Spinoza’s model of a free man is in my view inadequate for reasons I will explain below. The idea of God as absolutely free is on the other hand an adequate idea. Why did Spinoza did not use the model of God to deduce maxims of how to live as human being? Partially the reason is that, when it comes to formulating maxims that are useful for human beings, God is not an appropriate model, for Spinoza absolutely wants to get rid of speaking of God in anthropomorphic terms. Secondly – and this is the reason why the model of a free man is an inadequate idea – a free man can never be perfectly free like God. God’s model of freedom is therefore only useful in a very specific way, which Andrew Youpa formulated as follows: ‘The idea of the free man (...) is the idea of God’s *power* expressed in a singular thing’.<sup>137</sup> We now have to see how human freedom, power, God and understanding are related.

Human beings, Spinoza thinks, can to a high degree be the cause of their own actions. That is not to say that human beings are free to the extent that they are undetermined – that option is ruled out in Spinoza’s determinism: they are free to the extent that they are self-determined. Spinoza’s determinism implies that human beings have no free will. The will is

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<sup>134</sup> *EIV*pref

<sup>135</sup> *EIV*pref.

<sup>136</sup> For a discussion of the different positions and an alternative view that also stresses the importance of God as model of human freedom, see A. Youpa, ‘Spinoza’s model of human nature’, in: *Journal of the history of philosophy*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2010) p. 61-76.

<sup>137</sup> Youpa, ‘Spinoza’s model of human nature’, p. 73.

determined as well. More precisely, as Steven Smith put it: ‘The fact that we desire this and not that is not a freestanding choice but the outcome of a whole range of antecedent conditions of which the will is but a determination.’<sup>138</sup> That is not to say that human beings cannot imagine that they freely will and do things. In fact, man’s appetites and desires continually make people think they freely want something. Spinoza observes in the appendix of *Ethics* part one that human beings continually deceive themselves by thinking themselves free. Their sense of having a free undetermined will is a result of their ignorance of the causes ‘by which they are disposed to wanting and willing’.<sup>139</sup> Just as God, human beings are continually *affected*. In the case of the one and unique substance – God – Spinoza refers to the way the substance is affected, as affections (*affectiones*), or modes.<sup>140</sup> These modes, of which there are infinitely many, should be thought of as ‘configurations’ or ‘states’ of the one substance God. At the same time, God manifests itself *through* its infinite number of modes. In the case of the affectedness of human beings, who themselves are modes as well, Spinoza also uses the term ‘affect’ (*affectus*). That is a special type of affection, namely a human affection:

By affect I understand affections of the Body by which the Body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.<sup>141</sup>

Notice that Spinoza presents us two ways in which affects can be conceived: (1) as affections by which the body’s power of acting is affected; and (2) the *ideas* of these affections (we will see later why this matters). The fundamental difference between how God, or nature, is affected, and how human beings are affected, follows from the difference between God being an infinite, and a human being, a finite being.<sup>142</sup> God cannot be said to be capable of

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<sup>138</sup> Smith, ‘What kind of democrat was Spinoza’, p. 10.

<sup>139</sup> *EI*app.

<sup>140</sup> *E1*d5.

<sup>141</sup> *EIII*d3

<sup>142</sup> Michael also Della Rocca also emphasizes the similarities between God’s nature and a human beings’ nature: ‘For Spinoza, God is not different from us (or from other finite things) in kind, only in degree and particularly only in degree of power. This emerges nicely from Spinoza’s emphasizing in 3p6 that, just as God is in itself, we too are in ourselves if only to some degree. In other words, we possess to some extent a defining characteristic of God: we are conceptually independent of other things to some extent at least.

The notion of striving reveals another similarity between us and God: our striving is not different in kind from what might be called God’s striving. The same kind of conditional claims hold for God as well as for us. Just as we will preserve ourselves unless other things interfere, so too God will preserve himself unless other

increasing or decreasing in strength, as human beings do, because God's power is infinite (it is after all the only existing substance). God is solely affected by modes which are existent in God itself. Human beings on the other hand, finite beings as they are, are continually acted upon. Hence Spinoza contends

that we *act* when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are *acted on* when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause.<sup>143</sup>

Thus Spinoza holds that we are active and powerful beings in so far as we are the adequate cause of things inside or outside us. An inadequate cause is a cause of which the effect can only partially be understood as following from it. 'Therefore, if we can be the adequate cause of any of these affections, I understand by the Affect an *action*; otherwise, a *passion*'.<sup>144</sup>

Affects can be either actions or passions and as such should be studied extensively, instead of being scorned, as Spinoza held many writers to have done so before him. Expounding the basic characteristics of Spinoza's thinking about how some affects can actually empower someone, will show us the way how to understand Spinoza's civic and political notions of freedom. They are grounded in his individual, or rather, psychological, notion of freedom.

The fundamental principle that guides each individual thing is, according to Spinoza, the striving for self-preservation, in Latin *conatus*:

'Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere (*conatur*) in its being'<sup>145</sup>

In fact, this striving, the *conatus* of each thing, constitutes, in Spinoza's view, the very essence of each thing. When we apply this principle to human beings, we arrive at the very basics of Spinoza's human psychology:

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things interfere. The only difference is that with regard to God there are no other things and so his striving for self-preservation is necessarily unimpeded.' Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p.152-153.

<sup>143</sup> EIII d2 [italics are mine, rk].

<sup>144</sup> E1 d3 [italics are mine, rk].

<sup>145</sup> EIII p6.



- When this striving relates to the mind, Spinoza calls it ‘will’ (*voluntas*)
- When this striving relates to the mind and body together, he calls it ‘appetite’ (*appetitus*);
- And when appetite is accompanied by consciousness, Spinoza calls it ‘desire’ (*cupiditas*)<sup>146</sup>

With regard to the will, we can begin to understand more and more of the intelligible character of Spinoza’s ideas concerning the empowerment of the human beings by reasonable understanding, when we go back to *Ethics* book two. There Spinoza already referred to the will as ‘a faculty of affirming and denying, and not desire’.<sup>147</sup> In other words, the will is a mode of thinking, whereas appetite and desire are components of the human psyche that necessarily involve bodily (together with mental) affections. The will, according to Spinoza, is not an affect. On the contrary, for Spinoza ‘the will and the intellect are one and the same’.<sup>148</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to realize that the will does involve a kind of striving. We will now see why this matters. According to Spinoza, desire (*cupiditas*) is one of the three primitive affects, together with joy (*laetitia*) and sadness (*tristitia*). On the basis of these three affects, all other affects – actions *and* passions – can be explained. Being joyful, or, on the contrary, becoming saddened, is explained by Spinoza as the mind undergoing a change to more, or lesser perfection. But what does this mean? The striving to persevere in one’s being actually means for Spinoza more than only striving to stay in the same state. Instead it involves that one strives to increase one’s power. For, in *EIIIp12* Spinoza states: ‘The Mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the Body’s power of acting.’ Sadness, therefore, does nothing but restraining or diminishing ‘man’s power of acting’ (*hominis agendi potentia*), while joy increases man’s power of acting.<sup>149</sup>

Recall first that Spinoza claimed that an affect is not only an affection of the body, but at the same time, the *idea* of this affection. Recall secondly, that in Spinoza’s view the will is not a desire, but a mode of thinking ‘by which the mind affirms or denies something true or

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<sup>146</sup> *EIIIp9s*.

<sup>147</sup> *EIIp48s*. Referring to the will as ‘faculty’ is however problematic here for Spinoza, since it suggests a certain centre in the human mind that is called the faculty of the will. But this seems to be misleading since Spinoza also holds that ‘the Mind is a certain and determinate mode of thinking (by P11), and so (by IP17C2) cannot be a free cause of its own actions, or cannot have an absolute faculty of willing and not willing.’ *EIIp48d*.

<sup>148</sup> *EIIIp49c*.

<sup>149</sup> *EIIIa3*.

something false'.<sup>150</sup> This leads him to the conclusion that an affect is actually a represented idea, which 'insofar as it is an idea, involves affirmation or negation'.<sup>151</sup> Then, insofar as we have adequate ideas about ourselves and the world around us, our mind rejoices or becomes joyful, and consciously affirms this. Passions, however, follow from inadequate ideas or the imagination. Understanding, i.e. acquiring adequate ideas, thus leads to joy and consequently to empowerment. Since people are necessarily affective beings, the mind continuously undergoes changes from lower to higher levels of perfection and vice versa. But it is impossible for a human being to reach *perfection*.

Understanding the affects is therefore crucial for Spinoza: 'The more an affect is known to us, then, the more it is in our power, and the less the Mind is acted on by it'.<sup>152</sup> This is what I take to be the crucial point of Spinoza's theory of psychological freedom: self-determination, through regulating the affects, as a result of understanding. To be sure, no human being is capable of being completely free in this sense. One can only regulate, moderate, or restrain the affects, not control them:

man is necessarily always subject to passions, (...) he follows and obeys the common order of Nature, and accommodates himself to it as much as the nature of things requires<sup>153</sup>

The connection between Spinoza's metaphysical definition of freedom and the individual freedom of human beings can now be made explicit. According to Spinoza, absolute freedom consists of complete self-determination, not 'indeterminedness'. By increasing his or her power of acting (*potentia agendi*), a human being can determinate him or her self to a higher degree. This process of empowerment is catalyzed by one's striving or *conatus*, which comprehends an intellectual striving for understanding – understanding one's place in nature and understanding one's own nature. How understanding relates to freedom is elucidated by Spinoza in a letter to one of his correspondents Willem van Blijenbergh:

our freedom is neither placed in contingency nor in a certain indifference, but in a manner of affirming and denying, so that the less indifferently we affirm or deny a thing, the more free we are. For example, if God's nature is known to us, then affirming that God exists follows

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<sup>150</sup> EIIp48s.

<sup>151</sup> EIIp49s.

<sup>152</sup> EVp3c.

<sup>153</sup> EIVp4c.

necessarily from our nature, just as it proceeds from the nature of a triangle that its three angles equal two right angles. Nevertheless, we are never more free than when we affirm a thing in such a way<sup>154</sup>

Because one's power to act increases with one's insight (whether in God, in the mathematical properties of triangles, or in one's own affective nature), one is more self-determining and thus more free.<sup>155</sup>

Of course, the *conatus*, and the way a person's *conatus* relates to one's intellect and bodily affects can differ enormously from one person to another. Spinoza's thorough awareness of this diversity between people is a continually recurring theme throughout the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.<sup>156</sup> What is absolutely crucial, is that someone can only reach an acceptable level of individual or psychological freedom if one has a considerable extent of civic and political liberty. Only in such a society the divergence of how people's *conatus* work out can be accommodated. In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza therefore takes up the challenge of how to construct a proper state, that is capable of doing this. That is the hard part:

To anticipate all this and construct a state in such a way that each person, of whatever character, prefers public right to private advantage, this is the real task, this the arduous work.<sup>157</sup>

### 3.2 Spinoza's arguments in favour of the free use of reason

In the former section I have argued that Spinoza transposed his view on the liberty of God, understood as absolute self-determination, to the realm of human beings. Although absolute freedom is necessarily unattainable, human beings can be said to be free to the extent that they are self-determined. The role of reason and understanding is central in this process of self-determination: only by the free use of reason can people enlarge their power to act (*potentia*

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<sup>154</sup> Letter 21 (28 January 1665), in: Spinoza, *The Collected Works*, p. 378.

<sup>155</sup> P. Steenbakkens, 'Spinoza over vrijheid, dwang en noodzaak', in: C. van Hirtum (ed.) *Libertas Philosophandi. Spinoza als gids voor een vrije wereld* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2008) p. 115-122.

<sup>156</sup> See for example, *TTP*, p. 198: 'for, by the laws of appetite, everyone is drawn in different directions'; and *TTP*, p. 252: 'It is (...) the purpose of the state to (...) to allow their minds and bodies to develop in their own ways.'

<sup>157</sup> *TTP*, p. 211.

*agendi*). With this fundamental insight Spinoza determined that civil and political liberties are essential prerequisites or preconditions in a society to provide the mere possibility of his view of individual liberty. So far I have presented the historical context and philosophical background that induced Spinoza to work out his profound conception of political liberty. In the present and in the following section we will explore the complexity of, and intentions behind the specific arguments he puts forward in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

In my view the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is essentially a defence of 1) the free use of reason; and 2) a (more) collective form of political self-determination. The first aspect may be conceived as an amalgam of what in modern parlance is better known as *civil* liberties. Civil liberties concern the freedom of speech, publication, and thought. It seems to me that Spinoza's extensive vision of *libertas philosophandi* can be conceived as including these civil liberties that are necessary to secure the free use of reason.<sup>158</sup> The second aspect is more strictly political in the sense that it is about political *participation*.<sup>159</sup> Spinoza does not use these terms himself, but the distinction is useful, because on the basis of this interpretation of Spinoza's conception of political liberty we will be in a better position to understand Spinoza's interventions in the debates and responses to the practical problems we have discussed so far.

Spinoza's discussion of the civil liberty to use one's reason freely is polemically pointed at the orthodox ministers of the Further Reformation, but is at the same time rooted in his view that confused ideas make people submissive and less free. For Spinoza, the antithesis of freedom is slavery.<sup>160</sup> That is, as we have seen in 3.1, slavery understood as dependence on inadequate or confused ideas. Spinoza commences the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* by

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<sup>158</sup> I concur with what a reviewer of the translation of the *TTP* by J. Israel and M. Silverthorne (2007) wrote: 'libertas philosophandi is a comprehensive freedom of thought and speech. It entails freedom of thought, freedom of speech and freedom of artistic expression, but also freedom to pursue scientific investigations, to print, own and discuss any books, and to teach controversial positions without fear of prosecution or retaliation.' F. Di Poppa, 'review' Benedict de Spinoza, J.I. Israel (ed., trans.), M. Silverthorne (trans.) *Theological-Political Treatise*, in: *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, Vol. 12 (2007).

<sup>159</sup> This conceptual distinction is inspired by T.H. Marshall's classic distinction of elements of citizenship between civil, political and social rights. Whether Spinoza also had a conception of social rights is doubtful. See however, J. Steinberg, 'Spinoza on Civil Liberation', in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2009), p. 35-58. Marshall defines a political right as 'the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body'. T.H. Marshall, 'Citizenship and Social Class', in: G. Shafir (ed.) *The Citizenship Debates. A reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p. 94.

<sup>160</sup> Compare *Ethics: EIIp49s1iv.D, EIVp66s*. See also S. James, 'Freedom, slavery and the passions', in: Koistinen, *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, p. 223-241.

lamenting the superstition and fear by which most people are captivated and governed. This servitude results from the ‘most powerful prejudices’ people have about religion, the ‘vestiges of our ancient servitude’.<sup>161</sup> With an obvious reference to the orthodox Calvinist clergy Spinoza warns that ‘the men who are trying to appropriate the authority of sovereigns (*summa potestas*)’ by utilizing religion to win the allegiance of the common people will ‘bring us back into servitude again’.<sup>162</sup> Spinoza thus opens a profound attack on what he perceived as the most dangerous kind of dependence on confused ideas: religious prejudices. A considerable part of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is therefore concerned with establishing and applying a historical-critical methodology of interpreting Holy Scripture. In doing so Spinoza aimed to give an answer to the questions what authority Scripture has and what its message was mainly about. Following the methods he proposed himself, Spinoza shed a radical new light on the status of such central themes as prophecy, revelation, miracles, piety and Scripture’s moral teachings and divine commandments.<sup>163</sup> Spinoza ended the first fifteen chapters of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* with the conclusion that Scripture, and religion in general, ought not to violate the free use of reason. Theology and philosophy are to be separated in two separate domains, for

the aim of philosophy is nothing but truth, but the aim of faith (...) is simply obedience and piety. The foundations of philosophy are universal concepts, and philosophy should be drawn from nature alone. But the foundations of faith are histories and language and are to be drawn only from Scripture and revelation (...) Faith therefore allows every person the greatest liberty to think, so that they may think whatever they wish about any question whatever without doing wrong<sup>164</sup>

This conception of faith is diametrically opposed to what Voetius and his orthodox followers proposed. According to their view the purity of doctrine, the truth of the Bible and the precepts to be found in the Bible are mutually dependent on each other. Recall that philosophy were to be the maidservant of theology. Faith does not leave much open for

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<sup>161</sup> *TTP*, p. 6-7.

<sup>162</sup> *TTP*, p. 7.

<sup>163</sup> In many cases Spinoza’s interpretations of these themes were not new. But in contrast to his many precursors, Spinoza’s Bible interpretation was radical because of its wide range of subjects, the way he links several arguments to each other and the sophisticated character of his arguments expressing his profound knowledge of Scripture.

<sup>164</sup> *TTP*, p. 184.

discussion. In other words, in relation to Scripture reason is not be used freely. The *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is, among other things, a devastating critique of this orthodox view.

Spinoza's strategy to engage in several discussion at the same time – the free use of reason in relation to the state *and* in relation to religion – seems a bit problematic with respect to the audiences Spinoza aimed to reach, especially if we reflect on the architecture of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Spinoza's discussion of the state, of rights, of sovereignty and how far the free use of reason extends 'in the *best* kind of state' is discussed in the last five chapters. One might wonder whether Spinoza really expected his political message to actually reach his intended audience. For, it is hard to believe that, say, regents would first read chapter after chapter of mainly theological, hermeneutical and philosophical exegesis, before finally coming to the strictly political part. In my view Spinoza surely wanted regents to grasp the message of his argument, but at the same time he was ambitious enough to intervene in a number of technical and less technical discussions in the field of biblical hermeneutics and theology. Whether this was the best strategy to convey his political point is doubtful. The early reception of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* seems to prove him wrong, as most reactions were more concerned with Spinoza's alleged atheism and materialism, than with the details of his political ideas.<sup>165</sup>

Nonetheless, the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is in my view not principally concerned with a new method of Biblical criticism, reinterpreting Scripture and the relation between faith and philosophy, although these are surely important elements of Spinoza's defence of the free use of reason. Spinoza's political theory is not an implication of his critique of dogmatic theology and orthodox readings of Scripture. Rather, his argument in the first fifteen chapters serves as a premise and substantial component for an overall argument for the free use of reason. This political argument for the free use of reason – in my view primarily addressed to the regents – is first stated in the preface. To this argument we turn now.

For Spinoza's first argument in favour of the free use of reason we must determine why Spinoza gave the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* the subtitle and 'core thesis' that he 'set out to demonstrate in this treatise', stating: 'freedom to philosophize may not only be granted without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be abolished without

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<sup>165</sup>W. van Bunge, 'The Early Dutch Reception of the *TTP*', in: *Studia Spinozana* 5 (1989), p. 225-247.

destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself'.<sup>166</sup> According to the title Spinoza's intention in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is to make clear to his audience that without granting the freedom to philosophize the Republic *as a whole* is put in danger. One crucial passage at the beginning of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* explains why. There Spinoza writes: 'For it is completely contrary to the common liberty to dominate the free judgement of the individual with prejudices or constrain it in any way.'<sup>167</sup> Notice that Spinoza does not try to establish the argument for the freedom to philosophize on grounds that are primarily concerned with the liberty of the *individual* citizen. In this passage Spinoza's assertion is that an *independent* argument can be made for the freedom to philosophize, that is solely concerned with the *common* freedom of the Republic as a whole. To secure its own political stability the state must grant people freedom of judgment. According to Spinoza, only if people's free thoughts and judgments are condemned by laws that are enacted about doctrinal matters, then people become potentially subversive (*seditiones*) to the state. To put it differently, people's thoughts and judgements as such are innocent to the stability of the state. They only become a possible source of civil conflict if they are condemned for religious reasons. Thus Spinoza cites Tacitus that 'if the laws of the state "proscribed only wrongful deeds and left words free," such subversion could not be made to proclaim itself lawful, and intellectual disputes could not be turned into sedition.'<sup>168</sup> The importance of this passage lies in what Spinoza actually means when he says that 'such subversion could not be made to proclaim itself lawful'. The subversion he points at is the 'alleged' subversion that is *potentially* subversive because it would be in conflict with religious laws. That kind of (religious) subversion can become a legitimate and widespread form of resistance against the religious laws and thus against the state. When religious subversion gets the appearance of a rightful form of resistance against (the religious laws of) the state, the stability of the state is endangered. Therefore, Spinoza claims, if religious subversion never will be declared subversive in the first place, then 'intellectual disputes could not be turned into sedition.'<sup>169</sup>

What I believe Spinoza is trying to make clear is that the enactment of laws about doctrinal matters is an incitement to rebellion and can as such be harmful to the common

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<sup>166</sup> *TTP*, p.1, 6. (translation modified): *Quibus ostenditur Libertatem Philosophandi non tantum salva Pietate, & Reipublicae Pace posse concedi: sed eandem nisi cum Pace Reipublicae, ipsaque Pietate tolli non posse.*

<sup>167</sup> *TTP*, p.6 (translation modified): *quandoquidem communi libertati omnino repugnat, liberum uniuscuiusque iudicium praejudiciis occupare, vel aliquo modo coërcere.*

<sup>168</sup> *TTP*, p.6.

<sup>169</sup> *TTP*, p. 6.

liberty of the Republic. This reading is supported by an assertion at the end of the last chapter of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*:

when the controversy about religion between Remonstrants and Counter-Remonstrants began to agitate office-holders and the Dutch provincial assemblies earlier this century, it led after a time to a complete split. This schism demonstrated in all sorts of ways that decrees designed to regulate religion which were intended to put an end to [theological] disputes, actually have the quite opposite effect, stirring people up rather than disciplining them while other men deem themselves authorized by such laws to arrogate a boundless license to themselves (...) It is thus plainer than the noonday sun that the real schismatics are those who condemn other men's books and subversively instigate the insolent mob against their authors, rather than the authors themselves, who for the most part write only for the learned and consider reason alone as their ally. Hence, the real agitators are those who attempt to do away with freedom of judgment in a free republic<sup>170</sup>

It would not be clear why Spinoza gives this *independent* argument for the freedom to philosophize such a central place in his treatise if one does not take into account which audience Spinoza tried to reach: the political authorities.<sup>171</sup> It was a right-out argument against the censorship the orthodox clergymen of the Further Reformation tried to push through. The best way to confront this threat, Spinoza must have thought, was by addressing the most powerful and relevant authorities. The political authorities were after all responsible for the enactment of the wishes of the clergy and the implementation of the laws concerning censorship. Moreover, since the political authorities were generally not so much interested in the individual liberty of its radical thinking citizens, all the more they were sensitive to an argument in favour of the common good and the political stability of the Republic as a whole. Indeed, as Frijhoff and Spies maintained, '[e]ssential for this community [Dutch society, rk] was the secular, non-religious principle of 'order', that is, the internal peaceful co-existence, the concord, of all groups and parties that made up the city, for the sake of the common good.'<sup>172</sup> Spinoza's message to the regents was: not he, Spinoza, nor his intellectual allies, but

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<sup>170</sup> *TTP*, p. 257-258.

<sup>171</sup> S. Frankel holds that Spinoza intended audience were merely clerics and theologians. That does not seem right to me, for it does not do justice to the political purposes Spinoza had in writing the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. S. Frankel, 'Politics and Rhetoric: The Intended Audience of Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus' in: *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 52, no. 4, (1999) p. 897-925.

<sup>172</sup> Frijhoff and Spies, *1650*, p. 178-179.



those who zealously tried to censor them were the ones most troublesome and likely to bring the Republic to the brink of the abyss.

Placing Spinoza in the De Witt camp, like so many commentators have done, albeit as an ‘engaged’ or ‘friendly’ critic, leads to misinformed judgements of certain passages of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. In particular those that deal with Spinoza’s attitude towards the regents and political climate in general. For example in Raia Prokhovnik’s evaluation of Spinoza’s statement that:

We are fortunate to enjoy the rare happiness of living in a republic where every person’s liberty to judge for himself is respected, everyone is permitted to worship God according to his own mind, and nothing is thought dearer or sweeter than freedom<sup>173</sup>

According to Prokhovnik this quote shows Spinoza’s admiration for ‘the policy of religious toleration pursued by De Witt’.<sup>174</sup> This is a remarkably limited interpretation for a book which seeks ‘to add to our understanding of Spinoza’s political works by explicating an important dimension of Spinoza’s intended meaning, which was primarily local and particularistic’ and ‘owes an enormous debt to Quentin Skinner’s revolutionary insights into the distinctiveness of contexts, highlighted in the illocutionary force of writers’.<sup>175</sup> While it cannot be denied that Spinoza was aware and appreciative of the relative freedom of thought, religion and speech in the Dutch Republic in comparison with other countries, the suggestion that Spinoza’s remark is just an expression of admiration misses the point. From the early 1660s on, as we have seen, Spinoza was deeply concerned about the way radical voices in the public sphere were put down. Like Meyer and many others Spinoza had to be very careful in publishing his work. Spinoza’s acquaintance Koerbagh had just died in prison and orthodox ministers raged that radicals (like Spinoza) were a great danger to Christian religion and moreover, to the state itself. In such an atmosphere it is very unlikely that Spinoza’s words were just plain praise for the Republic’s tolerant climate. It could be a form of ‘ironic protest’, a ‘piece of carefully wrought sarcasm’. But, following Jonathan Israel, I rather interpret it as a manoeuvre, as ‘a piece of exaggeration and subtle propaganda intended as part of a wider strategy to broaden

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<sup>173</sup> *TTP*, p. 6.

<sup>174</sup> Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*, p. 182.

<sup>175</sup> Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*, viii, 7. Compare p. 171, where another quotation of Spinoza’s praise for the Republic is understood quite plainly.

the scope of Dutch toleration'.<sup>176</sup> Spinoza tried to anticipate and influence the regents' outlook that a tolerant climate is a precious thing and brings many advantages.

Another problem with Prokhovnik's approach is that it underestimates Spinoza's theoretical purposes. In a book-length argument she tried to make clear that the 'Dutch mentality' is demonstrated in 'Spinoza's approach to the conduct of politics'.<sup>177</sup> In the political world of the Dutch, Prokhovnik holds, practice, pragmatism and particularism superseded theory. Accordingly, Spinoza should be understood from this perspective. But here Prokhovnik seems to follow Kossmann's anti-principled, anti-systematic view of Dutch political thought too strictly. Like other non-Dutch historians such as Simon Schama, Prokhovnik first distils a Dutch 'mentality' or 'Dutchness' and then tries to explain everything in terms of this characterization. But whereas De Witt can arguably be considered a pragmatic traditionalist in many respects, Spinoza cannot.<sup>178</sup> Spinoza criticized De Witt for not redesigning the political constitution of the Dutch Republic. De Witt was far too conservative in his eyes. Admittedly, Spinoza did not reject the structure of the Dutch state as such, that is, the multiple layers of States General, provincial States, and cities.<sup>179</sup> Rather, he was concerned with the form of government and its legitimization, a topic that was way more theoretical. Thus the 'stability-argument' for the free use of reason and the way in which Spinoza tried to win over the sympathy of the regents was part of a larger theoretical scheme. This larger theoretical scheme cannot be understood from a purely practical perspective, as Prokhovnik suggests, even if it is to an important extent shaped by it. By indulging in a larger political theoretical argument, Spinoza answered to the current state of political theory at that time. Spinoza's great adversary in this undertaking was Hobbes. Spinoza's criticism of Hobbes will be dealt with shortly. First we turn to Spinoza's second argument for the free use of reason.

As Spinoza wrote in his letter to Oldenburg in October 1665, one of the principal reasons he began working on the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was because he realized that in particular the prejudices of the theologians were the main obstacles for people to acquaint themselves with philosophy (comprehended in a broad sense including all intellectual

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<sup>176</sup> J. Israel, 'Religious Toleration and radical philosophy in the later Dutch Golden Age (1668-1710) in: Po-Chia Hsia and Van Nierop, *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age*, p.148-152.

<sup>177</sup> Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*, p. 168.

<sup>178</sup> Rowen, *John de Witt*, p. 398-399.

<sup>179</sup> *TTP*, p. 218-219.

knowledge, reasoning and science).<sup>180</sup> Therefore, he believed, it was essential to separate theology from philosophy into two domains. This separation notwithstanding, Spinoza believed that Scripture teaches the same true moral doctrines as philosophical reasoning would be capable of demonstrating. For Spinoza, faith ‘turns out to be any set of ideas or beliefs that incite people to behave morally’ and is ‘practically equivalent’ to philosophy.<sup>181</sup> It is just that not everyone is capable of reaching the true moral doctrine by the means of philosophical reasoning. Therefore Spinoza holds ‘the usefulness and necessity of Holy Scripture and revelation (...) to be very great’.<sup>182</sup>

This true moral doctrine, which Spinoza called ‘universal faith’ (*fidei catholicae*), consists only in practicing justice and loving one’s neighbour (*caritas*).<sup>183</sup> However, Spinoza also provides a more extensive ‘theological’ rule of life and calls this ‘divine law’ (*lex divina*). The divine law is the law which looks only to the supreme good (*summum bonum*) that human beings can attain. In Spinoza’s view that is the true knowledge and love of God.<sup>184</sup> In *Ethics* part five Spinoza also extensively argued that human salvation consists of, and can be acquired by, the intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*). Politics can only play a limited role in this process. It can provide the favourable conditions, but cannot force people to the intellectual love of God.

Spinoza does, however, identify a strand of thought called ‘universal ethics’ (*ethica universalia*), which ‘inquires into the means and what is the rule of life which this goal [salvation] requires, and how the foundations of the best state and the rules for living among men follow from it’.<sup>185</sup> Although Spinoza does not say it explicitly, we may assume that his account of the best state based on ‘universal ethics’ is presented in chapter sixteen. The ‘rule of life’ and the best state universal ethics is capable of demonstrating are at any rate human constructions. And with regards to these kind of human laws Spinoza is quite modest and

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<sup>180</sup> Spinoza, *Briefwisseling*, p. 226.

<sup>181</sup> Verbeek, *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 28, 35.

<sup>182</sup> *TTP*, p. 194.

<sup>183</sup> *TTP*, p. 182.

<sup>184</sup> In Spinoza’s own words: ‘Since the best part of us is our understanding, it is certain that, if we truly want to seek our own interest, we should try above all things to perfect it as much as possible; for our highest good should consist in its perfection. Furthermore, since all our knowledge and the certainty which truly takes away all doubt depends on a knowledge of God alone, and since without God nothing can exist or be conceived, and since we are in doubt about everything as long as we have no clear and distinct idea of God, it follows that our highest good and perfection depends on a knowledge of God alone (...) and therefore that man is necessarily most perfect and most participates in the highest happiness who most loves and most enjoys, above all other things, the intellectual knowledge of God, who is the most perfect being’. *TTP*, p. 59.

<sup>185</sup> *TTP*, p. 60.

careful. By human law Spinoza means ‘a rule for living whose only purpose is to protect life and preserve the country.’<sup>186</sup> Spinoza’s best feasible republic must therefore be modest in what it wishes to attain. Surely it cannot provide for people’s *summum bonum*. In Spinoza’s best feasible republic people can and are to a large extent allowed to be ‘unreasonable’, as long as they obey to the principle of universal faith, i.e. practicing justice and loving one’s neighbour. Spinoza actually thinks that widespread unreasonableness among many people is the most likely condition in a society. Only a small percentage of a population is capable of reaching the *summum bonum*. The point is that this is merely a private enterprise, it cannot be imposed politically or by any other authority. The divine law that leads to the highest good is thus a rather exclusive, individual undertaking, only few people are capable of and willing to pursue.

Universal faith merely consists in the principle of practicing justice and loving one’s neighbour and is accessible to *all* people. As for Spinoza’s interpretation of faith, the truth of it is irrelevant. The aim of faith is piety and obedience, which is drawn from the foundations of Scripture and revelation through the means of histories and narratives. Philosophy’s aim, on the other hand, is truth, and is drawn from nature through the means of general concepts and reasoning, but arrives at the same moral conclusions as (Spinoza’s reading of) the Bible. Spinoza brings his argument to an end by concluding that theology cannot restrict the freedom to philosophize, as long as this freedom does not lead to deeds contrary to *caritas, pietas*, and *justitia* – such as hatred, conflict, and disobedience to principles of universal faith. Spinoza draws a sharp line between thought and speech, on the one hand, and deeds and action, on the other. As long as one behaves according to the law there is no problem, Spinoza thinks. Freedom of thought and speech seem to be unrestricted, although speech that implies actions against ‘the pact that they made with the sovereign’ are prohibited.<sup>187</sup> Except for this, people should have all the freedom to philosophize and have the freedom to reach (spinozistic) salvation *or* to be as unreasonable as they wish, as long as they obey to the law. Moreover, Spinoza’s claim is that, following his conception of natural right the state simply does not have the absolute power to suppress its subjects’ powers to think freely, and consequently does not have a right to do so. The power to think freely is not something someone can

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<sup>186</sup> *TTP*, p. 59.

<sup>187</sup> *TTP*, p. 254. Drawing this line is of course problematic, for what kind of speech is to be restricted and what not? Spinoza does not go into detail. For a discussion of this problem, see Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, p. 221-223.

transfer to a sovereign, 'even were he to wish to do so'.<sup>188</sup> Along these lines Spinoza thus established the second major innovation of his theology: faith does not consist of having true beliefs about God, or prophecy, or the nature of the universe, but consists solely in performing the right actions, that is to say, practicing justice and loving one's neighbour.

For many believers, Spinoza's view on what faith consists of, would appear as quite meagre, not to say minimalistic. For, besides what is said above, everything with regards to religion *or* secular thought, is tolerated. This is precisely Spinoza's contention, as he says in the preface of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*: 'I became completely convinced that Scripture leaves reason absolutely free'.<sup>189</sup> For, if a citizen is completely left free in this, he is most capable of 'strengthening his love of justice.'<sup>190</sup> More generally, since happiness and the free use of reason are intimately connected to each other in Spinoza's philosophy, only the absolutely necessary infringements on the free use of reason are justified:

For simplicity and truth of mind are not instilled in men by the power of laws or by public authority, and absolutely no one can be compelled to be happy by force of law. It requires rather pious and fraternal advice, a proper upbringing and, more than anything else, one's own free judgment. Since therefore the supreme right of thinking freely, about religion also, belongs to each and every individual, and it cannot be conceived that anyone could surrender this right, every individual will also possess the supreme right and authority to judge freely about religion and to explain it and interpret it for himself<sup>191</sup>

Spinoza's second argument in favour of the free use of reason is thus basically concerned with the individual and the individual's liberty. The free use of reason enables individuals to cultivate their reason, to philosophize and to attain true happiness. They must be left alone in this undertaking. Religious nor civil authorities are allowed to intervene in this sphere of life.

What makes Spinoza's argument complicated, though, is that despite his 'modern' defence of the free use of reason concerned with the individual freedom to pursue one's happiness, he deems a 'public religion' essential for the survival of the state. Such a public religion would be based on the quite vaguely defined notions of piety and 'love of one's neighbour' and is needed to curb the passionate multitude. There are numerous passages in

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<sup>188</sup> *TTP*, p. 250.

<sup>189</sup> *TTP*, p. 9.

<sup>190</sup> *TTP*, p. 182.

<sup>191</sup> *TTP*, p. 116.

the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* that bring Spinoza's profound disdain for the common people to light.<sup>192</sup> Spinoza even wishes common people not to read his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* at all, since he deems it impossible to rid the common people of superstition and fear.<sup>193</sup> Belief in the narratives of the Bible 'is very useful for civil life', Spinoza states. Hence, ministers are invaluable to teach 'piety by the authority of the sovereign powers and adapt it by their rulings to the public interest'.<sup>194</sup> In other words, Spinoza holds, ministers are very useful as servants of the state to promote (Spinoza's) version of a public religion, that has 'true piety and faith' as its dogma's.<sup>195</sup> On this point Spinoza does not differ that much from orthodox Calvinists. Both agree on the need of a public religion and on the need of ministers to spread the message of piety among the common people in order to secure a public order. However, in contrast to Calvinist orthodoxy Spinoza held that 'those who exercise the right of government' are sovereign in religious matters: 'they must be both the interpreters and guardians of things sacred'.<sup>196</sup> In this respect the way Spinoza thinks about how public religion should function is very different from the orthodox Calvinist view and more closely to the remonstrant view of the position of the church in society. An independent religious authority which interprets divine law is unacceptable for Spinoza, for such an authority 'acquires overwhelming weight', as civil authorities will be merely regarded as 'members of the church',<sup>197</sup>:

Everyone knows how much influence right and authority in sacred matters have with the common people and how much everyone listens to someone who possesses such authority. I may say that whoever has this power has the greatest control over the people's minds. Therefore, any body which attempts to remove this authority from the sovereign power, is attempting to divide the government.<sup>198</sup>

Yet Spinoza was not opposed to a public religion, albeit an 'undogmatic' public religion facilitated by the state. Only in this way the passionate mass can be controlled. It seems therefore as if Spinoza's defence of the free use of reason is mainly reserved for those who

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<sup>192</sup> Especially in the preface, but also in chapters 12-15 where he keeps on repeating that the Bible is written for the simple minds of the 'common people'.

<sup>193</sup> *TTP*, p.12

<sup>194</sup> *TTP*, p. 247

<sup>195</sup> *TTP*, p. 290.

<sup>196</sup> *TTP*, p. 238.

<sup>197</sup> *TTP*, p. 234.

<sup>198</sup> *TTP*, p. 245.

have a fairly developed ‘capacity to reason’.<sup>199</sup> Spinoza’s view on the freedom of judgment and speech in relation to the state is in this respect quite ‘inegalitarian’. He explicitly says that people indeed cannot give up their right to think, judge and speak and they are allowed to do so without any restriction, but: ‘*provided they merely speak or teach by way of reason alone*’.<sup>200</sup> Spinoza does not seem to be really concerned with the ‘irrational’ common people, but rather with the freedom of ‘honest men who are banished like outlaws.’<sup>201</sup> Against the background of Spinoza’s socio-political background as discussed in 2.3 it seems plausible that Spinoza alludes here to ‘free-minded persons’ such as his friends and intellectual companions.<sup>202</sup>

There is a striking resemblance between Spinoza’s discrimination between free men who are guided by reason and the common people, and Franciscus van den Enden’s views. Van den Enden, former Latin teacher of Spinoza and free-thinker himself argued in his *Vrije Politieke Stellingen* (Free Political Institutions, 1665) for a ‘free people’s government’ (*vrye-volx-regeeringh*).<sup>203</sup> Unquestionably his democratic proposals were very uncommon at that time, but Van den Enden does set criteria of how to select qualified citizens to take place in what he envisioned as ‘councils of citizens’. Participation in these councils of citizens that would make up such a democratic government was reserved for those who ‘were well educated in their natural liberty’ and not ‘afflicted by superstitions’.<sup>204</sup> Moreover, Van den Enden denied the liberty to argue against his conception of ‘evangelijke-vryheit’ (equal liberty).<sup>205</sup> Van den Enden’s view suggests that only reasonable people were to have the liberty to speak and judge, just as Spinoza tends to reserve the freedom of speech to those who speak ‘by way of reason alone’.<sup>206</sup> Their conceptions of freedom of thought, speech and publication seem, if maybe not completely restricted to, at any rate reserved or meant for, a special type of citizens, namely reasonable citizens. This observation casts serious doubt, not

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<sup>199</sup> *TTP*, p. 193.

<sup>200</sup> *TTP*, . 252 [italics are mine, rk].

<sup>201</sup> *TTP*, .256

<sup>202</sup> *TTP*, p. 255

<sup>203</sup> Franciscus van den Enden, *Vrije Politieke Stellingen* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1992) p. 155, 177.

<sup>204</sup> ‘van hunne natuurlijke vryheit wel onderrecht zijnde (...) niet met superstitie behept’. Van den Enden, *Vrije Politieke Stellingen*, p. 180.

<sup>205</sup> *Vrije Politieke Stellingen*, p. 152. Wim Klever maintains that according to Van den Enden ‘all citizens have the same right to membership in the Council of citizens. It is unclear why Klever leaves Van den Enden’s restrictions on membership out of consideration. W. Klever, ‘A New Source of Spinozism: Franciscus van den Enden’, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1991) p. 625; Israel equally skips over this section of the *Vrije Politieke Stellingen*. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 175-184.

<sup>206</sup> *TTP*, p. 252.

only on the qualification of Van den Enden's, but also on Spinoza's alleged 'radical egalitarianism'. The recurring mistake commentators tend to make is to take the equality Spinoza and Van den Enden attribute to men in the state of nature as the measure of their overall egalitarianism.<sup>207</sup> The crux is, however, what kind of equality is ultimately attributed to people in 'real-life' civil society. On this level Spinoza's writings, even more so than Van den Enden's, exemplify an extreme disregard for the common people or the multitude.<sup>208</sup> Steven Smith aptly noted that 'Spinoza remained wedded to certain premodern notions about the difference between the intellectual and the vulgar which, it is believed, undercut his democratic commitments.'<sup>209</sup> Indeed, Spinoza did not make a stand for the liberty or rights of the '*grauw*' (rabble/mob) or '*het gemeen*' (common people). Rather he aimed to defend the liberty of his intellectual companions and reasonable burghers in general.<sup>210</sup> It is important to realize that Spinoza was not a modern democrat.<sup>211</sup>

### 3.3 Spinoza, Hobbes and democratic sovereignty

What then did Spinoza's claims about a democratic republic entail and how did he arrive at his rudimentary 'premodern' vision of democracy? To answer this question we have to return to our discussion of Spinoza's theoretical purposes. As I indicated before, one of Spinoza's important theoretical purposes was to refute Hobbes's political philosophical views. Spinoza's

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<sup>207</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 270-272; Klever, 'A New Source of Spinozism', p. 625-266.

<sup>208</sup> Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, p. 80-82.

<sup>209</sup> S. Smith, 'Spinoza's democratic turn: Chapter 16 of the Theologico-Political Treatise', in: *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 48 (1994).

<sup>210</sup> Compare also Arthur Weststeijn's recent discussion of the De la Court brothers and their view of on the desired capabilities of citizens: 'As we have seen, the De la Court brothers' republican preference for public discussion and decision-making did not entail truly democratic consequences in the strict sense that every citizen of polity was considered able to participate in government. Rather, as the De la Court brothers maintained that it is necessary that those who take part in public political debate have master honest *pharresia* and therefore can be expected to speak the truth, they drew a thin line between those citizens who are capable of free, straightforward speech, and those who are not.' A. Weststeijn, 'Mercury's Two Faces: Commercial Candour as the Key to Capability in the Dutch Golden Age', in: J. Hartman, J. Nieuwstraten, and M. Reinders (eds.) *Public Offices, Personal Demands: Capability in Governance in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2009) p. 172.

<sup>211</sup> I therefore strongly disagree with Frank Mertens' suggestion 'that Spinoza's political philosophy should (...) be considered the first fully developed theory of liberal democracy'. F. Mertens, 'Radical political theory in the Netherlands of the early modern period: Some influences and key notions of late seventeenth-century Dutch 'republicanism''. *Geschiedenis van de wijsbegeerte in Nederland: Documentatieblad van de Werkgroep "Sassen"*, Vol. 12 (2001) p. 86.



political thought is often labelled Hobbesian, or as Ed Curley put it, ‘eccentric Hobbesian’.<sup>212</sup> In my view, however, this characterization misinterprets some of the intentions Spinoza had in writing the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. It misses the point of Spinoza’s intended refutation of Hobbes. While Spinoza’s assumptions about natural law and sovereignty are on the face of it similar to those of Hobbes, they were in fact quite different and consequently led to very different conclusions. Spinoza is better interpreted as using some of Hobbes’s concepts, but then profoundly modifying them, as he had completely different political conclusions he aimed to arrive at. The fundamental problem Hobbes faced in his theory was an actual situation of anarchy: the English Civil War that raged between 1642 and 1651. The primary need in his view was that of a supreme political authority that was supposed to bring order and stability. The key question was how such a ‘Leviathan’ could be installed from scratch. Spinoza’s challenge was of a completely different kind. No sovereign had to be installed from scratch – there was a stable sovereign, the States of Holland, albeit that its authority was to some extent challenged by the church and potentially by a stadholder. Moreover, life in Dutch society was not affected by civil war, life was not ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short’.<sup>213</sup> Rather, the fundamental problems Spinoza faced were, as pointed out in the former chapters, first, a fanatical church that claimed a realm in society in which it was sovereign, and, in so far that was unattainable, aimed to subject the civil authorities to their doctrinal standards; and second, a political authority that denied an important part of the population influence on or a share in political power, so that it eventually might threaten its own position. Spinoza’s solution was, on the one hand, a theoretical defence of the absolute supremacy of political authority over ecclesiastical authority. On this point Spinoza basically agreed with Hobbes.<sup>214</sup> On the other hand, Spinoza suggested a redistribution of political power from the ‘few’ to the ‘many’ (that is, the ‘many’ citizens capable of reasoning). On this point he differs from Hobbes, who dismissively rejected democracy. Moreover, Spinoza’s conception of rights, the social contract, liberty and the nature of sovereignty are anti-Hobbesian.

A commonly held view is that Hobbes and Spinoza similarly held that the state of nature is fundamentally amoral.<sup>215</sup> In Spinoza’s words:

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<sup>212</sup> Curley, ‘Kissinger, Spinoza and Genghis Khan’, p. 315-342.

<sup>213</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by C.B. Macpherson (London: Penguin, 1985; 1951) I.xiii., p. 186.

<sup>214</sup> Verbeek, *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 59.

<sup>215</sup> H.E. Allison, ‘Benedict de Spinoza’, in: E. Craig (ed.) *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2005) p. 999.

there is nothing in the state of nature which (...) is good or evil; for everyone who is in the state of nature considers only his own advantage, and decides what is good and what is evil from his own temperament (...) He is not bound by any law to submit to anyone except himself. So in the state of nature no sin can be conceived<sup>216</sup>

Hobbes too held that ‘the notion of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there [in the state of nature, rk] no place.’<sup>217</sup> Nonetheless, he asserts ‘that every man, ought to endeavour Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of Warre’.<sup>218</sup> In the state of nature each man’s behaviour is prescribed by the (natural) laws of reason. Although Hobbes presents his readers a bold depiction of the amorality of the state of nature, he does not hold that the state of nature is completely devoid of any normative input.<sup>219</sup>

Spinoza’s view on man’s natural right in the state of nature is written in a more naturalistic language. His basic thesis is that right is *coextensive* with power:

By the right and order of nature I merely mean the rules determining the nature of each individual thing by which we conceive it is determined naturally to exist and to behave in a certain way. For example fish are determined by nature to swim and big fish to eat little ones, and therefore it is by sovereign natural right that fish have possession of the water and that big fish eat small fish. For it is certain that nature, considered wholly in itself, has a sovereign right to do everything that it can do, i.e., the right of nature extend as far as its power extends<sup>220</sup>

It is important to note that Spinoza does not *identify* right with power.<sup>221</sup> He merely aims to point out the thesis that there is no ‘transcendental standard of justice’ by which actions in the state of nature can be judged just or unjust.<sup>222</sup> Like Hobbes, Spinoza argues that the categories of just and unjust only have meaning in a civil order under laws uphold by a sovereign power.

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<sup>216</sup> EIVp37s2

<sup>217</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.xiii., p. 188.

<sup>218</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.iv., p. 190.

<sup>219</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.iv., p. 189-190.

<sup>220</sup> *TTP*, p. 195.

<sup>221</sup> J. Steinberg, ‘Spinoza’s Political Philosophy’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/spinoza-political/> ; Curley, Kissinger, ‘Spinoza and Genghis Khan’, p. 318-322.

<sup>222</sup> Curley, ‘Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan’, p. 322.

However, whereas Hobbes refers to the law of nature as a general rule reason prescribes to each man, Spinoza avoids every ‘ought’ in his description of natural law: ‘it is the supreme law of nature that each thing strives to persist in its own state so far as it can.’<sup>223</sup> Thus each man has the right to self-persistence, not because reason prescribes it, but because it follows from his nature to do so.<sup>224</sup> In this sense, Spinoza consciously put forward a view in which the right of nature as a whole, and the right of nature of individual human beings, is essentially the same. It does not provide another normative standard (right is might), but simply says that the right of nature is whatever follows from the laws of nature.

Before turning to Spinoza’s and Hobbes’s solutions for coming out of the natural condition – a decisive step in their arguments – we must draw attention to the fact that Spinoza does not characterize the state of nature as a condition of ‘war of every man against every man’<sup>225</sup>, although he certainly held that in this situation reason cannot be cultivated and is to that extent miserable.<sup>226</sup> This is not surprising, considering that Spinoza grew up in a to a large extent peaceful society. Nonetheless, also Spinoza held that people are passionate beings, more often led by appetite and desire than by reason. He did, however, not agree with Hobbes that the only ‘Passions that encline men to Peace’, are feare of Death’.<sup>227</sup> According to Spinoza, there is something more to it, for,

society is extremely useful, indeed wholly essential, not only for living safe from enemies but also for acquiring many other advantages. For unless human beings were willing to give each other mutual assistance, each one’s own personal skill and time would be inadequate to sustain and preserve him as much as would otherwise be possible<sup>228</sup>

Peace is more than the absence of war, Spinoza would write in the *Tractatus Politicus*, it is ‘a virtue which comes from strength of mind’.<sup>229</sup> Nonetheless, people are, ‘by the laws of

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<sup>223</sup> *TTP*, p. 195-196.

<sup>224</sup> Steinberg put it succinctly: ‘To say that something is done by right in Spinoza’s sense is to say that there is nothing in virtue of which that action can be judged impermissible, which is different from judging the action to be appropriate according to some new normative standard’. Steinberg, ‘Spinoza’s political philosophy’.

<sup>225</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, L.I.xiii., p. 184-185.

<sup>226</sup> It is unclear to me on what textual evidence Theo Verbeek in his discussion of Spinoza and Hobbes assigns this view (‘extreme misery and war’) to Spinoza. Verbeek, *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 46.

<sup>227</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, L.I.xiii., p. 188.

<sup>228</sup> *TTP*, p. 72.

<sup>229</sup> Spinoza, *Political Treatise [Tractatus Politicus]* in: Spinoza, *Complete Works*. Translated by S. Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002) p. 699.

appetite', constantly drawn in different directions.<sup>230</sup> The inconstancy of man's nature is actually the principal reason why Spinoza thinks a society needs a government in the first place:

if human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason points them to, society would surely need no laws; men would only need to learn true moral doctrine, in order to do what is truly useful of their own accord with upright and free mind. But they are not so constituted, far from it. All men do indeed seek their own interest, but it is not from the dictate of sound reason; for the most part they pursue things and judge them to be in their interest merely because they are carried away by sensual desire and by their passions (which have no regard for the future and for other things). This is why no society can subsist without government and compulsion, and hence laws, which moderate and restrain desires.<sup>231</sup>

Therefore, to make sure that people will not harm each other, and moreover, will be *confident* that they will not harm each other, everyone who joins society will have to give up a part of their natural right to the state. The state will consequently have the power to restrain the passions of the (inconstant) citizens.

The main issue is how to get out of the state of nature and this is again dependent on the question to what extent a man in the state of nature is obliged to keep his promise (and more generally, his agreement to a social contract). Hobbes is extremely clear about this: 'Covenants entered into by fear, in the condition of meer Nature, are obligatory. For example, if I Covenant to pay a ransome, of service for my life, to an enemy; I am bound by it'.<sup>232</sup> Contrary to his earlier statements about the complete amorality in the state of nature, he holds that (in the state of nature) one ought not to break covenants or promises, even if that is contrary to the natural right of doing anything that in one's judgement will help to preserve one's life. This is a crucial step in Hobbes's argument, otherwise it would be hard to see how the step of the instalment of an absolute sovereign by the mutual transfer of rights can be taken at all.

Whereas for Hobbes the transfer of rights to the sovereign is absolute, Spinoza's account of the transfer of rights is less definitive, as he makes clear in the first couple of

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<sup>230</sup> *TTP*, p. 198.

<sup>231</sup> *TTP*, p. 72-73.

<sup>232</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.xiv., p.198.

paragraphs of chapter sixteen.<sup>233</sup> Spinoza's conception of right is grounded in his conception of man taking part in the overall power of nature. 'Each person's natural right therefore is determined not by sound reason but by desire and power'.<sup>234</sup> Further on, Spinoza uses a counterexample specifically meant to refute Hobbes's view on obligation. This is another indication, I believe, that Spinoza had Hobbes's argument in mind when wrote this. Spinoza pictures two situations: one in which someone promises a highwaymen to give him what he wants, and a second in which someone promises another not to eat for twenty days. In both cases Spinoza thinks a man always has the right to break the promise. 'By nature's design', a man will always try to avoid harm. This is not something he ought to do, Spinoza holds, it's the way nature works. It follows that a transfer of rights in the way we have seen in the argument of Hobbes, is out of question. A person in the state of nature can transfer his right, but since 'natural right is determined by (...) power alone', there is no transcendental law that forbids a person to break a promise or an agreement if he judges it to be a greater good than keeping the promise: 'We conclude from all this that any agreement can have force only if it is in our interests, and when it is not in our interests, the agreement fails and remains void'.<sup>235</sup>

Whereas for Hobbes a natural right is above all a liberty which can be laid down in order to obtain a greater good, Spinoza's conception of a person's natural right is rather that one does those things by which one is determined by nature. Their different conceptions of natural right also have implications for their assessments of what freedom consists of. This is of course especially important our for discussion of Spinoza's conception of political liberty and to contrast it with Hobbes will help us to appreciate the distinct character of Spinoza's conception of liberty.

In Hobbes's view 'Liberty, or Freedome, signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition; (by Opposition, I mean externall Impediments of Motion);'<sup>236</sup> This is the classical statement of negative liberty.<sup>237</sup> People are free in so far as they are not hindered or interfered by external impediments. Hobbes's conception of natural right consists of the liberty to do everything that one judges to be in his own interest, without being obstructed in any way.

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<sup>233</sup> Hobbes holds that a person cannot lay down the right of security of life and consequently always has the right to resist the sovereign of taking away his life. This right notwithstanding, the sovereign actually has the right to take away a man's life, if the sovereign judges it to be the mean to preserve the peace. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.xiv. p. 192, 232.

<sup>234</sup> *TTP*, p. 196.

<sup>235</sup> *TTP*, p. 198.

<sup>236</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, II.xxi., p. 261.

<sup>237</sup> I. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in: Berlin, I. *Liberty* (ed. by H. Hardy) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 166-217.

Spinoza's conception of freedom to some extent embraces this negative element, but entails much more. According to Spinoza, 'a free man (...) [is] one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone.'<sup>238</sup> This implies that in Spinoza's picture of the state of nature, natural right does not necessarily entail freedom. For Spinoza the state of nature is actually a state of bondage in which people are generally irrational, uncultivated and slaves to their passions and inadequate ideas. Although man may have all the right to act on the basis of his desires and passions, it does not imply that he is thereby at liberty. For Hobbes each man in the state of nature has the natural right to do more or less anything, but in the commonwealth 'the Liberty of a Subject, lyeth (...) only in those things, which in regulating their actions, the Sovereign hath prætermitted'.<sup>239</sup> Hobbes's conclusion is thus that subjects who have contracted to a commonwealth, have less freedom in this civil state than they had in the state of nature, but that they are willing to make this sacrifice for the sake of peace. Spinoza's vision of the state is far more positively as he deems it a benefactor for citizens' endeavours to regulate their affects and become more free. Accordingly, he writes in the *Ethics*: 'A man who is guided by reason is more free in a state, where he lives according to a common decision (*ex communi decreto*), than in solitude, where he obeys only himself'.<sup>240</sup>

In contrast to Hobbes Spinoza has a quite outspoken conviction of man's *summum bonum* that is deeply connected with his conception of reason.<sup>241</sup> Human salvation lies in the intellectual love of God. Understanding God, or nature, increases one's power to act (*potentia agendi*). The path to this highest good, it is important to reiterate, is by and large an individual activity. Attaining this highest good is surely only possible in civil society, but it is not political power or law that can educate people to this state of perfectibility. It is a self-determinative activity that cannot be imposed on someone – that would be right-out contradictory to Spinoza's idea of individual self-determination.<sup>242</sup>

Spinoza's political theory, we may conclude from our discussion on his views on the state of nature, natural right, obligation, and the role reason plays in what means for person to be at liberty, is specifically designed so as to make sure that someone does not have to give up

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<sup>238</sup> EIVp67d. Compare this statement with: 'I call him free who is led by reason alone.' (EIVp68d) and in the *TTP*: 'Perhaps someone will think that (...) a free person to be one who behaves as he pleases. But this is not true at all. (...) The only free person is one who lives with his entire mind guided solely by reason.' *TTP*, p. 201.

<sup>239</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, II.xxi., p. 264.

<sup>240</sup> EIVp73.

<sup>241</sup> Contrary to Spinoza, Hobbes held: 'There is no *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers'. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I.xi., p. 160.

<sup>242</sup> Compare Smith, 'Spinoza's democratic turn'.

his liberty when he enters a political community. The implications of the basic premises of Spinoza's political philosophy are important, especially with regards to his views on sovereignty and democratic governance. Spinoza's views on sovereignty and democratic governance are thus both a theoretical refutation of Hobbes, as well as, and even more importantly so, an alternative to Orangist and *staatsgezinde* visions of republican government.

We have established that the debate about the best type of government was a crucial controversy in the Republic. Moreover, we have seen the powerful arguments of Orangist republicans who argued for a mixed constitution. On the basis of his theory of natural rights it is clear that Spinoza rejected Hobbes's theory of political obligation and consequently his absolute notion of sovereignty. What then is Spinoza's view of the best type of governance? Before we continue it is important to bear notice to the fact that Spinoza in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* sometimes seems to write descriptively about the process of how the state and its sovereign authority come about, and sometimes prescriptively, that is to say, about the 'best' or 'freest' state. In the *Ethics* part four, there can be no misunderstanding that Spinoza speaks about the 'best' state. Although he does not really go into detail, the most important theme there appears to be the 'common agreement' (*communi consensu*):

But in the Civil state, of course, it is decided by common agreement what is good or what is evil (...) [and] where it is decided by common consent what belongs to this man, and what to that<sup>243</sup>

The reason Spinoza ascribes such a central importance on the common decision of a people, is because prior to the civil state – that is to say, when people were still in a state of nature – notions such as good or evil, just and unjust, did not exist. However, when people in the state of nature transfer their natural right and thereby form a political community, this new society enables itself to 'prescribe a common rule of life'.<sup>244</sup> We already determined that instead of seeing the state as a necessary evil, Spinoza considers the state as a means to enable higher levels of freedom. As a consequence, a reasonable human being will also, 'insofar as he strives to preserve his being from the dictate of reason, i.e., insofar as he strives to live freely, desire to *maintain* the principle of common life'.<sup>245</sup> In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*

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<sup>243</sup> EIVp37s2.

<sup>244</sup> EIVp37s2.

<sup>245</sup> EIVp73d, [italics are mine, rk].

Spinoza again stresses the importance he attaches to the idea of free and common consent, but now in direct relation to democracy:

since obedience consists in carrying out commands on the sole authority of a ruler, it follows that [such subordination] has no place in a society whose government is in the hands of all and where laws are made by common consent. In such a society, whether the number of laws is increased or reduced, *the people still remain just as free, since they are not acting under the authority of another but by their own proper consent*<sup>246</sup>

And further on:

In a democracy *no one transfers their natural right to another in such a way that they are not thereafter consulted* but rather to the majority of the whole society of which they are part. In this way all remain equal as they had been previously, in the state of nature<sup>247</sup>

Spinoza quite explicitly holds that a democracy is ‘a united gathering of people which collectively has the sovereign right to do all that it has the power to do.’<sup>248</sup> What Spinoza seems to have in mind is the idea that all individuals who unite in the gathering of people should freely consent to the laws that are drawn in this meeting. In a democracy, Spinoza holds, there is no sharp distinction between the state of nature and a civil state. Instead, he tries to save the egalitarian aspect, as well as the self-determinative aspects of the state of nature (although we saw there are limits to Spinoza’s egalitarianism). The equal standing of human beings in the state of nature, however, is not equality in terms of equal rights. For, since people differ in power, they also differ in their natural rights. Rather, they are equal in relation to each other in the sense that everyone can do whatever they want, *as long as it is in their power*. Some people are more powerful or intelligent than others. They differ therefore in their ‘totality of right’ (that is coextensive with their totality of power). This is the state of affairs in the natural condition and in a civil state it will not be any different. Democracy just seems to be the best system to accommodate this diversity between people, because of its checks and balances.<sup>249</sup> The major consequence of Spinoza’s suggestion that in a democratic

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<sup>246</sup> *TTP* p. 173.

<sup>247</sup> *TTP*, p. 202.

<sup>248</sup> *TTP*, p. 200.

<sup>249</sup> Smith, ‘What kind of democrat was Spinoza’, p.24.



state citizens cannot give up all their natural right, is that the sovereign will always be limited. Just as with human beings, ‘the right of sovereign authorities is limited by their power.’<sup>250</sup>

Although Spinoza abhors Hobbes’s view of absolute sovereignty, he nonetheless stated in the *Tractatus Politicus* that democracy is ‘the completely absolute state’.<sup>251</sup> How should we interpret this conception of absolute sovereignty in Spinoza’s writings? Recall that the social agreement in his view is not so much a handing over of one’s rights, but is better interpreted as a power relationship between the sovereign and its subjects.<sup>252</sup> The contract holds, as long as the people who are governed by it accept the contract.<sup>253</sup> This makes the relation between sovereign and governed individual a dynamic power-relation that is as such never static. This dynamism of power is best secured and most stable in a democracy, Spinoza holds, since in a democracy individuals have a voice – they are ‘to be consulted’ – in how much power the state can exercise over its subjects. Thus, Spinoza’s advocacy of democracy is ‘designed to *enhance* the absolute character of the state’ as Den Uyl and Warner aptly wrote.<sup>254</sup> The more people are willing to abide by the laws of the state and in this way strengthen the power and legitimacy of the state, the more absolute the state will be. The prospects for this most powerful state are best when it is based on a democratic principle, Spinoza thought. When a state is repressive or acts contrary to the interests of its citizens, the willingness of its citizens to abide to the laws, to enhance its power and to accept its legitimacy, will diminish. On this analysis, Hobbes’s potentially oppressive absolute sovereign is not so absolute after all. But more importantly, this is precisely what Spinoza wished to prevent from happening in the Dutch Republic. A democratization of the oligarchic power structure is necessary, otherwise the state will lose its legitimacy, as the regents merely looked after their private interests and not after the common good. In that sense Spinoza had prophetic insight, as two years later in the ‘Year of Disaster’ De Witt’s government and many city councils were overthrown by the power of citizens who deemed their rule illegitimate.

Spinoza’s defence of democracy has to do – again – with his most fundamental notion of self-determination. Democracy is the political system Spinoza regards highest, because it

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<sup>250</sup> *TTP*, p. 251.

<sup>251</sup> *Tractatus Politicus*, p. 752.

<sup>252</sup> Malcolm, ‘Hobbes and Spinoza’ p. 554.; Smith, ‘Spinoza’s Democratic Turn’, p. 359-388.

<sup>253</sup> M. Walther put it as follows: ‘If *ius*, taken as a subjective right, is identical with power to act, then it follows that the laws as rules of common conduct owe their force, in the last instance to the acceptance of the governed themselves’, M. Walther, ‘Philosophy and Politics in Spinoza’ in: *Studia Spinozana* 9, (1993) p. 53.

<sup>254</sup> D. Den Uyl and S. Warner, ‘Liberalism and Hobbes and Spinoza’ in: *Studia Spinozana* 3, (1987) p. 292.

enables everyone to codetermine their own society and rule of life, and as a consequence to determine themselves, although the extent to which one can do this is inevitably limited. Therefore, people living in a democracy are always freer than in any other kind of political system. The crucial point is that the state always has to steer a certain middle course. Or as Spinoza put it in a letter to his friend and intellectual companion Jarig Jelles:

With regards to politics, the difference between Hobbes and me... consists in this that I ever preserve the natural right intact *so that the Supreme Power in a state has no more power over a subject than is proportionate to the power by which it is superior to the subject*<sup>255</sup>

Sovereignty is always a matter of degree, or more precisely, a proportional relationship of power between the state and its subjects. The dynamic power play between state and people lies precisely in the way the state checks its subjects by laws which they must obey. While the people will check the power of the state if they do not consent to the laws anymore – for example because they feel that the power of the state has grown too strong or does not look after their interests anymore. They can take the power of the state back as a consequence of the fact that the power of the state ultimately depends on the power of the people.

Reasonable people, Spinoza thinks, will always strive to design the state in such a way that they can be as self-determinative and powerful as possible within the framework of a state. For, without protection of the state, individuals normally do not have much power at all. A citizen will desire a strong, stable state, for only then the enhancement of his or her own power is possible. Spinoza's argument for the freedom to philosophize on the basis of, and from the perspective of, the welfare and stability of the state, as we have read in section 3.2, is thus anchored in his conviction that citizens desire a stable and strong state. The desire for a strong sovereign state – one that is not torn apart by religious and civil conflicts over dogmatic matters such as was the case in the first two decades of the seventeenth-century – is thus ultimately self-interested.

Accordingly, we can understand the self-determinative, though dynamical, character of Spinoza's notion of political freedom. Political liberty consists in the free consent to live in a free state (*respublica libera*) where laws are decided on by common agreement. The consent to hand over one's power to the state is, however, always conditional: in the end a citizen has the right to withdraw from the agreement if the agreement is not in the citizen's self-interest.

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<sup>255</sup> Spinoza, *Briefwisseling*, 'Brief 50', p. 309 [emphasis is mine, rk].

Spinoza believes that a citizen in a democracy has enough opportunities to influence the process of lawmaking and will therefore decide that it will not be in his or her self-interest to break the contract so easily. For, living in statelessness or in solitude is after all much more disadvantageous. Even if one cannot agree with all the laws, Spinoza holds, the prospect of a greater good – a stable and peaceful society – will encourage people to abide by the law.

Citizens' civil liberties and right of *libertas philosophandi* are indispensable to Spinoza's conception of political liberty. In a democracy people will be consulted and it is in this sphere of politics that civil liberties will prove their crucial importance. The participation of citizens in the process of the political self-determination of a state is only possible when the state is sovereign, while at the same time the irreducible pluralism of opinions of citizens is accommodated in this process. The accommodation of differences can only be secured by granting the people freedom of thought, speech, publication, and so on.

Hence, Spinoza's defence of the free use of reason is directed both to individual empowerment – the 'unconstrained flourishing' as one commentator noted – but is at the same time directed at the only workable way of collective (political) self-determination.<sup>256</sup> This collective self-determination opens up the possibility of common freedom or communal empowerment. Empowerment thus works both ways: the strongest state is that state which consists of flourishing powerful citizens. It is thus in the interest of the state to uphold a maximum degree of civil liberties for its citizens compatible with its own sovereign power. The other way around, citizens desire a strong state, that is self-determined, stable and peaceful, and will only desire as much liberty as is compatible with a state that has the ultimate power to secure this order. Acknowledging the continuous tension and dynamism in this relation between state and citizen, Spinoza deemed his conception of a democratic republic the most conducive to the empowerment of individual citizens and the state.

Earlier I noted Spinoza's rhetorical strategy to insist on the stability, peace and piety of the Republic. Considering the precarious situation in the period 1665-1670 – the Dutch Republic had to face France, England and other external threats – this is not that surprising. Spinoza knew all too well that the regents had a great interest in 'the conservation of the state'.<sup>257</sup> Orthodox Calvinist polemic propounded the message that radical writings were a threat, not only to the one true religion, but also to the civil order and the state itself. Spinoza

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<sup>256</sup> M.A. Rosenthal, 'Tolerance as a Virtue in Spinoza's Ethics' in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 34 No. 4 (2001) p. 557.

<sup>257</sup> *TTP*, p. 245.

turned the accusations of the orthodox clergy upside down: strict censorship causes instability and will undermine the loyalty and power of ‘well-meaning men’.<sup>258</sup> Spinoza thus tried to anticipate the fear that instability, disunity and quarrel, are detrimental for the overall political liberty of the Republic. By putting forward his reconceptualised notions of sovereignty, stability and unity, Spinoza responded to the debate about political liberty between Orangist and *staatsgezinde* republicans. At the same time Spinoza’s plea for the free use of reason was a response to the debates about the limits of questioning religion, the freedom to philosophize, and the proper relationship between political and ecclesiastical authorities. As I have tried to show, Spinoza’s responses to these debates were grounded in his conception of liberty as self-determination. Enlarging one’s power to act, not to be determined by factors external to oneself – both as individual as well as state – leads to more freedom. In that sense, Spinoza’s conception of political liberty was a practically relevant response to public controversies in the Dutch Republic, a profoundly philosophical and multilayered vision of liberty, and an attuned answer to debates in political theory at the same time.

### **3.4 1672: The Year of Disaster and the *Tractatus Politicus***

In this section I shall argue that in the light of my interpretation of Spinoza’s conception of political liberty, the suggestion that in the *Tractatus Politicus* Spinoza dropped his democratic sympathies and preferred aristocratic government instead, is unconvincing.<sup>259</sup> The civil and political aspects of Spinoza’s conception of political liberty are closely interconnected in his discussion of the best feasible state, that is, a democratic republic. In other forms of government, such as aristocracy and monarchy, political liberty – now narrowly conceived as political participation – is obviously less widely distributed than in a democratic republic. But citizens in these states can still be said to enjoy civil liberties (freedom of speech, opinion, press, etc.) and in that (limited) sense to be free. The conceptual distinction within Spinoza’s conception of political liberty between a civil and a political pendant enables us to understand why Spinoza in the *Tractatus Politicus* thinks that citizens in monarchies and aristocracies can still be said to enjoy a considerable degree of (civic) freedom.

After the publication of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza moved to The Hague.

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<sup>258</sup> *TTP*, p. 245.

<sup>259</sup> This is a widely held view by, among others, Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, p. 136-192. Balibar *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 50-51, and Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*, p. 230, 236.

In 1674, four years after its publication the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, together with Meyer's *Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres* and Hobbes's *Leviathan*, was officially banned by the States of Holland. But the view that it circulated freely during the first four years after publication is incorrect. The *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was widely condemned and suppressed.<sup>260</sup> Spinoza had to be very careful in these years and insisted that his friends did not publish a Dutch translation. In the year 1672, the so-called 'Year of Disaster', the Republic was invaded by France, England, Münster and Cologne. As a consequence, the government of De Witt fell and the Stadholderless Period came to an end. Prince William III restored the stadholderate and sixteen years later would even become king of England. The new political and intellectual climate under the restored Orangist regime turned out to be very different from the oligarchic De Witt regime.

With the multiple invasion three of the seven provinces were occupied. Historian Michel Reinders narrates:

Dutch citizens from the remaining provinces of Holland and Zeeland, started to riot against certain magistrates that had been considered responsible for the terrible predicament that the Dutch Republic was in. As a consequence, government collapsed. Citizens attacked regents on the streets and pillaged their houses<sup>261</sup>

In fact, all large cities saw revolts against regents. The most brutal and notorious of these revolts was arguably the one in The Hague, in which Johan de Witt and his brother Cornelis were murdered by a group of citizens. Their bodies were ripped to pieces. Spinoza, so it is told in a letter by G.W. Leibniz, wanted to go out of his house in The Hague to post a placard reading *ultimi barbarorum* (worst of barbarians), but was hold back by his landlord.<sup>262</sup> The experience of this event, many commentators have argued, led Spinoza to the conclusion to distrust and fear the 'the infatuated mob', the 'democratic multitude'.<sup>263</sup> According to Balibar, the political implications in Spinoza's third major work, the *Tractatus Politicus*, are 'significantly different'. Prokhovnik interprets the political theory of the *Tractatus Politicus*, in which she claims Spinoza's preference for an aristocracy is expressed, as Spinoza's

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<sup>260</sup> Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 276-278.

<sup>261</sup> Reinders, 'Burghers, Orangists and 'good government', p. 315.

<sup>262</sup> Nadler, *Spinoza*, p. 389-390.

<sup>263</sup> Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*, p. 181, 208.

‘mature’ reflections on politics.<sup>264</sup> On their reading, Spinoza’s conception of political liberty in the end does not necessarily entail a preference for democratic governance.

The problem with the contextual explanation of Spinoza’s alleged change of mind is that the ‘mob’ that murdered the De Witt brothers, was not *‘het grauw’* (the rabble). According to Michel Reinders, the role of ‘burghers’ in these events has been largely underestimated by historians.<sup>265</sup> Traditionally, the events in 1672 were discussed in terms of two ‘parties’ fighting each other. This vision was rightly amended by the view that parties did not really exist, but that in the cities the revolts must be seen against the background of fighting locally based factions.<sup>266</sup> According to the results of Reinders’ research, however, this view is also incomplete, since it were ‘burghers’ who participated in the riots and burghers who killed the brothers De Witt.<sup>267</sup> These experiences and change of political circumstances unquestionably left a mark on Spinoza’s thinking about politics. But the suggestion that Spinoza abandoned his ideas on democracy as a consequence of his experience with an irrational rabble is implausible.

Moreover, as I have tried to show in this chapter, Spinoza’s ideas on democracy were anchored in his premodern distinction between reasonable intellectuals and the unreasonable common people. This socio-political outlook did not change in the *Tractatus Politicus*. Spinoza’s democratic theory was not radically egalitarian in the first place. The suggestion that Spinoza advocated a democratic type of governance that would appoint a great role to the common people is misleading. Second, it is informative to carefully read the subtitle of the *Tractatus Politicus*: ‘in which it is shown how a community governed as a Monarchy or as an Aristocracy should be organised if it is not to degenerate into a Tyranny, and if the Peace and Freedom of its citizens is to remain inviolate’.<sup>268</sup> The title expresses Spinoza’s direct concerns. He was fully aware that in the post-1672 circumstances the prospects for a democratization of the Dutch Republic were running low. The task he therefore set for himself was to ask how a monarchy or an aristocracy are to be organised so as to secure ‘the freedom of its citizens’. On the basis of the interpretation of Spinoza’s political thought I have

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<sup>264</sup> Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, p. 50-51; Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*, p. 169.

<sup>265</sup> Reinders, ‘Burghers, Orangists and ‘good government’. See also his dissertation *Printed Pandemonium. The Power of the Public and the Market for Popular Political Publications in the Early Modern Dutch Republic* (Rotterdam, 2008) A book-edition of his dissertation is forthcoming.

<sup>266</sup> See Reinder’s ‘Burghers, Orangists and ‘good government’ – footnotes 12 and 13 for the relevant literature for these two positions.

<sup>267</sup> Reinders, ‘Burghers, Orangists and ‘good government’, p. 333.

<sup>268</sup> *Tractatus Politicus*, p. 680.

offered in this thesis, we can infer that Spinoza here does not refer to the liberty of political participation. Rather, he is concerned with the civil liberty of the free use of reason and how this aspect of political liberty were to be secured – *even* in a monarchy and aristocracy. It was the best he could hope for.<sup>269</sup> The freedom citizens could enjoy under these kind of governments is quite significant. In an annotation (33) to chapter sixteen of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* it is written: ‘A person can be free in any civil state whatsoever.’<sup>270</sup> Whether these are Spinoza’s own writings or a reader’s interpretation is not that important. The remark supports my reading of Spinoza’s thinking about political liberty. A democracy is the best feasible and most absolute state in which people enjoy Spinoza’s conception of political liberty. That is not to say that monarchies and aristocracies are necessarily ‘unfree’. Under these governments people can still be said to enjoy a considerable degree of civil liberty. As with Spinoza’s thinking about liberty on a personal level, political liberty is not a zero-sum game. Someone can never be absolutely free or unfree. Liberty on a purely personal level is dynamic, changeable and always a matter of degree in relation to the absolute freedom of God. Likewise, political liberty is dynamic, changeable and always a matter of degree in relation to the state.

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<sup>269</sup> Another reason why it is implausible that Spinoza changed his mind is that at no point in *Tractatus Politicus* he himself indicates that he did so.

<sup>270</sup> *TTP*, p. 271.

## *Conclusion*

Freedom was a highly contested notion in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. It returned time and again as the decisive element in the political, philosophical, and theological struggles that were fought out in the seventeenth-century Dutch public sphere. In the foregoing chapters I have presented Spinoza's multilayered conception of political liberty and considered the questions why and how it was so divergent and attentive to several debates in which the concept of freedom, one way or another, was of central importance. First, I have shown that with the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 the common resistance against a foreign tyrannical ruler as basis of the concord of the Dutch provinces fell away. Together with the temporary disappearance of the House of Orange after the death of William II, this resulted in a conceptual vacuum that gave room to other theories and justifications of political freedom. Three interconnected issues were disputed: the (fragmented) nature of political sovereignty, how to maintain the unity, and what the most desirable type of government was so as to secure the Republic's political liberty. Theorizing about political liberty was especially acute and critical as the potential return of a stadholder of the House of Orange was kept alive among Orangist pamphleteers and supporters, and moreover, because the position they defended was quite moderate and attractive. On the other hand, *staatsgezinde* republican theory was (within the Dutch context) not that radical either, as its language was anchored in the traditional liberties and privileges of the provinces, supportive of a public religion, and conducive to the commercial interests of the regents. In other words, as the Republic in the 1650s and 1660s was at its cultural, economic and political zenith, any alternative theory of governance had to be rhetorically sophisticated, nuanced and very well-argued if it wanted to compete with the existing well-established traditions of political argument.

On a second level there was a debate about the freedom of speech that reached its zenith in the 1660s. During the first two decades of the seventeenth century this debate was concerned with the freedom to question orthodox dogma within the Reformed church. In later decades new developments in philosophy and science put the issue of freedom of speech within universities and theology and philosophy departments. When in the 1660s radical writings appeared in the vernacular and evoked public outcries for strict censorship, Spinoza stepped in and would write what can arguably be called the most radical and sustained defence of the freedom of speech ever written in the history of the Dutch Republic. What made the debate about freedom of thought, speech and press, particularly important was the



way it was entangled with conflicting visions about the sovereignty of the state in relation to the ecclesiastical authorities. Freedom of judgment about religion became a political issue. Disputes about the freedom to exchange philosophical opinions blended together with debates about the limits of the power of the ecclesiastical authorities and thus with questions about the nature of the state and the extent of its authority. On a third level, the early seventeenth-century theological dispute about predestination addressed the freedom of man in relation to God and vice versa. This dispute, I argued, not only induced philosophers like Spinoza to rethink the most fundamental level of freedom, that is to say, liberty beyond – or maybe better: underneath – the civil and political realms of liberty, but also whether man’s highest good can be imposed by political means.

What made Spinoza’s voice so unique in the debates and controversies about liberty was that he aimed to sublimate this actuality – i.e. an incoherent amalgam of issues concerned with liberty that were fiercely discussed – in a comprehensive philosophical system. Freedom is the leading thread throughout Spinoza’s philosophy: on a metaphysical level, Spinoza understands God’s freedom as absolute self-determination. On a personal level, freedom is understood as a process of enlarging one’s power to act (*potentia agendi*) through an understanding of one’s surrounding, and one’s own affective nature. A third realm of freedom in Spinoza’s thought concerns the civil liberty of freedom of thought, speech, and publication (*libertas philosophandi*). And finally, a citizen body’s’ liberty of collective self-determination can be perceived as a form of political liberty (narrowly understood as political participation). If we would imagine the conceptual coherence of the various cherished freedoms within the Dutch republic as a loosely improvised rickety hovel build up out of practical necessity, then Spinoza would be the meticulous architect who aimed to rebuild it as a firm brick-house, solidly resting on its metaphysical foundations, structured by its conception of individual liberty and with civil and political liberties as its walls and roof.

While Spinoza’s conception of political liberty is very fascinating, it also created its own problems. Consider Spinoza’s response to the debate about sovereignty. It is clear that his advocacy of democracy was a right-out rejection of the Orangist defence of the mixed constitution, as well as a rejection of De Witt’s oligarchic republican government. But it remains quite unclear how a democracy were to be worked out in detail. Were the democratic ‘united gatherings of people’ to be held in the different cities? And how should the cities, and on a higher level, the provinces work together? In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza omits to answer such practical questions. He sometimes seems to be too occupied with other

purposes, which admittedly were both theoretical – refuting Hobbes – as well as practical. The practical applicability of his political theory may therefore at times seem beside the mark. Refuting Hobbes’s notions of natural right, obligation and sovereignty was an important part of the strictly political theoretical part of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. And although this might have served Spinoza’s theoretical interests, it may well be asked whether this strategy really furthered his cause to democratize the oligarchic type of governance that dominated the Republic.

Spinoza’s defence of the free use of reason was formulated in a more straightforward manner and was in this respect more promising. The power of his argument was that he turned the accusations of the orthodox clergy upside down: strict censorship causes instability and makes people impious. The free use of reason, on the other hand, enhances the stability and power of the Republic and will make people (although certainly not all people) more rational and thereby more pious and powerful. Spinoza thus defended the free use of reason from the perspective of the state: insofar as a state can have interests, having empowered citizens is certainly one of them.

Therefore, although I concur with Steven Smith’s judgment that ‘the ultimate justification of democracy’ in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, ‘is its enhancement of human freedom’, I would add something more.<sup>271</sup> Spinoza’s argument for democracy and the free use of reason in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was deeply concerned with the stability and peace of the state. Both the state as well as its citizens must become as powerful as possible. This central notion of becoming powerful in Spinoza’s political philosophy, I have argued, is based on the metaphysical and psychological foundation of what it means to be free. Only if both individual citizens as well as the state are guided by reason, they will become powerful and thus free. This outlook on politics implied a ‘reasonable use of the unreasonable’. Thereby I mean that in Spinoza’s eyes religious prejudices and belief in the moral value of the Bible are unreasonable, but still very useful. Public religion, I have pointed out, was for Spinoza a necessity to keep the irrational multitude in check. After all, in the cities of the province of Holland, it was not so much the centralized state that pressed its power and influence on its individual citizens – there was no such thing as an omnipotent state as in our age. Spinoza thus directed his attention to the powers that were actively involved in the everyday life of its citizens: the church and the clerics. He did not dismiss their presence, but aimed to use them for what he considered the common good. It is therefore

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<sup>271</sup> Smith, *Liberalism*, p. 133.

important to restate that Spinoza was not that radically egalitarian as is sometimes suggested. My analysis of Spinoza's socio-political standing, suggests, together with my reading of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, that Spinoza defended the interests of a specific group of people: 'free-minded' intellectuals, philosophers, reasonable citizens, and so on. The common people – the irrational rabble – was to be held down by his own version of a public religion.

Nonetheless, the combination of the two main aspects of Spinoza's conception of political liberty – the free use of reason and democratic political participation – are united in what he considered the best feasible and most absolute state, a democratic state. The connection between the political and civil aspect of Spinoza's conception of political liberty is this: only if the principle of freedom of thought and speech is satisfied, reason can influence the conduct of politics without destroying the foundations of the state.<sup>272</sup> In a democratic republic citizens are allowed the most possible negative liberty to pursue their self-interest – i.e. self-empowerment – and use their reason freely. This realm of liberty basically consists of *libertas philosophandi* (considered in a broad sense) What people will eventually do with this freedom, is a second degree concern for Spinoza. The diversity among and passionate nature of human beings is inevitable and ineradicable. The state nor the church, has any business in coercing people to think or act in particular ways, as long as people do not harm each other and do not threaten the sovereignty of the state.

It is therefore not convincing that Spinoza's only or primarily intended audience were Calvinist theologians, clergymen and ministers. Instead, I hope to have pointed out sufficiently, he wanted to convince both politicians, co-philosophers and other intellectuals of the advantages of his political philosophy. Insofar as Spinoza can be seen as an exponent of a culture of citizen activism, he was of course very different from burghers who mainly wanted to address individual regents and, more particularly the capabilities of those who held political office.<sup>273</sup> Spinoza's aims were much broader and intended to bring about a structural change in the Republic's type of government. This required in his eyes a much more elaborate type of 'pamphlet'. In order to bring about this change Spinoza felt that he had to redefine the purposes, power and legitimization of the state, both in relation to the church and in relation to its citizens. Thus Spinoza concluded in one of the most beautiful passages of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*:

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<sup>272</sup> Of course, one might argue whether this interpretation of the freedom of speech is tenable in light of the obvious suggestion that speech can be dangerous for the foundations of the state as well.

<sup>273</sup> M. Reinders, 'Capability and the Transformation of Dutch Citizenship', in: Hartman, et. al., *Public Offices, Personal Demands*, p. 176-198.

It is not, I contend, the purpose of the state to turn people from rational beings into beasts or automata, but rather to allow their minds and bodies to develop in their own ways in security and enjoy the free use of reason, and not to participate in conflicts based on hatred, anger, or deceit or in malicious disputes with each other. Therefore, the true purpose of the state is in fact freedom<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> *TTP*, p. 252.

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