What is the Scope of the Freedom to Philosophize?

Investigating Spinoza's defence of free philosophizing in the Theological Political Treatise

By

Johard Heyl

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Supervisor: Michael Griffin

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Vienna, 02.06.2025

Johard Heyl

Abstract

This thesis explores the scope of the freedom to philosophize in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP). It examines the tension between his robust defence of free thought and expression and his endorsement of limitations where such freedoms threaten the stability of the state. The central problem investigated, arises from Daniel Garber's (2008) argument that Spinoza's own philosophy – particularly its critique of anthropomorphic religious doctrines – might disillusion ordinary readers and thereby undermine the moral foundations of civic obedience. If true, this would suggest that Spinoza's own work violates the very boundaries of expression he supports, thus calling into question the internal coherence of the TTP.

In response, the thesis argues that Spinoza can address this problem by interpreting the doctrines of faith as flexible and interpretable in rational terms, allowing disillusioned readers to retain their commitment to simple and rational moral conduct, even as they might revise their theological views. It claims that Within Spinoza's framework, it seems unlikely that readers that are truly obedient, would be disillusioned of their understanding of moral conduct.

By examining Spinoza's political theory, his correspondence, and recent interpretations by Laerke (2021) and Rosenthal (2003), the analysis concludes that the true bounds to free philosophizing does not stem from the unintentional consequences of reasoned argument. Rather, in Spinoza's framework it is limited by the irrational psychological forces of ambition and superstition. Which can prevent reasoned discussion and in conjunction can threaten the stability of the state and thus be censored by Spinoza's merits.

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1. Introduction

In this study, I investigate Spinoza's defence of the Freedom to Philosophize, as it appears in his *Theological Political Treatise* (Hereafter TTP) published in 1670 (Spinoza 2016). Within this defence, Spinoza distinguishes Philosophy from religion and argues that it is better for authorities to maintain the freedom to philosophize than suppress it. That is, without danger and in order to better maintain the stability of the state. However, Spinoza also advocates for limits on such freedoms, particularly in cases where such expression could be abused to undermine the authority of the state. Then, Spinoza argues, one could be rightfully censored.

This account comes with tensions. One such tension, as interpreted by Daniel Garber (2008) states: Spinoza's own work could fall under such censorship criteria. According to Garber (2008), Spinozistic interpretations of God might disillusion the readers of the TTP of anthropomorphic narratives that underpin their obedience and faith. That is, to undermine reasons for their moral or virtuous conduct in life. If Spinoza's own philosophy undermines these narratives, he could also undermine moral and religious doctrines that underpin the state. Insofar as this does truly undermine the state, it would qualify censoring his own work, by his own merits.

I see this as a problem, as it would then seem that the TTP, which defends the Freedom to Philosophize, might itself not qualify for such freedom. Additionally, it limits the scope of free philosophizing immensely, as many arguments could be interpreted as possibly undermining state authority, even if reasonable and true. It seems that the tension would be especially apparent in claims Spinoza himself makes, where he states that his work does not in fact undermine the laws, piety or morals of his country (TTP pref. 35). In light of this problem, Spinoza would have to be interpreted as being more subversive in his writing or be in error with his defence. If more subversive, there seems to be tension with other

interpretations of free philosophizing, such as given by Mogens Laerke (2021), which has free philosophizing acting as argumentative, candid, equal discourse. If in error, it undermines the argument for free philosophizing.

Instead, if we assume that his argument within the TTP could be genuine, not subversive, I argue that Spinoza does have room to resist the tension that Garber (2008) proposes. People are unlikely to be disillusioned in a way that undermines their obedience or moral conduct, if they are disillusioned at all under Spinoza's account. Under Garber's (2008) account, an ordinary person could engage with Spinoza's work and have his previous anthropomorphic beliefs of God undermined. When this happens, it is argued, he loses much of the understanding and motivation behind his moral conduct, which is essential to carrying it out. This is particularly an issue for the sovereign if they cannot be taken as trustworthy for maintaining the laws and social order.

However, I argue that there is some flexibility to how such individuals could reinterpret their beliefs of God to be in line with the moral lessons that Spinoza believes are rational and simple. In such cases, at least under Spinoza's account, it seems individuals with an understanding of moral conduct are unlikely to abandon that moral conduct altogether, even if their initial way of understanding it is undermined. Instead, they look for more rational explanations of that moral conduct, or else Spinoza believes they did not have good intentions to start with. Thus meaning, that reasoned arguments are unlikely to lead people to abandon moral conduct if they hadn't done so already.

Instead, I argue that the bounds of free philosophizing is dictated more by the irrational elements of natural human psychology in Spinoza's sense. Using the analyses of Laerke (2021) and Rosenthal (2003) on these concepts, I argue influences of prejudice prevents reasoned engagement in free philosophizing. In addition, limitations on seditious speech

seems more aimed at ambitious individuals who might take advantage of superstitions to undermine the sovereign. I particularly look at correspondences between Spinoza and his contemporaries, Willem Van Blijenbergh and Albert Burgh, to highlight Spinoza's response and attitude towards psychological factors and how they prevent free philosophizing or are considered by him a danger to the stability and harmony of the state.

In section 1, I explore the context of free philosophizing and make notes on the referencing of Spinoza's primary texts that will be used throughout the paper. For the second section, I examine the political argument for free philosophizing, based on Spinoza's account of natural rights and social contracts. I also examine the limitations he imposes on that freedom regarding seditious acts. The third section examines Garber's argument in depth, concerning faith and obedience and how Spinoza's reasoned arguments could be interpreted as undermining moral conduct and the stability of the state. The fourth section covers my response to Garber, why I interpret the doctrines to be more flexible to reason, and why individuals are unlikely to be disillusioned in Spinoza's framework as Garber claims. The fifth and final section of the paper then examines my interpretation of the bounds of free philosophizing, specifically exploring the effects of superstition and ambition, and the relating case studies of Van Blijenbergh and Burgh.

1.1 Notes on referencing

This involves a close reading of the TTP, the Ethics, and Spinoza's correspondence. I use Edwin Curley's translations of the collected works of Spinoza, volumes 1 and 2 (Spinoza 1985; 2016). When referencing the TTP translation (Spinoza 2016), I will list the chapter number and section numbering according to the Bruder paragraphing system, (e.g., TTP 4.19). There are also authoritative original language editions of the TTP: the ALM edition, edited by Fokke Akkerman (Spinoza 1999), or the older third volume of Carl Gerbhardt's

Opera (Spinoza 1925). For ease of reference, I note that Curley's translations offers both Gerbhardt and Bruder referencing numbers within the TTP text, in addition to a table at the end of the volume, which helps correspond the Bruder numbers to ALM paragraph numbering. Thus, others can then refer through the Curley references to the Gerbhardt or ALM referencing.

For the Ethics translation as it appears in Curley (Spinoza 1985), I will follow the standard of referencing with the geometric style. Making use of abbreviations as used also by Curley (Spinoza 2016, xx-xxi) such that, for instance, (E1p8s) refers to the Ethics part 1, proposition 8, Scholium. For the letters, I will indicate the letter number followed by the Gebhardt volume and page number, as it appears in both Curley (Spinoza 1985; 2016) volume 1 and 2 translations, for example, (Letter 19 IV/86). My referencing is done, to remain neutral between the different versions of the Spinoza texts, but also to give as narrow an indication as to what section of the chapter, proposition, or section of the letter I am referring to when discussing the primary texts.

1.2 What is the freedom to philosophize?

The freedom to philosophize, and the arguments for it, should be understood in the broader notions of what philosophy was in the 17th century, and how it figured into larger controversies of the time.

Philosophy in Spinoza's sense could be equated with a style of rational inquiry more broadly. As noted by Curley (Spinoza 2016, 648), Spinoza for his part referred to philosophical studies as involving astronomy (TTP 2.26), as well as histories of nature (TTP 6.54), a type of data collection strategy based on Baconian philosophy of science according to Curley (Spinoza 2016, 634). Additionally, Laerke (2021, 34) highlights the extreme breadth of philosophy in

the 17th century, where just in natural philosophy, it could contain topics of metaphysics, physics, zoology, anthropology, and mathematics. Overall, Laerke (2021, 51) argues that Spinoza's conception of philosophy is broader, also including historical inquiry into meaning; rational analysis of truth; and sound judgement regarding authority. Philosophy thus has an extreme breadth of subject matter. From this, the freedom to philosophize could be more distinguished by its style of discourse than subject matter, as Laerke (2021, 62) argues.

Laerke (2021, 62) characterizes the freedom to philosophize as being a type of brotherly or friendly advice that involves five qualities: being argumentative, candid, falsifiable, presupposing equality among interlocutors and aimed at persuading others. Laerke (2021, 57) largely bases this characterization on Spinoza's analysis of the Apostolic letters in chapter 11 of the TTP. Spinoza primarily distinguishes between two types of discourses by the Apostles, where they speak as prophets, or alternatively as private persons and teachers (TTP 11.1). As Laerke (2021, 53) describes, while speaking in a prophetic style involves giving commands from God, speaking as teachers involves giving advice or teachings through arguments and reasoning. Laerke (2021, 62) claims that the latter acts as the paradigm case for free philosophizing. That is, exemplifying qualities where one engages others on an equal, reasoned, and honest basis, with the aim to persuade them (Laerke 2021, 58-59).

In Spinoza's letter to Henry Oldenburg, he writes of his intentions with the TTP, wishing to address:

> 1) The prejudices of the theologians; for I know that they are the greatest obstacle to men's being able to apply their minds to philosophy; so, I am busy exposing them and removing them from the minds of the more prudent.
> 2) The opinion the common people have of me; they never stop accusing me of atheism, and I am forced to rebut this accusation as well as I can; and
> 3) The freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think, which I want to defend in every way; here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness. (Letter 30 IV/166/5)

Thus, Spinoza seems to argue for a style of discourse where one can candidly say what you think. He also opposes it quite clearly to cases of prejudices and attitudes of suppressing opinions through authority, as this would also go against the argumentative and equal basis of free philosophizing. This further seems to go along with concerns that Spinoza had about controversies involving authorities and the ability to freely hold, share and express ideas.

Spinoza's TTP is situated in the discussion of religious conscience and issues surrounding the authority of the sovereign and theologians. As Rosenthal (2003, 320) notes, Spinoza can be read as giving an Erastian justification of toleration in line with arguments of the time. According to this view, the state, rather than the church, is the proper authority to manage religious disputes and state doctrine. At the same time, Spinoza is seen as a founder of modern liberalism, arguing for freedom of conscience that even a state would be unable to completely suppress even if it wanted to. Spinoza claims this is because there are certain things such as their judgements and reasoning that people cannot willingly give up. They are unable to do this, even under coercion from a sovereign (TTP 20.2).

Both readings seem to hold some truth, given certain contexts and controversies in Spinoza's time that he attempted to address. As established by Laerke's (2021, 32) analysis, Spinoza's argument for the freedom to philosophize can be understood as historically situated in two controversies that occurred in the 17th century. The first was a theological-philosophical dispute, concerning the freedom to pursue natural philosophy as separate from the dictates of theological authorities, and the second is the controversy of religious conscience within the Dutch Republic (Laerke 2021, 12-13). Spinoza's arguments for the freedom to philosophize considering both controversies, can not only be understood as a defence for freedom of expression and thought, but also as an argument for freedom of conscience. The TTP then, is an ambitious framework for investigating relations of authority between philosophy and its

scientific teachings, theology and its moral teachings, and sovereign authority in relation to both.

2. The political argument for the freedom to philosophize

Spinoza offers two arguments in defence of the freedom to philosophize: a political argument from chapters 16-20 of the TTP, and a theological argument found in chapter 13-15 of the TTP. The latter primarily addresses the separation of philosophy from theology, and whether one would have to undermine or be subordinated to the other.

I will address whether Spinoza does in fact undermine theology in his account of the freedom to philosophize, at a later stage. For now, this analysis focuses on why the freedom to philosophize should be politically permissible. As summarized by Rosenthal (2003, 328), this is argued for by first establishing that the mind cannot be completely under the control of another, second that no one can surrender their natural right to reason freely, and third, that any attempt to do so ends up undermining stability. Furthermore, it is stated that attempting to deny free expression – or the freedom to philosophize – of those beliefs, would end up undermining the sovereign's authority and the stability of the state, at worst leading to the dissolution of the social order which is to everyone's benefit. Spinoza bases this account on assumptions of what is necessary for the long term stability of a state, namely good faith or trust from its citizens.

2.1 Freedom of thought

The political argument for free philosophizing is presented primarily in Chapter 20 of the TTP, titled "It is shown that in a Free Republic everyone is permitted to think what he wishes and to say what he thinks" (TTP 20). Here, the crux of Spinoza's argument for permitting the freedom to philosophize is articulated with the claim that people naturally have a right to judge what they believe on matters and, from this, that it is prudent to allow them to express

it. However, this is particularly based on Spinoza's conception of natural rights and social contracts that he develops earlier in the TTP.

Spinoza believes that you only have the natural right to something, to the extent that your power allows you to do it (TTP 16.3). An example for him being:

> For example, fish are determined by nature to swimming, and the large ones to eating the smaller. So it is by the supreme right of nature that fish are masters of the water, and that the large ones eat the smaller. (TTP 16.2)

From this, Spinoza believes that a social order can be constructed within a natural right framework. He believes that people will act according to what they perceive to be to their benefit (TTP 16.15). Social orders, where people are governed by common laws, are according to Spinoza one such benefit, as it is not to anyone's benefit to have everyone have the natural right, or ability, to do whatever they like (TTP 16.12). Particularly, as Spinoza believes that people have different desires and would inevitably end up in conflict with each other (TTP 16.14). Therefore, often we agree or promise to adhere to contracts. However, maintaining them is much harder, as everyone still maintains the right to deceive others based on what powers you are promising to give up (TTP 16.16).

The solution for maintaining the stability of a social contract thus comes through two avenues for Spinoza. The first avenue is to maintain it by the good faith of the contractors, that is because they, "…recognize the supreme utility and necessity of the Republic…" (TTP 16.22). However, this on its own is not enough, because you cannot be certain of someone's good faith in keeping to promises. Thus, promises often would require something additional for Spinoza (TTP 16.23). This second avenue being to empower an individual, or group of individuals, with the natural rights to compel others by threat of punishment. To the extent that:

> It follows also that if a person has the supreme power, which enables him to compel everyone by force, and restrain them by fear of the supreme punishment (which everyone, without exception, fears) then that person has the supreme right over everyone. (TTP 16.24)

However, for Spinoza, not all natural rights can be transferred to the sovereign or magistrate in a social order, such as with freedom of thought. For Spinoza, some rights are just fundamentally part of one's nature as a human. Stating, "No one will ever be able to transfer to another his power, or consequently, his right, in such a way that he ceases to be a man" (TTP 17.2). One such natural right that a sovereign is unable to fully control, is the judgements and beliefs of other people:

> Indeed, no one can transfer to another person his natural right, *or* faculty, of reasoning freely, and of judging concerning whatever. Nor can they be compelled to do this (TTP 20.2)

The rights of a sovereign and his citizens depend on their ability to bring about specific actions or a certain state of affairs. Then, from the above quote, Spinoza seems to assume that people can always believe what they judge to be reasonable or advantageous, regardless of coercion. The assumption seems plausible, as you can imagine that even under coercion of force, you might say or act as if you believe something externally without truly believing it privately. Thus, according to Spinoza (TTP 20.3), as far as this private domain of thought remains, you maintain the natural right to think as you will. However, this is not enough to prevent the sovereign acting against different beliefs.

The problem is this, insofar as the sovereign can compel beliefs, Spinoza must go further in his defence, as he acknowledges that a sovereign can maintain the ability to, "…consider as enemies anyone who does not believe as they do" (TTP 20.6). The issue being that even if the sovereign cannot maintain absolute control, they can still exercise threats and punishment, which could be argued to be beneficial to the sovereign. In fact, Rosenthal (2003, 323) notes such historical arguments, such as by Justus Lipsius, which Spinoza would likely have had in mind. As Rosenthal (2003, 323) explains, arguments at the time put forth the idea that a state need only be tolerant of different beliefs to the extent that it is pragmatic for the state to allow

them. Thus, Spinoza needs to make a pragmatic argument against why a sovereign would not just coerce beliefs anyway, even if they lack absolute control or the natural right.

Spinoza's response is that in trying to compel beliefs, the sovereign is forced into relying on a violent or coercive rule of their people. Spinoza assumes that while the sovereign can coerce others, they also force the state into a position of ruling violently, which is unsustainable and thus unpragmatic:

> I grant that by right they can rule with the utmost violence and condemn citizens to death for the slightest of reasons. But everyone will deny that they can do these things without detriment to the judgment of sound reason. Indeed, because they can't do these things without great danger to the whole state, we can also deny that they have the absolute power to do such things (TTP 20.7).

I think that Spinoza motivates this assumption through the belief that a sovereign undermines themselves by seeming unreasonable. For Spinoza, if you act against what others see as reasonable, you risk seeming "mindless" (TTP 16.14). This is an issue, if you require people to buy in to the social contract that underpins your power, as you do not seem trustworthy. Spinoza notes that, "… a contract can have no force except by reason of its utility. If the utility is taken away, the contract is taken away with it and remains null and void" (TTP 16.20). If people entered the social contract due to it seeming beneficial, then the more the sovereign threatens violence to its citizens the more the advantage of the contract is taken away. Thus, the sovereign ends up undermining the supporters or good faith in its regime and creates enemies that would seek to exit the contract at the first opportunity. This seems dangerous for a sovereign, as there is no guarantee that they can maintain the power only by force.

Thus, Spinoza acknowledges that a sovereign can command absurdities, and that these commands would be reasonable to follow if it is the lesser of two evils (TTP 16.27). However, he also seems to emphasize the fragility such a rule can have, if the right to rule only lasts as long as the power to enforce it does, stating:

> If they should lose [that power], they also lose, at the same time, the right of commanding all things. [The right] falls to him or those who have acquired it and can retain it. (TTP 16.28)

Therefore, the first step in Spinoza's argument for the freedom to philosophize is that trying to enforce private beliefs forces you into a coercive rule. Following this, a coercive rule is not sustainable to carry out, as it is more prudent to gain people's good faith to support your regime, rather than relying on coercion. Or otherwise, as Spinoza quotes of Seneca, "no one continues a violent rule for long" (TTP 16.29). From this Spinoza believes it is politically pragmatic to have people ultimately believe what they will privately.

2.2 Free expression

Similarly, for the second step, Spinoza argues that it would also be prudent for the sovereign to allow free expression and freedom to teach what one thinks – or as he calls it, the freedom to philosophize. As Spinoza argues, if it is the case that people cannot do otherwise than believe or judge certain things, then often people will also be unable to do otherwise but speak and communicate those judgments, as "Not even the wisest know how to keep quiet, not to mention ordinary people" (TTP 20.8). Trying to suppress such expressions would just lead to people holding their own opinions, but more deceptively and with greater danger to the sovereign.

This is a problem that is particularly highlighted by Justin Steinberg's (2010) analysis of Spinoza. Steinberg (2010, 218) notes that moral legislation or decrees from the sovereign, which aim at making people more virtuous through enforcing beliefs or certain expressions, risks undercutting the stability of the state. This is especially true if it entails suppression of opinions that are reasonable, such as scientific facts, or philosophical speculations. Steinberg (2010, 224) emphasizes that Spinoza believes that such legislation can be potentially self-defeating. On the one side, it alienates and aggravates virtuous citizens to the point of sedition. Virtuous citizens think it is important to hold beliefs they judge true, to the point of

disregarding and actively working against the authority of the sovereign or magistrate in potential rebellions if unable to do so:

> For the most part, men are so constituted that they endure nothing with greater impatience than that opinions they believe to be true should be considered criminal and that what moves them to piety toward God and men should be counted as wickedness in them. The result is that they dare to denounce the laws and do what they can against the magistrate; they don't think it shameful, but quite honourable, to initiate rebellions and attempt any crime for the sake of this cause. (TTP 20.29)

On the other hand, such laws or decrees could embolden unvirtuous characters. For the people whose opinions are supported by the sovereign, they would tend to, "... accept the laws as privileges, and triumph in them so much that afterward the magistrate won't be able to repeal them even if he wants to" (TTP 20.34). According to Spinoza, the people most likely to support repressive laws are also often the most corrupt or flattering individuals who attempt to use the system to their own advantage:

> But suppose this freedom could be suppressed, and the men so kept in check that they didn't dare to mutter anything except what the supreme powers prescribe. This would surely never happen in such a way that they didn't even think anything except what the supreme powers wanted them to. So, the necessary consequence would be that everyday men would think one thing and say something else. The result? The good faith especially necessary in a Republic would be corrupted. Abominable flattery and treachery would be encouraged, as would deceptions and the corruption of all liberal studies. (Spinoza 2016, TTP 20.27)

The result – even if people outwardly conform to authority, it amounts to mere lip service. The sovereign loses two-fold: empowering the unvirtuous and suppressing the virtuous. Spinoza warns that unvirtuous characters will use the laws to further their own power at the cost of the magistrate, while virtuous individuals either engage in similar lip service, or else risk persecution, even death, by refusing to comply (TTP 20.36).

Overall, this takes on a similar strategy to the freedom of thought, by arguing again that the sovereign risks unsustainable rule if it encourages deception and untrustworthiness. For Spinoza, reasonable people that act in good faith towards their contracts with the sovereign, are a stabilizing force in the state:

> If all men could easily be led just by the guidance of reason and could recognize the supreme utility and necessity of the Republic, there would be no one who would not absolutely detest deceptions. With the utmost faith, everyone would stand by their contracts completely, out of a desire for this supreme good,

> the preservation of the Republic. Above all else they would maintain trust, the chief protection of the republic. (TTP 16.21)

As mentioned above, people follow the contract if it appears to their reasonable benefit to follow, without which it dissolves along with the sovereign's power. While many people will be compelled by the force of the sovereign to obey this contract, as Spinoza emphasizes as well (TTP 16.24), this is unsustainable to do just by coercion. Therefore, having people that do not require coercion to obey laws but will follow it by reason alone is very beneficial for the sovereign. Such seems to be the case for philosophers, or Spinoza's writers, "…who for the most part write only for the learned and call only reason to their aid" (TTP 20.42). These practitioners of the freedom to philosophize, would be the people to find a social contract of society reasonable. That is, if reasonable people can see that it is to no one's benefit to live in a state of nature. Conversely, if the sovereign encourages behaviour to make people less likely to act in good faith towards the sovereign, it risks destabilizing their rule. Hence, Spinoza argues, the sovereign must allow the freedom of opinion and expression in the freedom to philosophize to maintain both the stability of the state, and through this stability, also his authority (TTP 20.37).

2.3 Limits on the freedom to philosophize

From the above argument, Spinoza establishes that you can have free thought and expression and teaching of that thought, since it is more prudent for the sovereign to allow. Nonetheless, Spinoza does not advocate an unrestricted freedom. This limitation is also what provides one of the tensions within Spinoza's account. As Daniel Garber (2008, 170) points out, expressing one's opinion is still an action. If this action threatens the stability of the state by undermining the sovereign, Spinoza supports limiting it. He states:

> But anyone can think, and judge, and consequently speak, without infringing on their right, provided that he only speaks or teaches, and defends his view by reason alone, not with deception, anger, hatred, or an intention to introduce something into the republic on the authority of his own decision. (TTP 20.14)

Spinoza therefore justifies limitations on speech using the same reasoning by which he defends its freedom: To preserve the stability of the state and the sovereign's authority. The key limit on that speech seems to be what Spinoza discusses as being seditious speech, that is, speech that undermines the sovereign's legitimacy or incites others to undermine the authority of the sovereign.

2.4 Seditious opinions:

Spinoza defines seditious opinions as those which:

> …as soon as they are assumed, destroy the agreement by which each person surrendered his right to act according to his own decision. (TTP 20.20)

Examples from Spinoza include beliefs: that promises need not be kept, or that the sovereign is not your master or authority (TTP 20.21). This is problematic for Spinoza, because if the social contract of the state requires that you promise to give up certain natural rights to gain the benefits of that social order, then these types of beliefs undermine the good faith in that agreement. That is it makes you untrustworthy:

> This isn't so much because of the judgement and opinion as because of the action such judgments involve. For by the very fact that he thinks such a thing, he cancels the assurance he's given, either tacitly or explicitly, to the supreme power. (TTP 20.21)

Sedition then, and the limit on the freedom to philosophize, are very particular kinds of beliefs and actions. As Michael Della Rocca (2010, 169) notes, they involve either rebelling against the sovereign by contradicting his commands or attempting to persuade others to do so. However, they share the type of bad faith towards your agreement with the sovereign or magistrate of the state. As Spinoza believes, every citizen by explicit or tacit agreement is bound equally by the law (TTP 16.51). When individuals act as though they are exceptions, that is to enact their own decision on public business, then they commit treason (TTP 16.51).

In other words, you act deceptively and in bad faith to the tacit agreement of keeping to laws if you commit actions that aim to supersede the laws and decisions of the sovereign of a state.

To conclude then, for Spinoza, you can disagree with the reasonableness of certain laws of the sovereign with the freedom to philosophize, given that you still see yourself as subject to those laws and the decision of the sovereign (TTP 20.16). As opposed to this a seditious individual would act more in bad faith towards the social contract. In which case Spinoza believes they can be rightfully censored for expressing hate towards the sovereign or attempting to incite a mob:

> …to accuse the magistrate of inequity, and make him hateful to the common people, or if he wants to nullify the law, seditious, against the will of the magistrate, he's just a troublemaker and a rebel. (TTP 20.15)

However, here there are problems with understanding this scope of the freedom to philosophize, as highlighted by Daniel Garber (2008). In theory there might be a distinction between the intention to be seditious with one's speech or the intention to defend your view by reason. But, Garber (2008, 171) argues that intention is a bad metric to distinguish the two cases, as it is not clear when the person is using speech virtuously or using reason with ulterior motives to undermine the sovereign (Garber 2008, 171). That is, it is difficult to know whether the person acts in good or bad faith towards the sovereign.

Garber (2008, 171) further argues, that on Spinoza's account he would rightfully have to censor or suppress speech that could have the effect of undermining the stability of the state, even if you did not specifically intend to have this effect. Spinoza's own philosophy might fall under this limitation of sedition according to Garber (2008, 166-167), as Spinoza's own account in the TTP seems to undermine traditional views of religion. Garber (2008, 166-167) argues for Spinoza religion dictates people's moral conduct in society. Thus, insofar as that moral conduct underpins people's trustworthiness and good faith towards the sovereign, it

would have bad consequences to undermine these traditional views, even by rational and true arguments.

3. An issue on the scope of the freedom to philosophize

The issue as Garber puts forth, is that Spinoza's philosophy, through reasonable and free expression, might also have the consequence of undermining people's moral conduct, and through this their trustworthiness and good faith. The sovereign has an interest in what religion considers permissible or impermissible, as it relates to how they would regulate laws in Spinoza's framework. Insofar as religion can have a large influence on people's hearts, or their trustworthiness, undermining this can have an effect on the sovereign's ability to maintain stability.

This criticism is based on the fact that external religious practice is also considered by Spinoza to be rightfully the authority of the sovereign. As argued above, Spinoza grants that every citizen in a republic has freedom of conscience. However, he still maintains that civil authorities play a crucial role in regulating the external practices of religion (TTP 19.3), as Garber (2008, 167-168) also highlights. For Spinoza, religious practice or the moral conduct that accompanies it, gain legal force only when enacted as civil laws tailored to the public good. This is the right of the sovereign or civil authorities:

> First, though, I want to show that Religion receives the force of law only from the decree of those who have the right to rule, that God has no special kingdom over men except through those who have sovereignty, that Religious worship and the exercise of piety must be accommodate to the peace and utility of the republic, and hence, must be determined only by the supreme powers, who must also be its interpreters. (TTP 19.2)

To shortly explain this radical view. For Spinoza (TTP 19.18), God does not literally give laws as a prince, thus the moral conduct in religion do not have a coercive force like a law. That is unless, Spinoza (TTP 19.19) continues, the ruler makes it a law. Thus, for Spinoza (TTP 19.42) it becomes important that a sovereign has control over what are considered morally permissible actions- according to the sovereign's interpretations- as otherwise the sovereign conflicts with religious authorities over matters of law, which leads to more conflict in the state. Spinoza holds two commitments here then. First, Spinoza has a commitment to

not dividing the sovereign's authority in the state, in fear that this would undermine the social contract and the stability of the state, such that religious authorities could contradict what are permissible actions. Second, that a sovereign's interpretations only have the force of law, to the degree that it literally becomes a law.

Now, Garber (2008, 182) argues that obedience, as dictated by the sovereign, plays an important social role in getting people to be sociable and adhere to the laws of society. Garber (2008, 183) further argues that if Spinoza's philosophy undermines people's faith, which underpins their obedience to the laws of the sovereign, then it could be dangerous. For instance, by creating individuals for whom anything goes. According to Garber, they could be relied on to act in their own interest, rational or not, but would not dependably act in a way that is conducive to social harmony (Garber 2008, 183). Thus, Garber seems to make the case, that philosophy or reasoned arguments could also unintentionally undermine good faith which is conducive for the sovereign's stability. That is, if free philosophizing was allowed due to the risk of encouraging bad faith, then there is also the risk that free philosophizing creates more bad faith individuals. This implies a stronger boundary on free philosophizing, and could also be framed as the problem of the unintended consequences of free expression.

3.1 Problem of an imperfectly rational reader

The view that Garber puts forth, relies on what Spinoza says of faithful tenets and moral conduct in the earlier chapters of the TTP. That is, concerning the separation between reason and faith, or religion and philosophy. As Garber (2008, 171) notes, for Spinoza the main teachings of religion are concerning the virtues of loving your neighbour as yourself and loving God (TTP 12.34). This is also confirmed by Spinoza as the foundation of scripture and requires only such knowledge that you can obey. He states:

> Obedience to God consists only in the love of your neighbour…From this it follows that the only knowledge Scripture commends is that necessary for all men if they are to be able to obey God according to this prescription, and without which men would necessarily be stiff necked, or at least lacking in the discipline of obedience (TTP 13.8)

Thus, for Spinoza, obedience to religions' main teachings, does not require particular knowledge – in other words, it does not require scientific or philosophical knowledge (TTP 13.7) – but rather only obedience, which is this general moral conduct. Garber (2008, 172) argues however, that Spinoza is still committed to some propositional knowledge being necessary for the obedience to faith. This is what Spinoza mainly discusses under the notion of faith, and its related doctrines of faith.

3.2 Anthropomorphic doctrines of faith

The doctrines of faith are propositional knowledge of God that underpin and is necessary for obedience. I note that there is some variation on how this definition of faith should be translated. Both Curley (Spinoza 2016, 266) and Garber (2008, 172) mention in their footnotes their disagreement on this particular passage. Under Garber's translation, Spinoza's definition reads:

> ...I shall begin with a definition of faith, which according to the foundation we have given, must be defined as follows: thinking such things about God that if the person disregards them, obedience to God is destroyed, and such that, if obedience to God is posited, they are necessarily posited". (Garber 2008, 172)

While under Curley's translation it reads:

> [Faith is] thinking such things about God that if you had no knowledge of them, obedience to God would be destroyed whereas if you are obedient to God, you necessarily have these thoughts. (TTP 14.13)

I take it that Garber's translation tends to favour a more active notion of how faithful tenets are necessary for obedience. Garber takes it that faith does not obtain when the certain propositional knowledge of God is disregarded, seeming to involve volition on the part of the believer. However, Curley translates it as a broader notion of just lacking knowledge of those propositions, as failing to know, rather than failing to act on what you know.

From his own definition, Garber argues for three claims of how Spinoza relates these doctrines to obedience. The first, Garber (2008, 172) argues, is that the doctrines of faith are necessary and sufficient conditions for obedience in religion and thus virtuous conduct. To think the doctrines are true necessarily means that you are obedient, and if you are obedient, you necessarily hold those beliefs, he says. Second, he interprets that Spinoza takes the effectiveness of doctrines, in getting people to obey, to matter more than their truth content (Garber 2008, 173). This much is evident from when Spinoza states:

> Faith requires, not so much true doctrines, as pious doctrines, that is, doctrines which move the heart to obedience, even if many of them do not have even a shadow of the truth. (TTP 14.20)

Third, Garber (2008, 173) also takes it that while the beliefs themselves could be strictly false, Spinoza still holds that it is important for the believers themselves to take them as true, to be effective. This is also evident such as when Spinoza states:

> This is true provided the person who accepts them does not know they are false. If he did, he would necessarily be a rebel. For how could someone who is eager to love Justice and to obey God worship as divine something he knows to be foreign to the divine nature? (TTP 14.20)

From all of this, Garber (2008, 179) insists that if such doctrines are to be effective, they have to be understood as necessarily anthropomorphic propositions of God. This is because that is how most people understand God in *their* terms, and the way in which obedience is effectively gained (Garber 2008, 179). Spinoza seems to acknowledge this case as well, as he also enumerates the doctrines anthropomorphically, such as seeing God as a judge or model for human life:

> that *God exists, i.e., that there is a supreme being, supremely just and merciful, that is a model (exemplar) of true life*; for whoever does not know or does not believe that he exists cannot obey him or know him as a judge. (TTP 14.25)

Garber (2008, 177) argues then that it seems unlikely that there would be a Spinozistic understanding of doctrines such as this. Most evidently because in Spinoza's philosophy he is quite emphatic that an intellectual knowledge of God cannot consider God as a model for instituting the true way of life (TTP 13.24).

The problem set forth then, is that a rationalistic conception of God excludes the anthropomorphic ideas in Spinoza's sense. Instead, a Spinozistic philosopher, as Garber (2008, 176) notes, understands the doctrines of faith as universal and eternal truths to be necessarily embraced. That is, they act in accordance with moral conduct not due to commands but because it seems rational to them, thus not really obeying at all. This is for instance what Spinoza seems to argue, when he sees true blessedness as following divine law from true knowledge of God, rather than fear of punishment or love for something else (TTP 4.14).

This is not necessarily a problem for the rationalistic philosopher. Spinoza could still claim that his philosophy is true, and in accordance with moral conduct. However, the issue Garber (2008, 182) lays out is that despite it being rational and possibly true, it still undermines obedience of ordinary people, as by disproving anthropomorphic understandings – the understandings necessary for obedience – Spinoza shows they are strictly false.

3.3 Disillusionment

If ordinary understandings are underpinned by anthropomorphic conceptions of God, then Spinoza's philosophy undermines this. If people's obedience necessarily relies on these anthropomorphic understandings of God, then their obedience is also undermined. In such a case it would then seem, as Garber (2008, 182) argues, that Spinoza's philosophy would undermine public obedience to moral conduct and that he knew this. Particularly, by disillusioning readers of the reasons they thought they were acting morally for.

As Garber (2008, 183) relates the story, the readers of the TTP might start on a journey of discovering their ideas of God are in fact false but might not all end up learning how their moral conduct is correct and worth adhering to in the Spinozistic sense. These "imperfectly rational readers" of the TTP, as Garber terms them, would be left with an undermined obedience. These individuals end up undermining social stability, as they cannot be counted on to act according to obedience or according to rational truths to follow moral conduct and be conducive to social harmony (Garber 2008, 183). That is, it becomes less certain that you can rely on them to act in good faith in accordance to the sovereign or magistrate's commands.

Therefore, the problem stands: if Spinoza's philosophy undermines obedience of the public, then it would also undermine the authority of the sovereign that dictates external practice of that obedience. If it undermines the authority of the sovereign, then Spinoza's own philosophy would qualify for censorship – or as Garber (2008, 186) suggests, would have to be limited in the scope of its free expression and publication. This is Garber's problem of an imperfectly rational reader of the TTP, someone disillusioned or accidentally misled by Spinoza's teachings, which thus undermines the authority of the sovereign and limits Spinoza's freedom to philosophize. It could also be framed as the unintended consequences for social stability when expressing free opinions.

4. Spinoza's response for imperfectly rational readers

Garber provides an important challenge to Spinoza's defence of the freedom to philosophize. That is, whether his philosophy might unintentionally lead to immoral conduct or disillusionment of faith. This critique relies on the claim that ordinary people must understand doctrines of faith anthropomorphically, that these doctrines are strictly false, and once found out that it could disillusion people of obedience or moral conduct. However, I think there is more flexibility in the interpretations of the doctrines than Garber allows. I argue, the doctrines can be rationalized in different ways. Further, that the teachings of moral conduct are itself considered by Spinoza to be simple and understandable truths. From this concluding that undermining anthropomorphic interpretations would not necessarily undermine obedience to teachings of moral conduct for Spinoza.

4.1 Flexibility of the doctrines

Spinoza argues that the doctrines of faith can be interpreted in multiple ways. For instance, for the particular case of what God is and whether he could be considered a model to emulate, Spinoza does seem to include some interpretations in Spinozistic terms of how you could consider God a model for true life, which he would consider correct. Spinoza (TTP 14.30) argues:

> …it doesn't matter, as far as faith is concerned:
>
> [i] what God (*or* that model of true life) is, whether he is fire, spirit, light, thought etc., or
>
> [ii] how he is a model of true life, whether because he has a just and merciful heart, or because all things exist and act through him (and hence that we too understand through him, and see through him, what is truly right, and good). (TTP 14.30)

Thus, there seem to be two disjunctive interpretations which allow for both anthropomorphic and Spinozistic understandings. The former interpretation views God as just and merciful in a

more anthropomorphic sense. The latter interpretation sees God as the cause through which we discern what is right. The second interpretation would seem to then place the judgement of God not in anthropomorphic terms, as an actual judge, but instead in accordance with a more Spinozistic sense. That is, where through knowledge and love of God, thus "through" God as Spinoza (TTP 4.12) argues, one is truly blessed and as pursuing the highest good. While the latter is more correct, both seem to convey a common moral principle for Spinoza, that sees God as providing understanding for how one should live. Thus, the anthropomorphic interpretation is strictly false, but not in the moral principle it conveys.

This flexibility in interpretation seems to coincide with how Spinoza considers anthropomorphic interpretations to be wrong in his other works, as discussed in the Ethics. As Laerke (2021, 99) notes, Spinoza sees most people's mistaken views of God as terminological. Spinoza holds, all people have an adequate idea of God (E2p47), but often associate God with what is easier to imagine. Thus, associating the wrong words or terms with God:

> …they cannot imagine God, as they can bodies, and that they have joined the name *God* to the images of things which they are used to seeing. Men can hardly avoid this, because they are continually affected by bodies. And indeed, most errors consist only in our not rightly applying names to things. (E2p47s)

Therefore, there is some evidence that mistaken views on the doctrines, at least concerning the general moral principles, could be more terminological in Spinoza's framework. This seems further supported, as Spinoza also states of the doctrines that he does not consider them contrary to reason, and thus they seems open for a rationalistic interpretation:

> For if you consider the precepts of Theology taken in this sense, *or* its teachings concerning life, you will find that it agrees with reason; if you consider its intent and end, you will find that it contains nothing contrary to reason. That's why it is common to everyone. (TTP 15.24)

Garber, however, argues that this kind of interpretation of the doctrines does not solve the problem of ordinary people being disillusioned. For faith to be effective, what matters is whether most people believe the doctrines to be true as *they* understand them, rather than a

complex interpretation of a philosopher. Even if we accept that Spinoza holds the more flexible position above, Garber (2008, 179) contends this still poses a problem: the effectiveness of these doctrines would depend too heavily on the authority of philosophers.

Garber (2008, 179) argues this parallels Spinoza's own critique of Maimonides in the TTP. According to Spinoza (TTP 7.77), Maimonides' position holds that all scriptural passages in religious texts have to be true in accordance with reason. Spinoza (TTP 7.77) rejects this on the basis that it overly twists the meaning of the scripture towards one's own prejudices and reasoning. In addition, it makes a natural interpretation very unintuitive. Most ordinary people do not have time for complex philosophical demonstrations, according to Spinoza (TTP 7.79). Thus, to be effective it would have to rely on the testimony and authority of philosophers who are ill suited as moral authorities, since "... people would mock rather than venerate them" (TTP 7.79). This is presumably due to their reasoning being inaccessible, and because Spinoza holds that philosophers can err (TTP 7.79).

While I agree with Garber that this flexibility does not fully resolve the problem, it does show that the doctrines allow room for reinterpretation. Additionally, I think it also indicates that Spinoza's emphasis is more on the general moral principles behind the interpretation, rather than the exact interpretation themselves. If ordinary people can have a correct understanding of the moral principles, which Spinoza thinks are simple to understand, then it would seem less likely that they would abandon those principles when shown their initial interpretation is wrong.

4.2 Is obedience undermined?

Garber's argument hinges on the claim that obedience is undermined when anthropomorphic interpretations are disproven. However, if people's beliefs of religious doctrines, concerning

moral principles, contain partial truths – and if, as I argue, their understanding of moral teachings are also rational – then it becomes less clear whether obedience is really at risk.

Spinoza claims that religion primarily aims at teaching obedience, and that these teachings are simple and rational. Thus, despite teaching such obedience through inaccurate, non-rational stories, the intent of what is taught is rational. Based on this, I argue that Spinoza's philosophy may challenge the terminology by which people conceptualize God and initially learn moral lessons, but that this does not necessarily undermine their grasp of moral conduct. Rather, it is plausible that upon being disillusioned of anthropomorphic understandings, people would seek new ways to rationalize and interpret what they regard as morally true, thereby leaving their obedience intact.

Spinoza clearly states that the aim of scripture is to teach obedience, but he adds that it does so by cultivating a good heart or virtuous disposition:

> We said in the preceding Chapter that the purpose of Scripture is only to teach obedience. No one can deny this. Who does not see that each Testament is nothing but a training in obedience, and that neither Testament has any other aim than that men should obey from a true heart? (14.6)

As previously mentioned, obedience consists chiefly in loving your neighbour as yourself. This Spinoza considers to be the rational foundations of scripture and religion, even if they are taught through simplified, or anthropomorphic, stories:

> Next, although religion as the Apostles preached it by relating the simple story of Christ does not fall under reason, nevertheless, by the natural light everyone can easily appreciate its most important themes, which, like the whole of Christ's teachings, consists chiefly in moral lessons. (TTP 11.15)

These moral lessons, Spinoza emphasizes, are not advanced philosophical doctrines, but instead simple truths that anyone can understand. Such as when he argues:

> …the doctrine of Scripture does not contain lofty speculations, or philosophical matters, but only the simplest things, which anyone, no matter how slow, can perceive. (TTP 13.4)

From these points, it is clear that Spinoza believes most people would learn of doctrines of faith and of moral conduct through inaccurate and simplified stories, if not everyone.

Yet, what these stories are intended to teach – namely, moral truths – is ultimately rational and straightforward. Theology thus plays an important role for Spinoza: it communicates rational moral lessons in a way that people of any intellectual capacity can understand:

> By theology here I understand, in brief, revelation, insofar as it indicates the goal we said Scripture aims at: the principle and manner of obedience, *or* the doctrines of true piety and faith (TTP 15.24)

Building on this foundation, I propose that Spinoza might analogously hold the following view: many of us grow up hearing fictional stories and fables that help us understand the difference between good and bad moral actions. For example, children are told that Santa Claus will judge their actions and put them on the naughty or nice list. However, as we grow up and perform good actions, we come to understand those moral actions as being simply reasonable. That is, we develop an understanding of what good moral conduct is. Thus, even if we come to hear that Santa Claus does not exist, it seems unlikely that someone who has been disillusioned would necessarily abandon the lessons learned about good moral conduct in early childhood.

We see at least some semblance of a response like this from Spinoza when asked for what reason you would accept or obey theological teachings, as they are based on these imaginative narratives. Spinoza (TTP 15.26) acknowledges this as a problem. That is, if we accept it without any reason, then we are acting foolishly, so there must be some justification. However, as Spinoza (TTP 15.27) continues, it cannot be based on reason, as then theology does seem to be under the authority of philosophy, falling into Garber's problem of it being too complex reasoning for most people. Instead, Spinoza responds regarding obedience:

> To this I reply that I maintain unconditionally that the natural light cannot discover this fundamental tenet of theology- or at least that no one yet has demonstrated it. So revelation has been most necessary. Nevertheless, I maintain that we can use our judgement, so that we accept what has already been revealed with at least moral certainty. (TTP 15.26)

Reason might not be enough to start with to initially understand why you should obedient or follow moral conduct. However, Spinoza does maintain that after you learn and understand what moral conduct has been revealed, that you can use your own judgement and reasoning to find moral certainty. Thus, I interpret that Spinoza, if his philosophy does debunk the anthropomorphic understanding of faithful doctrines, would respond that it is more likely that the disillusioned individual would reinterpret the doctrines in accordance with their current understanding of moral conduct, than abandon it altogether. They adjust their judgements, not their understanding of obedience. In this way, obedience – as moral conduct in society – need not be undermined by philosophy. Additionally, this interpretation also makes sense within Spinoza's own response to objections that his work might undermine moral conduct.

4.3 Disingenuous engagement

Conversely, how Spinoza responds against the claims that his work supports immoral conduct, also seems to support the above interpretation. Spinoza admits there are cases where people might claim that his works give greater license for sin, but he believes that this conclusion would be quite irrational and finds the motivations of such people suspect:

> I confess that certain profane men, to whom religion is a burden will be able to take what I have said as greater license to sin, and without any reason, but only to surrender to their sensual pleasure, infer from this that scripture is everywhere faulty and falsified, and so of no authority. (TTP 12.6)

Similarly to people who do understand moral conduct, Spinoza seems to believe that people that act immorally will also look for rationalizations to justify their behaviour. Therefore, such people, according to Spinoza, never understood the reasons for moral behaviour to begin with, not even the anthropomorphic understanding:

> But there is no remedy against people like that. As the old adage goes, you can't say anything so correctly that someone can't distort it by misinterpretation. Anyone who wants to indulge in sensual pleasures can easily find a reason for doing so wherever he likes. Those men long ago who had the original texts, and the ark of the covenant – indeed, the Prophets and Apostles themselves – were no better or more obedient. Everyone, jew and Gentile alike, has always been the same; in every age virtue has been extremely rare. (TTP 12.7)

Therefore, Spinoza's response to potential cases of individuals that interpret his work as promoting immoral behaviour, is that they never understood the work in the first place. Either through ignorance, as they are seemingly interpreting it this way "without any reason" (TTP 12.6), or else intentionally, as they are rationalizing the argument towards their own ambitions and desires. Regardless of how carefully one writes, publishes, or expresses an opinion, such individuals can always find some reason to justify their own desires. This response seems to further indicate that Spinoza does not consider it possible that his philosophy can lead to a genuine disillusionment in the way Garber describes.

However, this still leaves us with the question, as to what exactly Spinoza's boundaries for free philosophizing are. I argue that Spinoza's account of prejudiced or superstitious individuals, and how ambitious individuals take advantage of them, provides a better idea of the boundaries of free philosophizing. The boundaries Spinoza sets are not concerned with the unintended consequences of reason. Rather, the boundaries are the irrational tendencies of people's nature to either disregard reasoned arguments due to prejudice, or else seek to undermine the sovereign's authority for their own ambitions.

5. Ambition and superstition as barriers to free philosophizing

Ambition and superstition are powerful psychological forces that lead to social conflict and intolerance, particularly against those who express disagreement. Drawing on Rosenthal (2003) and Laerke (2021), I argue that in Spinoza's sense these forces inhibit people's ability to philosophize freely and delineates the boundaries of free philosophizing. Spinoza's account of prejudice seems to emphasize that most prejudiced people disregard reasoned arguments, and that it gets in the way of free philosophizing as a style of discourse. In turn ambitious individuals are the greater threat for Spinoza, that a sovereign needs to censor. As they could use superstitions and flattery to undermine the sovereign's authority, and gain influence for themselves at the cost of the public good.

5.1 Ambition and its psychological basis

According to Rosenthal (2003, 322), Spinoza bases his conception of ambition on an account of two interrelated ideas in the Ethics: the conatus doctrine and the imitation of the affects.

First, Rosenthal (2003, 322) explains the conatus doctrine (E3p6) as the striving that each being has to preserve itself. Rosenthal (2003, 322) elaborates that in Spinoza's (E3p28) account, we are often drawn to and find joy in things that help us preserve ourselves in pursuit of this end, and find sadness and seek to eliminate things that go against our self-preservation. Second, in terms of the imitation of the affects (E3p27), Rosenthal (2003, 322) explains that we are emotionally influenced by others and thus we tend to empathize with those whom we imagine to be like us.

Combined, these two notions produce a drive for social approval or praise. As Rosenthal (2003, 323) notes, individuals feel joy when others are joyful and sadness when they are judged negatively. This dynamic creates conditions where individuals seek to conform to

others opinions or else to reshape others' opinions. However, because people have different temperaments, there is often an inevitable clash between individuals, as they disagree on beliefs (Rosenthal 2003, 323). This seems to be especially the case for superstitions. As Spinoza states:

> As easy, then, as it is to take men in with any superstition whatever, it's still just as difficult to make them persist in one and the same superstition. (TTP pref 8)

However, due to this difficulty, this also means that successful superstitions, such as in religions, often become institutionalized which leads to larger group conflicts, as Laerke (2021, 99) notes. That is, according to Spinoza (TTP pref 9), because religion is often embellished with "ceremony and pomp" to have greater weight and influence, whether true or not.

5.2 Superstition and prejudice as limits on reason

According to Laerke (2021, 99), superstitions, at least when institutionalized, feature long standing and deeply rooted forms of prejudice. Prejudices themselves are often equated with opinions and preconceived notions by Spinoza (TTP 2.24), as noted by Curley (Spinoza 2016, 651) in his glossary. These prejudices tend to distort reasoning and impair judgements. Spinoza, for instance, particularly critiques religious authorities as promoting superstitions to influence people's emotions, and not have them reason or judge on their own:

> … immense zeal is brought to bear to embellish religion – whether the religion is true or illusory – with ceremony and pomp, so that it will be thought to have greater weight than any other influence, and so that everyone will always worship it with the utmost deference. The Turks have succeeded so well at this that they consider it a sacrilege even to debate religion; they fill everyone's judgement with so many prejudices that they leave no room in the mind for sound reason, nor even for doubting. (TTP pref 9)

A second feature for superstition then, other than being long standing prejudices, is that it is often driven by emotions rather than reason. As Spinoza states:

> Some say that superstition arises from the fact that all mortals have a certain confused idea of divinity. My account of the cause of superstition clearly entails, first, that all men by nature are subject to superstition; second, that like all mockeries of the mind and impulses of frenzy, it is necessarily very

> fluctuating and inconstant; and finally, that it is protected by hope, hate, anger, and deception because it arises, not from reason, but only from the most powerful affects. (TTP pref 7)

Rosenthal (2003, 324) particularly emphasizes how superstitions are manifested in the case of hope and fear. Humans find themselves in conditions of uncertainty, with uncontrollable, external natural events. As Rosenthal (2003, 324) explains, for Spinoza (E3p18s2), our expectations for the future are uncertain and based on whether we expect our desires to be satisfied or not, which causes us to switch between joy or sadness in an unpleasant way. That is, hoping for good outcomes and fearing the bad outcomes.

In response, people then turn to any available advice, even if it is irrational or superstitious, according to Spinoza (TTP pref.1-2), as it helps them feel in control. A vivid example by Rosenthal (2003, 324) is the stock market. If things go well, people are overconfident in their abilities to predict the market. However, when the market takes a turn for the worse, they turn even to irrational places for advice, such as Wall Street Journal employees telephoning psychics during a crash (Rosenthal 2003, 324). As Rosenthal (2003, 325) notes, the more uncertainty, the greater the fear, or the less knowledge we have, then the greater the risk that we would follow bad advice.

In such contexts, ambitious individuals, who seek to gain influence over others, can exploit fear and uncertainty to gain authority. As Rosenthal (2003, 325) argues, these figures may use superstitious claims either to guide people virtuously – as Spinoza's ideal sovereign interprets laws for the general republic's good – or else manipulate them for personal gain. This can escalate as well, as mentioned before, if groups can form around different superstitions and prejudices. Rosenthal (2003, 325) argues that this can lead to a conflict of beliefs between individuals or even groups of individuals whose leaders use these beliefs in support of their own power.

This provides an interesting account as well, as to what Spinoza might fear from ambitious individuals and superstitions. Superstitions tend to lead to people not really using reason, but basing their judgements off of long-standing prejudices, appeals to authority, or else on emotions such as fear and hope. Further, this creates a platform for ambitious individuals who might seek to exploit the superstitions to further their own authority and power, dividing or undermining the power of the sovereign authority or state.

5.3 Bounds of free philosophizing I: superstition

We can then return to the effects that such psychological accounts have for understanding the bounds of free philosophizing. Spinoza is quite critical of both prejudices and ambition due to the above patterns of behaviours. Those with prejudices, who become more subject to the authority and reasoning of others, would tend to dismiss Spinoza's philosophy, but without reason. Especially if it is institutionalized, and regards religious matters and what is considered pious. This seems to be, for instance, the type of criticism that Spinoza lays out in in the preface:

> As for those who are not philosophers, I am not eager to commend this treatise to them. There's nothing in it which I might hope could please them in any way. I know how stubbornly the mind retains those prejudices the heart has embraced under the guise of piety. I know also that it's as impossible to save the common people from superstition as it is from fear. And I know, finally, that what the common people call constancy is obstinacy. It's not governed by reason but carried away by an impulse to praise or to blame. (Spinoza 2016, TTP pref.33)

Spinoza's criticism of superstition does not seem to be the risk that people might misinterpret his work in such a way as to make them more impious, as in Garber's account. Instead, his concern seems to lie more with the frustration, that prejudiced or superstitious individuals do not use their own judgments or reasoning to evaluate his arguments in an argumentative, candid way. Rather, they are dismissive due to their prejudices. It seems that rather than evaluate the arguments on their own merits, such prejudiced individuals would more dismiss Spinoza's arguments in favour of existing institutional authorities. Thus, one bound on the

freedom to philosophize seems to be that common people's prejudices often comes in the way of being able to engage in reasoned arguments – a concern supported by Laerke (2021, 99-100) who argues that prejudices impair reasoning.

5.4 Bounds of free philosophizing II: ambition

Cases of ambitious and harmful authorities seem to appear when Spinoza discusses clerics who abuse religious superstitions. Steinberg (2010, 219-220) particularly notes this anticlericalism in Spinoza's TTP, suggesting that Spinoza perhaps sees ambitious clerics, who try to turn the common people against the monarch or those that disagree with them, as being the exact seditious characters that would attempt to abuse the freedom to philosophize. Laerke (2021, 109) seems to support this view with the historical context, where it is likely that Spinoza is criticising orthodox Calvinist Theologians in the Dutch Republic, who wished to censor religious sects with differing doctrines.

This theme also seems to be evident from the preface where Spinoza sees everything wrong in the church as stemming from ambitious individuals:

> What's the cause of this evil? Doubtless that religion has commonly consisted in regarding the ministries of the church as position conferring status, its offices as sources of income, and its clergy as deserving the highest honour. For as soon as this abuse began in the Church, the worst men immediately acquired a great desire to administer the sacred offices; the love of propagating divine religion degenerated into sordid greed and ambition; and the temple itself became a theatre, where one hears, not learned ecclesiastics, but orators, each possessed by a longing not to teach the people, but to carry them away with admiration for himself, to censure publicly those who disagree, and to teach only those new and unfamiliar doctrines which the common people most wonder at. This had to lead to great dissension, envy, and hatred, whose violence no passage of time could lessen. (Spinoza 2016, TTP pref. 15)

Therefore, Spinoza seems to be making the following argument: the church has influence over the common people potentially to the point that they could endanger the stability of the state. Particularly, as Laerke (2021, 118-119) argues, through trying to flatter the sovereign to institute privileges or instrumentalise the people's superstitions towards their own ends. This

creates a danger for the sovereign, as ambitious authority figures gain power to make prejudiced individuals hostile towards people that disagree with their authority. Spinoza seems to believe that philosophers, who ideally would support the sovereign's authority in reasoned good faith, might especially be targeted, as they could potentially expose clerical figures to ridicule by rationally disagreeing with their authority:

> If anyone says he has a Spirit other than [reason] which makes him certain of the truth, he's making a false boast. He's speaking only from a prejudice stemming from his affects – or else he's fleeing for protection to sacred things, fearing that he'll be defeated by the Philosophers and exposed to public ridicule. (TTP 15.42)

Thus, when Spinoza speaks of potential dangers in allowing the freedom to philosophize, such as occurs with sedition, it seems that he is speaking more of this type ambition, which might divide the authority and influence in the state.

From the above then, it seems that the true bound of free philosophizing is whether individuals are guided by prejudice and ambition or engage in candid, reasoned, and equal argumentative discourse. This appears to be a key factor in enabling genuine philosophical inquiry and showcasing the boundaries of it. I argue boundaries of prejudice and ambition seems supported by cases of Spinoza's correspondence with Van Blijenbergh and Albert Burgh as well.

5.5 Van Blijenbergh correspondence

The correspondence between Willem van Blijenbergh and Spinoza offers insight into why Spinoza discounts those he sees as prejudiced from truly being able to engage in free philosophising. Second, it reveals his expectations of philosophical discourse, namely, that it should aim solely at truth through reason, rather than appeal to authority or commands.

In the initial correspondence, Van Blijenbergh tries to ingratiate himself with Spinoza by stating that they both aim at finding truth. In his first letter to Spinoza, Van Blijenbergh writes concerning questions of the then recently written treatise, *Descartes "Principles"* and the *Metaphysical Thoughts.* He introduces himself as:

> …one who, driven only by a desire for pure truth...strives to plant his feet firmly in knowledge... has no other end than the truth, who seeks to acquire, by science, neither honour nor riches, but only truth. (Letter 18 IV/80)

Van Blijenbergh emphasises that his philosophical aim aligns with Spinoza's: the pursuit of truth, seemingly by means of science and natural philosophy. Spinoza responds in kind indicating his interest in starting an intellectual exchange:

> Since I too, aim at nothing else, this made me resolve not only to grant completely your request…, but also to do everything on my part to bring us to a closer acquaintance and genuine friendship. (Letter 19 IV/86).

What seems to especially draw Spinoza into this correspondence is Van Blijenbergh's apparent sincerity in pursuing philosophy and engaging in genuine intellectual exchange. Spinoza seems to affirm this fact by his reply:

> To me, of the things outside my power, I esteem none more than being allowed the honour of entering into a pact of friendship with people who sincerely love the truth; for I believe that of things outside our power we can love none tranquilly, except such people. Because the love they bear to one another is based on the love each has for knowledge of the truth, it is impossible to destroy it as not to embrace the truth once it has been perceived. (Letter 19 IV/87)

Thus, from the correspondence so far, Spinoza seems to support Laerke's (2021, 62) idea of what free philosophising entails. That is, candid, reasoned, and equal discussion in pursuit of truth and seeming to enter an intellectual friendship. However, if philosophical discussion treats others as equal interlocutors, if you must use reasoned argument, and must be candid and honest in your opinions, then appeal to authorities or prejudices would be looked down on, as it does not relate to your own candid and argumentative opinion. This is particularly an issue that appears as the correspondence with Van Blijenbergh unfolds. The turning point comes when Van Blijenbergh reveals his principles of philosophising:

> ...the clear and distinct conception of my intellect and the revealed word, or will, of God. According to the one I strive to be a lover of truth, according to the other a Christian philosopher. Whenever it happens, after a long investigation, that my natural knowledge either seems to contradict this word, or is not easily reconciled with it, this word has so much authority with me that I suspect the conceptions I imagine to be clear, rather than put them above and against the truth I think I find prescribed to me in that book. (Letter 20 IV/97)

I believe here, Van Blijenbergh seems a good example of a prejudiced thinker, which Spinoza critiques in his discussion of superstitions. That is, those who subordinate reason to religious authority, making philosophy the handmaid of theology. The position here being, that rather than evaluating arguments based on their rational merit, Van Blijenbergh would, in Spinoza's sense, defer his judgement to scriptural interpretations. This especially seems to relate to Spinoza's criticism of Alfkahar's position – whom Spinoza takes as a defender of making philosophy the handmaid of theology. Spinoza interprets Alfkahar as holding that we're bound to accept as true whatever scripture affirms and reject what it denies (TTP 15.15). Excluding arguments that there are contradictory passages in scripture (TTP 15.19), Spinoza (TTP 15.3) mainly fears that making philosophy the handmaid of theology would leave you ignorant or include ancient prejudices in your own judgements by not following what your reason shows otherwise. For Spinoza, you have to make judgements: either with reason, which might contradict authorities, or without it, which would be foolish:

> If without reason, then of course we're acting foolishly and without judgement. If with reason, then we embrace Scripture only by the command of reason. We would not, therefore, embrace it if it were contrary to reason. (TTP 15.9)

Unsurprisingly then, Spinoza's response is to break off the correspondence, not seeing the possibility for a genuine intellectual and free philosophical exchange if their principles of what is reasonable is radically different:

> When I read your first letter; I thought our opinions nearly agreed. But from the second, which I received on the 21st of this month, I see that I was quite mistaken, and that we disagree not only about the things ultimately to be derived from first principles, but also about the first principles themselves. So, I hardly believe that we can instruct one another with our letters. For I see that no demonstration,

> however solid it may be according to the Laws of Demonstration, has weight with you unless it agrees with that explanation which you, or Theologians known to you, attribute to sacred scripture. (Letter 21 IV/126)

Therefore, this correspondence of Spinoza seems to exemplify one of the boundaries you encounter in free philosophising. If free philosophising is candid, argumentative, and equal exchanges of ideas in pursuit of truth, Spinoza believes that appealing to the judgements or prejudices of authority figures, on the basis of it being authority figures, hinders free philosophising. Crucially, Spinoza seems to emphasise that he believes that Van Blijenbergh would not accept philosophical demonstrations, but only views which he, or theologians that he defers to, would attribute to scripture. If he admits his judgement to the authority of theologians, this admits only their prejudices in argumentation as authoritative. Similarly, if he admits only the authority of scriptural interpretations, then outside moral matters it would likely include ancient prejudices and superstitions in one's judgements as well. In addition to the issue that you would have to give reasons for your scriptural interpretation. This, for Spinoza, places Van Blijenbergh among prejudiced individuals, who, despite claiming to seek truth, are not likely to be hindered from participating in free philosophizing.

5.6 Albert Burgh correspondence

In the case of Albert Burgh, Spinoza seems to respond to Burgh as a typical case where someone is misled by ambitious authorities and becomes hostile through superstitions and bad authorities. The danger of ambition then, as showcased through this correspondence, is the degree to which superstitious individuals can be motivated to be hostile towards others that disagree by the influence of ambitious authorities.

Edwin Curley (2010, 11) examines the correspondence between Spinoza and Albert Burgh, a former close friend who in 1675 wrote urging Spinoza to convert to Catholicism. Curley

focuses on how this exchange reflects Spinoza's views of religion as often shaped by superstitions and prejudice – though still compatible with a practical universal faith. Unlike Van Blijenbergh, Burgh demands Spinoza's conversion and accuses him outright of corrupting others, similar to what the case of disillusionment implied in Garber's account:

> I have indeed written this letter to you with a truly Christian intention: first, that you may know the love I have for you, even though you are a Pagan; and second, that I may call upon you not to persist in corrupting others too. (Letter 67 IV/291)

Curley (2010, 11) especially notes how Burgh's tone becomes abusive and hostile towards Spinoza, claiming that Spinoza has been deceived by the devil:

> Though you're a very intelligent man and have received a mind endowed by God with excellent gifts, though you love and are eager for the truth, nevertheless you've let yourself be led astray and deceived by that wretched and very proud Prince of wicked spirits. What is your whole philosophy but sheer illusion and a fantasy? Yet you commit to it, not only your peace of mind in this life, but the eternal salvation of your soul. (Letter 67 IV/281)

In response to Burgh's claim that he has been misled by the Devil, Spinoza directly challenges the idea that God, being infinite and just, would allow this kind of deception without punishment. Thus, he commits to using reason, to try and undermine Burg's claims:

> You lament that I allow myself to be led astray by the Prince of wicked Spirits. But I beg you to be of good heart and return to yourself. When you were in possession of your faculties, unless I'm mistaken, you worshiped an infinite God, by whose power absolutely all things happen and are preserved. But now you are dreaming of a Prince, an enemy of God, who, contrary to the will of God, leads astray and deceives most men- good men, in fact, are rare- and that for that reason God hands these men over to this master of wicked acts, to be tortured for eternity. The divine justice therefore allows the Devil to deceive men with impunity. But the men the Devil has wretchedly deceived and led astray are by no means without punishment. (Letter 76 IV/319a)

The argument from Spinoza, as Curley (2010, 15) explains, is that if there is an infinite God, infinitely just and powerful, then the devil cannot deceive without God's permission and God would not punish those deceived by his permission. Thus, as Curley (2010, 15) argues on this, and as I agree, Spinoza seems to reject the type of scepticism that Burgh puts forth based on his reasoning that Burgh's position seems to be absurd. In fact, Spinoza goes further to claim that Burgh holds delusional or irrational views through his superstitions. That is, he claims superstitions such as held by Burgh fundamentally contradict common sense:

> Would these absurdities still have to be tolerated if you worshipped an infinite and eternal God, instead of the one whom Chatillon, with impunity, fed to his horses in the city of Tienen? And you weep I am wretched? You call my Philosophy, which you have never seen, a fable? O, young man, bereft of understanding, who has bewitched you, so that you believe you are eating that highest and eternal being, and have him in your intestines? (Letter 76 IV/319a)

Spinoza seems to believe that Burgh's belief in superstitions, such as he alludes of the eucharist, are absurd even if widely believed at the time. As Curley (2010, 17) notes, the fact that such superstition are believed does not indicate the truth of it for Spinoza, but rather the sad truth that human affairs lead people to easily believe anything whatsoever. Thus, superstitions by themselves, just like authoritative prejudices in the case of Van Blijenbergh, cannot count as reasoned arguments for believing something. Thus, Spinoza seems to believe the characterizations of his philosophy by superstitious individuals to be disingenuous or not coming from a genuine engagement with it.

However, differing from Van Blijengergh cases, Spinoza also seems to highlight the influence of ambitious authority figures on superstitions, as he claims Burgh is listening to untrustworthy figures due to fear, rather than reason:

> So why do you want me to believe that my demonstrations come from the Prince of wicked Spirits, whereas yours are inspired by God – a especially since I see, and your letter clearly indicates, that having become a slave to the church, you've been guided not so much by the love of God as by fear of hell, the only cause of superstition. [NS, LC: For I ask you], is this your humility, that you don't trust at all in yourself, but in others, whom many, many people condemn? (Letter 76 IV/323a)

In this way, the crux of critique against Burgh is made clear: Burgh's submission to religious authorities – whom Spinoza believes are often driven by ambition, superstition, and fear – prevents him from using his own faculties of reason. In fact, Spinoza seems to claim that Burgh is acting completely irrational. Spinoza challenges Burgh, saying that he is not humble and candid with his reasoning, but is acting at the behest of untrustworthy authority out of fear. In addition to making him hostile towards people that disagree with those authority figures, even former friends.

Burgh's case seems to show just how much influence ambitious authority figures can have over others through superstitions. For the sovereign of a state, who wishes to facilitate

stability and not to have his authority contradicted by others, ambitious individuals can potentially cause schisms. This is, for instance, one of the final points that Spinoza emphasizes in the TTP:

> …the real schismatics are those who condemn the writings of others and seditiously incite the unruly mob against the writers, not the writers themselves, who for the most part write only for the learned and call only reason to their aid. Again, the real troublemakers are those who want, in a free Republic, to take way freedom of judgement, even though it can't be suppressed. (TTP 20.42)

Spinoza's main concern does not seem to be the threat of reasoning leading people astray, but the opposite: that people's natural psychology of ambition interacts with superstition to irrationally divide power within the state, risking that upstart authority figures can use that influence to undermine the stability of the state. That is why Spinoza allows censorship in cases where people try to create schisms in the republic, such as inciting a mob against the sovereign, but not just for any reasoned view that might be interpreted differently by others.

6. Conclusion:

Spinoza's defence of the freedom to philosophize, as articulated in the TTP, rests on a careful balance between freedom of conscience and expression, and limitations for the stability of the state. While Spinoza upholds the values of free philosophizing for societal well-being, he does place limits on expression, especially as regarding potential seditious behaviour, which constitutes actions that necessarily undermines the sovereign's authority and the agreement that everyone is subject to the same laws.

One tension in this defence I attempted to resolve, as highlighted by Daniel Garber (2008) – is that Spinoza's own work might fall under his criteria for censorship. That is, the claim that Spinoza's philosophy might disillusion people's beliefs in an anthropomorphic God and, insofar as their obedience and moral conduct are underpinned by such beliefs, this could in fact push people to not be reliable citizens in maintaining societal stability.

I argue against this by first showing that the doctrines that Spinoza undermines, have more flexibility in how they can be interpreted. From this, I argue that individuals who come to learn of moral conduct through strictly false stories, if lessons of moral conduct is considered simple and rational itself, would likely rationalize their belief systems to account for their moral beliefs in a new way. Conversely, I argue that individuals that do claim Spinoza's philosophy undermines moral conduct, or justifies immoral conduct, are also considered by Spinoza to be disingenuously engaging with his work, seeking to rationalize their own immoral conduct.

The true reason for limits on the freedom to philosophize is not imperfectly rational individuals that may be disillusioned by reasoned arguments. Instead, it is the natural and somewhat irrational factors of ambition and superstitions. I particularly examine the cases of how ambitious individuals influence others through superstition, and how such superstition

and prejudice often get in the way of free philosophizing. Prejudices act as appeals to authority, which are not argumentative as such. This gets in the way of free philosophical discourse, as I examine in the case of Spinoza's correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh. In turn, ambition becomes dangerous, when it can use superstitions to drive schisms in a republic. Actions such as these could be rightfully censored according to Spinoza, as it endangers the stability of the state and the authority of the sovereign. Spinoza's correspondence with Albert Burgh in particular showcases the danger and influence that superstition has, especially when ambitious and untrustworthy individuals can use them to gain authority. This shifts the boundaries of the freedom to philosophize in Spinoza's sense as not being the risk of misleading others, but rather on the limitations of human nature, where people are often unable to philosophize freely if they defer to others' authority regarding matters of their own judgement and reasoning. Or else, when in pursuit of their own interests and goal, against the public good, ambition drives division in a society. Thus, in line with Spinoza's broader framework, free philosophizing, when allowed, enables virtuous people to engage the sovereign authority rationally, candidly, and on an equal basis. However, it is censored when individuals are not genuinely acting on rational argumentation but instead seeking to use superstitions to motivate others towards their own advantage and authority.

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