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SPINOZA ON THE POLITICAL USES OF SUPERSTITION

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SPINOZA ON THE POLITICAL USES OF SUPERSTITION

In the very first sentence of the preface his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*), Spinoza comments on how we come to be bound by superstition: “If men could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if fortune were always favorable to them, they would never be possessed by superstition.” [G III 5] Superstition is one of the central themes of the preface that follows. Spinoza explains what it is, how it arises, and generally bemoans the tendency people have toward superstitious beliefs and practices. One could reasonably expect that one of the main themes of the book that follows will be the elimination of superstition, and its replacement by a more enlightened form of religion at very least, if not by reason. At the very end of ch. 11 of the *TTP* Spinoza writes: “How happy our age would surely be now, if we saw religion again free of all superstition!” [*TTP* 11.24, G III 158] But, I shall argue, the argument is more complicated than that. In the end, I argue, Spinoza does not eliminate superstition completely, but, in a way, transforms it into something positive, something that will lead people to virtue and support the stability of society.

Let me begin the argument by examining what Spinoza means by superstition in the *TTP* and other related texts. The idea of superstition in the period is somewhat vague. The Academie Française dictionary of 1694 defines it as follows:

Opinion vaine, mal fondée en fait de religion. Fausse confiance en de certaines paroles, en de certaines ceremonies, ausquelles s'attachent les personnes foibles & simples.

Superstition seems to be just a general irrationality, especially about matters religious, an irrationality associated with the common people. This is quite consonant with the way Spinoza often uses the term. In ch. 7 of the *TTP* he writes that superstition is an evil “which teaches men to scorn reason and nature, and to admire and venerate only what is contrary to both of these.” [*TTP* 7.4; G III 97] In a letter he wrote to Oldenburg in November of December 1675, he writes that “the chief distinction I make between religion and superstition is that the latter is founded on ignorance, the former on wisdom.” [Letter 73, G IV 307-8]

But Spinoza also seems to have a more precise idea about what superstition is supposed to be. In this more precise sense of the term, superstition seems connected especially with fear. In a letter to Albert Burgh from December 1675 he writes: “...you have become the slave of this Church [i.e. the Roman Catholic Church] not so much through love of God as fear of Hell, which is the single cause of superstition.” [Letter 76, G IV 323] In the *TTP*, Spinoza seems to link fear and superstition in a more general way. In the preface he writes:

... we could give a great many examples which would show most clearly that men struggle with superstition only so long as they are in fear; that all the things they have ever worshipped in illusory religion have been nothing but apparitions,

the delusions of a sad and timid mind; and finally that seers have held the greatest control over the common people, and been most dangerous to their Kings, when states have been in the greatest difficulties. [*TTP* pref § 6]

How exactly is this supposed to work? The kind of fear that Spinoza has in mind, I think, arises from the lack of control we have over things in the world. Here, again, is the opening passage of the preface:

If men could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if fortune were always favorable to them, they would never be possessed by superstition. But often they are in such straits that they cannot decide on any plan. For the most part they vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear, because of the uncertain goods of fortune, which they desire immoderately. [*TTP* pref. § 1]

In particular, the fear that moves them to superstition seems to be the fear that we may lose things that are important to us. Again, in the preface he writes:

... we see that the men most thoroughly enslaved to every kind of superstition are the ones who immoderately desire uncertain goods, and that they all invoke divine aid with prayers and unmanly tears, especially when they are in danger and cannot help themselves. Because reason cannot show a certain way to the hollow things they desire, they call it blind, and human wisdom vain. The delusions of the imagination, on the other hand, and dreams and childish follies they believe to be divine answers. [*TTP* pref. § 4]

The superstition to which this fear leads us is the positing of a God who imposes a kind of order in the world, an order that isn't really there. We want to know what will give us some certainty, will help us become rich or successful, and will help us to get the material things in the world. We therefore suppose order and patterns in nature, hidden messages from God where there are none. When fearful people become frustrated with reason, which "cannot show a certain way to the hollow things they desire," "they believe God rejects the wise, and writes his decrees, not in the mind, but in the entrails of animals, and that fools, madmen and birds predict his decrees by divine inspiration and prompting." [*TTP* pref. § 4] And they then pray to this God to help them overcome their fear by ensuring that they can get what they want.

This, then, is superstition: the belief that there is a hidden order imposed by God (or the gods), and that if we pray in the appropriate way, we will gain the control over our lives that we seek, currently without success. This teleological conception of nature is, in greater generality, what Spinoza develops more systematically and in more detail in the appendix to E1.

In E1app, Spinoza begins by reviewing what he takes himself to have proved in the body of E1, that God exists, that he is unique, etc. But then he turns to the main business of the appendix, addressing directly the "prejudices that could prevent my demonstrations from being perceived." This resembles the strategy of others of his

philosophical contemporaries. Bacon begins his *Instauratio magna* project with an account of the Idols, inborn tendencies of thought that tend to lead us astray, which must be corrected before we can find the truth. Descartes begins the *Meditations* by doubting everything he formerly believed, in order to withdraw the mind from the senses and, more generally, to clear the mind of the Aristotelian assumptions that we naturally come upon in the careless years of our youth, and which are reinforced by our parents and our teachers. Spinoza, too, thinks that we are all naturally led into errors that cloud the mind and must be eliminated before we can perceive the truth. But he offers a rather different suggestion about where we go wrong:

All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God. [G II 77]

In short, the central prejudice that Spinoza recognizes is the teleological conception of nature, the idea that everything has a purpose, given to it by God. Spinoza then goes on to offer a diagnosis of how this prejudice arises, to give a series of arguments intended to attack it directly, and to give an account of the other errors that this prejudice lead us to make.

Most interesting from the perspective of my interests is the account that Spinoza gives of why people all have a tendency to hold a teleological view nature. People begin, Spinoza says, with a mistaken belief that they have a free will. And since they always act for an end, that is, they do that which leads to their own advantage, they assume that other people do as well. When they cannot learn directly from other people what those ends are in some particular case, they infer what those ends must be by imagining themselves in their circumstances, and reflecting on what might have motivated them to do what they do. In this way people “necessarily judge the temperament of other men from their own temperament.” [G II 78] Looking outside the world of human actions, people notice things that are useful for them: “e.g., eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish.” And so people behave much as they do when confronted with another person whose behavior they seek to understand: they imagine themselves in the position of the divinities, and reflect on what might have motivated them to do something similar. In particular, they infer that these features of the world are there for a purpose as well, put there by a God or gods for their benefit: “they had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers of nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.” Naturally, they assume that these Gods do things for the same kinds of reasons that humans act. “Hence, they maintained that the Gods direct all things for the use of men in order to bind men to them and be held by men in the highest honor.” And this, in turn, led people to worship this God, “so that God might love them above all the rest, and direct the whole of Nature according to the needs of their blind desire and insatiable greed.” And here we are on the familiar ground that we saw covered by the

preface to the *TTP*: it is our cupidity that leads us to pray to God in order to satisfy our “blind desire and insatiable greed.” In this way, Spinoza writes, “this prejudice was changed into superstition, and struck deep roots in their minds.” [G II 79]

In this way the teleological conception of nature in the appendix to E1 is closely linked with the discussion of superstition in the *TTP*. At the core of superstition in both texts is what Spinoza considers to be the central prejudice that prevents us from grasping the truth about things: the teleological conception of nature. It is a central goal of the *Ethics* to eradicate this prejudice to which we are all strongly inclined and replace our mistaken teleological conception of nature with a true conception of God and the nature of things, and in this way eliminate the grounds of superstition altogether. But, I claim, Spinoza takes a very different strategy in the *TTP*.

At this point, I would like to turn back to the *TTP*, to themes that may seem at first entirely unrelated to the question of superstition, obedience to moral law and what Spinoza calls the “dogmas of universal faith.” (In my account of these themes, I am drawing heavily on an earlier paper of mine, “Should Spinoza have Published his Philosophy?”)

In the *TTP* Spinoza argues that the central teaching of revelation is not knowledge, strictly speaking, but a *command*: “For from Scripture itself we have perceived its general tendency without any difficulty or ambiguity: to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself.” [*TTP* 12.34, G III 165; cf. *TTP* 14.9, G III 174] And insofar as the central teaching of revealed religion is a command, the central teaching of the Scriptures must be seen as *obedience to this command*. In the title to chapter 13, for example, Spinoza notes that the Scripture “...does not aim at anything but obedience....” [G III 167] A bit later in the chapter, Spinoza notes that “...the purpose of Scripture was not to teach the sciences. For from this we can easily judge that it requires nothing from men but obedience, and condemns only stubbornness, not ignorance.” [*TTP* 13.7, G III 168]

The love of God and of one’s neighbor is, for Spinoza, central to the practice of religion. Not surprisingly, this is what reason teaches as well, as Spinoza argues in the *Ethics*. In E4p37 Spinoza proves that “The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this Desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater.” The greatest good is, of course to live according to the guidance of reason, that’s to say, to know God [E4p27-28], and insofar as other people share this nature with us, they will be useful to us, that is, capable of entering into a stable society with us. [E4p29-37] That is to say, the rational person loves his neighbor as himself, because in doing so, he makes his neighbor a suitable member of a common society. And the idea that insofar as we are rational we love God above all is a central conclusion of E5, the ground of eternity and beatitude. It is not surprising that these same conclusions, conceived now as commands to be obeyed rather than the consequences of rational deliberation appear as the teachings of revelation. As Spinoza

argues in opening chapters of the *TTP*, there is nothing that we can learn from revelation that couldn't be learned from reason, except obedience itself.<sup>1</sup>

But imperfectly rational people can't learn to love their neighbors and God as eternal truths which can be established through reason. They need to be convinced to regard them as commands, and they need to be convinced to obey them. This, for Spinoza, is where faith enters. He notes:

... everyone is agreed that Scripture was written and published, not for the wise only, but for all people, of every age and kind. From these considerations alone it follows with the greatest evidence that the only thing we are bound by Scriptural command to believe is what is absolutely necessary to carry out this command. So this command itself is the unique standard of the whole universal faith. Only through it are we to determine all the dogmas of that faith, those everyone is bound to accept. [*TTP* 14.10, G III 174]

This leads directly to Spinoza's definition of faith:

... 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. [*TTP* 14.13, G III 175]<sup>2</sup>

Faith involves thinking things, that is, holding the opinion that certain propositions are true. These propositions are beliefs such that *if* you hold them, then you are necessarily obedient to the

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<sup>1</sup> "...the power of reason does not go so far as to enable it to determine that men can be blessed by obedience alone, without understanding things. But Theology teaches nothing but this, and does not command anything but obedience." [*TTP* 15.22-23, G III 184]; "Nevertheless, we cannot demonstrate by reason whether the foundation of Theology – that men are saved only by obedience – is true or false. So someone may raise against us too the objection: why then do we believe it? If we embrace it without reason, like blind men, then we too act foolishly and without judgment. On the other hand, if we want to maintain that we can demonstrate this foundation rationally, then Theology will be a part of Philosophy, and ought not to be separated from it." [*TTP* 15.26-27, G III 185]

<sup>2</sup> The Latin is somewhat delicate here, and my translation departs somewhat from Curley's. The Latin reads as follows: "Ut itaque rem totam ordine ostendam, a fidei definitione incipiam, quae ex hoc dato fundamento sic definiri debet, nempe quid nihil aliud sit quam de Deo talia sentire, quibus ignoratis tollitur erga Deum obedientia, et hac obedientia posita necessario ponuntur." The verb "sentire" here means to think or believe in the sense of holding an opinion: it is in this sense that Spinoza talks of "...thinking such things about God..." Curley translates the next phrase as "...that if the person is not familiar with them, obedience to God is destroyed..." The translation 'familiar' for 'ignoratis' doesn't ring true to me. Given the 'sentire' in the previous clause, Spinoza seems to be saying something stronger, that the person does not hold the opinions in question. I have tried to capture this with the translation: "...if the person disregards them." I have also changed Curley's translation in the last phrase. He writes: "...if obedience to God is posited, these beliefs are necessarily posited." While we are certainly dealing with beliefs, the word 'belief' does not appear in the Latin.

central command of revealed religion. And similarly, *if* you are obedient to the central command of revealed religion, then you necessarily hold those beliefs.

But what exactly are the beliefs that, for Spinoza, are taken to support obedience? The issue receives its longest and most careful development in chapter 14, where Spinoza sets out what he calls the “dogmas of universal faith [*fidei universalis dogmata*].”<sup>3</sup> Spinoza begins his exposition as follows:

And I shall not be afraid now to enumerate the dogmas of universal faith, that is, the fundamental principles of the whole of Scripture, all of which ... must tend to this point: that there is a supreme being, who loves Justice and Lovingkindness; that everyone, if he is to be saved, is bound to obey this being and to worship him by practicing Justice and Lovingkindness toward his neighbor. [*TTP* 14.24, G III 177]

He then enumerates the dogmas as follows:

- I. 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;
- II. that he is unique; for no one can doubt that this too is absolutely required for supreme devotion, admiration and love towards God; devotion, admiration and love arise only from the excellence of one by comparison with the others;
- III. that he is present everywhere, or that everything is open to him; for if things were believed to be hidden from him, or people were not aware that he sees all, they would have doubts about the equity of his Justice, by which he directs all things, or at least they would not be aware of it;
- IV. that he has the supreme right and dominion over all things, and does nothing because he is compelled by a law, but acts only from his absolute good pleasure and special grace; for everyone is bound absolutely to obey him, but he is not bound to obey anyone;
- V. that the worship of God and obedience to him consist only in Justice and Lovingkindness, that is, in the love of one's neighbor;
- VI. that all and only those who obey God by living in this way are saved, the rest, who live under the control of the pleasures, being lost; if men did not firmly believe this, there would be no reason why they should prefer to obey God rather than their pleasures;
- VII. finally, that God pardons the sins of those who repent.... [*TTP* 14.25-28, G III 177-8]

These then are the propositions which, if genuinely believed, that is, genuinely held to be true by someone, will guarantee that he will be obedient to the command to love God and his neighbor. And, in turn, anyone who is obedient to the command is obligated to believe these.

Before unpacking these articles of faith and understanding their connection with obedience, let me begin with the notion of obedience itself. Spinoza's conception of obedience is greatly

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<sup>3</sup> Again, I have departed from Curley's translation. He translates this as “tenets of *the* universal faith.” While it is, of course, correct, Latin doesn't have a definite article and any such addition involves an interpretive decision. His translation suggests that the dogmas form the basis of a kind of universal religion, a reading that seems wrong to me for reasons I will indicate below.

clarified in one of the later notes he added to the *TTP*. The note is added to a text from chapter 16, where Spinoza writes:

No one knows, by nature, that he is bound by any obedience to God; indeed, no one can attain this knowledge by reason at all, but only by revelation, confirmed by signs. [*TTP* 16.53, G III 198]

In his note, Spinoza makes the following remarks:

...the love of God is not obedience, but a virtue which is necessarily in the man who rightly knows God. Obedience is concerned with the will of the one commanding, not with the necessity and truth of the matter. ... [W]e have shown that the divine laws seem to us to be laws, that is, things instituted just as long as we do not know their cause. But when this is known, they thereby cease to be laws, and we embrace them not as laws, but as eternal truths. That is, obedience passes into love, which proceeds from true knowledge as necessarily as light does from the sun. So we can, indeed, love God according to the guidance of reason, but we cannot obey him according to the guidance of reason, since by reason we can neither embrace divine laws as divine so long as we are ignorant of their cause, nor conceive God as establishing those laws like a prince. [G III 264]<sup>4</sup>

Spinoza explains it in similar terms in a letter to Willem van Blyenbergh on 5 January 1665:

I say that Scripture, being particularly adapted to the needs of the common people, continually speaks in merely human fashion, for the common people are incapable of understanding higher things. That is why I think that all that God has revealed to the Prophets as necessary for salvation is set down in the form of law, and in this way the Prophets made up a whole parable depicting God as a king and lawgiver, because he had revealed the means that led to salvation and perdition, and was the cause thereof. These means, which are simply causes, they called laws, and wrote them down in the form of laws; salvation and perdition, which are simply effects necessarily resulting from these means, they represented as reward and punishment. All their words were adjusted to the framework of this parable rather than to truth.<sup>5</sup>

Spinoza's position seems to be this. Now, for the person who has "true knowledge," loving God is something we do of necessity, "as necessarily as light [passes from] the sun." However, not everyone is in this cognitive state. For those who aren't, they must conceive of loving God as if it were the command of a prince. In this way, while the perfectly rational person will love God, he will not do so out of *obedience*, strictly speaking: knowing that God is not the kind of being that gives commands, to the extent that we are rational, we simply *can't* obey God. Obedience to the moral law is, in this way, appropriate only for those who follow the moral law because they believe

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<sup>4</sup> The notes on the *TTP* that we have seem to have been copied from notes that Spinoza made on his own copy of the *TTP*. On these notes, see Lagrée and Moreau's remarks in the introduction to their edition of the *TTP*, pp. 28-37.

<sup>5</sup> G II 92-3 (Shirley 809). Thanks to Andrea Sangiacomo for calling this passage to my attention.



that they are commanded to do so, and not because they understand through reason why they should. The rational person embraces the moral laws “not as laws, but as eternal truths.”<sup>6</sup>

This, in turn, illuminates the way in which the dogmas of universal faith are connected with obedience. The person with limited intellect doesn’t see how the imperative to love God and his neighbor are eternal truths, which once understood must be followed. Instead, he sees them as laws, commands, like the laws that a prince decrees for his subjects. If he genuinely believes that there is a God who is a supreme being, merciful, just, and worthy of love, and at the same time is a law-giver and a judge, omnipresent, omnipotent, and whose will we are bound to obey, then he would be obedient to this God. If, on the other hand, such a person were to be obedient and determined to follow the command to love God and his neighbor, then it is not unreasonable for him to believe that there is a God who had exactly the properties that are ascribed to him in Spinoza's dogmas of universal faith, that he is supreme, merciful, just, a lawgiver and a judge, omnipresent, omnipotent, etc. Furthermore, Spinoza wants to argue that this moral law-giver has a character that constitutes a model for us to follow: “... there is a supreme being, supremely just and merciful, that is, a model [*exemplar*] of true life.”<sup>7</sup> One would have to do considerably more work to demonstrate that the precise doctrines Spinoza advances rigorously follow from obedience, and that from these doctrines, it follows rigorously that one must be obedient. But the general idea should be clear enough: obedience to the moral law is closely connected with a belief in the existence of a moral law-giver, a model of rectitude who demands our obedience.

Now, Spinoza says, it doesn’t matter whether these dogmas of universal faith are true or false: what is important is that belief in them are required for people to be obedient to the moral law, and that obedience to the moral law requires that they be believed:

... faith does not require dogmas which are true as much as it does dogmas which are pious, i.e., dogmas which move the heart to obedience, even if there are many among them which have not even a shadow of the truth, so long as the person who accepts them does not know them to be false; otherwise he would necessarily be a rebel. For how could it happen that someone who is eager to love Justice and to obey God should worship as divine something he knows to be foreign to the divine nature? [*TTP* 14.20, G III 176]

Many of the dogmas he sets out among the dogmas of universal faith are literally true within Spinoza's philosophy. Certainly God exists for Spinoza, as is asserted in the first dogma, at least as

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<sup>6</sup> This seems not altogether consistent with what Spinoza says in 4.14 (G III 60), where he implies that one cannot really love God unless it is through understanding that this love is the highest good. If taken seriously, this would seem to imply that obedience is strictly speaking impossible.

<sup>7</sup> The idea of an exemplar of the character toward which we strive is an interesting theme in Spinoza's thought in the *TTP*. See *TTP* 13.23 (G III 171), *TTP* 14.30 (G III 178). It is also very prominent in other works, including the *Tractatus de emendatione intellectus* and the *Ethics*. On this theme see Daniel Garber, “Dr. Fischelson's Dilemma: Spinoza on Freedom and Sociability,” in Yirmiyahu Yovel and Gideon Segal, eds., *Spinoza by 2000: The Jerusalem Conferences. Ethica IV: Spinoza on Reason and the “Free Man”* (New York: Little Room Press, 2004), pp. 183-207.

he understands what God is. God is certainly unique for Spinoza (dogma II), present everywhere (dogma III), and acts only by his nature (dogma IV). It is, furthermore, not impossible to construe Spinoza's philosophy as holding that worshiping God is just acting with justice and lovingkindness (dogma V) or that only those who live this way can be saved (dogma VI). But there are at least a couple of dogmas in Spinoza's list that are very difficult indeed to fit into his own philosophy. As Spinoza understands God, it is very difficult to construe him as "supremely just and merciful," or "a model [*exemplar*] of true life" or as a "judge." These are definitely anthropomorphic conceptions of God which Spinoza explicitly denies both in the *TTP* and in the *Ethics*.<sup>8</sup> Nor is it easy to see how Spinoza's philosophy could accommodate the belief that "God pardons the sins of those who repent." Leaving aside the evident anthropomorphism in that dogma, in the *Ethics* Spinoza is quite clear that repentance is inappropriate for the rational person: "Repentance is not a virtue, that is, it does not arise from reason; instead, he who repents what he has done is twice wretched, that is, lacking in power." [E4P54] Indeed, the whole spirit of the dogmas of universal faith are strikingly inconsistent with Spinoza's philosophy. If the dogmas of universal faith are supposed to underlie the view of God as the supreme prince and lawgiver, to whom obedience is due and who will punish us for failing to be obedient, then it is very difficult to see how any set of dogmas that could support or follow from obedience could fail to be inconsistent with Spinoza's radically anti-anthropomorphic view of God in the *Ethics*.

Various commentators have expressed discomfort with the fact that the dogmas of universal faith, which Spinoza seems to advance seriously in the *TTP* and which at one point in the *Tractatus Politicus* he even seems to propose as the grounds of a minimal state religion [*TP* 8.46], might actually be false. Alexandre Matheron, for example, has proposed an elaborate way of interpreting them so that they come out consistent with the radically non-teleological and non-anthropomorphic doctrine of the *Ethics*.<sup>9</sup> But this isn't really to the point: while they may be made true by a clever reinterpretation of the terms in which they are framed, the anthropomorphic and teleological interpretation under which the dogmas of universal faith are literally false is central to their efficacy in supporting obedience. It is because they understand them anthropomorphically, and believe them to be true in that sense that the multitude thinks of the fundamental moral precept as a law, commanded by a divine God, worthy of obedience. And were they to learn the interpretation that makes them true, that is, the interpretation in accordance with which they would be consistent with strict Spinozist principles, they would no longer be anthropomorphic and would no longer support obedience. If they were to replace the anthropomorphic God, the ultimate prince,

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<sup>8</sup> See *TTP* 13.24 [G III 171] where Spinoza explicitly notes that the true conception of God is inconsistent with seeing him as a model: "...the intellectual knowledge of God, which considers his nature as it is in itself (a nature which men cannot imitate by any particular way of life and cannot take as a model for instituting the true way of life), does not in any way pertain to faith and to revealed religion."

<sup>9</sup> See Alexandre Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1971), pp. 94-127.

giver of laws with a true picture of God the Eternal, then they would have no grounds for obedience to moral principles construed as laws.

At this point we can return to the question of superstition. I began by showing how superstition for Spinoza is grounded in a teleological conception of the world. The fundamental error that leads to superstition is the teleological conception of nature, the view that everything in nature has a purpose, which was put there by agents—God or gods—who act as we do, and chose things for a reason, ultimately in order to induce men to love them and worship them. Now, in the *Ethics* Spinoza presents a radically different conception of God and nature, one in which there is no room for such a teleological perspective. Within the context of the *Ethics*, the philosopher comes to understand the moral law—to love your neighbor as yourself and to love God above all—as an eternal truth that we follow on the basis of reason alone. However, in the *TTP*, the situation is quite different. For the imperfectly rational masses, the moral law is presented *as* a law, which is to be followed out of obedience and not out of understanding. But to be obedient, the imperfectly rational person requires faith, the belief in an omnipotent law-giver who imposes order on the world, who will reward those who obey his laws and punish those who violate them: this, in essence, is the teleological conception of nature. Which is to say, obedience requires that the imperfectly rational person hold a teleological conception of nature, the very conception of the world that underlies superstition.

What Spinoza has done here is remarkable: he has taken the teleological conception of nature, the fundamental and deep-seated prejudice that grounds superstition, and transformed it into something positive, the grounds of obedience to the moral law. The philosopher who can follow the argument of the *Ethics* doesn't need it, of course. For the philosopher, the moral law—love your neighbor as yourself and love God above all—is grasped as an eternal truth, something that we can know through reason alone, something binding on us as rational beings. But the imperfectly rational person cannot grasp this. Such a person must be convinced to follow the moral law through other means. In the *TTP*, I would argue, Spinoza teaches us how to live in such a world of imperfectly rational humanity. Rather than abandoning the common people to superstition and the disorder and unhappiness that it leads to, Spinoza shows how the teleological view of the world toward which the common people are strongly inclined can be used as a support not of superstition but of the moral life.<sup>10</sup> In the opening passage of the *Tractatus Politicus*, Spinoza's last work, he famously writes:

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<sup>10</sup> An interesting possible connection with the dogmas of universal faith in *TTP* 14 can be found in E5p10s. There Spinoza writes:

The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, *or* sure maxims of life [*certa vitae dogmata*], to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular

Philosophers conceive the affects which trouble us as vices, into which men fall by their own fault; for that reason they usually laugh at them, weep for them, censure them, or (if they want to seem particularly holy) curse them. In this way they think they perform a godly act and believe they attain the pinnacle of wisdom when they have learned how to praise in many ways a human nature which exists nowhere, and how to assail in words the human nature which really exists. For they conceive men not as they are, but as they wish them to be. That's why for the most part they have written Satire instead of Ethics, and why they have never conceived a Politics which can be put to any practical application. The Politics they have conceived would be considered a Chimaera, and could be set up only in Utopia, or in the golden age of the Poets - i.e., where there was no need for it at all. [TP 1.1]

In contrast to this, Spinoza proposes a realistic politics, a politics that takes into account people as they really exist. This realistic conception of ethics and politics is brilliantly realized in the *TTP*, where Spinoza shows us how people as they really are can be led to virtue surprisingly enough through the very thing that inclines them to superstition, their irrational tendencies to believe in a teleological order of nature.

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cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready.

The point is that for people who are imperfectly rational, they should memorize certain *dogmata* and in that way use the imagination to aid them in behaving correctly in new situations. In the rest of the scholium, Spinoza goes on to illustrate this. There is it clear that the maxims are derived from propositions in E4, for example. In this way precepts of reason are associated with the imagination (memory) and used to guide behavior. But the use of the term “*dogmata*” in this context suggests a possible connection with the dogmas of universal faith in the *TTP*. The dogmas in the *TTP* are a bit different, of course, insofar as they are not derived from reason. But even so, the possible connection is very interesting.

This might also be the way to understand the “model of human nature [*naturae humanae exemplar*]” of E4pref, often identified with the “free man” of E4p67 and following. Note here that in the dogmas of universal faith in *TTP* 14, God is characterized as “*verae vitae exemplar*”. [G III 177] On this reading, the “free man,” like the God of *TTP* 14 can be regarded as an imaginary construct, one that cannot actually exist in nature, but which may be helpful to keep in mind when we are thinking about how to act. Though by E4p4 we the idea of a finite mode that is completely active is literally impossible, we can, perhaps, through the imagination conceive of such a thing. Though an inadequate idea, it may still be helpful for guiding our behavior.