

*Charitable Interpretations and the  
Political Domestication of Spinoza,  
or, Benedict in the Land of the  
Secular Imagination*

Yitzhak Y. Melamed

*A fool hath no delight in understanding, but that his heart  
may discover itself.*

PROVERBS, XVIII 2

*1. Introduction*

IN A BEAUTIFUL recent essay, the philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong explains the reasons for his departure from evangelical Christianity, the religious culture in which he was brought up. Sinnott-Armstrong contrasts the interpretive methods used by good philosophers and fundamentalist believers:

Good philosophers face objections and uncertainties. They follow where arguments lead, even when their conclusions are surprising and disturbing. Intellectual honesty is also required of scholars who interpret philosophical texts. *If I had distorted Kant's view to make him reach a conclusion that I preferred, then my philosophy professor would have failed me.* The contrast with religious reasoning is stark. My Christian friends seemed happy to hide serious problems in the Bible and in their arguments. They preferred comfort to intellectual honesty. I couldn't.<sup>1</sup>

1. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2007), 73; italics added.

To what extent can we, historians of philosophy, claim the virtue of intellectual honesty? Speaking frankly, I do not find the practice criticized by Sinnott-Armstrong's philosophy professor rare or unusual at all. We very frequently distort the views of past philosophers in order to reach the conclusions we prefer. We just call it "Charitable Interpretation."

In this essay, I discuss and criticize the logic behind so-called charitable interpretations in the history of philosophy. This phenomenon is ubiquitous and is not at all restricted to a particular philosophical strand or ideology. Analytic philosophers and postmodernists, Marxists, liberals, secularists, and fundamentalists, we all engage in the very same domestication project. Even more disturbing than the sheer ideological pervasiveness of this phenomenon is the fact that, on many occasions, *superb* philosophers and historians take part in this fairly childish endeavor.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the general logic of charitable interpretations in the history of philosophy, mostly by addressing discussions in metaphysics and epistemology. In the second part, I focus on the somewhat less noticed use of charitable interpretations in the study of political philosophy and point out the quintessential role ideology plays in these discussions. In both parts, I concentrate mostly on the interpretation of Spinoza's thought.<sup>2</sup> I do so not because I have special fondness for Spinoza ("guilty as charged," I admit), but because Spinoza is such a beast (and may I add, an enchanting beast) and attracts a disproportionate share of the domestication efforts from historians and philosophers of all creeds and persuasions. In the third and final part of the paper, I will begin to outline an alternative *methodology*, which suggests that past philosophers can be most relevant to our current philosophical discussion, to the extent that they provide us with *well-motivated challenges to our commonsense beliefs*. Such challenges have the invaluable virtue of being able to undermine our most fundamental and

2. Unless otherwise marked, all references to the *Ethics*, the early works of Spinoza, and Letters 1–29 are to Spinoza (1985) (abbreviated C). In references to the other letters of Spinoza I have used Spinoza (2002) (abbreviated S). I have relied on the Spinoza (1925) critical edition for the Latin text of Spinoza (abbreviated G). I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza's works: *DPP* = *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* [*Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I & II*]; *CM* = *Metaphysical Thoughts* [*Cogitata Metaphysica*], *KV* = *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* [*Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*], *TTP* = *Theological-Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*], *TP* = *Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Politicus*], *Ep.* = *Letters*. Passages in the *Ethics* will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); "d" stands for either "definition" (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or "demonstration" (in all other cases.) Hence, *E1d3* is the third definition of part 1 and *E1p16d* is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1.

secure beliefs and force us to engage with the most fundamental questions. What more can we expect from good philosophy?

Before I begin my crusade against the Marxists, secularists, analytic philosophers, and all the other gangs mentioned earlier, let me point out one view or method that I will *not* criticize. I have *nothing* against anachronism, at least not against intentional, well-crafted anachronism. Intentional anachronism is used in a very creative way in music (see the works of Arvo Pärt and Michael Nyman). It has been put to some very impressive uses in literature (as in Christoph Ransmayr's 1988 novel, *Die letzte Welt* [*The Last World*], or in Shakespeare's Roman tragedies), and in principle, I see no reason that it cannot be used in a similarly fruitful manner in philosophy. I am not a historicist, though I have respect for the consistent upholder of this view, and my crusade attempts to save *philosophy*, not history, from the intellectual laziness of domestication efforts. However, it will turn out that in order to have the best *philosophical* profit from past philosophical texts, it is crucial to read them in a historically precise manner.

## 2. Part One: "Be Aware of the Charitable Interpreter": *Charitable Interpretations, the History of Philosophy, and Gettier's Fallacy*

The logic of charitable interpretations is rather simple. Suppose a Past Philosopher (PP) makes a statement S. We believe that S, read literally, is clearly unacceptable. Since we appreciate PP as a great mind, we cannot believe that he or she could have uttered such foolishness. Thus, instead of ascribing S to PP, we ascribe S', which is different from, and sometimes even utterly opposed to S. Let us look at a few examples.

In his 1984 book on Spinoza's *Ethics*, Jonathan Bennett suggested that Spinozistic modes should not be interpreted as tropes, since tropes "are nonsense."<sup>3</sup> In his 2001 *Learning from Six Philosophers*, Bennett confesses that he changed his mind and that he now thinks that "tropes are just fine."<sup>4</sup> So far, so good—I have nothing but admiration for a philosopher's willingness to persistently reexamine his views. But strikingly in 2001, Bennett also argued that we should interpret Spinoza's modes as tropes. Why? Did Bennett's change of mind regarding the value of tropes change the views presented by Spinoza in

3. Bennett (1984), 94.

4. Bennett (2001), I 145.

his 1677 text? Why did the change in Bennett's evaluation of trope theory have to be accompanied by the ascription of this view to Spinoza as well?

Let us have a look at a second example. In an impressive recent article, Jonathan Schaffer provides some intriguing arguments in support of Priority Monism, the view according to which there is exactly one *basic* (i.e., independent) concrete thing, *the universe*.<sup>5</sup> Schaffer contrasts Priority Monism with the much more radical Existence Monism, which asserts that everything that is, is exactly one concrete thing. Priority Monism allows for the universe to have a plurality of (proper) parts since, according to Schaffer, the whole is prior to its parts, and the existence of a plurality of dependent things (the universe's parts) is consistent with Priority Monism. Existence Monism does not allow for the universe to have parts insofar as it rules out the existence of *any* plurality of concrete things, even if these are *not* independent things. At this point, Schaffer asks whether the monism of historical figures such as Spinoza, Hegel, Plotinus, Proclus, Lotze, Royce, Bosanquet, Bradley, and Blanshard is Priority or Existence Monism. He answers:

It seems to me that the priority reading should be preferred to the existence reading if the texts in question can sustain it, on the grounds of interpretive charity. After all, Existence Monism is a radical view, conflicting with such seeming truisms as Moore's "Here's one hand ... and here is another."<sup>6</sup>

The logic of this argument should be familiar: Existence Monism is crazy. Spinoza and Hegel and Parmenides, etc., were "Great Minds." We should do our best to avoid ascribing "crazy views" to "Great Minds."

I am not going to address, here, the question of whether Spinoza is, or is not, a Priority Monist.<sup>7</sup> (Let me just note, in passing, that Spinoza does not seem to share Schaffer's conviction that the whole is prior to its parts. On the contrary, Spinoza argues on many occasions that parts are prior to their wholes.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the priority of Spinoza's one substance to its modes cannot

5. Schaffer (2010), 66. Cf. Schaffer (2008).

6. Schaffer (2010), 66.

7. I tend to believe that Schaffer's important distinction between Priority and Existence Monism is not sharp enough and that as a result, certain views such as Spinoza's could be placed in either camp depending on one's precise interpretation of the priority relation at stake. I discuss this issue briefly in Melamed (2012b), 216.

8. See *DPP* 1p17d; *CM* II, v, G I 258: C 324; *KV* I, ii, G I 25 and G I 30; Ep. 35, S 856; and *E1p12d*. For discussion of these passages, see Melamed, "Spinoza's Mereology."

be the priority of the whole to its parts.) I brought the example of Schaffer's distinction in order to demonstrate the logic of charitable interpretations and the manner it is used to domesticate past philosophers.

Let us quickly consider a third and final example. In an important recent article on Spinoza's necessitarianism, Edwin Curley and Gregory Walski write:

We defend the view that Spinoza is committed to allowing for the existence of a plurality of possible worlds .... We think this ought to be the default interpretation of Spinoza. It is, as Bennett says "tremendously implausible" that this is the only possible world.<sup>9</sup> We operate on the methodological principle that views which are tremendously implausible should not be attributed to the great, dead philosophers without pretty strong textual evidence.<sup>10</sup>

Let me note briefly that, for all I can tell, *no* view should be attributed to *anyone* "without pretty strong textual evidence." Still, the gist of Curley and Walski's view is quite clear. They state the methodology of charitable interpretation in a very transparent and helpful manner: our default attitude should be such that we try to avoid ascribing radical and implausible views to great, dead philosophers.

What is wrong with this methodology? Later, I will suggest that in a sense this methodology involves a cult that resists the ascription of errors to great minds in a manner not very different from the fundamentalist's refusal to allow for any errors in the literal reading of the Bible. But before we address these lofty issues, let me discuss a few mundane points.

First, the implausibility of a belief is usually measured by its agreement with our so-called commonsense intuitions. Such intuitions might be, more or less, common, but they are rarely held by everyone (by the way, how common should they be in order to be counted as commonsense intuitions? 60 percent? 70 percent? 98 percent? Is there a meta-commonsense intuition about how common an intuition should be in order to count as bona fide common sense?). I, for one, have no commonsense intuitions as to whether this is

9. In fact, Bennett makes a more hesitant claim: "the view that this is the only possible world *seems on the face of it to be* tremendously implausible" (Bennett (1996), 75; italics added). Bennett's formulation itself is a bit odd (if a claim is "tremendously implausible," why qualify it as only *seeming* to be so, and if it only *seems* implausible, then probably it is not *tremendously* implausible).

10. Curley and Walski (1999), 242.

the only possible world, or whether there is a plurality of possible worlds, or whether parts are prior to their wholes, or wholes are prior to their parts. In fact, on both issues, I understand both sides of the debate. Now, you might claim that I am too corrupted by philosophical studies and speculation, and that we should follow our so-called pre-philosophical intuitions. Yet, it seems to me very odd that we should give preference to the intuitions of the butcher and shopkeeper rather than the philosophically informed person, especially when the issues at stake are *philosophical* (and not butchery or shopkeeping).

Second, the methodology of charitable interpretation is a major stumbling block to the understanding of philosophers belonging to cultures distant in either time or space. The intuitions of thinkers belonging to such cultures are often different—sometimes radically different—from our own, and by adhering to the imperatives of charitable interpretation, we risk becoming deaf to their unique voices. The charitable interpreter will do his best to reinterpret these bizarre voices in a manner that is most familiar to him. By doing so, he compromises the recognition of the other person's subjectivity and deprives himself of knowledge and appreciation of human diversity. The charitable interpreter will do his best to multiply himself in space and time by enforcing his own views "as much as the text can sustain it" on the writings of other thinkers. How uncharitable!

Third, charitable interpretation deprives us of the most profitable use of past philosophers, i.e., the rather rare opportunity to encounter well-argued and well-thought challenges to our most fundamental beliefs. It is precisely because the writings of past philosophers come from cultures that are significantly different from our own (and hence share many fewer of our common-sense intuitions than writings of our contemporaries) that they can provide us with these challenges. A philosophical narcissist will try to find his image everywhere, but a thinker who is not lazy and whose thought is still flexible and alive should welcome a challenge that may lead to questioning his or her most obvious beliefs.

Charitable interpretation of past philosophers is used much more frequently than in the few cases in which it is stated honestly and transparently (as in the examples I provided). It often appears in the form of the claim that a past philosopher is *relevant* to the extent that his claims are vindicated by contemporary philosophy or science. Thus, for example, one could find Leibniz praised for advocating the relativity of time and space. Of course, such praises commit an obvious Gettier fallacy.<sup>11</sup> Assuming that

11. See Gettier (1966).

the theory of relativity is true, Leibniz indeed held a justified, true belief, but it is certainly not true *by virtue* of the reasons Leibniz had in mind, since he did not believe in an upper limit to possible velocity. Thus, even though the theory of relativity agrees with Leibniz's belief in the relativity of space, this does not at all vindicate Leibniz's views, since the agreement is merely coincidental.

My point about "vindication" leads us to another crucial feature of the use of charitable interpretation among late twentieth-century analytic historians of philosophy—namely, its apologetic nature. Analytic philosophy began with a ban that seemed to commit the old history of philosophy and metaphysics to the flames.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the dons of Cambridge and Oxford could not dispense with Plato and Aristotle, and even Kant was relatively immune from this wholesale condemnation, but for the great metaphysician of the modern period, it was a lengthy and painful process (which is still incomplete) to reclaim philosophical respectability.

Historically speaking, it is clear why figures such as Spinoza and Hegel were reintroduced into the mainstream of analytic philosophy through a domestication project that reinterpreted the two as harmless, mostly commonsense, philosophers. I am not convinced that this apologetic process was strictly inevitable.

When analytic philosophers of the sixties and seventies asked, "why should we care about the philosophies of Spinoza and Hegel?" they posed a *legitimate* question, which undermined traditional values and conventions that many contemporary Europeans took for granted (to my mind, the naive question "why should we care about it?" is fair in almost *any* context). Unfortunately, the answer supplied by many contemporary historians of philosophy was little more than an attempt to acquire a kosher stamp. These answers frequently took the form of "Spinoza's philosophy is important because he advocates an attractive view" that was in vogue at that time (such as holism, the deductive-nomological model, anomalous monism, and these days, metaphysical monism). I find such answers disappointing. I do not need Spinoza in order to examine these views. Quine, Hempel, Davidson, and Jonathan Schaffer are good enough. I need Spinoza in order to examine precisely the positions that were *not* presented by other philosophers. I need Spinoza in order to examine *Spinoza's* views.

12. On the emergence of analytic philosophy and its rejection of the substantially metaphysical theories of the British Idealists, see Michael Della Rocca's chapter in this volume and Soames (2003), vol. 1, 94–95.

### 3. Part Two: “Spinoza Got It Right”: Charitable Interpretations and the History of Political and Religious Thought

Over the past few decades, Spinoza has been claimed by a variety of ideologies, each being attracted to one element of his thought, and subsequently attempting to enlist him among its ranks. The poor seventeenth-century philosopher has had to undergo a series of posthumous conversions that could be proudly compared with the modest achievements of the great old inquisitors of the past. The late Emilia Giancotti-Boscherini, a superb Marxist Spinoza scholar, labored with great diligence and talent to show that Spinoza’s thought truly belongs to the school of modern materialism.<sup>13</sup> Graeme Hunter, a Protestant scholar, has recently argued that Spinoza’s thought was “internal to Protestant Christianity” and that Spinoza did not entertain any “heretical doubts about the divinity of Christ.”<sup>14</sup> In terms of pure public relations, it seems that the most successful posthumous conversion is the common custom today to refer to Spinoza by his given Hebrew name, “Baruch,” in spite of the simple fact that we have *no trace* of evidence showing that Spinoza *ever* used this name in his adult life. Whether and to what extent Spinoza’s Jewish upbringing played a significant role in his thought is an important question that needs to be addressed through careful study of his work and the works of his teachers. Renaming Spinoza “Baruch” is nothing but an instant and cheap gesture of political correctness. Still, the most *important* and *elaborate* Spinozist conversion is the recent attempt to bring Spinoza under the holy wings of Enlightenment Secularism.

In a series of recent books, Jonathan Israel, an outstanding economic historian,<sup>15</sup> has argued that the values of modernity owe their origin to Spinoza’s philosophical school, which he terms “the Radical Enlightenment.” Thus, for example, in his 2006 *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel writes:

“Modernity” conceived as an abstract package of basic values—*toleration, personal freedom, democracy, equality racial and sexual, freedom of expression, sexual emancipation, and the universal right*

13. Giancotti-Boscherini (1978).

14. Hunter (2005), 83. For discussion of Hunter’s claims, see Melamed (2012a).

15. See Israel’s 1986 masterpiece study, *The Dutch Republic and European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism*.

to knowledge and “enlightenment”—derives ... from the Radical Enlightenment.<sup>16</sup>

The association of Spinoza with modern liberalism is commonplace among today’s writers (especially among Jewish writers). Thus, Steven Nadler argues: “Spinoza was an eloquent proponent of a secular, democratic society, and was the strongest advocate for freedom and tolerance in the early modern period.”<sup>17</sup> According to Leo Strauss, Spinoza is responsible for “the decisive impulse toward ... modern republicanism which takes its bearings by the dignity of every man,”<sup>18</sup> and if we believe Rebecca Goldstein, “Spinoza fundamentally insisted on the separation of church and state,” thus anticipating and indirectly influencing the founding fathers of America.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, I cannot provide here a comprehensive account of Spinoza’s political thought. Still, before joining this “Spinoza Got It Right!” celebration of Benedict the secularist, feminist, liberal, humanist, democrat, and egalitarian, let me suggest a preliminary and cursory fact-checking. In the following few pages, I will concentrate on the “package of basic values” suggested by Israel, since it seems to present in a condensed and transparent manner a very common recent image of Spinoza. Was Spinoza indeed a champion of “toleration, personal freedom, democracy, equality racial and sexual, freedom of expression, sexual emancipation, and the universal right to knowledge and ‘enlightenment’”? Let’s see.<sup>20</sup>

A. “*Separation of Church and State.*” In the *TTP*, Spinoza argues that the state’s “supreme powers [should be] the interpreters of religion and religious

16. Israel (2006), 11; italics added. Cf. Israel (2010), vii–viii, for a restatement of the very same basic values of the so-called Radical Enlightenment. Anticipating the response that perhaps Israel intended to ascribe these values only to Spinoza’s *followers* in the Radical Enlightenment and their interpretation of Spinoza (and not to Spinoza himself), let me note, first, that if indeed (as I will shortly show) Spinoza was very far from advocating Israel’s “basic values of the Radical Enlightenment” it is not at all clear in what sense Spinoza can be associated with the “Radical Enlightenment” (whatever this term means). Second, let me point out that Israel actually attributes this package of values *directly* to Spinoza. For the ascription to Spinoza of support for democracy and egalitarianism, and objection to oligarchy, see Israel (2010), 2, 92–94, and Israel (2006), 231, 252, 561. For descriptions of Spinoza as a champion of “comprehensive toleration,” “freedom of worship,” and “liberty of expression,” see Israel (2006), 155, 157, 231, 252, and Israel (2010), 92. This is merely a small selection among many similar passages.

17. Nadler (2012).

18. Strauss (1965), 16.

19. Goldstein (2006), 11.

20. For a complementary overview of Spinoza’s critique of metaphysical humanism, see Melamed (2010a).

duty.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed Spinoza repeatedly argues in this work that no one should be allowed to preach publicly on issues of religion, unless he is first granted permission to do so by the sovereign. In this context, Spinoza writes:

But if anyone should ask now “By what right could Christ’s disciples, who were private men, preach religion?” I say that they did this by right of the control they had received from Christ over unclean Spirits (see Matthew 10:1). For above, at the end of Ch. 16, I explicitly warned that everyone was bound to keep faith even with a Tyrant, except that person to whom God, by a certain revelation, had promised special aid against the Tyrant. So it is not permissible for anyone to take this as an example, unless he also has the power to perform miracles.<sup>22</sup>

In order to avoid any misunderstanding of Spinoza’s sardonic claims, let me make clear that he did not believe in ghosts or unclean spirits, and since he deemed the belief in unclean spirits to be simple nonsense,<sup>23</sup> it seems that “the right against unclean spirits” was no better. Christ’s disciples could preach in public without permission from the Romans, since they *believed* that they had a right (or power) against unclean spirits (a right or power which may or may not have saved them when they were *justly* persecuted by the Romans). However, Spinoza adds, those who are not granted such a special “right” are not allowed to preach in public without securing the permission of the sovereign.<sup>24</sup> This seems to be a rather bizarre notion of the separation of church and state, but perhaps in other texts, Spinoza is more conventional in endorsing the “basic values of modernity.”

The *Political Treatise* is one of Spinoza’s two incomplete works written at the very end of his life. In this work, Spinoza envisages a “National Religion.”

Although everyone ought to be given the freedom to say what he thinks, nevertheless large assemblies ought to be prohibited. And so those who are devoted to another religion ought to be allowed, indeed, to build as many houses of worship as they wish, provided they are small, modest, and somewhat dispersed. But it is very important that

21. *TTP*, chap. 19, G III 232.

22. *TTP*, chap. 19, G III 233.

23. See Spinoza’s amusing correspondence with Hugo Boxel, Eps. 51–56. For Spinoza’s claim that “true Christians” should not believe in ghosts, see *TTP*, chap. 2, G III 43.

24. For further discussion of this passage, see Melamed (2012a), 142–44.

the temples which are dedicated to the national Religion [*patriae Religioni*] be large and magnificent, and that only Patricians or Senators be permitted to officiate in its chief rituals. So only Patricians should be permitted to baptize, to consecrate a marriage, lay on hands, and without exception, to be recognized as Priests, and as defenders and interpreters of the national Religion.<sup>25</sup>

Some commentators cite this passage as evidence of Spinoza's support for religious tolerance.<sup>26</sup> We will shortly deal with this notion of "religious tolerance," but for the time being, let me just point out that in this text as well, Spinoza's alleged support for the separation of church and state seems to be highly idiosyncratic, given his endorsement of national religion and the allocation of priestly functions to the ... Senators.

B. "*Toleration.*" In the passage just quoted, Spinoza suggests that the state should allow the existence of other houses of worship (apart from those of the national religion), provided that these other religions are *systematically* discriminated against. Indeed, Spinoza is willing to tolerate disgraced and lowered religions that will attest to the glory and success of the national religion. You may call this tolerance if you wish;<sup>27</sup> but, according to this notion of tolerance, any government that falls short of exterminating or expelling the believers of a minority religion should be praised as genuinely tolerant. Hence, according to this notion of tolerance, we should praise (for example) St. Augustine's "tolerance" toward the Jews, and today's people of Switzerland for their generous willingness not to exterminate Muslims as long as their mosques and minarets "are small and modest" (as Spinoza says) in comparison with the temples of the state's majority religion.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, apropos of tolerance, only rarely does Spinoza address the issue of excommunication. Yet, in one of these rare references, Spinoza stipulates that excommunication should be *supervised* by the state.

25. *TP*, chap. 8, G III 345.

26. Israel (2006), 155.

27. This is essentially the medieval notion of tolerance, by which Muslims and Christians (when the latter were not engaged in strict extermination) treated each other and Jews; it is also how Jews imagined they would treat Muslims and Christians when they gained power (see Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, *Hilkhot Melachim*, VI, 1). Under this model, the other is conceived as a parasite whose unfortunate presence is not to be eradicated by force. One may expect human beings to treat each other in a more decent way, for example, by celebrating the presence of the other and valuing a multiplicity of competing, unsubordinated, cultures. Such a celebration of multiculturalism has no trace in Spinoza.

28. See Cumming-Bruce and Erlanger (2009).

No one has the right and power without the authority or consent of the sovereign to administer sacred matters or choose ministers, or decide to establish the foundation and doctrines of a church, nor may they without that consent give judgments about morality, and observance of piety, or *excommunicate* or receive anyone into the church, or care for the poor.<sup>29</sup>

Notice that in this passage Spinoza lists excommunicating among the *legitimate* and common functions of the church, alongside almsgiving and establishing doctrines of faith. Spinoza stipulates that all functions of religion should be supervised by the state, but he does *not* have any in-principle objection to the use of excommunication. On the contrary, he seems to treat it just like any other legitimate function of the church. Thus, it seems that Spinoza's notion of tolerance is just as idiosyncratic as his view of the separation of church and state.

C. "*Equality Racial and Sexual, and Sexual Emancipation.*" In the Third Chapter of the *TTP*, Spinoza scolds those who believe that "nature produced different kinds of men,"<sup>30</sup> but it would be too quick for us to conclude from this that Spinoza is in favor of racial equality. Spinoza's writings are not free of contemporary European prejudices, and his depiction of Islam<sup>31</sup> (and to a lesser extent, Judaism) seems to be a perfect reflection of the bigotry common among his contemporaries.

It is difficult for me to see in what sense Spinoza can be described as supportive of sexual emancipation. His attitude toward sexuality is, for the most part, highly negative. Consider, for example, the following passage:

He who imagines that a woman he loves prostitutes [*prostituere*] herself to another not only will be saddened, because his own appetite is restrained, but also will be repelled by her, because he is forced to join the image of the things he loves to the shameful parts [*pubendis*] and excretions [*excrementis*] of the other. (E3p35s)

Describing a woman who refuses one's love as "prostituting," and her lover's sex organs and semen as "shameful parts and excretions," does not seem to me

29. *TTP*, chap. 19, G III 235; italics added.

30. *TTP*, chap. 3, G III 47.

31. For Spinoza's rather ridiculous depiction of Islam as allowing no doubts or religious controversies, see *TTP*, Preface, G III 7. Unlike Spinoza's intimate knowledge of at least some core divisions of Jewish literature, his brief discussion of Islam discloses nothing but ignorance and prejudice.

to be in the spirit of the sixties, but who knows? Perhaps we should charitably interpret “prostituting” as nothing over and above lovemaking (for how could a great mind like Spinoza think that genitals are “shameful”?).

Much more telling and important is Spinoza’s attitude toward “sexual equality.” At the very end of the extant part of his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza claims, “Women and servants... are under the authority of their husbands and masters.”<sup>32</sup> He goes further, and argues:

Women do not, by nature, have equal right with men, but they necessarily submit to men, and so it cannot happen that each sex rule equally, much less that men are ruled by women.<sup>33</sup>

Along the same lines, Spinoza argues that in a monarchy—one of the three legitimate forms of government according to Spinoza—“under no circumstances should daughters be permitted to inherit the state.”<sup>34</sup>

The exclusion of women from the polity is just one feature of a broader attitude toward women in Spinoza’s work. In general, for Spinoza, the adjective “womanish” is strongly pejorative, as, for example, in his description of vegetarianism as an “empty superstition and womanly compassion [*muliebri misericordia*]” (*E4p37s1*).<sup>35</sup>

D. “*Universal Right to Knowledge and Enlightenment.*” Discussing Maimonides’s attempt to reinterpret Scripture so that it agrees with philosophical truth, Spinoza scolds Maimonides’s “excessively audacious” method and criticizes him for depriving the masses of the opium of anthropomorphic religion.<sup>36</sup> Spinoza does not believe in educating the masses in a transparent

32. *TP*, chap. 11, G III 359.

33. *TP*, chap. 11, G III 360.

34. *TP*, chap. 6, G III 306. Compare with this sober note by Margaret Wilson (1999, 193n26): “It seems to be widely agreed that Spinoza is quite derogatory in what he states and implies about the mentality of non-male humans. Ruth Barcan Marcus and Anne Jaap Jacobson have both suggested to me that it is worthwhile to consider the relations between major philosophers’ views about non-male humans and their views about non-human animals. I think they are probably right.” Let me just add that, as we have just seen in Spinoza’s discussion in *E3p35s*, he does not hold in high regard the physicality, or carnality, of non-male humans.

35. For other pejorative references to women see *TTP*, Preface, G III 5, and chap. 3, G III 57.

36. See *TTP*, chap. 7, G III 115–16: “It completely takes away all the certainty the multitude can have about the meaning of Scripture from a straightforward reading of it.”

manner so that the common people can advance beyond the anthropomorphic imagery of scripture and learn the true nature of things:

Men must be led in such a way that they do not seem to themselves to be led, but to live according to their own temperament and from their free decree.<sup>37</sup>

The main function of religion in Spinoza's ideal state is to manipulate and control the masses, and it is essential for this purpose that the simple-minded citizens *not* be aware of the manner in which the sovereign manipulates them. *Sapere aude* [Dare to Know], the (somewhat pompous) slogan of Kantian Enlightenment, is not the advice Spinoza would offer to the masses. Achieving true knowledge is frequently detrimental to the masses. For Spinoza, the masses should be taught primarily to be *obedient*, and insofar as knowledge may impede obedience, it should *not* be taught to the masses.

We should say that a person believes something piously or impiously only insofar as either his opinions move him to obedience or he takes a license from them to sin or rebel. As a result, if anyone becomes stiff-necked by believing truths, his faith is really impious; on the other hand, if he becomes obedient by believing falsehoods, it is pious.<sup>38</sup>

E. “*Democracy*.” Democracy is one of the three legitimate forms of government that Spinoza examines in his *Political Treatise* (the other two being aristocracy and monarchy). As far as I can see, Spinoza prefers both democracy and aristocracy to monarchy, though it is not at all clear what his preference is between democracy and aristocracy. Spinoza's very qualified support for democracy does not stem from any principled egalitarianism. For the most part, he despises and fears the masses. “The mob is terrifying if unafraid,” Spinoza warns in the *Ethics* (*E*<sub>4</sub>p54s), and the whole structure of his political philosophy rests on the foundational observation that “it is impossible that most people will be eager to live wisely” (*TP* Ch. 10 | III/356). Spinoza's main motivation for supporting democracy relies on the rather naive form of realpolitik which assumes

37. *TP*, chap. 10, G III 356.

38. *TTP*, chap. 13, G III 172. See also *TTP*, chap. 14, G III 176: “Faith does not require tenets which are true as much as it does tenets which are pious, i.e., tenets 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.”

that a large group of people with a vast variety of conflicting desires is unlikely to agree on extremely irrational policies. “The will of a very large council,” says Spinoza, “cannot be determined so much by inordinate desire as by reason.”<sup>39</sup> Spinoza’s fear of Caligula- or Nero-like rulers is the main reason for his rejection of monarchy. Democracy and aristocracy, he thinks, do not allow insanity to take hold of the state, simply because it is impossible for the insane to agree on a common madness. Naïveté is not typical of Spinoza, but on this issue, the events of the twentieth century clearly refuted him.

Our cursory review of Spinoza’s compliance with Jonathan Israel’s package of basic values of modernity shows that Spinoza’s performance was hardly satisfactory. Spinoza expresses reserved support for democracy though the underlining reasoning behind this view is not particularly impressive. We also saw that Spinoza advocated a complete assimilation (rather than separation) of religion and state, that he viewed women as essentially inferior to men, that he viewed human sexuality in derogatory terms, and that his notion of tolerance was essentially the medieval notion that stipulated systematic discrimination against religious minorities. At this point one may wonder how serious and highly intelligent historians could ascribe to Spinoza the package of liberal values mentioned. As I just noted, there is *some* basis for Israel’s sweeping generalizations, but the actual picture is far more complex. What makes serious historians engage in such an apparently reckless hermeneutics? For all I can tell the main motivation behind this practice is to show that Spinoza’s political thought is *relevant* to today’s discourse, or that Spinoza was the source of what we deem to be fair and right. We interpret Spinoza charitably (i.e., bending the text so that it can be read as expressing a desirable and respectable political view) since we highly appreciate his genius. A great political philosopher should advocate “decent” views (i.e., views that are similar to ours).

We can present this point in the form of a question: if indeed Spinoza was no feminist, no egalitarianist, and supported systematic discrimination against religious minorities—*why should we care or study him at all?* I find this question both legitimate and important, and the following section will be dedicated to outlining a surprising answer to this question; but let me state from the very beginning that I completely agree with the claim that we engage with past philosophers to the extent that we consider them relevant to our thought. The question is: *what makes a past philosopher relevant?*

39. *TP*, chap. 8, G III 336. See also *TTP*, chap. 16, G III 194.

#### 4. Part Three: Philosophical Relevancy

The claim that we should care about past philosophers to the extent that their thought is relevant allows for a variety of ways by which past philosophers can be relevant. Yet, it rules out one position that is somewhat mischaracterized in the existing literature on the methodology of the history of philosophy. The so-called antiquarian approach is supposed to justify our engagement with past philosophers as a practice that is done for its own sake, or simply in order to record the views of past philosophers as historical facts, regardless of whether their thoughts are relevant to our discussions. This is an enchanting view, but for all I can tell, this “method” was never pursued outside of some short stories by Borges and his likes. A historian (any historian, not only historians of philosophy) who is interested in recording facts regardless of whether these facts are relevant to us should be engaged in the history of the rhinos in twelfth-century Sumatra just as much as he or she is engaged in twentieth-century political history. Qua facts, the number of teeth of any twelfth-century rhino is just as good as the rhetorical capacities of a certain Adolf Hitler, or the sex drives of Rasputin. Oddly enough, however, there are very few dissertations on our poor twelfth-century Sumatran rhino, and quite a few on Hitler and Rasputin. To put things simply: there is no history that is not motivated by what the historian finds relevant to his or her life. Otherwise, we would be picking our subject matter by random choice of a space-time unit (e.g., the space of this room in January 12, 1012). The choice of subject matter by a historian of *philosophy* is not different. We pick a topic that, in one way or another, we deem to be relevant to us.

There are many manners in which past philosophers can be relevant to us. We can study past philosophers in order to uncover the genealogy of our current values and beliefs. In this manner we learn the causal trajectory of our common beliefs, and what seems to us natural and obvious is exposed as a historical construct, attached to certain concrete circumstances. Alternatively, we can turn to the history of philosophy in order to import and revive unjustly abandoned notions or views held by past philosophers. Thus, analytic philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century imported the medieval distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* modality. A third view may suggest that past philosophies could be used in order to compare and contrast similar views across the centuries. Thus, one can profitably observe the similarities and differences between Spinoza’s and Davidson’s versions of the

holism of the mental. This can be—if conducted properly—a legitimate and fully conscious anachronistic exercise.

While I have much sympathy for each of the aforementioned motivations for the study of past philosophers, I would like to suggest another, somewhat surprising, reason that I find compelling. We should engage in the study of good past philosophers, *not in spite, but because* of the fact that frequently past philosophers argue for views that are significantly different from ours. We should consciously challenge ourselves in a dialogue with philosophers whose views are both (a) *well argued*, and (b) *different from ours*. Such a dialogue is likely to make us probe our most basic beliefs, expose our own blind spots, and reevaluate what we take to be obvious and natural. Past philosophies give us the rare opportunity to challenge ourselves in dialogue with “justified, *wrong*, beliefs,” or more precisely, beliefs that appear to be well justified and that we still deem to be wrong. Instead of searching for anticipators of our own views, we should look for well-justified alternatives that can challenge our views. I stress that we should engage with *well-argued* views of past philosophers, because we should not adore any whimsical non-sense of the great past philosophers. We should treat past philosophers with the same critical attitude with which we treat our peers, yet we should do our very best to let them speak *in their own voice*, and avoid bending the text so that it can express the views we find attractive. For that reason, it is crucial that before we generate our critical dialogue with past philosophers we should carefully reconstruct their views with maximal historical precision. We should be maximally attentive to the text and strive to reject the temptation of anachronistic interpretation, not because anachronism is wrong in itself, but rather because it deprives us of the rare opportunity to challenge ourselves in a critical dialogue with intelligent views that are different from ours. Thus, precise *historical* reconstruction is a major prerequisite for using past philosophers in the most profitable manner *philosophically*.

If the text of Spinoza’s *Theological Political Treatise* suggests that the state should use religion as a political tool for the manipulation of the masses, we should not bend the text so that it can be read as separating state and religion. We should be open to the idea that Spinoza might be an acute political philosopher, having strong arguments in favor of his position, while not agreeing with us. Once we realize that, we should go deeper and seek for our and Spinoza’s reasons. Posing such a contrast—especially in moral and political issues—is likely to make us question premises that usually we barely consider, or even realize.

### 5. Conclusion

Before concluding this chapter let me address the question of whether there are *any* cases of legitimate charitable interpretations of past philosophers. I believe there are; a wholesale ban on charitable interpretations would seem to stem from an attitude that sanctifies the text and idolizes its author. Unfortunately, I am not aware of any philosophical author who is immune from error, and for that reason I think we must be open to the possibility that the text may contain an error (whether it is mere a slip of pen or a more substantial error) which has to be emended. Yet, I contend that charitable interpretations of past philosophers should be severely restricted and very cautiously pursued. The most (and possibly the only) legitimate application of charitable interpretation would be in the case of internal consistency within the same text, i.e., when an author makes explicitly contradictory claims within the same text. But even in such a case, we should be very careful before turning to the aid of charity. First, we should keep in mind the possibility that the author is *intentionally* toying with the law of non-contradiction. If we have any evidence that the author does not accept the standard formulation of the law of non-contradiction, we should abstain from employing charity. Second, we should consider the possibility that the author changed her mind while writing the text. This possibility should be given more consideration when we are dealing with textual units that are rather long, and in cases where we have evidence that the author revised her earlier statements in a later period. Third, we should consider the possibility that the internal inconsistency in the text may result from unresolved deliberation by the author. In such a case, we should note the tension and consider various resolutions. Pointing out tensions and internal contradictions in the thought of a philosopher may advance us quite a bit not only in obtaining the precise historical facts, but also (and more important) in uncovering the logical space of the issues at stake.

In this chapter I have criticized the attitude common among contemporary historians of philosophy (and some philosophers) who strive to reconstruct the texts of past philosophers so that they appear respectable and agree with the common views and intuitions of our contemporaries. I have argued that this practice deprives us of the most philosophically profitable use of past philosophers, i.e., their ability to challenge our own well-fortified intuitions. There is a significant relation between one's methodology in studying the history of philosophy and one's preferred methodology of philosophical inquiry. Philosophical conservatism and slavish adherence to so-called commonsense

intuitions, while they do not strictly necessitate the use of charitable interpretation of past philosophers, seem to play a significant role in motivating the appeal to charity. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the value of philosophical intuitions. Still, let me suggest briefly that even if the appeal to intuitions were unavoidable (and I am not yet convinced that this is indeed the case), it would by no means imply that intuitions should be instantly accepted; rather than uncritically consumed they should be used as a crucial ingredients of philosophical *slow cooking*. They should be challenged, tested, and modified time and again.

One finds a very similar philosophical sensibility in Spinoza's famous discussion of miracles in the *TTP*.

But since miracles were produced according to the capacity of the common people who were completely ignorant of the principles of natural things, plainly the ancients took for a miracle whatever they were unable to explain in the manner the common people normally explained natural things, namely by seeking to recall something similar which can be imagined without amazement. *For the common people suppose they have satisfactorily explained something as soon as it no longer astounds them.*<sup>40</sup>

What precisely went wrong in the *vulgus*' attempt and failure to explain miracles? Obviously they erred, according to Spinoza, by "being ignorant of the principles of natural things"; but why did they *stay* ignorant in spite of their genuine attempt to trace the causes of miracles? Why did they not look for the natural explanations of miracles? The *vulgus* were definitely not wrong in trying to find a causal explanation for miracles; Spinoza openly argues that we ought to try to explain things through their proximate causes.<sup>41</sup>

What went wrong in the method of the "common people" was that they did not go far enough in their attempt to explain the nature of things. Instead of stubbornly seeking the explanation for each fact, they felt content once an extraordinary fact was shown to be the result of a *familiar* phenomenon, while paying no attention to the need to explain the familiar. In a way, they were rudimentary commonsense philosophers who asked for an explanation for what appeared to be against common sense and were completely reassured

40. *TTP*, chap. 6, G III 84; italics added.

41. *TTP*, chap. 4, G III 58. The last three paragraphs of this chapter are a modified version of Melamed (2010b, 130–31).

*Charitable Interpretations*

277

once the unfamiliar turned out to be a result of the common. For Spinoza, our familiarity with a phenomenon does not render it intelligible; the familiar or common, just like the extraordinary and uncommon, demands a clear explanation.

*Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank the participants at the workshop in Montréal, where this chapter was first presented, for their helpful comments. I am also indebted to Eckart Förster, Zach Gartenberg, Michah Gottlieb, Zeev Harvey, Nick Kaufmann, Mogens Lærke, John Morrison, and Oded Schechter for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.