Ethics and Interpretation, or
How to Study Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus Without Strauss

Nancy Levene
Williams College

We shall make every effort to understand what [Spinoza] says exactly as he means it. For if we fail to do so, we are likely to substitute our folly for his wisdom. (Leo Strauss)

"[We must] speak according to the power of understanding of ordinary people, and do whatever does not interfere with our attaining our purpose." (Benedict de Spinoza)

Introduction

It has been almost half a century since Leo Strauss first published his innovative and influential book, Persecution and the Art of Writing, a collection of essays on three Jewish thinkers which strives to document the impact of social and political forces on their philosophies. The book today retains little of its novelty if only because it has been so successfully absorbed into mainstream approaches to the thinkers in question, Judah Halevi, Moses Maimonides, and Benedict de Spinoza. More generally, the book inaugurated, well before the entrenchment

---

1 I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation for their generous support while I worked on versions of this article.

of contemporary literary theory, a suspicion of the text and a sensitivity to context that brilliantly filled a hermeneutical void in the treatment of classic works of philosophy and literature. In this light there are interesting methodological correspondences between Strauss's work and more postmodern approaches to texts, though these connections, and their ironies, will not be pursued here. It is rather the book's influence that I will focus on in this essay, a fact more equivocal than its literary prescience.

What follows is not an essay on Leo Strauss per se. It is rather a prolegomenon to a longer rereading of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* which takes as its focal point the dogmas that have grown up around this work, and which argues that these dogmas significantly stand in the way of an adequate reading of it. The dogmas in question do not originate solely with Strauss, but they are quintessentially expressed in his philosophical manual "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," and they are sufficiently calcified as to be virtually unquestioned in discussions of the *Tractatus* in Jewish thought. This is unfortunate, and the object my

---


5 For better or worse, academic discussions of Spinoza can primarily be divided between those for whom his significance is construed through the lens of his place at the origins of Jewish modernity and those for whom his significance is cast in terms of his metaphysics and/or politics, irrespective of his Judaism, such as it was. This is not to say that there are no treatments of both, but simply to observe that it is possible to make this distinction in the scholarship on Spinoza in a sharper way than one can in the case of any other major thinker in Jewish thought to my knowledge (there is, *mutatis mutandis*, a similar division in treatments of Maimonides, but the division is within Jewish studies itself). Outside of Jewish studies, Strauss's reading of Spinoza has not been nearly as dominant, and there have been a few noteworthy critiques of it. For a non-Straussian reading of the *Tractatus* see Brayton Polka, "Spinoza's Concept of Biblical Interpretation," *Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, vol. 2 (1992): 19–44 and idem, Spinoza and the Separation Between Philosophy and Theology, *Journal of Religious Studies* 16 no. 1–2 (1990): 91–119. For an explicit critique of Strauss, see Errol Harris, "Is There an Esoteric Doctrine in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus?*," in *The Substance of Spinoza* (Humanities Press, 1995), 125–148. Harris strongly refutes the contention that Spinoza contradicts himself in the *Tractatus*, the linchpin of Strauss's argument, as I discuss below. See also Alan Donagan, "Spinoza's Theology,"