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Virtue and Republicanism. Spinoza's political philosophy in the context of the Dutch Republic

"Republicanism in the Dutch Republic" as a theme smacks of tautology, for the uninformed at least. As a matter of fact, however, this outstanding example of a republic that, at least for the period concerned, the mid-seventeenth century, was a prime European power as well, did not supply an equally outstanding theory of republicanism to the history of political thought. For all its short-comings, republican practice outdid republican theory. The few books and tracts from this period that secured attention abroad did so for other qualities than their republicanism. Grotius's influence on Selden and Hobbes was scarcely a republican one. De la Court's "Interest of Holland", known to the international public in a French translation as the "Memoires de Jean de Witt", drew attention for its realistic discussion of reason of state in international relations.

Political writings as such were however not scarce in the Republic. Both tracts and treatises were published, devoted to a series of practical and theoretical issues, written by professors in the universities, by ministers, by practicing politicians and by others as well¹.

Among these "others" comes Baruch Spinoza. His *Treatise on Religion and Politics* was one of the two books he saw through the press during his lifetime.

On the basis of the assumption that, although political theorizing will not always solve conceptual problems in a political practice, it at least reveals their existence, I will develop two points. In the first place, I will try to show in what sense we can understand Spinoza's *Treatise* as an intervention in the mid-seventeenth century debate on the functions and extent of Dutch governmental authority. In the second place, I aim at a convincing description of Spinoza as a Dutch republican political thinker, that is, I will give some arguments for correcting our views of both Spinoza and Dutch republicanism.

I will start off with a description of Spinoza's predicament within the mainstream of the history of political thought, followed by an indication of the elements of more recent developments in the historiography of political thought that are relevant to my undertaking.

¹ Cf. for a description of the core of these tracts G. O. van de Klashorst e.a., *A Bibliography of seventeenth century Dutch political thought. An annotated inventory* (Maarsse 1986).

Spinoza: a philosopher, not a political theorist?

One of the reasons why Spinoza does not figure traditionally in the history of republicanism and the growth of republican institutions is evidently an old prejudice against seeing him as political theorist of importance. In a sense this judgement is not incorrect. A brief look at the "Wirkungsgeschichte" of Spinoza's thought reveals that overwhelming attention has been paid to his metaphysics. In his own day, the most important Dutch critic of the *Treatise* argued only against its metaphysical and theological premisses². Also his followers, the Spinozists, were first of all committed to the metaphysical system of their master. The German idealist reception was similarly motivated³. It is only at the end of the nineteenth century that the political work was to be studied in its own right⁴, whereas translations would appear only in this century⁵. Nevertheless, the effect of this growing attention for Spinoza as a political thinker outside the circles of Spinoza-students is still rather shallow.

When Berki in his widely used *History of Political Thought. A Short Introduction*⁶ devotes almost one page (out of 200) to Spinoza, it is more than just a reverential slip of the pen. Although this passage stands in no comparison with the extent to which e.g. Hobbes or Locke are dealt with, both the fact and the way in which it is done sharply differentiate from what used to be the standard treatment. Sabine, in the widely influential third, 1951, edition of his *History of Political Theory*⁷, only gives three references to Spinoza, in which his essential message is that although

Spinoza, following Hobbes, made the only determined effort to bring both ethics and religion into accord with mathematical natural science, ... his success was far from complete and in any event his influence was negligible until the beginning of the nineteenth century⁸.

Both aspects in Sabine's verdict are characteristic of the traditional opinion of Spinoza as a political philosopher: a far from complete success and a negligible influence. We see it repeated in Kossmann's history of Dutch seventeenth century political thought, to the effect that Spinoza's being a philosopher makes him unfit for a real, relevant and grounded contribution to the political debate in his society. The absence of a traceable influence on political life is *prima facie* taken to be almost self-evident⁹. This illustrates a strong bias on the part of the traditional approach in favour of a history of political thought as history of ideologies, as "Dogmengeschichte", leading to a

² *Lambert van Velthuysen*, *Tractatus de cultu naturali et origine moralitatis. Oppositus Tractatui theologico-politico et operi posthumo B.D.S., Opera omnia* (Rotterdam 1680).

³ Cf. *K. Gründer & W. Schmidt-Biggeman* (eds.), *Spinoza in der Frühzeit seiner religiösen Wirkung* (Heidelberg 1984); *Spinoza entre lumière et romantisme* (Les cahiers de Fontenay, no. 36 à 38, Fontenay-aux-Roses 1985).

⁴ *F. Pollock*, *History of the science of politics* (London 1890) is outstanding in this respect.

⁵ *J. Kingma & A. K. Offenberg*, *Bibliography of Spinoza's works up to 1800* (Amsterdam 1977); *J. Préposiet*, *Bibliographie Spinoziste* (Paris 1973), *H. G. Hubbeling*, *Spinoza* (München 1978).

⁶ London 1977.

⁷ *G. H. Sabine*, *A history of political theory* (London 31951).

⁸ *Sabine*, 391.

⁹ *E. H. Kossmann*, *Politieke theorie in het zeventiende-eeuwse Nederland* (Amsterdam 1960) 55–60.

certain derogation of those "abstract" philosophers that neither really understood the practical problems of the day nor were able to contribute to their workable solution.

In Pollock's *History of the Science of Politics*¹⁰ the discussion of Spinoza is understandably different and the attention and space he devoted to Spinoza ought to have become the standard in the field, but that did not happen. Post-war political philosophy and its history has been permeated by a deep-felt urge to differentiate as sharply as possible between political philosophy and political science especially in its behavioural mode. Per force, it was much opposed to the idea of reducing the history of political philosophy to that of political science. The change happened in quite a different way. It has been the growing emphasis on historical explanations of the varieties of political thought that paved the way to a fundamental reappraisal of Spinoza. The historical critique of the sometimes rather sweeping generalisations of political philosophers directed modern research in the "foundations of modern political thought" into new roads. Especially one of those sweeping generalisations, Meinecke's *Idee der Staatsräson*¹¹, prompted a more close attention to the Renaissance origins of early modern and modern conceptions of politics and political life and to a diversity of circumstantial factors that made for their shape, change and variety. I will shortly discuss this new historiographical method in political philosophy more in particular and for the present recall the recent, more historically oriented, publications on Spinoza. Hubbeling notes this new emphasis on "the historical approach, because we discovered that much work has yet to be done ... It appears that Spinoza's philosophy was much more widespread and much more read in his day than previous scholars thought"¹². He can point to a series of publications about seventeenth-century scholars close to Spinoza, and could have mentioned other works as well, that not only discuss the congeniality of Spinoza's ideas to those of contemporaries, but Spinoza's contribution to the historical development of certain themes in political philosophy as well¹³. Berki's analysis of Spinoza in his *History* is on the edge of the traditional and the modern approach. We may expect later histories of political philosophy to follow the modern lead altogether when the implications of the new historical understanding of Spinoza are fully worked out.

Similar tendencies seem to follow from historiographical and methodological assumptions underlying recent work on the history and impact of republicanism in early-modern political thought. The extent to which Spinoza responds to and revitalizes the republican strand in political philosophy is remarkable. The methodological urge for a contextual approach to his political thought will be seen to be a valuable guide-line for further understanding. But let me first shortly discuss these historiographical and methodological assumptions.

¹⁰ See note 4.

¹¹ F. Meinecke, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (München, Berlin 1924).

¹² H. G. Hubbeling, *Today's western Spinozism*, in: C. de Deugd (ed.), *Spinoza's political and theological thought* (Amsterdam 1984) 11.

¹³ E. g. E. O. G. Haisma Mulier, *The myth of Venice and Dutch republican thought in the 17th century* (Assen 1980); M. J. Petry, *Hobbes and the early Dutch Spinozists*, in: *De Deugd* (ed.), 150–170.

Republican contexts

Precisely under the aegis of a growing awareness of the fundamentally historical character of all political philosophy, an important group of scholars has been engaged in a new type of research that intends to specify how the conceptual and the practical levels of political thought interlink, sometimes even going as far as blurring the supposedly clear-cut distinction between these two levels. The most important and influential of these scholars are J. G. A. Pocock and Q. Skinner, who have set new standard for studying early-modern political philosophy, contributed important methodological analyses to the discipline, and stimulated numerous others to follow their track. From a different starting-point A. MacIntyre virtually comes to the same conclusions, showing not only that the modern predicament of ethical theory has historical origins, but also that it is precisely from a recognition of its historical character only that a distinct and relevant (political) ethics can emerge¹⁴.

Pocock has endeavoured to show that distinct political theories can be fruitfully treated as elements in a diachronic theoretical structure. Both the theoretical meaning of a treatise in political philosophy and the problems it was intended to solve can best be described, Pocock argues, by showing it to be a stage of a larger development. This approach does not play down the specific achievements of an individual author in contributing *his* treatise, on the contrary, it provides for a reasoned paradigm to make precise conclusions about the originality of each political philosopher who contributed to this diachronic structure. As Pocock puts it¹⁵:

It is ... right to remind ourselves that to know the occasion of an individual happening is not to know everything about what it was that happened.

These principles are applied in his most important book, *The Machiavellian Moment*, which

has been so designed that we are concerned with identifying certain conceptual vocabularies which were available for talking about political systems considered in their particularity, with exploring their limitations and implications and considering how these operated, and with examining the processes by which these conceptual systems, their uses and implications changed over time¹⁶.

The conceptual vocabulary elaborated in *The Machiavellian Moment* is that of civic humanism, by which Pocock links in a long and sustained development the classical republicanism of quattrocento Florentine political thought via seventeenth-century English Harringtonian republicanism and its eighteenth-century aftermath to its reception during the American Revolution. Part of this enterprise, naturally, is the attempt to argue the centrality of the political vocabulary studied. Civic humanism, that is, should be seen as the, or a very important, linch-pin of early-modern political phil-

¹⁴ A. MacIntyre, *After virtue. A study in moral theory* (Notre Dame 1981).

¹⁵ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment. Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton 1975) 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

osophy which, although differently functioning in different politico-cultural settings, makes comparable a large array of theories by showing them to wrestle with the same set of problems in a single, but gradually developing set of terms.

Civic humanists, first of all, were acutely aware of the historical character of their society and of the body politic, both in that they sensed the continuity of political thought as such, and in their acknowledgement of the frailty of human institutions that may originate, prosper and decay. This is central in Machiavelli's, as it is in Harrington's, writings. Both were concerned to find out how a republic can be made as enduring as possible. They were convinced that a republic can be stable, that is prosper, only when the public good predominates over private interests. Thus far they accepted in a true Renaissance mood, the Aristotelian conception of politics and also agreed with Aristotle's definition of a citizen as someone who at the same time governs and is governed. But they were no longer sure about the way to bring this about. According to Aristotle, the virtuous man is subduing his private interests to the public good just because he is virtuous, i.e. performs the duties pertaining to his station in society. Machiavelli realized however that the applicability of Aristotle's principles to Renaissance society was barred by Christian ethical theory which, in principle at least, does not allow for a morality differentiated according to social position. Machiavelli understood that if the Christian prince has the same moral obligations as anyone of his subjects, there is in the end nothing left for an Aristotelian theory of virtues to be applied to, and consequently no possibility for a conception of the public good.

The Machiavellian conception of "virtù", therefore, is both a return to an Aristotelian conception of politics, and a polemical attempt to bring politics back into moral discourse. Both aspects of the virtù-concept, however, triggered ramifications of a fairly wide range. Societal structures in Machiavelli's time were no longer those of classical Athens, nor, for that matter, of republican Rome.

So, new conceptualizations of social structure were needed. At the same time, "virtù" as excellence and achievement, asks for standards of excellence and achievement and these can only be derived from a functional theory of society that shows what is excellent for what or for whom. The search for such a theory of society is, so to speak, the implicit theme in the subsequent development of classical republicanism, with the odds of getting hold of it changing, as society changed, as the predominant conceptual categories changed.

The concept of time, central to Pocock's work, comes in at two levels therefore: it inheres in the central civic humanists' puzzle (how to prevent a republic from decaying, how to make it persist in time) and it is the basic dimension in which civic humanism itself develops.

Skinner is less at home with grand visions. He prefers to let general conclusions, if at all, arise from a meticulous analysis of the context in which political ideas operate. Characteristic of this bend is his discussion of moral concepts in Machiavelli. The first thing to do, according to Skinner's method, is to delineate the "genre" to which Machiavelli's writings conform, viz. the type of literature and the societal functions these writings represent. This also implies in the first instance a playing-down of the peculiarity and singularity of Machiavelli's work, only to bring out his most original aspects

by showing where he deviates from the "genre"¹⁷. The results of this analysis Skinner applies in a restructuring of our inherited picture of political philosophy. In a recent article, Skinner gives a demonstration of this new historiographical approach. As he deals with a concept I will come back to in my discussion of Spinoza, I here shortly sketch his argument. This article concerns the problems we have in understanding the early-modern discussion of liberty¹⁸. He makes it convincingly clear that a certain early-modern conception of liberty does not fit well into the dominant modern understanding of the concept. In a very closely reasoned argument he shows that the classical Machiavellian conception of freedom consists in the following two basic tenets.

First of all, a citizen's freedom is only possible in a free republic (a "vivere libero") that remains "in libertà".

Secondly, he shows that a free republic can be maintained if and only if its citizens show "virtù": defend themselves courageously by serving in a citizen army, govern their own republic with temperance and in an orderly manner, practice prudence in the exercise of both. So in the end it is in everybody's interest to show "virtù", because only then can they expect to be able to pursue their private goals, whether these are glory, power, wealth or just the quiet enjoyment of a decent life. This conception of freedom comes ultimately down to: a citizen's way to freedom is service to the republic. This is highly in opposition to modern views, which all in one way or the other accept Berlin's verdict that negative freedom (freedom from ...) and positive freedom (freedom to ...) are incompatible. These modern views take it to be a basic fact about freedom that freedom in the first sense can never entail duties and that freedom in the second sense can never entail individual liberty to do what one wants to do. Modern theorists of the concept of freedom are prone therefore to accuse Machiavelli of logical inconsistency, or else try to deny his identification of negative and positive freedom. Berlin¹⁹, for instance, imputes the concept of positive freedom to Spinoza, not considering the possibility that Spinoza uses a negative concept as well. I shall come back to that in my discussion of the concept of virtue in Spinoza.

In this section my first concern was to point out the manner in which Skinner's micro-analysis fits into and completes the new historiographical approach. By offering more and "disturbing" details to our understanding of the early-modern way of thinking about politics, Skinner gives additional weight to the principles I may sum up here:

Political philosophy is not a collection of eternal truths about politics. It is a sustained endeavour on the part of participants in a political community to conceptualize their political experience. They partake in an ongoing debate on this experience which is changing, which incites conceptual changes and which reacts to conceptual changes by incorporating new ways of doing things.

¹⁷ This method is defended and exemplified in a.o. *Q. Skinner*, *The foundations of modern political thought*, 2 vol. (Cambridge 1978) and *Q. Skinner*, *Machiavelli* (Oxford 1981).

¹⁸ *Skinner*, *The idea of negative freedom*, in: *R. Rorty* a.o. (ed.), *Philosophy in history* (Cambridge 1984) 193–221.

¹⁹ *I. Berlin*, *Two concepts of liberty*, in: *idem*, *Four essays on liberty* (Oxford 1969).

By grasping this fact about political philosophy we do not only learn how to analyse its content, but we will also be able to gain a better understanding of political philosophy in our own time.

Implications

The first suggestion that might come out of this short discussion could be to discuss Spinoza's political writings in terms of the civic humanist vocabulary, to check for the precise practical problems and political discussions which may provide Spinoza's political thought with a context. To a large extent, however, that research has been undertaken already. Although more work remains to be done, the results so far indicate the wide use Spinoza has made of the civic humanist tradition²⁰. I shall come to that shortly, but I want first to discuss the further conclusions we might draw from these results. My first problem in interpretation is: how does Spinoza's political philosophy deal with time, how does it itself stand in time. The second is: what solutions does Spinoza offer where he is not in agreement with, takes opposition to, or enlarges upon classical republicanism.

Let me first develop a possible set of theoretical conclusions according to the Pocock-Skinner line presented so far.

Viewed as history proper, the work of these scholars and their kindred stands on its own, but qua political philosophy one cannot stop just here. Political philosophy asks for some sort of evaluation, elaboration or critical restatement, in that we try to understand how political philosophy in *time* relates to *our* time and how we are able to act accordingly.

In the case of Spinoza's philosophy we have to do with a system of thought that deals with conceptions of duration, time, of man and his power or virtue on a separate footing. For Spinoza, although politics is philosophy, not all philosophy is politics. It is, for instance, easy to see that whenever Spinoza agrees with some tenet of civic humanism, he professes to prove the statement in question from his general philosophy, which in many respects differs from the underlying philosophical beliefs of the republicans.

The most important of these differences is perhaps, if I may say so, Spinoza's identification of "fortuna" with nature. The blind force of "fortuna" for Spinoza is but the invariable law of nature. Virtuous man no longer keeps fortune in awe as a capricious woman, as Machiavelli puts it²¹, but becomes virtuous in so far as he complies with the permanent and, if understood, dependable laws of nature. In a sense, the bifurcation of "fortuna" and "necessità" is overcome. Both are only subjective appraisals of an inherently deterministic order. This endows the "political problem in time" with its characteristic Spinozan structure. There cannot be corruption of the body politic in Machia-

²⁰ See for the most important results: *Haitsma Mulier*.

²¹ *Il Principe*, ch. 25.

velli's or Harrington's sense, since "per realitatem et perfectionem idem intelligo"²². And as a matter of fact, where we might have expected the term corruption to appear in the *Political Treatise* it is conspicuously absent²³. Time-concepts appear in Spinoza in a different tone. Spinoza's answer to the civic humanist's problem of corruption, the inevitable decay of a prospering commonwealth, is to point out the possibility of an eternal political order²⁴. This eternal political order is even realizable for no matter which state, as political rules can be easily thought out in accordance with "natura loci et gentis ingenio"²⁵. In the *Treatise on Religion and Politics*, on the other hand, a different time-concept is predominant: here we see described the changes over time of exactly the "natura loci" and "gentis ingenium", together with the effects of outside destabilizing forces ("fatum inevitabile"? which elsewhere is said to be the only possible cause of the destruction of a well-founded commonwealth)²⁶. Both uses of the concept of time are clearly Spinozistic, but I am not convinced that what we find here is only a matter of application of Spinoza's general philosophy to the political realm. The crucial fact is, that in the political treatises Spinoza uses most of the terms stemming from the *Ethics* in a somewhat less categorical, a somewhat more commonsensical way. In the *Political Treatise* eternity is not sempiternity, rationality is somewhat more like reasonable, maybe even like decent, "potentia" is reduced more often than not to numbers (inhabitants, for instance), and harmony of interests is identified by the cash-nexus, to the detriment of ideological factors. Liberty is more like a mixture of Hobbesian "absence of external impediments", balance of power and Machiavellian civic liberty²⁷.

I do not want to deny the relevance of the *Ethics* to the treatises, but neither do I want to skip over the complex difficulties involved in Spinoza's applying the theory of the *Ethics* to a theory of political life. These difficulties, together with the (limited) similarity with classical republicanism, are a clue to certain aspects of Spinoza's political philosophy. Another example is this: when Spinoza advocates the propagation of "avaritia" to counter moral decay in a prospering nation (instead of laws against luxury that would not have any effect)²⁸, his insight may be as correct as Adam Smith's positing that selfish behaviour is beneficial to the wealth of nations. But somehow it is like advising birds to fly, because advising them otherwise won't help, since they only accept advice to do what they would do anyhow. Why advise then? I choose the example of "avaritia" with purpose, because in a more general ethical sense it is definitely

²² Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Definition 6.

²³ Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, ch. 10, sec. 4, the term corruption does occur in the *Treatise on religion and politics*, as we will discuss later.

²⁴ *Political Treatise*, ch. 10, sec. 8, 9; ch. 8, sec. 3, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 10, sec. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 10, sec. 9.

²⁷ Alquié argues that Spinoza on principle is changing the meaning of his concepts from one context to the other, but in the case of Spinoza's political philosophy I can hardly see that this could have been prevented, unless Spinoza would not have cared to be understood by people accustomed to a commonly used political vocabulary. F. Alquié, *Le rationalisme de Spinoza* (Paris 1981).

²⁸ *Political Treatise*, ch. 10, sec. 4, 5.

not to people's advantage to be avaricious. People striving for things outside themselves are indulging in passionate behaviour, thereby debarring themselves from becoming active. Avarice might be functional to the welfare of a nation, but by not being functional to the welfare of an individual a thorny problem arises. Or even more generally, can *any* political science that is founded on countervailing powers (that is, on the idea that citizens should have and should strive after equal or compensating power against each other) solve the problem of virtuous behaviour, unless it admits that civic virtues are *the* virtues?

A way out may seem to be to devise a political system in such a way that its being balanced does not foreclose the future development of "real" virtues. But can this be done? The English neo-Harringtonians faced a similar problem, and were unable to solve it. They were convinced that²⁹

(t)he man who lived in the expectation of reward for his civic actions was a creature of passion, not of virtue, and by definition lacked the quality necessary to resist further degeneration.

Instead of those pessimistic conclusions, others³⁰

readily accepted that men were factious and interested beings and instead of regarding these characteristics as fatal if unchecked to virtue and government, proposed to have them policed by a strong central executive, which did not itself need to be disciplined by the principles of virtue, but might without suffering harm appeal to the passions and interests of men. It saw personal morality as private rather than public, a matter of probity in interpersonal dealings which did not require to be expressed in acts of civic morality or statesmanlike virtue, and might contribute only indirectly if at all to the maintenance of a moral climate in politics.

According to MacIntyre³¹ this last view took hold, in due course divesting even private morality from any content whatever as the extreme relativism of emotivist ethical theory gathered momentum. MacIntyre's subsequent conclusion that the present choice is between Nietzsche and Aristotle may seem dramatic, but is in fact well-founded. As soon as the classical paradigm dissolves that the individual good and the social good are and should be related, and it did dissolve during the coming-of-age of a means-ends structured political science, then we have to confront the choice: morality and the moral life are social ends like Aristotle's "eudaimonia", or we are our own masters at last when we realize that all moral discourse is inherently void.

As MacIntyre states the problem³²:

There is no third alternative and more particularly there is no alternative provided by those thinkers at the heart of the contemporary conventional curriculum in moral philosophy, Hume Kant, Mill.

Basically the problem was already there in Spinoza. It is reflected in modern Spinoza commentaries that split up in two sides: those that emphasize that "might equals right" in Spinoza, as opposed to those who have it that "right equals might" is more basic³³. The modern tendency is indeed to overlook the possibility that Spinoza's po-

²⁹ Pocock, 482.

³⁰ Ibid., 487.

³¹ MacIntyre, 62 ff.

³² Ibid., 118.

³³ For the power-side of the debate see e.g. W. N. A. Klever, Power: conditional and unconditional, in: *De Deugd*, 95–105. The opposite contention is more widely defended as in H. De Dijn, *Ervaring en theorie in de staatkunde: een analyse van Spinoza's Tractatus Politicus*, in: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 32 (1970) and in J. Wetlesen, *The sage and the way* (Assen 1979).

litical philosophy is precisely an attempt to have it both ways: an ethical theory as well as a science of politics. It can be understood this way, precisely because Spinoza, long before the eighteenth-century debate on virtues and interests started, had run into what came to be in the end the fundamental problem of the Machiavellian moment: can a means-ends structured political science ever contribute more to politics but a greater perspicacity or reliability and ever provide more than a reasonable calculation of interest, while we endeavour to lead a rational life of true brotherhood, love and understanding? It won't do to say that political science teaches us that this endeavour is unrealizable. Anyway, it was Spinoza's endeavour.

Spinoza will be presented here as an unorthodox republican in a Dutch context who not only revitalizes classical republicanism but puts it to new uses as well. The Dutch context will be briefly discussed first, followed by a sketch of the theologico-political debate. In the last two sections, I will show the specific consequences for Spinoza's approach to politics and his ensuing republicanism.

Republicanism in a Dutch context

"Dutch republicanism" is rather resistant to attempts of definition. Kossmann, in his very precise and wide-ranging survey of Dutch seventeenth century political writings³⁴ (of which an English edition would still be welcome), has made it abundantly clear that a full-grown legitimation of the Dutch Republic scarcely appeared before the end of the century. The arguments in defense of the Dutch Revolt put forward from about 1580 till about 1620, did not grow up to a positive doctrine of the foundations, sovereignty and working of this rather hybrid political system. It did not fit into readily available models, a fact to be eschewed in a time when modernity or novelty was not as central a value in political thought as it later became³⁵.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, however, political thought did flourish in the Republic. And although at the Universities a hitherto unexplained bias towards monarchy is notable³⁶, republicanism in one way or the other is a recurrent theme throughout the century. In a meticulous survey of the influence of the Venetian political model on Dutch political thought, Haitsma Mulier has pointed out the existence of at least two strains of republican thought³⁷. In the first place, and most well-known, there is the anti-Orangist republicanism of especially De la Court and Spinoza, which according to the standard view defines a republic in contrast to monarchy. In the se-

³⁴ *Kossmann, Politieke theorie*.

³⁵ In contrast, Koenigsberger is less unwilling to call the Vranck-Grotius conception of sovereignty a theory in its own right. The context in which this judgement comes, namely an inquiry into the power of deputies to States-assemblies, is an indication that local attitudes are more important for the understanding of Dutch seventeenth century political thought than is normally assumed. *H. G. Koenigsberger, Estates and revolutions. Essays in early modern European history* (Ithaca, London 1971) 204–208.

³⁶ *H. Wansink, Politieke wetenschappen aan de Leidse universiteit 1575–± 1650* (Utrecht 1975).

³⁷ *Haitsma Mulier, Myth of Venice*.

cond place, however difficult to summarize in one consistent position, there can be discerned republican views that are not opposed to providing a place for the House of Orange in the political system. They tend to prefer a mixed constitution to an aristocratic regime.

These two strains of republicanism differ both in theoretical structure and in ideological orientation. The former defends undivided sovereignty, rejects the idea of a mixed constitution. They are radical in their principles as well as in their advice for political reforms. There is an aristocratic republicanism, or in De la Court's apt phrase: "an aristocracy which comes closest to popular government". For all their critique of any monarchical aspirations of the House of Orange, their critical stance towards oligarchic tendencies among the "regenten", the political elite composing the governing bodies, is not to be overlooked. We should therefore be careful not to identify this radical republicanism with the general ideology of the "regenten", not even with that of John de Witt.

Neither can the latter type of republicanism be solely characterized along ideological lines. Although most proponents of it defend the Stadholder, their defence in the most interesting cases is first of all a theoretical one, an attempt to analyse the perplexities of political reality and especially the shortcomings of the aristocratic model. They discuss the functions the One may have as against the Few and the Many, be it as a balancer, the symbol of unity, or the expedient executor of collective decisions³⁸. Naturally, also these positions are argued in a republican style: "antiquitas", political stability and durability as well as international power and prestige are the type of criteria against which political models are measured.

In defence of this interpretation in accordance with the historiographical principles discussed above, a lot of research remains to be done. The upsurge of it might be to uncover the discursive continuity underlying both versions of republicanism, and a reappraisal of the alleged centrality of the debate on the Stadholder in mid-seventeenth century Dutch political thought. The divergence on the point of the mixed constitution between the radical republicans and the "Orangist" theorists would rank high on the agenda. We would expect the "faction-political" approach to become less central in our understanding of the shared convictions in Dutch republicanism. For all their political quarrels, the Dutch shared a strong feeling of self-government and the politicians had a strong sense of responsibility for the commonwealth. As a specific contribution to this programme I will elaborate one element of this discursive continuity that is relevant to an appraisal of Spinoza's republicanism, namely the debate on church-state relations³⁹.

³⁸ See especially *G. O. van de Klashorst*, Metten schijn van monarchie getempert. De verdediging van het stadhouderschap in de partijliteratuur, 1650–1686, in: *H. W. Blom & I. W. Wildenberg* (eds.), *De la Court in zijn tijd* (Maarssen 1986).

³⁹ For a general overview *D. Nobbs*, Theocracy and toleration. A study in the disputes in Dutch Calvinism from 1600 to 1650 (Cambridge 1938); *H. A. Enno van Gelder*, Getemperde vrijheid (Groningen 1972); *H. Schilling*, Religion und Gesellschaft in der calvinistischen Republik der Vereinigten Niederlande, in: *F. Petri* (ed.), *Kirche und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in deutschen und niederländischen Städten der werdenden Neuzeit* (Köln, Wien 1980) 197–250.

The republican element in the church-state debate

Like most political relations in the Dutch Republic, church-state relations were intricate and balanced relations. And as balances are always in danger of tipping, there are likely to exist discussions about borderline cases where tipping is imminent. Most of these discussions in the mid-seventeenth century had a local character. The great national strife that raged during the Truce-years ending in the decapitation of Oldenbarnevelt, lost its sway at the end of the sixteentwenties. In contrast for example to the vicissitudes of religious politics in England, the national authorities did not identify with the official church to such an extent that they were prepared to enforce the acts against unorthodox religious practices. Besides, they had a war to fight and, as in other matters, citygovernments claimed their autonomy in dealing with religious peace.

Because of this decentralisation of church-state relations, it is difficult to give a correct general description of the ensuing situation. But especially in the cities of Holland a general tendency can be noted to keep conflicts at a low profile, which was the more easily achieved as the possibilities for the contending parties to mobilize effective outside support were scarce.

But the central contentions of the church-state debate were still there. Their target was the correct interpretation of "religio interna" and "religio externa", of the means leading to salvation, and the duties of a Christian government. The practical issue was the toleration of unorthodox protestant churches. Characteristically, the debates did not touch upon more general political questions. The existing political system is taken for granted. The arguments propounded turn around specific policies. Nevertheless, these discussions have a republican overtone. The notion of citizenship is involved as part of the general setting of the discussions.

On the whole the debate was inconclusive. Both in practical politics and in theory there was no winning side. The contestants were entangled in a stalemate-situation of "balanced argumentation". Both parties to the debate are quite clear that the "salus populi" is the concern of the government. Both understand this care for the people's well-being as active interference by the government with their subjects' lives. A good government is a government that enforces its conception of the good life⁴⁰.

At the same time both parties value highly the religious community, that is to say, the communal enactment of the belief in a law higher than that of the state.

Here comes the dilemma: since religion is a communal concern, but the people's well-being a governmental concern, all argumentation for or against governmental interference in religious practices is inconclusive.

The orthodox plea for eradication of heresies becomes for the heterodox an unchristian demand for the constraint of conscience ("conscientien-dwang").

The heterodox plea for toleration, at one time within the Reformed Church, later on outside, would involve an abdication by the government of its duties, to wit, the promotion of the salvation of its citizens – at least according to their adversaries.

⁴⁰ *Van Gelder, Getemperde vrijheid*, 37–48.

In both cases the other party decries the appeal to governmental interference as an illegitimate intrusion upon Christian values as they prosper and are to be promoted within the community of believers, but the principle of pleading itself, both accept. On this level the “*res publica*” is salvation, of all members of the republic. Reformation politics turns to itself, and its problems become apparent. The dilemma could not be solved by absolutist or liberal means, as both solutions would defeat the primacy of communal religious experience. The absolute alternative, for example, was proposed in an anonymous book, “*De jure ecclesiasticorum*” published in 1665⁴¹. Arguing along Hobbesian lines, all religious organisation (the *religio externa*) comes under the authority of the “*Prodi*”, God’s substitutes, namely the government. Ministers are regarded as governmental officers, responsible to the government, not to their parish. On the other hand, the “*religio interna*” is left free to each individual, on the basis of the law of nature. This book, once ascribed to Spinoza, provides for religious peace, by providing for peace, irrespective of the spiritual well-being of the people. Not surprisingly, “*De jure*” did not obtain much sympathy from either side to the debate. It denied the importance attached to the communal and social aspects of religion and its ensuing political meaning⁴².

Liberal solutions were even less apt, at least at that time and in the form they were presented. De la Court, for example, leaves little doubt as to his low estimate of religious experience, especially in its organized form⁴³. Toleration is good for economic welfare, and he is a declared opponent of enthusiasm. But Locke’s solution, let alone Hume’s, is far from the seventeenth century Dutch understanding of man and society.

Apparently, any important contribution to the debate had at least to respect the two basic tenets underlying it; the importance attached to communal religious experience, and the autonomy of the government in providing for the well-being of the people. Only a respectful transformation will do. We therefore turn to one element in the debate that provides the background to Spinoza’s transformation.

Already the important Remonstrant and prolific writer Johannes Wtenbogaert had opposed government enforcement of one religious conviction to the detriment of others, on the argument that no mortal being can really know the truth in religious matters. Only God will separate the heretics from the true believers⁴⁴. As such the argument did not carry much weight, since in the Bible God has revealed at least part of his intentions. So, more often than not, the discussion turned into a fierce debate on the true meaning of the Holy Scripture. But if truth is what matters, an analysis of truth itself might create new openings. This is at least as Adriaen Paets understood the problem.

⁴¹ *Lucius Antistius Constans*, *De jure ecclesiasticorum* (Alethopolis 1665).

⁴² *Nobbs*, *Theocracy and toleration*, 245: “The modest book of Constans was notable only as an example of these absolutist and secular theories ...”.

⁴³ *P. de la Court*, *Interest van Holland, ofte gronden van Hollandswelvaren* (Amsterdam 1662) preface.

⁴⁴ *J. Wtenbogaert*, *Tractaet van’t Ampt ende Authoriteyt eener Hooger Christelijcker Overheydt in kerckelijcke saecken* (Rotterdam 1647); *van Gelder*, *Getemperde vrijheid*, 241–244.

In a little "war of pamphlets" in 1654 and 1655, the Rotterdam magistrate Paets eloquently disputed with some orthodox ministers of the same city, who demanded strict measures against heretics⁴⁵. As one of his bases he chooses what one might call the epistemological approach. Truth in religion cannot be known by us. Hence we cannot dare to call other people heretics because they do not share our convictions. Next to it, if we (or the government) do enforce our religion upon others, they would by complying behave insincerely, overtly practicing what they do not believe. Alexander Petrie⁴⁶, one of his adversaries, contests the argument by pointing out that we do persecute criminals: does not that make for insincerity as well? Here Paets retorts that we must discriminate between forcing people to omit performing acts they know to be impious (that is, criminal acts) and forcing to omit performing acts they sincerely believe to be pious. As it stands, this retort begs the question, as long as Paets cannot objectively distinguish impious from pious. He comes up, however, with such a criterion, although it seems he did not understand its real force. The important fact about religious convictions, says Paets, is that they do not depend on the will. We can will to abstain from criminal acts, but we cannot will to believe what we don't believe. Religious conviction is a measure unto itself, it is the inner conviction of the heart⁴⁷.

No doubt Spinoza, being a descendant of Marranos, would have felt at home with Paets's argument about insincerity. The ensuing question of truth, however, turned out to be more important to Spinoza. Confronted with the fruitless and endless debates on the true religious principles, he must have realized that if the positive value of the quest for piety and salvation had to be saved, something else had to be done than to join one of the parties and strengthen their ranks. Nor did he choose to deride those who excluded him from the Synagogue. Spinoza opted for an inquiry into the underlying causes of these quarrels. This inquiry led him first to probe into the *Emendation of the intellect* and to compose a *Short Treatise on God, Man and his well-being*, which is so to say the prolegomena to his *Ethics*⁴⁸. In the *Treatise on Religion and Politics*

⁴⁵ Adriaen Paets was born in 1631 in Leiden, he died in 1686. Since 1664 he occupied a seat in the Rotterdam government. He was sent as an ambassador to Spain in 1672. Although removed from his political functions during his absence, he was restored later. Cf. C. W. Roldanus, Adriaen Paets, een republikein uit de nadagen, in: Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 50 (1935) 134–166. The most interesting of these pamphlets is *Anon.*, Sedig Antwoord van N. N. gereformeerd Hollander op de lasteringen tegen zijn Brief uyt-gestort van A. P. S. R. een vreemd Dienaar des Goddelijken Woords binnen Rotterdam. Waar in bewesen werd dat de dwalende als soodanige niet strafbaar zijn door uyerlijck geweld (Leyden [1655]) which contains his reply to A(lexander) P(etrie) S(cotae?) R(eligionis?).

⁴⁶ Alexander Petrie, born in ca. 1594 came to Rotterdam as the first minister to the Scottish Church in 1642. Before he died there in 1662, he was active against Independents and Baptists and wrote a compendious work on the history of the Catholic Church 600–1600. Cf. W. Stevens, The history of the Scottish Church (Rotterdam, Edinburgh 1833) 1–22.

⁴⁷ Paets will repeat this position to the end of his Lettre de monsieur H. V. P. a monsieur B[ayle]. sur les derniers troubles d'Angleterre: où il est parlé de la tolerance de ceux qui ne suivent point la religion dominante (Rotterdam 1686).

⁴⁸ Citations from these works, all posthumously published in 1677, will be given from The collected works of Spinoza, vol I, ed. & tr. by E. Curley (Princeton 1985), which is indeed a very fine and scholarly edition. The *Emendation* and the *Short Treatise* were written about 1660–1662. The *Ethics* was finished in 1675.

(*Treatise*, for short) he then put down his political philosophy with the explicit intention to contribute to a solution of the fruitless religious debates. Spinoza's transformation of the problem-situation consists in a separation of religion from reason or philosophy, and in the suggestion that freedom of thought is in accordance with the government's care for the commonwealth. How Spinoza proceeds to this conclusion and in what sense this shows him to be an heir to the republican tradition, I will discuss in the next section. Given my general purpose to place Spinoza in the appropriate Dutch political context, I will deliberately neglect his position vis-a-vis his main philosophical target, that is Descartes.

Virtues and *respublica*

On the face of it, Spinoza seems to operate within the same paradigm as the other participants to the theologico-political debate. The last two chapters of the *Treatise*, in which the previous eighteen chapters culminate, are designed to show first that the government has the absolute "*ius circa sacra*" and second that the government must not enforce religious beliefs⁴⁹.

The first principle is presented by Spinoza as an antidote to the libellous ministers craving for power. It is based on the previously developed argument that as sin is the transgression of law, and as there is no law without a state, the contents of sin are defined by the state. Therefore "*in solo iustitiae et charitatis sive verae religionis jure Dei regnum consistit*"⁵⁰. Since we can only follow God's law by following the law of the state, it is evident for Spinoza that "*pietas erga patriam*"⁵¹ is our greatest duty. Whoever retorts that politicians might easily slip into heresy and have therefore to be corrected by the ministers, is asked by Spinoza whether there is any reason to suppose that ministers are less heresy-prone than politicians. Since all the present troubles have their origin in the subtleties and philosophical digressions with which the ministers have adorned their profession, his conclusion in this nineteenth chapter is that a government can keep an absolute "*ius circa sacra*", as long as it withstands the proliferation of dogmas and the confusion of theology with science.

In the next chapter, Spinoza starts from the seemingly conflicting assumption that each man is "*dominus suarum cogitationum*"⁵², feels himself master of his own thought and is prone to voice his ideas. This is not harmful, as long as it does not turn into "*laesio majestatis*". Since "*finis ergo reipublicae revera libertas est*"⁵³, we have to

⁴⁹ The *Treatise on religion and politics* (*Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Amsterdam 1670) is cited according to the Gebhardt-edition, Spinoza Opera, ed. by C. Gebhardt (Heidelberg 1925) vol. III. The last two chapters are titled respectively: *Ostenditur jus circa sacra penes summas potestates omnino esse, et religionis cultum externum reipublicae paci accommodari debere, si recte Deo obtemperare velimus. Ostenditur in libera republica unicuique et sentire, quae velit, et quae sentiat, dicere licere.*

⁵⁰ Spinoza Opera, vol. III, 216.

⁵¹ Ibid., 218.

⁵² Ibid., 226.

⁵³ Ibid., 227.

find the mean between the government's authority and man's need for expression. By referring to the argument from insincerity, Spinoza concludes that this mean is to be found by judging men according to their actions not according to their thoughts; "ius circa sacra ... ad actiones referatur"⁵⁴.

Spinoza's analysis in these chapters is a forceful description of the actual situation. It endorses the pacificatory policy in the Dutch Republic. At the same time, it provides an ideological analysis of the strife itself: it is shown to originate from the self-indulgence of the victims of religious repression and from the vain-glory of those who manage to have their views imposed upon others. This spiral leads to nothing. It can only be stopped by a sovereign government that knows how far to extent its power in religious matters, that knows to refrain authoritatively from using its power. As it stands, this is a kind of Bodinian prudence. We have to probe Spinoza's arguments a bit further to find out in what way he intended to provide the contestants with arguments to overcome their unfruitful opposition. To that effect we should look behind Spinoza's use of the topos of insincerity, that is at the origin of his conception of truth. In the *Emendation* first an indication is given of the relevance of truth for morality. After explaining that good and bad are only relative concepts, "so that one and the same thing can be called both good and bad according to different respects ... especially after we have recognized that everything that happens according to the eternal order, and according to certain laws of Nature"⁵⁵, he states that human endeavour is directed at the attainment of "the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature"⁵⁶. And here is his programme:

"This, then, is the end I aim at: to acquire such a nature, and to strive that many acquire it with me. That is, it is part of my happiness to take pains that many others may understand as I understand, so that their intellect and desire agree entirely with my intellect and desire. To do this it is necessary, *first* to understand as much of Nature as suffices for acquiring such a nature, *next*, to form a society of the kind that is desirable, so that as many as possible may attain it as easily and surely as possible" (then come 3. moral philosophy, and education, 4. medicine and 5. mechanics, to complete his programme)⁵⁷.

Knowledge, "true ideas", comes in the first place. In explaining what it is to know, Spinoza deliberately wants to avoid the scepticist trap, namely the regressus that each criterion for truth asks for another criterion to support its correctness. According to Spinoza, to develop a criterion, or a method, is to reflect on truth, but to that purpose we have to have some true idea in the first place: "Method is nothing but a reflexive knowledge, or an idea of an idea; and because there is no idea of an idea, unless there is first an idea, there will be no Method unless there is first an idea. So that Method will be good which shows how the mind is to be directed according the standard of a given true idea."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid., 233.

⁵⁵ Collected works of Spinoza, 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 19.

The first important fact about Spinoza's conception of truth is, that he introduces a scale of truth which ranges from mere opinion to vague experience, to belief, to clear truth. No bifurcation of ideas into true and false. Less truthful ideas are not false, but imperfect, although we tend out of ignorance to regard our actual beliefs as "klare Kennnisse", that is clear knowledge or "cognitio claro". But, "falsity is never manifested or indicated through itself"⁵⁹. Paets had linked the enforcement of religious beliefs and insincerity. Spinoza makes insincerity and falsity equivalent.

But his theory of truth on the other hand, is not to imply that man is not forced to do what he does, and think as he does. In this respect, both the formation of knowledge and that of political relations reflect that man is only part of Nature: "The weakness of our nature requires us to love something, and to unite ourselves with it, to exist."⁶⁰ In the *Short Treatise*, the object most worthy of our love is said to be the most perfect Being, God. In the *Treatise* Spinoza elaborates a distinction between the God of popular belief and God as he really is. That is, Spinoza introduces a correspondence between belief-systems (such as a certain religion) and the scale of truth⁶¹. This is the second important fact.

In the same way as the God of revelation is a short-hand way, a first approximation of rational knowledge of God, so society and state are a first approximation of the rational union of man with man. That is to say, in the same manner as imperfect man is bound to love and obey the decrees of God, he is bound to love and obey the commonwealth, however imperfect it is. This is the third element.

The dimensions of knowledge, organized knowledge (as in religion or "scientia"), and societal organization are thereby structurally equivalent. The impact of this correspondence is that in the same sense as every idea can be said to contain *some* truth, this can be said of every belief-system, or of every form of societal organization for that matter. Only in this last respect, Spinoza dares remark that this applies to the Turkish Empire as well⁶². But the wider implications will be evident.

In this setting, the argument from insincerity gets a new and forceful meaning. According to Spinoza, where men are forced to speak differently from what they think, they are forced to lie. If people were forced to lie "fides, in republica apprime necessaria, corrumperatur et abominanda adulatio et perfidia foverentur, unde doli et omnium bonarum artium corruptio"⁶³. Fides and corruption are opposites. Fides is used here in the double meaning of faith and trust, since for Spinoza fides occurs in all three dimensions just mentioned: it denotes the third stage on the scale of truth, it de-

⁵⁹ Ibid., 124; cf. J. Bennett, *A study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Cambridge 1984) 162 ff., W. N. A. Klever, *Spinoza's methodebegrip*, in: *Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte* 75 (1982) 28–49.

⁶⁰ Collected works of Spinoza, 105.

⁶¹ Cf. for discussion of a similar problem T. H. Zweerman, *The method in Spinoza's Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*. Some remarks on this problem inspired by the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* and by *Epistola 37*, in: J. G. van der Bend (ed.), *Spinoza on knowing, being and freedom* (Assen 1974) 171–183.

⁶² John Locke reflects this point of view, when he takes up this topos of the toleration discussion: *A letter concerning toleration*, London 1689, ed. & intr. by J. H. Tully (Indianapolis 1983) 56.

⁶³ Spinoza Opera, vol. III (*Treatise*), 229.

noted belief-systems, and in the construction "bona fides" is used several times to indicate trust in interpersonal relations. Fides links all three meanings together: the communal pursuit of rational insight, of blessedness and salvation, and of trusting cooperation, are all exempla of the human quest for truth, for the "amor intellectualis Dei"⁶⁴. The state itself, as a system of cooperation, is the fides-practice par excellence, the prerequisite for other trusting practices. Religious experience is paramount among these, but there are others: commercial practices in Amsterdam come under this heading, as well as the proceedings of correctly organized governing bodies as discussed in the *Political Treatise*. Insincerity is the vice of falsity. But since falsity can only be known in contrast to a true idea, insincerity is the only form of falsity possible. As insincerity is therefore the vice par excellence, virtue, its complement, can therefore be said to consist in complying with one's own standards, including those of one's community. The worth of virtues, of practices that exhibit fides, cannot be proved in a positive sense. Only when new practices develop, the old ones can be shown to fall short of the standard of the new ones. And new practices do develop, as is evident from Spinoza's description of the gradual separation of scientific practices from religious ones. In a very fundamental sense, new practices make for a better understanding of the virtuous core in the old practices.

A republic is therefore to be praised, since it embodies a further stage on the way to human freedom. More than any other political system it promotes the fides-practices: communal religious experience, the bona fides in social, economic and political behaviour. It may fall short of ultimate perfection. But the only way to reach the reign of reason is, as it stands, to prevent the reign of insincerity. Necessity, time and virtue all point to the central importance of the republican way of life, in which not only reason is liberated from religion, but religion from reason as well.

Conclusion

In the end, Spinoza's republicanism is, for all its radicalism, firmly in accordance with the Dutch religiously coloured conception of community; for all its rationalism, it properly reflects the contingencies of political life. At the same time, however, Spinoza did transform the structure of classical republicanism. *Time* is the correlated evolution of truth and human cooperation. Society may lapse into corruption, but it is its own, uncertain measure in this respect. *Necessity* makes for very small margins indeed. But if fortuna comes in at all, it is as an opportunity for understanding and cooperation, and, she is kindled in a free republic. *Virtue* consists in understanding this process, and in complying with it, whatever the actual circumstances.

If Spinoza did choose sides in the mid-seventeenth century disputes, it was not for reasons the States-party would have endorsed. A virtuous republic, after all, is by no means dependent on the virtue of its rulers alone.

⁶⁴ Collected works of Spinoza, (Ethics), 611: "Love of God, not insofar as we imagine him as present, but insofar as we understand God to be eternal. And this is what I call intellectual love of God."