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**The End of Deception in Modern Politics: Spinoza and Rousseau**

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**The End of Deception in Modern Politics: Spinoza and Rousseau**

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## **Abstract**

### **The End of Deception in Modern Politics: Spinoza and Rousseau**

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“Enlightenment,” declared Kant, “is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” an immaturity maintained by all those “dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments.” As a result, more and more self styled philosophic critics of the Enlightenment have accused Kant and his less impressive ilk of perpetuating a grand, even unconscious, farce: their naïve vision of liberation was but a magnificent ruse for compelling obedience to a new host of dogmas and gods. The power and influence of this sort of critique has provoked a wide ranging and lively reappraisal of the degree to which the philosophers of the Enlightenment were founders of a regime rooted ultimately in deception or emancipation. In order to enter and evaluate that debate, I take up the views of Spinoza, a founder of the Enlightenment, and one of its greatest critics, Rousseau. According to both Spinoza and Rousseau, all societies, no matter how Enlightened, have to perpetuate deceptions in order to make political rule both legitimate and acceptable to

the ruled: humans are not naturally meant for political rule or political life. They both agree that the liberation of talents is at the core of the Enlightenment's approach to achieving this kind of legitimacy. But while the liberation of talents is considered an unequivocal good by Spinoza even if that liberation must have as its basis several fundamental deceptions, I argue on behalf of Rousseau that the Enlightenment perpetuates a deep moral corruption of man by stimulating within him the desire for an impossible celebrity that could never truly or authentically satisfy his deepest needs.

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## Introduction: The Twilight of the Enlightenment

“Enlightenment,” Kant famously declared, “is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” an immaturity maintained by all those “dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments” (54-55).<sup>1</sup> To be sure, Kant’s answer reflects the particularity of his own moral philosophy, which has as its aim the awakening of man to the need and possibility for autonomous self-legislation. But Kant’s response also crystallized the more generally shared Enlightenment hope that, for the first time in the history of the world, man could at last throw off his religious and authoritarian chains that so constrained his freedom and live according to a cultivated, unmediated reason (55).<sup>2</sup> Enlightenment, for Kant, would entail the embrace of a new kind of organizing principle: “freedom,” especially the freedom to make “public use of one’s reason in all matters” (55). The prospects for this Enlightenment initially appear rather hopeless. For Kant, the human masses have been dulled into a kind of sleepy and slavish adherence to the reigning “rules and formulas” which nourish a “permanent immaturity” (55). Man had become so accustomed to the ease with which he had lived under the old despotism that he would have no clue how to make use of a newfound freedom. “Consequently,” claims Kant, “only a few have

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” in *Political Writings*, by Immanuel Kant, ed. and trans. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). All subsequent parenthetical citations to Kant’s text reference this edition.

<sup>2</sup> For more evidence to support this claim from Kant’s point of view, I refer the reader to Kant’s assessment of the progress of the Enlightenment, midway through the essay quoted above: “If it is now asked whether we at present live in an *enlightened* age, the answer is: No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*. As things are at present, we still have a long way to go before men as a whole can be in a position (or can even be put in a position) of using their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters” (58).

succeeded, by cultivating their own minds, in freeing themselves from immaturity and pursuing a secure course” (55). To live a rationally directed life is simply too difficult for most ordinary men and thus individual Enlightenment does not provide a solid enough foundation for a broader cultural awakening.

But, claims Kant, the prospects for a *public enlightenment* are entirely opposite. He suggests that if only the public is allowed a certain freedom, it is all but inevitable that it should enlighten itself. Open up the public square to the play of rational debate and inevitably man will come to see past dogmas as oppressive chains to be opposed. To be compelled to accept anything on faith would be dead, instead replaced by a willful acceptance of publicly defensible reasons. Soon political and civic institutions will come to rest on more thoroughly rational foundations.

Kant understands thoroughly that this kind of massive cultural awakening may require an initial revolution to administer a coup de grace to the old dogmas, but if man is not “[reformed] in his manner of thinking” then most certainly new prejudices will arise to take the place of those past (55). According to Kant, it is the philosopher who will be the herald of this long term cultural project of reformation, which ultimately has as its goal the erection of a publicly critical cultural community of philosophers and artists, intellectuals and politicians. What is assumed, then, is that such a project is both feasible and good from the perspectives of the philosophic educator and ordinary citizen alike.

But the Enlightenment vision represented here by Kant receded and the so-called “postmodern age” increasingly came into view in the latter twentieth century. As a



result, more and more self styled philosophic critics of the Enlightenment have accused Kant and his less impressive ilk of perpetuating a grand, even unconscious, farce: their naïve vision of liberation was but a magnificent ruse for compelling obedience to a new host of dogmas and gods.<sup>3</sup> The power and influence of this sort of critique has provoked a wide ranging and lively reappraisal of the degree to which the philosophers of the Enlightenment were founders of a regime rooted ultimately in deception or emancipation. And at the center of this debate, Spinoza and Rousseau should rightly stand. In the one hundred years prior to Kant's celebration of the Enlightenment's emancipator power, Spinoza formulated the philosophic foundations of modern liberal democracy and the idea of free speech in an open republic, both of which came to define the twin ideals of the Enlightenment. In turn, Rousseau provided a powerful critique of that vision of the Enlightenment, claiming that it had ushered in a new age of softer but equally degrading slavishness. But, as we shall see, while Spinoza and Rousseau clearly influenced Kant, their answers to the question, "What is Enlightenment?" would have been very different from the answer that Kant provides. For one, although Spinoza is a chief advocate of liberal democracy, his philosophic outlook is permeated with a fundamentally inegalitarian view of human beings, which situates them along a dichotomous spectrum

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that, while this attack seems rather contemporary, its central contention can be traced back to none other than Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in his "First Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences," seems to attack his *philosophe* adversaries as but propagandists for a cause that will ultimately end in man's degradation rather than liberation. For the more contemporary "postmodern" viewpoint referred to here, one might refer to the influential anti-rationalist progressivism of Richard Rorty. Rorty's work, representative of many postmodernist intellectuals, marries a metaphysical and epistemological attack on the Enlightenment ideals of certainty and truth with a progressive-left politics that seeks to preserve some modified form of the political project of the Enlightenment, though on explicitly pragmatic, non-rational preference.

of the “vulgar” and the “philosophic.” And it is on the basis of this assessment of human beings that Spinoza forms two distinct, but interrelated goals: (1) to present a convincing and satisfying account to those more “vulgar” of the political value and “philosophical truth” of the Spinozist political vision; (2) to educate more philosophically inclined readers to a clear-sighted, ultimately philosophic appreciation of the existence of and need for *noble* deception in his liberal democratic political vision. To define and explicate these two goals in Spinoza’s work, I turn first to his treatment of this difference between the philosophic and vulgar as rooted in human nature and psychology. Then, I turn to the philosophical need and political value of deception in the social contract of Chapter Sixteen. Next, I explicate the role deception plays in Spinoza’s treatment of the sovereign’s authority over religious and political speech in Chapters Sixteen through Twenty. Finally, I conclude the essay by considering Rousseau’s articulation of the need for political deception and his attack on the particular Enlightenment form of it.

## I. The Connection Between Spinoza's View of Human Psychology and His Two Purposes Concerning Deception

Spinoza opens his *Theologico-Political Treatise* with a brief, but substantial, sketch of his understanding of human psychology. He implies at first that each and every human being is liable to the folly known as “superstition,” a psychological state characterized by a frantic search for any authority who claims to be able to deliver and secure the goods of fortune that all human beings so desperately desire (*TPT*, P.1.1-3).<sup>4</sup> This superstition is nourished by the widespread human desire for “uncertain goods of fortune, which men long for without measure” (P.1.2). It is with this phrase that Spinoza means to explain the underlying psychological provocation that enables the full-blown growth of superstition from its natural psychological seeds. Man is a naturally desirous creature who wants interminably what he deems to be good. Thus, fortune, which is felt strongly through his memories of past goods and evils, looms large as an unforeseeable and uncontrollable force that has the power to deliver or deny the attainment of what he desires. The power of one's desires coupled with a deep memory of the power of fortune to determine their satisfaction makes him “vacillate” psychologically between hope for future good and dread of future suffering (P.1.2). And, Spinoza stresses that this experience makes men “miserable”: what men truly want, it seems, is to *end* as permanently as possible this state of nagging, anxious insecurity, which at last causes them to seek out anyone or anything that offers them some sort of remedy to the wicked

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, ed. and trans. Martin D. Yaffe (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004), xv. All subsequent parenthetical references to Spinoza's text are to this edition.

vagaries of fortune (P.1.2). What begins as a primitive and natural superstitious disposition eventually lends itself to complete subservience to both individual diviners and more organized, competing sects, who portend to have access to a wisdom greater than human and thus have the power to “prognosticate” and even affect the course of fortune (P.1.8; 1.7).

It is from this sketch of a fundamentally needy and instable human psychology that Spinoza characterizes a distinct difference between those who cannot liberate themselves from the disposition to dread and superstition and those who can. The key, as Spinoza subtly implies at P.1.3, is self-knowledge: he claims that though “no one is ignorant” of the psychological phenomena of dread and superstition, “most are ignorant of themselves.” He is indicating that it is this crucial knowledge of oneself that is the genuine solution to the natural cyclical vacillation of hope and dread. It is only later in Chapter Four that Spinoza makes explicit the notion of self-knowledge as a means to psychological liberation. There he defines law as “a plan of living which a human being prescribes for himself or others in view” of either one of two aims: to promote the civic peace and security of the republic (the human law) or to attain the *summum bonum* of the active perfection of the one’s own understanding (the divine law) (4.1.2; 4.3.1). That active perfection, declares Spinoza, culminates in self-knowledge because man—as a piece of God’s infinite expression of the “natural things”—can only know what is truly useful through the perfection of his understanding (4.2.3-4, 4.3.1-3). The vulgar, though, are not only unable to cultivate this greater capacity for understanding demanded by

divine law, but they do not even know that this higher aspiration even exists: Spinoza declares that “mostly human beings are more or less incapable of perceiving [the true aim of the laws]” because the power of their lower animal part inclines them to “live on the basis of anything but reason” (4.2.2, see especially 16.3.2, 16.4.1-2, 16.5.16). Spinoza therefore suggests that the best that can be hoped for from the vulgar is obedience to a plan of living—developed by philosophers to be implemented by the lawgiver—that is consistent with the peace and security of the republic. But since the vulgar mass is unaware of and unable to satisfy the higher aspiration to knowledge, that merely salutary plan of living, founded on the rational desire to preserve oneself, can only be a mere simulacrum of the philosopher’s own complete rational liberation from the unruly cycle of dread and superstition.

As such, Spinoza reminds us in the preface that “it is equally impossible to take away superstition from the vulgar as to take away dread” (P.6.1). The resounding pessimism of this statement, though, should be balanced against the optimism of Spinoza’s earlier claim that “only while dread lasts do human beings struggle with superstition,” which implies that even though the *seeds* of superstition may be permanently ingrained in human beings, they need not flourish into full-blown superstitious religions if man can be made sufficiently secure in this world: Spinoza’s overarching approach to managing the problem of superstition will therefore involve the attempt to make men feel free of those fears that fuel and nourish superstition in the first place (P.1.8). As we will see, it is due to Spinoza’s recognition of the vulgar’s actual

inability to use their reason to free even themselves from dread that he turns to a philosophic and political project that has as its chief aim the mitigation of those underlying causes of dread through a specific arrangement of noble lies.

## II. Deception in the Social Contract

Of course, the largest contemporary obstacles standing in way of Spinoza's project were those Christian dogmatic clergymen, who, in manipulating human psychology, had created the conditions for a disastrous, superstitious, and violent religious conflict and warfare. In Chapters Seven through Fourteen, Spinoza shows that his project to make religion more hospitable to the apparently liberal project launched in Chapters Sixteen through Twenty does not aim to persuade these types of devout clergymen. One of his intended audiences is instead a class of men identified in the preface as those potentially open to the arguments of philosophy or a pseudo-philosophical rendering of the Bible. It is these men who he believes can emancipate themselves from their superstitious subservience to religious authority if only the belief that "reason has to serve as handmaid to theology" could be toppled (P.6.1). Assuming that those men have been liberated through his arguments from that faith which had required an abdication of reason, Spinoza turns next to building from essentially rational philosophic premises an entirely new rationalist political thought.<sup>5</sup> But, as we will see in Chapter Sixteen, this new political science can only be victorious if Spinoza's pseudo-philosophic class of readers swallows wholesale a fundamental deception at the basis of the social contract.

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<sup>5</sup> I refer the reader to Spinoza's explicit reiteration of the purpose, on the whole, of roughly the last fourteen chapters: "So far, we have taken care to separate Philosophy from Theology and show the freedom of philosophizing which the latter grants to each" (16.1.1).

In Chapter Sixteen, Spinoza must confront the challenge of articulating a coherent social contract teaching on the basis of his overarching teaching about human nature and natural right. This task poses a peculiar challenge to Spinoza's political philosophy because the establishment of the social contract demands that each individual give up unconditionally some essential elements of his natural rights even while Spinoza's teaching openly propounds man's "unlimited natural right" to all things. Spinoza must therefore present a persuasive, if not entirely forthright, account for *why* men would surrender their rights that will make sense within the framework of his rationalistic utilitarian ethics.

This foundational task proceeds upon Spinoza's articulation of natural right. The elaboration of that doctrine emerges from an extension of his earlier discussion of the human longing for the "uncertain goods of fortune" without limit (see, for example, 16.3.3). The right to man's possession of those goods is rooted in Spinoza's conception of nature: all the things of nature are endowed with certain powers that cannot help but be used since each being is "naturally determined for existing and operating in a certain mode" (16.2.1). And, as we later learn, that mode is the one that conduces to the goods associated with the preservation of that being. Flowers harness the power of the sun and grow, fish swim and consume one another if they are able (16.2.1-3). And, in abstracting from the beings of nature to human nature, Spinoza declares that man has a natural right to everything he can do to preserve himself "as far as [his] determinate power extends" (16.2.3). Flowing from the existence of those self-preservative powers, everything man



perceives to aid in his self-preservation he will strive to do, whether sound or unsound, rational or irrational (16.2.4, 16.3.3). But, what complicates picture even more, is that Spinoza has already implied that in the state of nature almost all self-perservative beings will be unable to recognize the “true plan of living” in accord with reason because the very possibility of that recognition can only come later: Spinoza declares that “everyone is born ignorant of everything” and, even still, some are naturally more inclined to “live on the basis of the laws of reason” while those “who [are] ignorant and weak-spirited” are not (16.2.6-7). Spinoza judges then that for the vast majority of human beings the “laws of appetite” naturally eclipse reason or virtue as a standard and motive behavior (16.3.2).

Those appetites, claims Spinoza, are so entrenched in man’s nature that he would never willingly give up his absolute natural right for accruing for himself the good things in nature unless compelled by the “dread of a greater evil or in hope of a greater good” (16.5.9). Although alliances based upon an open and honest alienation of one’s rights for the sake of mutual benefit can form, Spinoza claims that the total alienation of one’s rights prior to the social contract typically occurs through a process of deception: “no one,” claims Spinoza, “will promise without a ruse to yield the right he has to all things, and absolutely no one will state promises unless on the basis of dread of a greater evil or in hope of a greater good” (16.5.9). To explain this claim, Spinoza calls on the image of a Robber, who through the force of his power compels the weak to promise to assent to whatever the Robber wants (16.5.10-11). To appease the Robber, the weak promise to

withdraw their right to all things and strictly obey the Robber's will. But it is only by virtue of the weak's greater hopefulness that through lulling the Robber into a false sense of comfort and superiority that the weak might be able to slip away. This is the only conceivable case prior to the erection of civil society that a promise to yield all things would be made since, according to Spinoza, man will never knowingly choose something that is bad for him or makes him worse off. Whether at the moment of promising one was sincere or not is irrelevant; from the perspective of hindsight, one inevitably is compelled to choose the lesser of two evils and, as Spinoza's example implies, to deceive the Robber is a far lesser evil than the willful deprivation of the rightful means to one's living. Therefore, man always chooses in accord with the eternal "universal law of human nature," which states that he is compelled to pursue the good and will only sacrifice an apparent, immediate good for what seems to him some greater, more worthy good (16.5.6). Through this example that Spinoza means to make us wonder: are all contracts built on false understanding? Do we all simply make contracts and keep them only when they benefit us? And, if so, can a polity be grounded on such a utilitarian notion of contract or does it need a quiet non-utilitarian supplement to mend its cracks?

Before we take up this question, we should take note of the suspect nature of Spinoza's suggestion that man cede all of his natural rights to the sovereign on the basis of utility alone (16.5.14, 16.6.1). This seems, of course, counterintuitive: how could it make sense that utility is the basis for giving up all the means to maximize one's utility in any given situation? Spinoza recognizes the implausibility of this idea and he

acknowledges the difficulty of getting anyone to agree to such a contract on a clear-sighted perception of utility. If “no one is bound to stand by his compacts unless in hope of a greater good or in dread of a greater evil,” why would any man abide by the alienation of his natural right based on greater utility when it is always within his right to take advantage of others through deception or retake his right to defend against other potentially exploitative deceivers (16.5.16)? Indeed, Spinoza even admits how utopian the social contract must seem on the basis of his conception of natural right as might: at 16.5.16, he claims that all would strike such a deal only if they could be “easily guided solely by the guidance of reason” to “acknowledge the highest utility and necessity of a Republic” (16.5.16). That deal seems increasingly unlikely since, as Spinoza has emphasized over and over, man does not typically take reason as his guide. He is a creature endowed by nature with many ruling passions, which drive him towards violating his promises or exploiting his fellow man whenever it seems better to do so.

And then, after outlining the substantial difficulties in forming a successful social contract Spinoza implies that man’s signing of the social contract is the only lasting remedy to his vulnerability to ruses, deceptions, and potential exploitation from other human beings in the state of nature. It is the only through the social contract that man, motivated by some perceived utility, alienates his rights while retaining an absolute assurance that the deal struck between man and man is genuine and not deceptive: man cedes his natural rights to a sovereign who, by virtue of the power to compel obedience through punishment, ensures that no one violates the compact and retreats to his natural

right to whatever he may have power over (16.5.17, cf. 16.5.16). The pact is a genuine one, according to Spinoza, because it seemingly results in a net gain in utility, for the power of the sovereign promises to quiet dread and support peace and prosperity for individual citizens. But Spinoza has quietly pointed to at least two deceptions that are necessary in order to make a stable social contract possible. First, it does not seem reasonable that the philosophic (those able to overcome the cycle of dread and superstition by virtue of the power of their reason) would agree to keep the faith since, according to Chapter Four, they would see no reason to sacrifice themselves as thinking beings for the sake of preserving the Republic. That Republic is, at best, a means to living the highest life: it would make no sense for them to sacrifice the end for the sake of the means.

In considering the second necessary deception, we should remind ourselves that Spinoza claims that human beings only cede their natural rights to a higher power solely on the basis of a hope for a greater good or in dread of a greater evil. The vulgar apparently cede these rights to the sovereign for greater hope of attaining and securing those goods of fortune which they crave. But any ordinary experience of life in a Republic indicates that once man has ceded these rights and joined in compact, he will inevitably encounter times in which the highest power commands him to make a sacrifice for the sake of some greater good that may not be coeval with his own perceived good. Such sacrifices will especially be hard for the vulgar because they remain especially attached to their enjoyment of the goods of fortune. What Spinoza provokes us to

wonder is: how can these men be transformed to think that their highest good is coeval with the defense of the Republic, that entity whose defense is only required as a means to what they truly deem to be good—the satisfaction of their passions?

We are reminded that, in war or in times of national crisis, for example, it may not be clear that one will wish to sacrifice himself to protect the integrity of the Republic, especially if he believes that his fighting could likely result in his death—something likely more dreadful than not fighting at all—and that others can be persuaded or coerced to sacrifice themselves for the sake of his own protection. Spinoza might mitigate this problem by pointing to the sovereign’s power to punish; the sovereign might use the punishment of death to motivate his subjects to serve in wars, knowing that they will prefer the risk of death in battle to the certainty of death at the sovereign’s hand. At this decisive moment, man is compelled to accept, as Spinoza puts it at 16.5.16, the preservation of the Republic as his “highest good,” which he now refers to as consistent with the new “faith” (16.5.16). It appears, then, that though he had initially signed a contract solely on utilitarian grounds, at the most decisive instance—when the whole political order is threatened from within or without and we are called to sacrifice to defend it—it shows itself to rely ultimately on a “faith” in a good other than ours, the good of the Republic. We wonder: what is the character of this faith?

Suppose, for instance, that the sovereign is ultimately called to justify the use of his power to punish. He cannot, of course, make a claim that runs counter to the utilitarian basis of the contract: he must somehow claim that the punishment or other

compelling powers are deployed in the individual interest of the subject. But one wonders how exactly he will make this claim since, from the perspective of the citizen, to be compelled by the threat of punishment to do something that he would otherwise not do seems wholly against one's interests. When at any individual moment that citizen perceives obedience to the sovereign as resulting in a perceived *net loss* in utility, it seems that only through deception would he *willingly* make a sacrifice and see that sacrifice as ultimately consistent with the utilitarian basis of the contract. He would need to be somehow tricked by the sovereign to believe that such sacrifices in the name of obedience to an abstract compact or "the common good" *are* somehow bound up with own self-interest. He will hence be persuaded to believe that the sovereign, through his guidance and commands, is the entity best able to help him obtain the "goods of fortune" he so desires, especially when an apparent sacrifice is required. In a sense, then, Spinoza indicates that the social contract can only really be made stable and lasting if indeed this essential deception is maintained through the sovereign's political prudence.

### III. The Role of Deception in the Practices of the Sovereign

Midway through Spinoza's final Chapter Twenty, he proclaims the following about the highest purpose of the newly erected Republic: "The aim of a Republic is not, I say, to make human beings from rational beings into beasts or puppets, but on the contrary, it is for their mind and body to function safely in their functions and for them to use free reason...The aim of a republic, therefore, is really freedom" (20.4.2-3). It is pronouncements like these, peppered through the five chapters that end Spinoza's work, that create the overarching impression that Spinoza's project advocates, nay, requires the utmost religious and political liberty. But, while Spinoza wishes to persuade the potentially friendly liberal theologians of his audience of the pressing need and value of that kind of liberalism, he obliquely (and not so obliquely) indicates that there will be strict limits on that liberty. As we have seen, Spinoza recognizes in Chapter Sixteen that the social contract is fragile at best and requires deception to legitimize it and keep it stable; this in turn suggests the thought that, especially in a liberal Republic, certain curtailments on any use of liberty that could compromise certain vital deceptions—like the civil religion of Chapter Fourteen or the social contract of Sixteen—will be required.<sup>6</sup> But, as we were reminded before, Spinoza wishes for what appears to be a genuine political and religious freedom to be the highest aspiration of the Republic. If that aspiration is not to seem hollow, the liberal citizens will need to accept these curtailments as something other than what they in fact are, as not restrictions of the "freedom of

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the role civil religion plays in Spinoza's thought, see especially the *Theologico-Political Treatise* 14.1.37-49.

judgment” at the center of the open Republic, but as measures consistent with the highest right of the sovereign and the greater faith in the preservation of the Republic as the highest good (see 16.5.16).

To better understand those restrictions, we turn now to the purpose and justification for the sovereign’s power as it relates to the regulation of religious speech. Our analysis returns to Chapter Sixteen, where, in order to define and defend the power of the sovereign in the contractual Republic, Spinoza claims at 16.6.3 that “the highest power is bound by no law; but all have to obey it in everything. For all had to compact, tacitly or expressly, when they transferred to it all their power to defend themselves, that is, all their right” (16.6.3). The transference of those rights, as we have seen, was in no way contingent; in order for the social contract to be made stable and enforceable, the contractors had to agree to be “bound to exercise absolutely all the commands of the highest power, *even* if it commands the most absurd things” (16.6.4). And since the sovereign’s highest duty is the maintenance of the greater good understood as the security and peace of the Republic, those commands, as we soon discover in Chapter Nineteen, will especially be concerned with regulating “religion’s outward worship, and all exercise of piety,” including interpreting scripture, in accord with “the peace and preservation of the republic” (19.1.21). How, one might wonder, could Spinoza possibly justify and defend this tremendous and even interfering power of the sovereign when taking into account the rather liberal presentation of the right to free speech in Chapter Twenty?



Spinoza defends this right of the sovereign in reference to what he deems as the highest law to which both the Republic and divine are subservient: the “welfare of the populace” (19.2.5). And, since “the divine lessons revealed by the natural or the Prophetic light do not receive the force of a command immediately from God, but, *necessarily*, from those—or with those mediating—who have the *right* to command and decree,” then it follows that all private citizens must defer to the sovereign to formulate and enforce those laws which establish “by what plan each has to treat his neighbors with piety” consistent with the welfare of the populace (19.1.20, 19.2.6, emphasis added). In Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen, however, Spinoza has made clear that religious authorities are not typically willing to cede such authority to the sovereign. For, even prior to Spinoza’s full argument on behalf of an “open” or “liberal” Republic, he shows us that he is keenly aware that, if left to an unregulated and unlimited freedom of speech, the clergy will use that space to incite destabilizing religious warfare between competing sects over insignificant, but psychologically gripping, doctrinal controversies (cf. Chapter 20).

He briefly explicates the problem in Chapter Eighteen, justifying his earlier outline of the problem of superstition of the Preface with some historical analysis. When the religious authorities were freely allowed to transact the business of the Republic in accord with their pontificate powers, such powers were used to decree “new things daily about the ceremonies, about the faith, and in everything they wanted” in order to tighten their grasp over the lives of the citizens and hence increase their authority and glory

(18.1.13). Soon pontiffs used this power over religious law and ceremony to compete for the loyalties of their subjects; different camps formed and eventually crystallized into quarrelsome sects, which broke apart the Republic. Hence, Spinoza denies that these ministers of the sacred matters have any right to decree or transact any business of the imperium, including religious, on the implicit grounds that the vulgar pontiffs will always prefer their own glory over and above the safety and social cohesion of the regime (18.4.1). The clergy of the various sects will therefore only be able to “give answers concerning no matter unless asked, and meanwhile with teaching and practicing only what is accepted and most usual” (18.4.1). And ultimately the sovereign’s highest right to command everything in keeping with the highest law of the public welfare permits a rather substantial power to regulate the speech of religious authorities in accord with what is “accepted and most usual” i.e. most salutary (18.4.1). The problem of religious faction will be mitigated, then, by simply making all religious practice as uniform as possible, while convincing the religious believers themselves that such a curtailment of religious speech is consistent with that “highest law, which all laws, human as well as divine, have to be accommodated” (19.2.5, cf. the first dogma, 18.4.1). To allow religious authorities to determine their own sacred matters is tantamount to providing the necessary conditions for the introduction of violently competing theories of what is most useful and best for man and hence the citizens of the Republic as a whole (cf. 19.2.22-23).

To what extent, then, will citizens be free at all to speak their minds on the most important religious matters, those matters on which they cannot help but form judgments according to their particular “mental cast” (20.1.4, 20.2.1)? How will Spinoza compel acceptance of such censorship in an apparently open Republic? Spinoza’s project as it relates to the taming of religion seeks to convince the religious authorities that, in fact, no such unjustified or overly harsh censorship will exist in the open Republic. In Chapter Twenty, Spinoza declares that such an absolute right of the sovereign to establish acceptable religious speech is not at all in tension with the considerable freedom granted for the independent and diverse ways in which “each’s psyche has to be moved in devotion toward God” (20.1.3). For, even though the sovereign may have a right to be the final interpreter of right and piety, the simple fact that sovereign compulsion cannot plausibly “make human beings not pass judgment on any matters on the basis of their own mental cast” prevents the repression of the freedom and independent faculty of judgment (20.2.1, see especially 20.2.2). And, ultimately, since man’s highest good is the intellectual knowledge of God, the open Republic will permit all men to seek the understanding that will fulfill their highest capacities. However, Spinoza makes clear that even though citizens may seek that knowledge in separate ways and form separate judgments, they will not be permitted to “act solely on the basis” of those judgments if they prescribe a plan of living in contradiction to that of the Republic’s (20.4.5). Citizens, though, may speak against a law or presumably an established religious dogma if in fact they can plausibly claim that such a decree conflicts with “sound reason,” which

presumably culminates in the “true” knowledge of God (20.4.7). But, if, as suggested by Spinoza’s hints, sound reason should discover that either (a) the sacrifices required by the sovereign are, indeed, not in one’s self-interest or (b) the sovereign’s coercive power over the exercise of religion prevents the attainment of a perceived higher spiritual good of practicing religion in the manner one sees fit, then will not that “freedom to redress” the government simply be an ineffectual illusion? (19.2.6). The sovereign, then, will be charged with the duty of ensuring that citizens use their reason only in the limited ways that the sovereign deems “sound.” Citizens will not be free to critique the philosophical or theoretical underpinnings of the great social contract (20.4.13). They will not, for example, be able to argue against the wisdom of keeping contracts or argue for a plan of living according to private whim given that the great social contract is in part made binding by a faith in the inviolability of contract and the right of the sovereign’s power of decree. And quickly, implies Spinoza, as more and more people experience the value of the social contract and the sovereign’s power over religious expression in the form of greater security and prosperity, citizens will stop concerning themselves with those who profess to hold the “real” truth, either in the form of radical philosophic critique or religious sectarianism.

#### IV. Some Thoughts on the Viability of Political Deception in Spinoza

As we have seen, Spinoza has indicated the philosophic need for several salutary deceptions if his political project is going to be viable. The social contract is only practicable if the lawgiver can persuade man to always perceive his obedience to the sovereign's commands as good for him even or especially when that sovereign commands him to make a necessary sacrifice. And, if the Republic that emerges from such a deception is to nourish the kind of civic and political culture that Spinoza thinks necessary both for the security of the citizen and freedom of the philosopher, there will need to be certain strict restrictions upon the freedom of political and especially religious speech to insulate the regime's dogmas from attack or contest. If the regime, though, is to preserve its explicit higher purpose—to "liberate" the individual to use his faculties—then these curtailments will need to be understood as somehow not restrictions on speech, but somehow actually consistent with the interests of those curtailed. One wonders, though, to what degree the sovereign itself will be able to successfully defend these deceptions and restrictions in a political and civic culture that champions the very principle of free thought and speech. Will an entire political edifice built upon foundational deceptions collapse in the wake of the eventual rise and growth of the central institution of free thought and speech? Does not Spinoza anticipate and even encourage his followers, modern and postmodern, to fall in love with the institution of freedom of speech even at the potential cost of unmasking the noble lies at the core of his political project?

## V. Rousseau: the Great Skeptic

Rousseau was the first of the great late-modern critics of the Enlightenment to openly question the viability and goodness of what may be termed the Spinozist/Hobbesian/Lockean political project known as the Enlightenment. Rousseau's critique revolves around his general view that science or philosophy is incompatible with a free Republic. Science or philosophy, understood in a modern sense as "Enlightenment" philosophy, tends to undermine or chip away at the necessary foundations of any society, both present and future. This thought, of course, is not a revolutionary one in the history of philosophy: both Plato and Aristotle believed that philosophic teaching should be moderated by the concern of justice understood as upholding the common good or as supporting those decent opinions at the backbone of any healthy political regime. What, then, is new in Rousseau's vision for philosophy? And how would Rousseau approach Spinoza's paradoxical claim that a free Republic depends upon the freedom of thought and speech as its core or principal ballast and justification?

We begin at the launch of Rousseau's philosophic vision, *The First Discourse on The Sciences and the Arts*. It is here that Rousseau lays the groundwork for his entire philosophic vision. And it is there that we will be able to discern Rousseau's comprehensive critique of the Spinozist proposition that the Spinozist regime satisfies the principal aim of any Republic, to allow "for their mind and body to function safely in their functions and for them to use free reason and not struggle in hatred, in anger, or

with a ruse, and not bear an inequitable spirit towards one another” (20.4.2-9). Spinoza and his fellow pre-modern proto-liberals often defend the right of man to express himself through the use of his mind and body unimpeded by sovereign intrusion. But to what end? What is the necessary outcome of the retreat of the state from the everyday lives of its citizens?

## VI. The Enlightenment Revised and Revisited

The hallmark and pride of the “civilized” societies of the eighteenth century was their prodigious advance in the arts and the sciences. Rousseau begins his essay by praising this movement with the soaring rhetorical for which he is typically known:

It is a grand and beautiful sight to see man emerge from obscurity somehow by his own efforts; dissipate, by the light of his reason, the darkness in which nature had enveloped him, rise above himself; soar intellectually into celestial regions; traverse with giant steps, like the sun, the vastness of the universe; and—what is even grander and more difficult—come back to himself to study man and know his nature, his duties, and his end (35).<sup>7</sup>

Here Rousseau immediately brings into view the great chasm between the darkness of ignorance, which apparently nature “envelopes” us, and the grand and vastly difficult liberation of self-knowledge and knowledge of the whole. In a sense, Rousseau here is replicating the cave allegory of Plato’s *Republic*: we are reminded of the self-directed movement from the darkness of the cave to the light of the sun. Contrasting with the *Republic*—in which the philosopher is forcibly compelled to return to the cave—Rousseau’s ideal, however, culminates in a study of “man,” “his duties,” and “his end.” And it is this task that Rousseau especially wants to highlight as “even grander and more difficult.” Rather than liberating the mass of men to make this flight upwards to the truth, why does the Enlightenment, according to Rousseau, make it all but impossible?

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<sup>7</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. by Roger D. Masters and trans. by Roger D. and Judith R. Masters (Boston: St. Martin’s Press, 1964). This and all subsequent references to the *First Discourse* are taken from the Masters’ translation noted in the bibliography.



To answer this question provoked by his first paragraph, Rousseau launches into a discussion of the status of the arts and sciences in his own day. What is presumed and implied by the question of the Academy is that the arts and sciences have not only “purified morals,” but have also elevated French and, more broadly speaking, European civilization beyond anything imagined before. Rousseau uses his contemporary French example to speak “beyond his century” about the dual challenges the rise of a “sophisticated” civilization poses to the authentic, transparent way of life at the core of the happiness available to the mass run of the non-philosophic. In the process, Rousseau reveals how all societies are rooted in a kind of deception. But, unlike Spinoza, Rousseau makes a stark division between the healthy and unhealthy political deceptions of traditional societies and the Enlightenment.

At the least, according to Rousseau, the Enlightenment had taken the most necessary step of lifting Europe from the “barbarism” of the Middle Ages. It was the “nondescript scientific jargon” of Christian scholasticism that had sunk Europe into a condition “even more despicable than ignorance” (35). After the revolution to “common sense” precipitated by the emergence of the authentic and unadulterated classical heritage of ancient Greece in Europe, a new kind of unprecedented culture emerges. Rousseau defines the essence of that culture as one of “literary occupations,” which make men “more sociable by inspiring in them the desire to please one another with works worthy of their mutual approval” (35-36). A society with a flourishing artistic and philosophic segment is nothing new or even unusual; we only need to mention Pericles’ celebration of

Athens' artistic achievements as one of her great gifts to the subjects of Athenian imperialism. And, according to Rousseau, it was that artistic legacy that served as the crucial trigger in lifting men from the fog of the Middle Ages. What is new, then, is the place or role of the "literary occupations" in the Enlightened regime's education of its citizens.

## VII. Healthy and Unhealthy Deception

To understand why the status of the “literary occupations” in Europe pose a particular philosophic and political problem, we will need to better understand Rousseau’s analysis of the permanent role deception plays in legitimizing political rule. The Enlightened regime, according to Spinoza, would need to maintain several noble lies to make the social contract stable and to render benign any and all religious challenges to the new order. Rousseau both broadens and radicalizes this appeal while simultaneously showing how Enlightenment effectively undermines the ability of the truly philosophic to defend and nourish a healthy political and moral life.

The foundations of political life, according to Rousseau, are universally simple: “The mind has its needs as does the body. The needs of the body are the foundations of society, those of the mind make it pleasant” (36). Our bodily needs apparently outstrip our singular ability to satisfy them. But in joining together in society, our natural liberty is compromised by the demands that other men place on us. No longer are we free to simply take whatever we wish in accord with our desires; we must take heed of the desires, needs, and wishes of others. Since, according to Rousseau, we “seem” to have been born for “the sense” of “original liberty,” such demands are inevitably seen as burdensome and odious. The pleasures of the mind, which society affords us not only through the arts and the sciences but all sorts of public distinctions of talents, are the necessary antidote to those initial feelings of repression and unhappiness: “the needs of the mind make [society],” i.e. political rule, “pleasant” (36).

In all “civilized” societies, societies which we would regard as possessing a high level of humanity and a softness of mores, the sciences and the arts play the essential role in veiling the underlying unhappiness of being commanded from without: “While government and laws provide for the safety and well-being of assembled men, the sciences, letters, and arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized peoples” (36). Now it is clear that the sciences and the arts do not merely distract men from the reality of life under political rule; they actually beautify and ennoble that rule itself, making it appear as something pleasant and satisfying in and of itself. This need not occur by any propagandistic buttressing of the regime’s underlying claims to rule. Instead, Rousseau claims, political rule is made legitimate by an degrading coincidence of apparent interest between ruler, artist and scientist, and common men. Rulers support the arts and sciences because they are an effective means to keep their subjects docile and quiet: “Princes,” Rousseau declares in a footnote, “always view with pleasure the spread, among their subjects, of the taste for arts of amusement...[f]or, besides fostering that spiritual pettiness so appropriate to servitude, they very well know that all needs the populace creates for itself are so many chains binding it” (36). As the pleasures of the mind, which, as Rousseau has claimed, render political society benign and sweet, grow and develop, their rises an ever greater demand for a diverse and splendid array of them. In turn, “talent” emerges as the quality of

character most venerated and exalted. More and more men are attracted to cultivating new talents and the rulers support their development and spread. Soon enough, an entire industry of the arts and sciences emerges as a necessary, nay, essential foundation for the pride and justification of the regime itself. The appearance of the pleasures of the mind, buttressed by the regime and its industry of artists and scientists, provide the essential deception for justifying an unnatural and slavish dependence.

What is the specific character of that dependence in Enlightened societies? To answer that question, we must explore Rousseau's sophisticated analysis of the connection between talent and civility in Enlightenment societies. Rousseau seems to imply that in traditional societies, the decency or uprightness of a man could be measured in exact proportion to the judgments of their fellow countrymen. Those societies had as their core principle virtue. And, as Rousseau, claims, "virtue seldom walks in such great pomp" (37). Virtue in these societies so obviously recognizable by any common man of common intelligence that there need not be much discussion or debate over its character. In fact, the presentation of virtue is often aided or made more vibrant when it is displayed as the only or essential element free from dazzling or distracting ornament. Thus, as Rousseau claims, "the good man is an athlete who likes to compete in the nude" (37). He wants to compete in the nude because he wants to earn praise for what he really is.

The societies rooted in the kind of ethic exemplified by the nude wrestler are not free of deception either. It is no secret that the traditional societies celebrated by Rousseau as having high degrees of moral excellence trafficked in the most stultifying

conformity and repression. One need only make mention of the Scythians, a bloodthirsty tribe of marauders, or the severe and demanding Spartans. But Rousseau implies throughout the *First Discourse* that the “chains” of traditional societies are rendered benign through the advent of a mutually beneficial and invigorating love of virtue. Virtue has its’ origins in the human longing to be admired for the traits or qualities of character that are truly good or beneficial for oneself or especially for others. In Rousseau’s description of the “simplicity of the earliest times,” it is telling that men are said to be virtuous because they enjoy “having gods as witnesses of their actions” (54). The gods, of course, were perfectly wise and penetrating judges of moral worth. We are reminded that in Enlightened societies, there occurs a rupture in the psyche of man because he perceives his happiness to terminate in the height of artistic or scientific genius admired by all but obtained by the rare few. By nature, as is revealed by Rousseau’s reference to traditional societies, he wants to be admired for what he actually is and not what he seems to be to others. He therefore attempts to be something he is not for the sake of the superficial praise of his contemporaries. There occurs no rupture in the psyche of the virtuous man of a traditional society: he lives freely because his excellence is of a type that is both obtainable and transparent by ordinary men.

With the artists and scientists having supplanted the valiant soldier or vigorous athlete as cultural models, the true genius or philosopher is also gravely threatened. The problem, according to Rousseau, is twofold. On the one hand, the philosophers and artists themselves operate on a level of genius simply impossible or inaccessible to most

men. As Rousseau claims, they themselves were “destined” to be nature’s disciples and thus needed no teachers (62-63). In an era in which the mass taste for art and science demands pleasing products for their enjoyment, the truth is understood as always accessible and easily communicable through the modern textbook. We, according to Rousseau, have lost our ability to distinguish just what kind of rare genius is required for true wisdom. He needs to be absolutely uncompromising in his search for the truth while possessing an artistic genius for translating that truth into something useful for all who follow him. “What dangers there are! What false paths when investigating the sciences! How many errors, a thousand times more dangerous than the truth is useful, must be surmounted in order to reach the truth? The disadvantage is evident, for falsity is susceptible of infinite combinations, whereas truth has only one form” (49). And there is nothing in that form to guarantee its usefulness: “hardest of all, if by luck we finally find it, who among us will know how to make good use of the truth?”

Instead of embarking on this possibly fruitless struggle, Rousseau claims that in times of popularized art and science many of these potential geniuses will simply be seduced by the possibility of celebrity, preferring “to compose ordinary works which are admired during [their lifetimes] instead of marvels which would not be admire until long after [their deaths]” (53). This phenomenon is exacerbated by Enlightenment because, contrary to what we might expect with the invention of the printing press, mass circulation does not guarantee that they will be even marginally influential. The activities of the true genius will be either lost or indistinguishable in the mass swath of

“entertainments” produced by the industries of the arts and sciences. The most spurious demonstration of Einstein’s theory of relativity or a cheap imitation of Michelangelo’s David might as well be genuine from the perspective of mass taste: what is pleasing or attractive to ordinary men need not be the same as what is genuinely good, admirable, or true. Even if the mass of men relegate the judgment of philosophy and art to “experts” on account of their ignorance, they are still responsible for judging and choosing the qualifications of those experts. Are not their judgments based mostly on the potentially deceptive impressions made upon them by the apparently wise? That the genuinely philosophic, scientific, or artistic will be read or venerated is left to pure coincidence. The transmission of genuine philosophic or scientific genius to all those potentially philosophic, present and future, is in grave jeopardy.



## **Conclusion: Rousseau's Lasting Relevance**

According to both Spinoza and Rousseau, all societies, no matter how Enlightened, have to perpetuate deceptions in order to make political rule both legitimate and acceptable to the ruled: humans are not naturally meant for political rule or political life. Both Spinoza and Rousseau agree that the liberation of talents is at the core of the Enlightenment's approach to achieving this kind of legitimacy. But while the liberation of talents is considered an unequivocal good by Spinoza even if that liberation must have as its basis several fundamental deceptions, Rousseau claims that the Enlightenment perpetuates a deep moral corruption of man by nourishing within him the deep desire for an impossible celebrity of Enlightened philosophic genius. Taking a step back, we wonder: what is the relevance of Rousseau's critique for our evaluation of political and moral life in the Enlightened societies of today?

As the regimes in the West have changed from corrupt monarchies to prosperous and stable liberal democracies, men in the West have developed a deep bond with the arts and sciences. The intensification of this bond can be best understood as indicative of the success of the Enlightenment liberation of human talent: a stranger to our culture could with great plausibility identify the core of our way of life with the consumption of those "talents" and the worshipping of celebrity. With the rise of the internet and the deep institutionalizing of the artist's right to free speech, the near unfettered consumption of the products of the arts and science has become a staple. In turn, art and science have entrenched themselves as the primary satisfactions of a new type of man that has emerged

in the West society, the bourgeois. That type has become increasingly characterized with the moralistic attachment to what is considered to be an absolute and unfettered right to the free consumption of the products of the arts and sciences. The practical consequence of that kind of attachment has been the slow erosion of any kind of comprehensive view of the legitimacy of our democratic political life. That our way of life is good and legitimate we seem to unanimously agree. The “deceptions” of the Enlightenment seem to have burrowed themselves deep into our half-conscious and vaguely understood opinions. But increasingly we give very little attention to the question of why our way of life is legitimate or good.

This practical consequence was prefigured by the Spinozist/Hobbesian/Lockean Enlightenment project, which attempted to push the human passions toward pursuits that were politically benign and spiritually petty. Even though such a strategy might have led to stable and generally peaceful regimes, the peoples of the West, so attached to their private sphere of rights, experience little sense of social duty, the need for citizenship, or individual self-sacrifice for the defense of the nation. This is evidenced especially by the well known lack of voter participation in elections or civic life and the dwindling power of civic associations. Alexis de Tocqueville, a student and critic of Rousseau, notes that the insular sphere of rights often creates a rampant despotic individualism that corrodes citizenship (663).<sup>8</sup> Although he believed that there existed in the American ethos deep

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<sup>8</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000). All subsequent citations to Tocqueville’s text reference this edition.

counterweights to this phenomenon, the following passage could very easily describe us today:

I want to imagine with what new features despotism could be produced in the world: I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and part, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others: his children and his particular friends form the whole human species for him; as for dwelling with his fellow citizens, he is beside them, but he does not see them; he touches them and does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone, and if a family still remains for him, one can at least say that he no longer has a native country (663).

In making a stark distinction between the vulgar and the philosophic, Spinoza perhaps would not have been surprised by Tocqueville's description. But would Spinoza have been worried by the power and reach of the "small and vulgar pleasures" enabled by the arts and the sciences? Would the harmoniousness of Amsterdam, which Spinoza cites as his ideal toward the end of the *TPT*, seem less luminous or attractive in the wake of widespread divorce and depression? Perhaps not. As Spinoza claims in the Preface of the *TPT*, "it is equally impossible to take away superstition from the vulgar as to take away dread" (P.6.1). The best that can be hoped for is a society that quiets or mitigates dread by providing security and pleasing comforts. For, we are beings who are controlled by the pursuit of future pleasures. But insofar as we are reasoning beings who want to know that those pleasures are actually good for us, it would seem that Enlightenment contributes nothing to this end. It is this longing for what is actually good that Rousseau, in groping for the wisdom of the ancients, wishes to stimulate.

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