

Considerations on conservation and change in the
Tractatus Theologico-Politicus

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Conservation plays a crucial and multi-levelled role in the *TTP*.¹ We can forthwith disclose it in the complete title of the treatise:

*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus Continens Dissertationes aliquot, Quibus ostenditur Libertatem Philosophandi non tantum salva Pietate, & Reipublicae Pace posse concedi: sed eandem nisi cum Pace Reipublicae, ipsaque Pietate tolli non posse.*²

Safeguarding at the same time piety and the peace of the Republic shows itself as a double aim that the author wants to present as not only compatible with the freedom to philosophize but also inseparable from it.

If the first part of the subtitle already contains as an implicit feature of it the reference to the conciliation of the freedom to philosophize with the preservation of piety and peace, the second part goes a step further. It indeed reinforces the need to preserve piety and peace as linked to the aforesaid freedom when it declares that without the latter they would sink into nothingness. Philosophical liberty becomes then a *sine qua non* condition of the existence

¹Used abbreviation for the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, quoted in Latin according to the edition by Gebhardt published in volume 3 of his edition of Spinoza’s *Opera* (Spinoza, *Opera*, hrsg. von Carl Gebhardt, Band 3, Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1925, reprinted in 1972). Further references to this edition of the *TTP* will appear in the footnotes as G, followed by the page number.

² In the most recent English translation of the treatise, by Silverthorne and Israel, the title is thus rendered: “Theological-Political Treatise / Containing several discourses which demonstrate that freedom to philosophize may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself” [Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, edited by J. Israel, translated by M. Silverthorne and J. Israel, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 1]. From now on I shall use this translation, referred to as SI, followed by the page number, in the quotations of this article with only slight alterations from my own.

and maintenance both of pious behaviour in men belonging to a community and of a peaceful republic.

A main objection against this view would be that the complete title of the *TTP* does not expressly mention conservation. Moreover, even if it did, that would not mean that its function there rises above the status of a merely instrumental function.

Responding to this argument, I claim that the Author in the subtitle clearly declares that according to him the tie that bonds freedom to philosophize to piety and to peace is such that these two cannot be preserved without the former. Thus, one cannot abstract the operational character of conservation from what it is applied to, and the survival of a pious behaviour and of public peace depends upon that kind of freedom.

The epigraph that immediately follows the title, taken from an Epistle of St. John the Apostle, corroborates the idea of conservation through the repeated use of the verb *manere*, laying stress on the intertwining of the divine and the human: “*Per hoc cognoscimus quod in Deo manemus, & Deus manet in nobis, quod de Spiritu suo dedit nobis*”.³ Spinoza will quote again the very same verse in the chapter XIV of the *TTP*. The context of that quotation reveals his understanding of it and gives us a hint on why he adopted it as an epigraph for the whole work. The framework is that of a harsh attack on sectarianism, and there he explicitly links faith to obedience and claims that the gift of the divine Spirit to men is charity. In a way, the character of permanence transmitted by the dwelling of men in God and the maintenance of God in men thought in relation to obedience and charity, both having social and political connotations, bespeaks the idea of conservation as necessary to the interplaying of the theological and political dimensions.

³“Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit”, 1 John, 4: 13, *KJV*. The corroboration seems even more obvious in translation if we use the version of the verse by Silverthorne and Israel, who literally render *manere* by “remain”: “By this we know that we remain in God, and God remain in us, because he has given us of his spirit”, SI 1].

Reading the notion of conservation into the title and the epigraph of the *TTP* would amount to no more than a farfetched overinterpretation of Spinoza's words if the text itself of the work did not reveal it as an essential element of the project it puts forward.

Usually scholars and commentators while stressing Spinoza's defence of the freedom to philosophize in its relation with the pair *theological and political* tend to underestimate, if not to completely forget, his attentive highlighting of the conservation motive he develops within the context of that very same defence. One of the factors that mostly substantiate this omission is the circumstance that many among the fiercest attackers of the *TTP* belonged to what nowadays most historians classify as conservative circles. The reception of Spinoza's philosophy in general and in particular of the *TTP* (as well as its later fortune) also bolsters the view that undervalues the presence of the themes related to conservation in the *TTP*, and it accentuates the most modern elements of that philosophy and specially those in clear cleavage with the mainstream thought of its epoch.

We cannot deny the immense influence that work had in the development of secular thinking, in the formation of modern democratic Republicanism, in the origins of individualistic liberalism, in the renewal of hermeneutics of the Bible and in the expansion of freedom of thought. Jonathan Israel in his monumental work on the Enlightenment has even maintained with a remarkable display of erudition and evidence that Spinoza was indeed the central figure in the early development of the Enlightenment movement, representing its most extremist current, because of his materialistic, religiously sceptical and liberal minded philosophy.⁴

⁴See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, *passim*]. Even now, there is no consensus among scholars either about Israel's classification of the currents of Enlightenment or about his characterization of Spinoza's role in its development. It has recently been written that Israel took the expression "radical Enlightenment" from Margaret Jacob [Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1981], giving it a different mean-

However, even if we accept as decisive both Spinoza's radicalism and its influence on the course of modern political thought in general as well as its impact on the origins of liberalism, we should take enormous care in avoiding contaminating our study of his texts by what we know of the heritage they plausibly produced and also in averting to project backwards on his political philosophy features of a current of thought that only much later was coherently constituted as such. We also should not neglect connotations of theses, themes and motives we may read in Spinoza's work for the reason that they do not seem to concur with his characterization as one of the founding fathers of modern liberalism.

The study of the notion of conservation in Spinoza has suffered from the perhaps excessive polarization of the analysis of his work from a political point of view around the nucleus formed by the central ideas related to his being a harbinger of the modern democratic republicanism.

The late French scholar François Zourabichvili, in a study published in 2002, called *Le conservatisme paradoxal de Spinoza. Enfance et royauté*, greatly repaired the omission by interpreting Spinoza's philosophy from a perspective precisely focusing conservation. For him:

“Spinoza's philosophy places the *conservation* of the form at the centre of its practical concerns. Notwithstanding this there never was

ing [cf. Tristan Dagron, *Toland et Spinoza. L'Invention du néo-spinozisme*, Paris, Vrin, 2009, p.191]. If that seems to be true if we only consider titles, as an expression “radical Enlightenment” was not unheard-of at least since the early 20th Century. After all, many people in different ages have considered Enlightenment as itself a radical movement. An explicit mention of the linking of Spinoza to radical Enlightenment appears in Strauss's book published in 1930 and translated into English 35 years later: “It is for this reason and only for this reason That Spinoza's work is of fundamental importance. The context to which it belongs is the critique of Revelation as attempted by the radical Enlightenment”, Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Chicago & London, The Chicago University Press, 1965, p. 35 [1st German edition: 1930].

a philosophy like his so much concerned with *rupture*: it proposes a new life to the individual and new institutions to the community".⁵

The aim of this article is much narrower than that of Zourabichvili's book, having, unlike it, no ambitions to provide a global and somewhat systematic interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy. Neither it aspires to attribute to the Dutch philosopher any kind of conservatism, including the paradoxical sort Zourabichvili speaks of. My purpose in this article is merely to pinpoint the significance of the notion of conservation in the *TTP* and exclusively in the *TTP*. My intentions depart from those of Zourabichvili in still another aspect for I do not centre my attention in "conservation of form".

One of the reasons why I refrain from ascribing to any aspect of Spinoza's thought some sort of conservatism, albeit a paradoxical one, rests on the imprecision, vagueness and anachronistic character of the designation when applied to a 17th Century philosopher⁶.

Apart from this, the *TTP* clearly sustains positions and theories that would practically seem an understatement to classify them as merely controversial for its contemporaries. To name but a few of them, the apology of freedom of thought, the defence of religious tolerance, the conception of piety as obedience, the necessity of complete separation between philosophy and theology, a new and audacious biblical exegesis and the focusing of the political utility of religion are elements that compose a rationalistic philosophical system of a clear-cut modernity. Nevertheless,

⁵François Zourabichvili, *Le conservatisme paradoxal de Spinoza. Enfance et royauté*, Paris, PUF, 2002, p.31. The translation is mine, keeping in italics the words in the original that way highlighted.

⁶The very same motive impels me to avoid designating Spinoza as a real liberal thinker. However, I cannot but admit that there are ample grounds for envisaging him as a forerunner of liberalism while I would not dream of inscribing him or his works as precursors, alongside, for instance, Michel de Montaigne, Richard Hooker or Hume, of what would turn to become modern conservatism. In spite of this, his materialism can easily be reconciled with modern political conservatism, as three of the foremost original philosophers representing this current in the 20th Century well illustrate: George Santayana, Michael Oakshott and Anthony Quinton.

recognizing the innovative overtones and the anti-traditionalistic aspects of Spinoza's philosophy should not lead us either to interpret it as entirely revolutionary or to undervalue, if not to ignore, the elements that integrate it presenting some sort of continuity with coeval traditions of some import. Neither should we pass over themes and positions that apparently could possibly contradict the appreciation of its radicalism or even simply that tend not to corroborate what is now becoming the mainstream characterization of Spinozism. Thus I shall here freely use *sensu lato* the opposed terms conservation and change, associating them with others somehow related to the notions they represent. Unlike that of Zourabichvili's, my point of view privileges the priority of conservation over change.

As, for instance, scholars like Israel and Nadler have with minuteness demonstrated, for Spinoza's contemporaries the anonymously published *TTP* stood out among the writings then published as particularly seditious and revolutionary.

At least, one passage in it, belonging to the chapter VII, apparently shows that its author manifestly admitted endorsing innovation:

“Though we admit this procedure does not suffice to achieve certainty about everything in the biblical books, this is not due to any defect in it but to the circumstance that the path it shows to be the true and right one was never cultivated, or even ventured on, by men, so that owing to the passage of time, it became arduous and almost impassable, as is eminently clear from the difficulties that I have pointed out”.⁷

When referring to his method of interpretation of Scripture as the true and right way of gaining access to the contents of the Bible never before conceived, Spinoza presents his work as a self-conscious product of an original thinking. He here seems proud

⁷SI 111; G 112: “ [...] & quamvis concedamus, eandem non sufficere ad omnia, quae in Bibliis occurrunt, certo investigandum, id tamen non ex ipsius defectu oritur, sed ex eo, quod via, quam veram & rectam esse docet, nunquam fuerit culta, nec ab hominibus trita, adeoque successu temporis admodum ardua et fere in via fere fit, ut ex ipsis difficultatibus, quas retuli, clarissime constare puto”.

of authoring a hermeneutical method unheard-of and, at least, purportedly innovative. But intellectual innovation and love of novelty for its own sake are distinct things that may or may not converge. When one claims his novel method of interpretation is the true and right one, one is not contending it should be adhered to for its very newness but instead for the reasons he thinks demonstrate it as right and true. If such a claim could possibly be denounced as revealing arrogance or self-conceit, it would however be wrong to envisage it as a sign of neophilia. The general purpose of finding a way that renders the truth of the Sacred Books more easily accessible through the application of rational means and the natural light of human reason was not itself an entirely new project one cannot find earlier than in the 17th Century. Some projects of Natural Theology of the late Middle Age or of the Renaissance period, such as the one due to Ramon Sbiuda in the early 15th Century, for instance, clearly share that purpose with Spinoza. Moreover, we could say that according to his point of view his new method serves both to access the understanding of what is not new and precisely to obviate dangerous innovations causing conflicts, thus for him irreconcilable with concord, harmony and charity, in a word, with what he sees as the biblical message.

I also have here to stress that “On the Interpretation of Scripture” stands out as a chapter of the *TTP* where Spinoza more clearly than elsewhere shows respect for tradition as such⁸ and concern with the maintenance of peace and concord among men, expressly accusing the hypocrisy of fanatics and sectarians that gainsay those values and contribute for the victory of war and discord. He also incontrovertibly repudiates those exegeses that put into the Sacred writings what is not there:

“For, as we have already shown, we are not permitted to adjust the meaning of Scripture to the dictates of our reason or our preconceived opinions; all explanation of the Bible must be sought from the Bible alone”.⁹

⁸See, for instance, SI 106; G 106.

⁹SI 101; G 101: “Nam, ut jam ostendimus, nobis non licet ad dictamina nostrae rationis, et ad nostras praeconceptas opiniones mentem Scripturae

His adversaries, of course, could have accused him of falling into the very same mistake he denounced in others.

The mere circumstance that Spinoza's proclaimed respect for Biblical tradition as such (grounded on the quite extended and profound knowledge he shows of it) contrasts with his distorted version of sacred history does not authorize, for itself, the disclaiming of Spinoza's sincerity and the refutation of the merits of his method. One should perhaps isolate his hermeneutics from the uses he gives it and consider that the unorthodox views he substantiates with it could possibly derive from an authentic attachment to tradition, independently of the deviating and undeniable anti-traditionalistic outcomes that result from its application. The fact is that Spinoza's hermeneutics apparently are consonant with the purpose of reconstructing by reason the original truth of Scripture, formulating it with clarity and not willingly misrepresenting it for sectarian motives (even if he indeed misrepresents it). His intent seems to be demonstrating that sectarian readings of the Bible resulting in fanatical beliefs that authorize the most conflictive and bellicose behaviour are groundless. Spinoza is not alone here for he shares this purpose with some programmes of apologetics and projects of natural theology of traditional configuration. Nonetheless it is undeniable that Spinoza goes against tradition in his severe critique of revealed religion. One could say, using passages from a writing of Leo Strauss, that Spinoza could, in alternative to more current interpretations, be read as not really a revolutionary thinker but as "the heir of the modern revolt and the medieval tradition as well"¹⁰, for being "the first great thinker who attempted a synthesis of pre-modern (classical–medieval) and of modern philosophy"¹¹.

In another of his main writings on Spinoza, the celebrated essay "*How to Study Spinoza's 'Theologico-Political Treatise'*", first published in the *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jew-*

torquere, sed tota Bibliorum cognitio ab iisdem solis est petenda". Cf, e.g., G 156; SI 160.

¹⁰Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique . . .*, p.15.

¹¹Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique . . .*, pp.15-16.

ish Research, Vol. 17 (1947-1948), and four years later collected in a book, Leo Strauss put forward the hypothesis that this text intentionally had several layers of meaning that could be read by groups of readers differently equipped to penetrate into it, thus turning it into a sort of exoteric writing in part destined to an esoteric kind of interpretation¹². While recognizing the brilliance of Strauss's arguments in favour of his hypothesis, we have some difficulty in considering it thoroughly convincing¹³. Thus, we prefer to envisage the *TTP* as not willingly insincere and try to understand some contradictions as well as ambiguous or enigmatic passages of it as due to causes each of which has to be analyzed within its precise context. We should perhaps take into account that it would be excessive to read the *TTP* as a systematic work comparable to the *Ethics*, or to interpret it in the light of Spinoza's masterpiece. Some ambiguities may be dictated by rhetorical reasons. As Steven Nadler, after discussing Strauss's theory, says about Spinoza's "relatively gentle treatment of the Christian Gospels"¹⁴, he could be "working with a rhetorical strategy geared toward drawing in his audience, and thus does not always mean exactly what he says or say everything that he thinks"¹⁵.

Be it as it may, the endorsement of neophilia does not ensue from Spinoza's attacks on crucial aspects of religious Jewish and Christian tradition. If such would be his intent most likely he would really behave according to his motto "Caute", being more cautious than audacious and trying to hide his novelties under the cover of less challenging and provocative statements. In truth, notwithstanding its originality and its many innovative traits the

¹²Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Chicago & London, The Chicago University Press, 1988, pp.142-201 [1st ed.: 1952].

¹³See, as an example of an excellent analysis of this straussian reading, Diogo Pires Aurélio, "Introdução", in Baruch de Espinosa, *Tratado Teológico-Político*, tradução, introdução e notas de Diogo Pires Aurélio, 3^a ed., Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 2004, pp.40-44.

¹⁴Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell. Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 172.

¹⁵*Ibidem*.

TTP seemingly reveals mistrust for the acceptance of what is new for the sake of newness. We may even find in it passages that suggest some sort of misoneism.

Spinoza makes a point of criticizing readings of Scripture that introduce religious innovations, using the sacred writings for warring and politically destabilising purposes. Accordingly, he insists on presenting his method as a sort of therapeutics against such exegetical innovations, explicitly associating the devising of novelties in religion to the instigation of quarrelsome controversies and to “the promotion of conflict and dissemination of furious hatred”¹⁶:

“If people truly believed in their hearts what they say with their lips about Scripture, they would follow a completely different way of life. There would be fewer differences of opinion occupying their minds, fewer bitter controversies between them, and less blind and *reckless ambition to distort* our interpretation of the Bible and *devise novelties in religion*. On the contrary, they would not dare to accept anything as biblical teaching which they had not derived from it in the clearest possible way.”¹⁷

We thus see that Spinoza associates the devising of novelties and the willingness to distort the interpretation of Scripture with the very defects he denounces in the *TTP* as contrary to the maintenance of the peace of the republic and to the observance of piety, of which the safeguarding, according to him, depends upon the defence of the freedom to philosophize.

His method, in conformity with a practice of piety properly understood and grounded on solid criteria of exegesis, aims at transparency, which for him is related to reason and nature and opposed to the opinions, points of view and attitudes maintained by his adversaries.

¹⁶SI 98; G 97: “[...]disseminandis discordiis inter homines, et odio infensissimo”.

¹⁷SI 97; G 97: “Quod si homines id, quod verbis de Scriptura testantur, ex vero animo dicerent, tum aliam prorsus vivendi rationem haberent, neque tot discordiae eorum mentes agitent, neque tot odiis certarent, nec tam caeca et *temeraria cupiditate interpretandi* Scripturam, *novaque in Religione excogitandi* tenerentur : Sed contra nihil tanquam Scripturae doctrinam amplecti auderent, quod ab ipsa quam clarissime non edocerentur” [italics added].

At the end of the crucial chapter XIV of the *TTP*, where he particularly addresses the issue of the separation of philosophy from faith following the chapter XIII devoted to show the identification of piety with obedience as the main aim of the teachings of Scripture, Spinoza defends himself from the accusation of neophilia:

“Finally since the things we have demonstrated here are the cardinal points proposed to make in this treatise, we desire, before going any further, to make an earnest request of my readers, to read these two chapters with some attention and take the trouble to reflect on them again and again, and to understand that *we have not written them simply to introduce novelties*, but to correct abuses that we hope on day to see corrected”.¹⁸

As here, in a place of utmost importance in the *TTP*, the conclusion of a pair of chapters where he defends two main points summed up in the subtitle of the treatise, Spinoza clearly shows himself in a defensive attitude, precisely drawing attention to the novelty issue, he plausibly addresses readers that would use the tag of “novelty” applying it to ideas they disapprove of as a disparaging means of justifying their bigotry and their refusal to reflect upon the arguments put forward by the author.

Faith, thus conceived, somehow associated with conservation is fully in accordance with freedom to philosophize and disavowed by the fomentation of strife:

“Faith therefore allows every person the greatest liberty to philosophize, so that they may think whatever they wish about any question whatever without doing wrong. It only condemns as heretics and schismatics those who put forward beliefs for the purpose of promoting *disobedience, hatred, conflict and anger*. On the other hand, faith regards as faithful only those who promote justice and charity as far as their reason and abilities allow”.¹⁹

¹⁸SI 185; G 180: “Denique, quoniam haec, quae hic ostendimus, praecipua sunt, quae in hoc tractatu intendo, volo, antequam ulterius pergam, lectorem enixissime rogare, ut haec duo Capita attentius legere, et iterum, atque iterum perpendere dignetur; et sibi persuasum habeat, *nos non eo scripsisse animo, ut nova introduceremus*, sed ut depravata corrigeremus, quae tandem aliquando correctae videre speramus” [italics added].

¹⁹SI 184-185; G 179-180: “Fides igitur summam unicuique libertatem ad philosophandum concedit, ut quicquid velit, de rebus quibuscunque sine scelere

According to this viewpoint, the instigation of conflict denotes heresy and the promotion of charity faith. The only limit put by faith to the freedom of thought will then consist of seditious opinions inciting rebellion and tumultuous actions. However, the liberty to philosophize does not entirely coincide with freedom of thought, for philosophizing seems to be somehow self-limiting to Spinoza. Even if they proclaim themselves supporters of tradition and defenders of religion, those whose divulged opinions entail disruption of the political body and of society and contribute to the disintegration of civil harmony belong to the camp of innovators. By contrast whoever will sustain methods and theoretical hypotheses defending what tradition presents as defensible and fostering the adherence to religious precepts of political consequence stands out as a preserver of order.

One can however ask if the misoneism shown in these passages (among many others) of the *TTP* only reveals a merely strategic function. Should we read it as ironic? In spite of what some commentators have said on the behalf of either of these two solutions (or of both at the same time), an attentive rereading of the *TTP* does not allow me to be conclusive as to the question. Yet I feel inclined to admit that the signs of misoneism Spinoza places throughout the treatise make sense if interpreted as sincerely affirmed, being consistent with his practice of biblical hermeneutics and with his naturalism. Spinoza's aversion to newness and to innovations not rationally and religiously grounded on solid foundations fits perfectly to a system that asserts the order of nature as fixed and immutable. We could even consider in the extremely controversial exposition about miracles in chapter VI²⁰ aspects of

sentire possit & eos tantum, tanquam haereticos, & schismaticos damnat, qui opiniones docent, ad *contumaciam, odia, contentiones, & iram* suadendum: & eos contra fideles tantum habet, qui Justitiam & Charitatem, pro viribus suae rationis, & facultatibus, suadent" [italics added].

²⁰It must be said that far from being completely original it takes roots on a relatively traditional kind of explanation of some miracles resorting to the figure of imagination used by Christian authors like Pomponazzi and Montaigne.

a “naturalistic misoneism” relying on the rejection of innovation as one of the main causes of dissention.

“All this evidently proves that nature maintains a fixed and immutable order, that God has been the same in all ages known and unknown to us, and that the laws of nature are so perfect and so fruitful that nothing can be added to or detracted from them, and miracles only seem to be *new* owing to men’s ignorance. This, then is what is explicitly taught in Scripture; nowhere does it teach us that anything happens in nature that contradicts nature’s laws or cannot follow from them [...] It follows, further, and with the utmost clarity, that miracles were natural events and therefore must be explained so as not to seem *new* (to use Solomon’s word) or in conflict with nature, but as close to natural realities as possible; and I have given some rules derived from Scripture alone in order that anyone should be capable of doing this fairly easily”.²¹

The circumstance that Spinoza tries to explain the reception of novelties in the light of a psychology of error that he integrates into his system applying its findings to his explanation miracles proves that the specific problems raised by the perception of what is unprecedented and new also plays a relevant role within his philosophy. According to him, men are more concerned with confirming their preconceived opinions than with observing and describing facts as they sense them. Such a concern distorts their perception of events and consequently their understanding and narration of them:

“It happens very rarely that men report something straightforwardly, just as it occurred, without intruding any judgment of their own into the telling. In fact, when people see or hear something new, they will,

²¹SI 95-96; G 95-96: “[...] quae omnia clarissime docent, naturam fixam atque immutabilem ordinem servare, Deum omnibus saeculis nobis notis et ignotis eundem fuisse, legesque naturae adeo perfectas et fertiles esse, ut iis nihil addi neque detrahi possit, et denique miracula, non nisi propter hominum ignorantiam, ut aliquid *novi*, videri. Haec igitur in Scriptura expresse docentur, at nullibi, quod in natura aliquid contingat, quod ipsius legibus repugnet, aut quod ex iis nequeat sequi, adeoque neque etiam Scripturae affingendum. [...] Ex quibus porro evidentissime sequitur, miracula res naturales fuisse, atque adeo eadem ita explicanda, ut neque *nova* (ut Salomonis verbo utar) neque naturae repugnantia videantur, sed, si fieri potuit, ad res naturales maxime accedentia, quod ut facilius ab unoquoque possit fieri, quasdam regulas ex sola Scriptura petitas tradidi [italics added].

unless very much on their guard against their own preconceived opinions, usually be so biased by these that they will perceive something quite different from what they actually saw or heard had happened, especially if the event is beyond the understanding of the reporter or his audience, and most of all if it is in his interest that it should have happened in a certain way".²²

Such a reflection on men's relation with newness and on the severe limitations imposed by prejudices, personal interest on the operation of the senses and on understanding shows how people in general, for Spinoza, do not adequately use their judgment and tend to put its power under the sway of passions. Hence, their lack of judgment entails an impious behaviour and no less impious results, their sectarian motivations and feelings being often masked under an apparent religious fervour.

The author of a work such as the *TTP*, which explicitly struggles against the factors identified as the ones leading to the total dissolution of the social and political body, searching for prophylactic or therapeutic means capable of preventing or avoiding the fratricide internecine caused by sectarianism using religious pretexts, could difficultly abstain from subscribing some sort of misoneism, albeit a naturalistic one, somehow associated with the notion of conservation, and integrating it into his theological-political philosophy.

For Spinoza, the subordination of politics to religion does not safeguard public safety and stability. Contrariwise, public institutions protecting freedom of thought function as a way of opposing the interference of sectarianism and fanaticism in politics through novelties introduced for their sake. The apology for obedience as piety turns conservation into the link connecting religion to politics. Hence Spinoza's necessity of defending stability and firmly

²²SI 92; G 91-92: "Raro admodum fit, ut homines rem aliquam, ut gesta est, ita simpliciter narrent, ut nihil sui iudicii narrationi immisceant. Imo, cum aliquid novi vident aut audiunt, nisi maxime a suis praeconceptis opinionibus caveant, iis plerumque ita praeoccupantur, ut plane aliud, quam quod vident, aut contigisse audiunt, percipiant, praesertim si res acta captum narrantis, aut audientis superat, et maxime si ad ejus rem referat, ut ipsa certo modo contingat".

repelling rebellion as well as religious and political innovations introduced as such.

The notion of conservation pervades Spinoza's views on contractualism as exposed in the *TTP*. We can also see its presence in, *inter alia*, his conception of the preservation of the Republic as "highest good"²³, the way he links the keeping of power by sovereigns to the search for that "highest good" through a moderate and rational conduct²⁴ (for the intemperate use of violence entails self-destruction) and his description and condemnation of the *crimen laesae majestatis*²⁵.

In a way, chapters XVII and XVIII of the *TTP* culminate an exposition that highlights conservation, namely when Spinoza, using examples both of Scripture and of classical history, examines how a State should be maintained avoiding two polarizing evils, rebellion of the governed and tyranny of those who govern, conservation appearing as the guiding principle of the middle term alternative to them²⁶. Stability and the maintenance of a balanced *status quo* generally suit better with "the practice of charity and justice" than alternatives to them except when the *status quo* negates that very practice²⁷. Thus, conservation befits both forms of government, monarchic or republican. Change involves undesirable consequences that Spinoza admirably portrays. The subversion of institutions and of what custom consecrates becomes a danger to be averted²⁸.

In order to demonstrate this point of view (according to which preserving the form of the state is preferable to its forced and voluntary alteration) Spinoza collects examples of religious and political about-turns from the history of England in the 17th Century (just like Montaigne illustrated an analogous argumentation with

²³Cf. SI 199; G 192.

²⁴Cf. SI 200; G 194.

²⁵Cf. SI 204; G 197.

²⁶Cf. SI 220 ff; G 212 ff.

²⁷Cf. SI 234; G 226.

²⁸Reading some passages of the *TTP* we have often the impression of reading a text by Hume or by Burke *avant la lettre*.

examples gleaned from the history of England in the previous century) which at the end have only the effect of definitely what time had slowly established for the sake of warmongering and serving uncontrolled passions and private interests:

“This is why a people have often been able to change tyrants but are never able to get rid of them or change the monarchical form into another form of state. The English people have provided a fatal example of this truth. They looked for reasons that would seem to justify their deposing their monarch. But once they had deposed him, they could do no less than change their form of state. However, after spilling a great deal of blood, they succeeded merely in installing a new monarch with a different title [...] By the time the people realized that they had done nothing for the safety of their country except violate the right of a legitimate king and change everything for worse, it was too late. Consequently, as soon as they had the chance, they decided to retrace their steps, and did not rest until they saw everything restored to its former state”.²⁹

It greatly honours Spinoza’s rationalism that it subtly and audaciously perfects itself by not rejecting incorporating rational explanations of what normally disclaims any kind of political rationalism. Thus the Dutch philosopher takes into consideration historical events such as those he called a “fatal example”.

When Spinoza analyzes the disrupting effects of revolutionary changes, of the political excesses of submission to religious imperatives and of the violence inherent to brusque alterations recurring to examples of Biblical and Classical History, as well as of

²⁹SI 235-236; G 227: “Hinc igitur factum, ut populus saepe quidem tyrannum mutare, at nunquam tollere, nec imperium monarchicum in aliud alterius formae mutare potuerit. Hujus rei fatale exemplum populus Anglicanus dedit, qui causas quaesivit, quibus specie juris monarcham e medio tolleret ; at, eo sublato, nihil minus facere potuit, quam formam imperii mutare, sed post multum sanguinem effusum huc perventum est, ut novus monarcha alio nomine salutaretur (quasi tota quaestio de solo nomine fuisset), qui nulla ratione persistere poterat, nisi stirpem regiam penitus delendo, regis amicos vel amicitiam suspectos necando, et otium pacis rumoribus aptum, bello disturbando, ut plebs novis rebus occupata, et intenta cogitationes de caede regia alio diverteret. Sero igitur animadvertit populus se pro salute patriae nihil aliud secisse, quam jus legitimi regis violare, resque omnes in pejorem statum mutare. Ergo gradum, ubi licuit, revocare decrevit, nec quievit, donec omnia in pristinum suum statum restaurata vidit”.

more recent times, never failing to show them as matter to be duly mused upon bearing lessons to be taken as to the conduct to adopt in the 17th Century Dutch Republic. His apology of stability is as eloquent as this analysis. In the conclusion of chapter XVIII, Spinoza insists on the defence of political conservation: “[...] the form of each state must necessarily be retained and cannot be changed without risking the total ruin of the state”.³⁰

Whereas we do not defend an interpretation that claims Spinoza’s philosophy could be considered conservative, we insist that in the *TTP* the notion of conservation plays a crucial role, being upheld in particularly important chapters. Zourabichvili, as we have said in the beginning of the article, highlighted aspect related to the theme of conservation and the problems it involves in Spinoza’s philosophy. Though his fascinating reading (the many merits of which are not confined to having tackled those problems) goes too far for classifying Spinoza’s philosophy as a sort of conservatism, he does not go far enough because he tends to underplay the concern of the Dutch philosopher with conservation as necessarily resulting in a paradoxical attitude the core of which consists in a set of contradictions:

“It [Spinoza’s philosophy] never fails [...] to address the problem of transformation, of its reality, its phantasm and the related borderlines [...]. There are three ways of escaping what Spinoza’s philosophy here impels us to think: the first is to interpret it as a conservatism (inclusively a political one), the second resides in interpreting as a transformism (inclusively a political one), and the third consists of interpreting this antithesis – which only two misrepresentations help to form – as a contradiction that can be attributed to the thinker”.³¹

After all, Zourabichvili seems here more interested in emphasizing the paradoxical dimension of Spinoza’s thinking than focused on its aspects related to his reflection on conservation, mainly the political dimension.

³⁰SI 237; G 228: “[...] uniuscujusque imperii forma necessario retinenda est, nec absque periculo totalis ipsius ruinae mutari potest”.

³¹F. Zourabichvili, *Op. Cit.*, p. 31 (my translation).

In this article, exclusively centred (mainly for methodological reasons) on the *TTP*³², I only tried to pinpoint Spinoza's enormous concern with conservation shown throughout its text. The passages I have highlighted, as well as some others in the same vein, do not allow us to characterize his thinking as conservative or as transformist. We cannot also classify it as simply paradoxical. Notwithstanding its ambiguities and contradictions, the *TTP* reveals itself as an extremely cogent work, especially when it deals with some issues and questions. One of the foremost among them is precisely the one that consists of his meditations on conservation related themes and motives.

³²I leave for a later occasion a more thorough study of the idea of conservation in Spinoza that will also take into account the *Ethics* as well as the *Political Treatise* and other writings of his.