

Was Spinoza a Machiavellian?

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At least since the *Spinozastreit* of the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment, many readers have questioned the sincerity of Spinoza's appeal to religion (especially Christianity) as the basis for a virtuous life. Is religion true or just politically useful? In his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza presents seven religious "dogmas" that all citizens in a democracy must obey because these credos are useful, not necessarily true. In general, Spinoza's sharp distinction between truth and obedience throughout *TPT* has generated the impression that he follows Machiavelli in understanding religion as a necessary fiction whose only value lies in restraining the "vulgar" masses so that philosophers can live a life of freedom and peace. Spinoza himself lends support to this interpretation when he openly defends Machiavelli's understanding of politics as the pursuit of freedom and power.

The twentieth-century political philosopher Leo Strauss offers one of the most famous interpretations of Spinoza as Machiavelli's apt pupil. In Strauss's view, philosophers from Plato to the Enlightenment invoked religious themes or ideas in their philosophies to avoid persecution from authorities that were hostile to philosophical questioning. Spinoza, as Strauss portrays him, appealed in particular to the biblical ethic of *caritas* or charity (love thy neighbor as one would love God) so that the "vulgar" masses could learn to equate this moral teaching of universal love with tolerance for the freedom of philosophers to think and write as they wished in a liberal democracy. Nevertheless, Spinoza, according to Strauss, sees *caritas* as a fiction akin to Plato's "noble lie," not a credo that is actually true. In short, no true philosopher can be pious except in a Machiavellian sense.

In my paper, I intend to evaluate the validity of Strauss's hermeneutic of suspicion. In particular, I argue that his interpretation of Spinoza's usage of *caritas* is incomplete at best and incorrect at worst. The "intellectual love of God" (*amor intellectualis dei*) that Spinoza articulates in Part V of the *Ethica* is identical to what he calls *caritas* in *TPT*. Although Strauss is correct to argue that Spinoza equates true religion with utility (*utile*), he fails to understand Spinoza's teaching that what is useful must also be true. The intellectual love of God, which is also paradoxically the love of humanity, is

not a ruse that a cynical philosophical elite must inflict on the vulgar. Rather, it is the truth that unites (or relates) both God and humanity, philosopher and believer, in the common purpose to treat each other as equals in a democratic imperium. This manifestation of love is ill-suited to the deceptive version of politics that Machiavelli promoted. The paradoxical nature of this love, which is both religious (godly) and secular (human), also throws into question Strauss's sharp distinction between religion and philosophy.