

The Theory of History in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*

Fredrika Spindler

In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, chapter seven, Spinoza states that in order to understand and interpret Scripture, i.e. the Old and New Testament (which, as with his own conviction, will prove to be perfectly in accord with the freedom of thought and philosophizing, contrary to the current interpretation of religious authorities) we must understand it in the light of its history.¹ This approach does not strike us as unreasonable or strange: indeed, it is not uncommon for us today to look back on history in order to situate various events, to understand our own position and current problems and affairs. To the philosopher, in particular, the injunction might even seem unnecessary, since history clings to every act of our thinking, pollutes our concepts regardless of what we want, reminding us forever and painfully of the impossibility of an immaculate conception. However, to the Spinozist reader, the author's claim is striking: not that Spinoza would be unaware of our historical condition – far from it, since he devotes one of the two books published during his own lifetime to this subject – but rather because throughout his work, the very notion of history, implicitly if not explicitly, is severely criticized. Indeed, if we understand anything at all about Spinoza's theory of knowledge, we know that true understanding is understanding from the view-point of eternity, a theme to which the fifth part of the *Ethics* is entirely devoted. That this implies a thorough undermining of our common conception of time should come as no surprise: eternity is, by definition, something other than time, eternity is without beginning and without end, and cannot be related to even the most infinite duration. In other words, if we are to understand

¹ Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, transl. R. H. H. Elwes (Dover Publications Inc: New York 1951) Page references will henceforth be given in the main text.

adequately only by seeing something in its eternal belonging, we must not turn to the way that the thing in question occurs in time, since all that is accounted for in this are external relations that are of no use to us if we want to see it in its essence or intrinsic constitution.

But in saying this, it seems that we – or rather Spinoza – have invalidated the very notion of history: indeed, what is history, if not precisely the retracing and the narrative of how things occur in time, of how they relate to one another and intertwine with one another in their temporality, i.e. in their extrinsic relations? It appears at this point that we are faced with at least two rather uncomfortable problems: in the first place, if Spinoza really holds that time, and thus history, cannot be of any relevance for real understanding, with what then are we left to understand ourselves and the world that we, as a matter of fact, do experience in time however inadequate this experience may be? And secondly, something which at this moment might appear as a secondary problem indeed, if history is invalidated so powerfully and definitively as it seems to be by Spinoza himself, then why does he expressly state that we read Scripture in the light of its history in order to understand its meaning? Even if we admit the possibility of a philosopher contradicting himself once in a while, this seems to be a rather heavy contradiction.

However it might be that we have just unconsciously jumped to a certain number of conclusions that in fact obscure our understanding of the problem in question. Undoubtedly, Spinoza privileges the eternal understanding over the temporal. But, just as certain, he himself accomplishes a meticulous historical analysis of the Bible. Moreover, in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and in the *Political Treatise*, he analyzes historically the movements by which our political societies evolve and take on different aspects, in order to establish the conditions of a viable and reliable civil – political – state. In other words, while it is true that any theory of knowledge, for Spinoza, must ground itself in essential and eternal understanding, it is no less true that this understanding by definition situates itself in actuality, as opposed to beyond the temporal condition that constitutes human existence. In yet other words, we can say that Spinoza, in an extremely urgent manner, particularly in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, tries to establish the conditions of our possibility of understanding our own history in order to live our present and our future in a way that makes us stronger, happier and freer than is presently the case. That is, he tries to make us

grasp how we interpret our own history in a way that we may become what we are. If this is the case, we must take a closer look at what Spinoza really means by time and history in order to see what is at stake in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*.

Given the absolute immanence of eternity and duration that Spinoza establishes in the *Ethics* – the former being the only dimension in which we can understand a thing in its essence, but the latter, the dimension within which we experience this eternity – the main problem appears to be the way in which we understand our duration, that is, our unlimited perseverance in existence, in terms of time, or rather, the way we confuse this positive determination with that of time which is an abstraction and as such, liable to generate inadequate ideas in particular. When Spinoza, in the letter XII on infinity to Ludovic Meyer, defines time as “an auxiliary of imagination,” he expressly states that time, when measured and divided in punctual instants, hours, days or seasons, only has a meaning insofar as it makes it possible for us to situate ourselves, in a more or less fictional manner, in the duration or the passing in which we are. To speak about an objective reality of time is therefore pointless. Or rather, it constitutes a habit of speech that we must use and understand as such: we are in the “passing,” and we quantify this passing in an imaginary way in order to relate to the passing of the beings that surround us. The “passing” is not, of course, imaginary in itself, as we easily can see at every moment in the changes of the relations of movement and rest constituting our body. However this passing cannot be ascribed to the quantitative measures that we give time, since this quantification is perfectly abstract and does not correspond to any given reality concerning the singular essence of each being which defines it: whenever we consider something in relation to a time-measure (hour, day or any other), we submit it to a beginning and an end, but this does not give us a real definition of the thing in question, since, as we know, the definition of a thing, for Spinoza, consists in expressing its possibility of existing, but not of its ending.

The idea of time-measure is thus something auxiliary, a helpful tool for the imagination in order to relate abstractly to the enviroing world, but it remains absolutely linked to imagination also insofar as it constitutes an inadequate way of conceiving things: indeed, it is imagination, not reason, that conceives of things in a linear way, that considers them in the order of their appearance. However it is this way of conceiving

them that is inadequate: knowing for real, that is by knowledge of a singular essence, is possible only in a rupture with the chronological or even existential chain, since this order gives only “extrinsic determinations, relations or, at most, circumstances,” according to §101 of *De Intellectus Emendatione*. These determinations or relations constitute information that gives us no clue to the definition or the essence of a thing. Knowing on the one hand that the existential order – the apparent linear causality in time (i.e. things succeeding one another and organizing themselves in what appears to be an order of past and succession) – gives us nothing but exterior relations which are therefore quite circumstantial, and knowing on the other hand, that it is impossible to comprehend the totality of this interconnection (which would be necessary in order to understand it as such) since we would have to have an infinite intellect – we would have to be God himself – it is very clear that it is not by a linear linking-up that we are able to grasp something, and we cannot develop ourselves correctly since it does not make us understand ourselves either. Duration, once again, does not encompass its own finitude but only its beginning, and it is thus insufficient to determine things by these measures. Clearly, says Spinoza, if we do, we thereby “separate them from the substance and the manner in which they [the modes] proceed from eternity, thus neglecting that without which they cannot be correctly understood” (Letter XII). In other words, if we persist in considering things according to the measures of time, we will at the most have an assembly of external relations of appearance, but not each thing in its singular sense since we then separate them from the whole of nature or the totality to which they belong.

Thus, determining things according to the abstract measures of time not only means that we fail to see them as singular realities existing according to their *conatus*, i.e. persevering in their being, but we also fail to perceive the essential linkage that makes them derive necessarily from the substance. In this way, things appear in a contingent and confused way. For Spinoza, no thing is to be understood in the apparent succession of measured time, and, he says, “it is not surprising that those who have made great efforts to understand nature’s progress by these notions, in themselves quite badly understood, have cast themselves into inextricable difficulties; they were unable to find a way out without confusing everything and by admitting the most absurd things.” An example of these absurdities is, for instance, the idea of

God having a temporal existence, thus being older now than at the birth of Adam, and so forth.

The point for Spinoza consists precisely in saying that whenever we want to know how things are constituted, or why they produce certain effects and not others, we cannot rely on an explanation in terms of measures of time, because these terms immediately falsify the nature of the things to be understood: they separate and divide that which, by nature, must be considered as a whole, in itself indivisible. This separation operates on several levels simultaneously: first, we separate the things from the substance, since we separate them from the simultaneous production of all things within the divine intellect. Then, we cut them off from their essence: what we must really know, that is, how a thing makes an effort to persevere in its being in an unlimited way, is thus immediately out of our reach. Finally, considering it in its measured temporality makes us consider it apart from other things: therefore we cannot understand how it relates to the rest of the world, how it affects the world and how it is affected by it.

This now brings us to Spinoza's treatment of historicity. By indicating what I would like to call Spinoza's rupture with linear chronology or temporality, I have tried to show how erroneous it would be to understand Spinozian temporality as a vision where things would follow one upon another in a single line, directing themselves towards a finality or a final end that would be eternity itself, or even a comprehension of it. In order to understand that this is not the case, we could have contented ourselves with the respective definitions of eternity and duration, since it is clear that eternity is not the continuation or even the finality of duration: on the contrary, they intertwine with each other, and eternity is always actual at every moment of duration. It is thus certain that we cannot speak of a progressive thinking in Spinoza: this would be as inexact concerning the different levels of knowledge as it would be concerning temporality. The "goal" to be attained is never, for Spinoza, situated outside of actual existence, which makes him radically different from the Judeo-Christian tradition of thinking, since salvation for him has no meaning except in this actual world: Spinozian beatitude is never *post mortem*, but always during this very life. This is exactly why we have to abandon the idea of a linear temporality: if the "goal" is not situated at the end – the end of our life, the end of our history – but is present at every moment of our duration, we have to understand the various things that happen to us in a way that

differs from their immediate succession and appearance. This means that we have to understand them by their intensive causes, that is, we have to considerably modify our understanding of what we call history.

To understand history by its causes implies something radically different from what we usually call history, as far as a linear and progressing narrative is concerned. We must instead examine the events of the past and of the present in terms of an intertwining of causes that cross one another, reproducing themselves at various times. Only in this way can we reach a knowledge of ourselves that would not be based upon the common misunderstanding of human history as the linear ascension towards the wisdom constituted by what Spinoza refers to as the third degree of knowledge and of the final and enduring civilization – a misunderstanding that is not only erroneous as such, but moreover, singularly deceptive since we can by no means pretend to have reached these heights, nor are we ever likely to do so. Spinoza is extremely clear on this subject, even if we can speak of something resembling a progression in, for instance, the way a child goes from complete ignorance to a certain kind of knowledge of himself and of the world in the apprenticeship of reasoning. Indeed, according to the appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*, an individual has, at birth, no knowledge of the causes of things affecting him.

As the child grows up it will, however, be affected by joyous passions that increase its capacity of action. Thereby the child will, little by little, learn to form adequate ideas concerning the relation of his body to the bodies that affect it. In this way, he can be said to have proceeded from the first degree of knowledge to the second – knowledge by common notions, that is knowledge that learns to recognize how certain things convene with one another, according to *Ethics* II, scholia of prop. 40. This is a knowledge of things in general, but one that is nevertheless adequate – *Ethics* II, prop. 37 and 38. But even if we do evolve from the first degree of knowledge to the second (reasoning by common notions), it is still obvious that it is not because we have gained knowledge of certain things that we cease to be affected in a passive way by others, of which we form inadequate ideas. Indeed, we will continue to be affected by passions, and we will continue to form inadequate ideas for the entirety of our lives – this happens every time we experience anger, hatred, sorrow and general misfortune which necessarily overcomes us at times. So, on an individual level, it would be very difficult to speak of a linear progression – the most we

can aim for is to increase to a maximum our affections of joy, and to limit those of sorrow, in order to, in certain moments, embrace the world with a real understanding. Moreover, even if Spinoza states that it is only from the second degree of knowledge that we can arrive at the third degree – meaning that it is not possible to go directly from the first degree to the third (*Ethics*, V, 28) the third degree being that by which we have knowledge of singular essences – this development does not really constitute a passage or step forward. The third degree of knowledge is precisely not *an acquisition*, but an intensification, a change of perspectives from the general to the singular, which by no means can be accounted for by a progressive or linear thinking.

On the level of collectivity, the problem is necessarily similar: naturally, we can speak of a progression in the history of humanity insofar as we can state for a fact a certain number of developments, be it in the technical skills of humanity where things certainly have advanced, or in our factual knowledge of the order of things. In *De Intellectus Emendatione*, Spinoza actually seems to imply such a progression:

But as men at first made use of the instruments supplied by nature to accomplish very easy pieces of workmanship, laboriously and imperfectly, and then, when these were finished, wrought other things more difficult with less labor and greater perfection; and so gradually mounted from the simplest operations to the making of tools, and from the making of tools to the making of more complex tools, and fresh feats of workmanship, till they arrived at making, with small expenditure of labor, the vast number of complicated mechanisms which they now possess. So, in like manner, the intellect, by its native strength, makes for itself intellectual instruments, whereby it acquires strength for performing other intellectual operations, and from these operations gets again fresh instruments, or the power of pushing its investigations further, and thus gradually proceed till it reaches the summit of wisdom.

More important even, we can state with Spinoza himself the fact that certain types of civil society tend to create the necessary conditions for improving or even for setting in progress knowledge and ways of living – these societies being ruled by democratic principles, a fact that we will consider more closely in a moment – which certainly seems to indicate not only that things can improve, but also that they do so under certain favorable conditions. It is only reasonable to see this as a historical process. However, what we are here calling a historical process is defined precisely by the fact that we isolate it from the totality of

the context. Whenever Spinoza considers the history of a society – that of the Hebrews, for instance, which is thoroughly analyzed in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, or, for that matter, whenever he considers the contemporary developments in his own nation, he explicitly pictures it within a very precise framework, a particular period, a particular moment, where he abstracts from everything that can be seen as an external influence of the state in question. This is, among other reasons, why the Hebrew state lends itself so conveniently to his analysis, since it was conceived by Moses precisely as an isolated entity, apart from everything else. In this perspective, we can indeed speak of a beginning and an end, or, in other words, a rise and a fall, and the reasons for this development can easily be divined by paying attention to the evolution of its institutions (the details of which I will not address here).

In contrast to this analysis, determinable in time and thus historically coherent, we cannot do the same thing with Humanity with a capital H, i.e. we cannot historicize human nature because, in essence, this nature is not given in temporal terms. The best example of this is, as usual, given by Spinoza himself, once again in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. In chapter XVI, which is fundamental to the understanding of the constitution of the political state, the central question is the passage from natural right to civil right: “*By the right and ordinance of nature, I merely mean those natural laws wherewith we conceive every individual to be conditioned by nature, so as to live and act in a given way:*” – and Spinoza gives the example of fish being naturally conditioned for swimming, and the greater devouring the lesser by natural sovereign right. “*For it is certain that nature, taken in the abstract, has sovereign right to do anything she can; in other words, her right is co-extensive with her power,*” this, since nature on the whole can only be defined by dint of its producing itself. Further: “*Now, it is the sovereign law and right of nature that each individual should endeavour to preserve itself as it is, without regard to anything but itself; therefore this sovereign law and right belongs to every individual, namely, to exist and act according to its natural conditions.*” Defining natural right as being exactly the same as the essence of every individual, that is her perseverance in existence, or *conatus*, whereby “right” stands in absolute proportion to the degree of power – *potentia* – expressed by the *conatus*, we are brought to understand why the civil right cannot – and it is not “must not,” but “cannot” – be of any other

nature than a right that maintains the essential determination of the *conatus*. Indeed, civil right must, in order to be accepted by each political subject, correspond to the same degree of perseverance in existence as does natural right; it must imply the same degree of perseverance in existence as, by extension, that of natural right, since otherwise it will be counter to the individual it is supposed to protect. And if it counters it, then no individual with common sense can adhere to it: I refer here to the extensive development of chapter XVI. Put differently, when we conceive of civil right, it must necessarily be in terms that maintain the possibility of each individual to persevere in existence to the fullest degree of her power, which means making possible a maximum of joyous affections and ensuring that she may develop her capacities of body and intellect without coming to harm. Indeed, this also happens to be the exact definition of the political state as Spinoza will have it.

This statement naturally has a great number of fundamental implications which are well worth lengthy discussions – on the political level, and also of how politics, to Spinoza, are necessarily connected with metaphysics. I will, however, just point out something of particular interest to our discussion here. In refusing the point of rupture between natural and civil right, Spinoza not only marks his strong difference with traditional philosophical political theory, where these two forms of right correspond to different things, but – and this is the important point – he refuses to see the passage from natural right to civil right as an evolution inherent in humanity in terms of a temporal development. Thus, he is not saying that before the constitution of civil rights, humans lived in the state of natural right which they transformed into a civil right at one point, say, for instance, as a passage from animality to humanity, but rather that these two manners of conceiving a human being coexist as two inseparable dimensions of our own understanding of ourselves. One dimension is natural right, insofar as we consider ourselves essentially as *modi* expressing by our *conatus* a specific degree of intensity of the substance's infinite power. The other is civil right, insofar as we consider ourselves in necessary coexistence with, and codetermination by, other individuals. Given this, we understand why the constitution of civil right cannot be seen as a Historical turn, nor be understood in terms of a History of Humanity, but rather, that it is constituted in various ways in varying degrees of perfection, over and over, each and every time that the determinations of human coexis-

tence allow for it. In other words, the constitution of civil right is incessantly reformulated under the different conditions of every specific constellation.

It then appears that we must be very careful not to confuse things of different orders. The problem, in reality, is not so much the fact that our evolution is determined by a certain temporality – it would of course be far from Spinoza to deny this fact – but rather that our comprehension of this order is necessarily and naturally subject to misinterpretations. When we do understand something, and thus can be said to progress, individually or collectively, we understand it in its proper causality: we understand how it expresses its particular relation to the substance, how from certain causes follow certain effects and this, with necessity, in a way that is regardless of time. Whenever we see this as a progression, we reveal only our own perspective, so to speak, where the thing occurred takes a meaning in our own view, clothing it thus with a sense that is finalizing – “it was meant to be,” etc. In this manner, we inscribe a finality in nature that is not to be found, could we consider it in its totality and its necessity.

In other words, the reasons why we still tend to understand time as well as history along these lines are clear to Spinoza: things do happen to us in a certain order, and we do perceive them that way. However, what we ignore is precisely the way these events are linked one to the other, just as we commonly ignore how they affect us: in trying to reconstitute the order of things, we more often resort to our imagination than to our reason. This means that we arrange them in patterns that comfort our already existing views and wishes, which in turn are largely determined by our general lack of knowledge. In this way, we tend to interpret things solely out of our own particular viewpoint, conferring upon them a meaning and a direction which in reality only corresponds to our particular way of sensing them. Thus we create a History by which we want to explain the world, when the only thing we are explaining is our own tendency to see the world in the most restricted of ways, though it does correspond to our chief interests. And even if this created History is coherent, which it may well be, it nevertheless reposes on a partial view that is specifically human: when we see things as absurd, useless or evil, it is in this perspective:

[I]t is because we only know in part, and are almost entirely ignorant of the order and interdependence of nature as a whole, and also because we want everything to be arranged according to the dictates of

our human reason; in reality that which reason considers evil, is not evil in respect to the order and laws of nature as a whole, but only in respect to the laws of our reason.

But in this partial view, which is indeed difficult to overcome, all we attain is an increasing confusion. In Spinozist terms, this is nothing but another way of speaking of sad passions by which we become more and more separated from our power of thinking and acting, thus leaving the door open towards all kinds of abuse – the abuse of statesmen who only want to maintain their own power, the abuse of religious authorities who seek their own privileges; in short, the abuse of all those who thrive on the weakness of others. These are different sorts of abuse that, like all other passions, are fuelled by the multiplication of affects that are involved in proportion to the number of individuals that are concerned. It is this problem that constitutes the heart of the matter treated explicitly by Spinoza in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, where he shows the different ways in which our interpretations of nature go astray, and how we create a History that does not correspond to reality, but that nevertheless tries to impose our own views on nature itself.

Spinoza also shows something else, perhaps of even greater interest. He shows how these various interpretations correspond not only to individual desires and affections, but even more so, how they are multiplied and transmitted by the affections of the multitude, thus creating far greater effects than would the deed of a single individual. It is this, I believe, that we must understand as the very core of Spinoza's development in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*: in very simple words, the problem is not that we exist in a temporality that is necessarily defined by our own finitude – we do experience things in the perspective of their beginning and of their ending – which makes it possible for us to speak of a history: the history of humanity, of a nation, of concepts and so forth. Yet, our way of interpreting this history – created by our own condition, so to speak, is necessarily determined by the way these events affect us in various ways *as individuals and as a multitude*.

It is this point that brings us back to my initial question, concerning Spinoza's recommendation that we read and understand Scripture in the light of its history. In relation to the previous investigation, though also in light of the fact that I have not developed each of the different points approached as each would require, I would like to think it is

possible for us to reach a certain understanding of this specific Spinozist equation.

We know now that history, in its broadest sense – that of the evolution and even more the direction of the world – does not really make sense to Spinoza. There are several reasons for this, which we can perhaps summarize by saying that this historical construction, in the first place, has a strong tendency to introduce the idea of a finality in nature which is nowhere to be found except in our own imagination and desire. This is why it is not a bearer of truth as such, since nature as such does not organize itself according to our wishes, to say the least. In the second place, the idea of explaining the world – ourselves and being as it is – through the idea of History tends to obscure the object of our interrogation rather than enlighten it, since whenever we try to grasp the order of being by submitting it to a linear and temporal view, we get further and further away from its actual being.

For Spinoza, things are not defined by their order of appearance, but by the intrinsic determinations that structure them, and these cannot be reached by a temporal consideration. Nevertheless, we are, as are all finite beings, determined existentially by what happens to us and in the order in which things occur. We are affected continuously, and by these affections, we generate affections upon ourselves and upon others. We can then, or rather, we must then, speak in terms of historicity, since that is the perspective in which we live, and by which we try to put some order into the infinite number of things affecting us simultaneously. In other words, in order to understand how and why things occur, we must delimit our analysis within certain borders, isolate it, not in order to think of it as a separate entity, but in order to figure out the determinations under which specific things occur by linking them together in a graspable causality which we can then compare or set in relation to other events or periods, and for which we thereby can establish a certain number of rules. Now this manner of proceeding is actually the same whether we are trying to grasp the meaning of a particular event, or a particular narrative, a particular action, a particular history or a natural phenomenon, according to Spinoza in the same chapter VII just referred to.

The second point is that we tend to create an interpretation of everything that happens to us. This means that we tend to construct a narrative which, on the one hand, corresponds at best to the facts experienced, but, on the other hand, is always determined by the way we

have been affected by it depending upon what implications it has carried with it. Now, we are affected not only by what happens to us at a given moment, or rather, the way we are affected does not only depend on what actually happens, but on the infinitely complex layers of things that have already determined us: previous experiences, customs, traditions, and so forth. This is to say that every interpretation is already conditioned, so to speak, by an almost countless number of previous interpretations, most of which we have already forgotten are interpretations, and not objective facts, to use a Nietzschean mode of expression.

All these elements must also, however, be taken into consideration, were we to engage in an interpretation of the Bible. Indeed, examining Scripture is not merely one option among others. It is necessary, according to Spinoza, since it constitutes perhaps the strongest and most important interpretations of our situation as human beings *per se*, at least in these parts of the world. For it gathers much of our understanding of ourselves as human beings, of the meaning of this being, and, most importantly, of the understanding of nature immediately transferred upon our societies. This means, first, that Scripture – to the extent that we conceive of it as a written document – must necessarily be considered as a mighty and powerful narrative that is an interpretation of a certain number of events and natural phenomena. I will not go into the problem of its historical accuracy or its supposedly divine origin here. Spinoza actually holds it to be the bearer of essential truths, however not in the way this is generally meant by religious authorities, but that, again, is not the point here. It is a narrative, and in order to be understood, it must be submitted to the same treatment as any narrative: it must be examined in the light of what it is actually saying. This, however, implies an extensive investigation of its own premises since we otherwise commit the most common error committed today, which is overlooking its singularity to the benefit of an imagined generality.

What, then, are its own premises or its own history? Spinoza states them clearly: understanding Scripture in light of its history implies three considerations. First, the consideration of “the nature and properties of the language [i.e. Hebrew] in which the Books of the Bible were written, and in which their authors were accustomed to speak.” In other words, it is necessary to compare every expression with common or conversational usage in order to establish what must be understood as metaphors, colloquialisms or literal sense and so forth. Second, we

must do an analysis of each book, and an arrangement of its contents under headings, in order to see how different texts treat recurrent themes. Third,

[s]uch a history should relate the environment of all the prophetic books extant; that is, the life, the conduct, and the studies of the author of each book, who he was, what was the occasion, and the epoch of his writing, whom did he write for, and in what language.

This also implies an investigations of the circumstances in which each particular book was admitted into the whole collection, and the circumstances surrounding its being accepted as sacred, and so forth.

Now, as we can see, when Spinoza is doing this, he is actually reconstructing the history of the Bible, showing, so to speak, two things simultaneously: first, that it has its own history, and that it is subjected to it as any other narrative would be, but secondly, even more importantly, that its validity itself is conditioned by its history, that is, by the different circumstances surrounding its interpretations. What Spinoza is actually doing then via the example of the Bible is showing how a historical narrative is constructed, and, at the same time, he is constructing another narrative superposed on the first one, and this is how this history must be read and understood. In this way Spinoza actually maps out the conditions for a science of history. This science of history – the thinking in history, a history that is always and already determined by its particular conditions of interpretation – must then be seen as a second-degree narrative – in Spinoza’s words, a *critical history*, a genealogy, having as its object not only the necessary linking of events, inasmuch as they can be reconstituted (and this is a great problem concerning the Bible in particular), but also the way in which the authors of history, being themselves most often unconscious of the causes affecting them, imagine the “meaning” of their history. However, Spinoza actually doubles this already double analysis in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, since he also relates it to the way that his own contemporaries perceive their own history and the model of interpretation constituted by the Bible, in order to show how our own modern history is conditioned.

So, what does this theory of history amount to? If there is no absolute history to which one can refer, we can, and must, in order to understand what kind of narratives we are determined by, establish a relation to our different ways of perceiving history or rather histories.

Understanding this, however, takes into account not one unitary history that would be that of mankind, but the different ways in which historical narratives are lived and perceived, and most of all, how they produce repercussions by the affections they create, by the multitude, and of the multitude, of the particular society they are related to. A theory or a science of history is thus, for Spinoza, nothing but a *theory of social passions*, passions of the collective body constituting society as such. This is where the science of history becomes a science of politics, grounded in the affectivity constitutive of our human condition.