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Article

Spinoza, Sin as Debt, and the Sin of the Prophets

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Abstract: In *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, Margaret Atwood examines different forms of debt and their various interrelations. Her work invites, but does not provide, an account or philosophy of debt or its deep implication in Christian beliefs such as sin, satisfaction, and atonement. This paper aims to bring to light insights into the link between debt and some aspects of Christian belief, especially the ideas of sin and satisfaction. It draws upon another unlikely source—the *Ethics* and political treatises of Spinoza. Spinoza’s view at least implies that the idea that sin (understood as the voluntary actions of a free agent) creates a ‘debt’ that is ‘paid’ by punishment is a potentially dangerous ‘fiction.’ Spinoza intuits that the subsumption of the idea of debt into notions of retribution, vengeance, satisfaction, or atonement, are driven by ‘superstition,’ envy, and hatred, and through imitating others’ hateful ideas of oneself. The idea of ‘debt’ is an artefact of civil authority that can only assume affective, normative purchase through internalizing fear of the implicit threat of punishment inherent in law. I will seek, finally, to suggest an implicit critique in Spinoza of the imaginative subsumption of debt into the space of *religio*.

Keywords: Spinoza; debt; sin; punishment; prophets

In *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, Margaret Atwood supposes that the very idea of debt is so deeply implicated in ideas of ownership, sin, duty, and justice, and so pervasive a plot in so many human stories, that it can only be deeply rooted in our nature. Indeed, it has an ancient, though often unacknowledged, place in the constitutive ideas and stories of our civilization.¹ Such claims are at one level truisms; but it behooves us to keep in mind the virtually primordial conceptual relationship between notions of sin, guilt, debt, and what Atwood calls ‘payback.’² The depth of this history is, after all, the source of impressions like Atwood’s—that debt is somehow deeply rooted in our nature, an innate sense of justice. This depth is also reflected in the idea that we are in debt for the very fact of our life, and any good fortune we happen to enjoy. The historical and conceptual depth of these associations is reflected further in deep linguistic connections, at least in Indo-European linguistic lineages, between notions of debt and duty. Notions of debt play a significant role in Hebrew Biblical narratives and law concerning sacrifice and themes of atonement. Atwood’s remarks, however, raise questions about the seemingly intrinsic and dialectical relation between debt and sin or guilt. At the very least, the association of debt with duty, and as something repaid for wrongdoing by punishment, which echoes through the stories Atwood tells, outlives theological notions of atonement and satisfaction with which it developed.

I narrow my focus to two questions raised by Atwood. Does wrongdoing create debt in any meaningful sense? If so, then ‘payback’ presumably comes in the form of a morally warranted punishment, which either atones or repairs a breach or harm wrought by the wrongdoing. Wrongdoing,

¹ Atwood (2008).

² Rospabé (1995); Mauss (1990); Graeber (2011); Douglas (2016) among others.

on such a conception, ‘spends’ something and has a ‘set price’ that must be ‘repaid.’ And this ‘price’ must somehow be quantifiable, as it must be proportioned to the gravity of the wrongdoing. The second question is this. Nobody denies the power of stories driven by the idea that punishment literally ‘pays a debt,’ but why is this idea so intuitive and powerful? Or to rephrase—what is our affective investment in this idea? In what way does the ‘payback’ satisfy, especially where irreparable damage has been done that cannot literally be repaired? A critical subsidiary of the second question is this one. Does the payback *really* ‘satisfy’ only because it assuages negative reactive emotional responses—affects that are arguably forms of hatred—that the wrongdoing generates?

It seems likely that the idea of duty and punishment as debt generates gripping stories because it was appropriated within Jewish and Christian traditions, where the ‘economy’ of justice and retribution within which it is conceived appears to transcend incremental human creation. Historic Christian accounts conceptualize a relationship between debt and sin where creation bears the imprint of God’s nature and intentions, and sin creates a debt of honor by violating the intentions of God as a superior, and as ‘owner’ of creation.³ In this context, wrongdoing is conceived not only as a failure of gratitude, but as the contravention of intentions inherent in God’s created order in a way that exhibits temerity.

I will argue, however—against the grain of Atwood—that wrongdoing does not and should never be conceived as generating a debt, because buying into this idea mobilizes bitter forms of hatred that impede the moral life, rather than reflecting its inherent rationality. I purport to find the most suggestive outlines of an argument in the *Ethics* and political treatises of Spinoza.⁴ Three stages of argument are required: (i) an argument against the idea that moral wrongdoing creates debt in any literal sense, (ii) a plausible explanation for why we so readily embrace this notion. Finally, (iii) why it is such a dangerous ‘fiction,’ and one that (I would argue) obscures what is really at stake in wrongdoing and duty?⁵

Spinoza never directly addresses the origins, nature, or ethics of debt. Why, then, would it occur to us to turn to his vexing texts for insight about debt or its connections to anything else? It is not only because of Spinoza’s ‘naturalism’—his insistence that human beings and all of their activity fall under the laws of nature, where every single body and every single event is yielded up by way of sufficient efficient causes alone, and could not possibly be otherwise. Nor is it only, or even primarily, because of his rejection of the idea that God is a personal being who creates, legislates, and judges, and who, though radically apart from nature, orders it with providential intent. Both of these aspects of his thought are critical backdrops for his iconoclastic ‘genealogy of morals.’⁶ A primary reason for

³ See, for example, Aquinas, ST I-II 87.1 and 3. A background can be found in some ‘New Testament’ passages: Matthew 6: 9–15 (the ‘Lord’s Prayer’), Romans 3: 23 and 6: 23, the latter of which construes death as paying the debt for sin. See also Augustine of Hippo: *On Christian Doctrine*, (Schaff 1887, p. 527). Additional sources that construe sin as creating a debt, or that construe a demand for satisfaction as debt, include John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, chap. 5, and Martin Luther, *Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*. But these are only mentioned here as perhaps the most noteworthy among many examples.

⁴ English translations of Spinoza’s works are those of Samuel Shirley, from Michael Morgan, ed. *Spinoza: Complete Works*, 2002, and hereafter cited as ‘Shirley.’ The Latin texts are from *Spinoza Opera*, Carl Gebhardt, ed. vols I-IV (Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1925), hereafter cited as ‘G.’ Citations from the *Ethics* are hereafter abbreviated as ‘E’; Roman numerals denote parts; ‘p’ denotes proposition; ‘d’ denotes definition; ‘dem’ denotes demonstration or proof; ‘s’ denotes scholium; ‘c’ denotes corollary; ‘pref’ denotes preface; ‘post’ denotes postulate; and ‘app’ denotes appendix (Gebhardt 1925).

⁵ I use ‘fiction’ here in the spirit of Spinoza to refer to narratives and ideas that are not true in any sense of correspondence. But their non-correspondence is typically invisible to subjects of such ideas and the narratives in which the ideas are embedded. Telling such stories, and ‘seeing the world’ through their lens, or in terms of ‘fictional’ ideas, does not reflect any intent to deceive. Indeed, the use of such ideas may reflect the highest level of adequacy that human subjects can achieve, given the language and ideas available to them. For Spinoza, however, there are God’s ideas of all things, even of other subjects’ ideas (i.e., ideas of ideas); and it is in reference to the way things are or came to be from a ‘God’s eye’ point of view that certain ideas may be deemed ‘fictions,’ even if they are cognitively and motivationally indispensable at another level.

⁶ The use of ‘genealogy of morals’ here implies—and, indeed, I would claim—that Spinoza anticipates Nietzsche’s account of the origins and motivational purchase of moral ideas of wrongfulness, etc. in terms of the shaping of affective hatred within the context of a specific history. As such, it implies that moral ideas are purely social creations, and that our development and use of such language bespeaks our impotence and exposure to pain/sorrow, not a capacity that defines our ascendant ‘personhood.’ Spinoza, like Nietzsche, also recognizes that the concealment of the ‘natural’ origins and causes of such ideas, and our employment of them, is itself implicated in their motivational power.

turning to Spinoza is that he exposes conventional morality (what the Hegelians, following Spinoza, will call *moralität*) as a social construction, which potentially enables one to be conscious of, or have more adequate ideas of, the natures and causes that animate one, and mobilize reasoned concurrence with sovereign power.

Spinoza took it as a critically important component of his political thought to acknowledge that stories, especially stories that function as sacred texts, have affective effects. They are, in terms of his account of the affects, vehicles of power which, in causally producing affects, move their readers to “greater perfection” or to “less perfection.” Although Spinoza’s own background was within the Jewish tradition, he lived and worked in a Christian society riven by upheaval and violence. And the reading and use of biblical stories in the context of religion and politics mattered critically.⁷ There is no denying that the theme of sin as debt is present in the Christian canon; and the metaphor of debt payment figured within both Jewish and Christian traditions of thought as an interpretation for sacrifice as it appears in the texts of the Hebrew canon.⁸ Spinoza was deeply suspicious and critical of the deployment of interpretations of biblical stories to ‘massage’ moral and political affects. He was most critical of deployments of rebuke and injunctions to humility, penitence, and shame, which themes of debt most commonly function to convey. Although he does not directly address the dangers of stories and readings of Biblical stories that construe repentance and atonement as payments of a debt, or of original sin as an unpayable debt burden, he is highly critical of taking the story of Adam and Eve to authorize such views. The implication—or so I will argue—is that construals of sin as debt in typical Christian readings of Biblical stories are dangerous. Such readings, in the context of rebuke, weaken readers who are moved by them in ways that conduce to the condition that Spinoza labels “servitude.” And this is a condition where taking even conventional moral blame at face value can “enslave.”

(i) *Spinoza and the ‘naturalization’ of affects and ‘morality’*

At the beginning of Part III of the *Ethics*, Spinoza complains that those who have written about the affects and human conduct before him seem to be dealing, not with natural phenomena that follow the laws of nature, but with phenomena outside nature, a “kingdom within a kingdom.” Over and against this past practice, Spinoza aims to “consider human actions and appetites just as if they were an investigation into lines, planes, and bodies.” On Spinoza’s alternative view, nothing happens in nature that can be conceived as a defect. “Nature is always the same, and its force and power of acting is everywhere one and the same; that is, the laws and rules of Nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another are always and everywhere the same.” Human nature and actions must be understood as a parts of nature that follows the “common laws of nature.” Spinoza thinks that we must knock humans off their ontological pedestal (the idea that they constitute a “kingdom within a kingdom”) in order to counter views that he rejects because those views yield up hatred of human nature and abuse of individuals, rather than understanding. In Spinoza’s own terms, he aims to give us an account of human affects and their mediation of natural causal power, which counters earlier views that “criticize weaknesses and limits” of human minds in ways that “bemoan, ridicule, despise, and most frequently abuse” the bearers of human nature. We should not expect Spinoza’s naturalistic account of the affects to constitute the sort of moral psychology that was more or less conventional in his day, whose aim was to specify and condemn vices as blameworthy. Instead, he gives us a causal account of the affects that aims to enable us to distinguish animating causes registered in joyful affects from weakening causes that diminish one’s capacity to persevere in one’s being and increase the powers of one’s mind. In any case, Spinoza makes it clear in E3pref that his account of the

⁷ See (Gatens 2012, 2013), on Spinoza’s uptake in the fiction of George Elliot, and (Gatens 2015) on the way in which Spinoza’s account of the function of imagination in prophetic ‘revelation’ and in the authority of the prophetic voice at least parallel earlier (perhaps especially platonic) accounts of poetic or artistic ‘inspiration.’

⁸ The most familiar are Matthew 6: 9–15 (the “Lord’s Prayer”), Romans 3: 23 and 6: 23, the later of which construes death as paying the debt for sin. It matters that the “Lord’s Prayer” figures in virtually every Christian liturgical tradition as a text memorized and repeated in primary occasions of worship.

affects aims not to “censure/blame” or “ridicule,” but to consider the affects in terms of the causal laws that describe the rational regularity of all of nature.

Spinoza follows Descartes in thinking of affect as an individual’s perception-like awareness of the effects of “external” causes upon one’s body, as an extended individual thing in nature. Bodies, as extended things, must function within nature’s laws. Spinoza’s departure from Descartes comes in the former’s subsumption of all human activity into “the common order of nature.” Spinoza figures the “inertia” of the composite body as an individual’s essential, natural striving to “persevere in its being”; and (departing from Descartes) he characterizes the mind as nothing more than the images and ideas (the “consciousnesses”) of these effects. Affects—joy, sorrow/pain, desire—are “consciousnesses” of the effects of external causes upon the “inertia” of the body and its parts, moving in concert, according to a *ratio* that defines it as an individual thing. “The human body needs for its preservation a great many other bodies, by which, as it were [*quasi*], it is continually regenerated” (E2post4). “The human body can be affected in so many ways by which its (own) power of activity is increased or diminished, and also in many other ways which neither increase nor diminish its power of activity” (E3post1). Finally, affects simply register or track in consciousness (or as present to the mind) these causal effects—joy/pleasure tracks the effects of causes that are quite literally animating it. Sorrow/pain track effects that diminish its power to persevere as the being it is. Desire is simply appetite—the “very essence” of a human being—insofar as one is conscious of this essential, natural striving or forward motion. All other affects are forms of these; affects are as diverse as their intentional objects.

Spinoza’s naturalistic account of the affects and powers of human minds entails a radical rejection of two cornerstones of theology regarding the passions and virtues up to the early modern period. The first is the idea that humans, as ‘minded’ subjects, have a will that is free from the order of nature, a will that, as Spinoza puts it, “disturbs rather than follows Nature’s order,” has “absolute power” over its actions, and “is determined by no other source than oneself.” Implicitly responding to Descartes, Spinoza argues that the idea of free will reflects an awareness of effects (one’s desires and willings) without an adequate awareness of their causes. Indeed, it is here where his break with Descartes is most stark. The illusion of free will intensifies hatred of wrongdoers perceived as proximate causes of wrong or harm.⁹

A second cornerstone of traditional theology is connected to the first. It involves, as Spinoza puts it in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, the human “prejudice” that “all things in Nature are like themselves in acting with an end in view” and that “God himself directs everything to a fixed end.” These ideas are implicated in the notion that “God has made everything for man’s sake and has made man so that he should worship God.” Spinoza regards those who accept this view as “victims” who are “so naturally disposed to accept it” that it never occurs to them to question it. Instead, Spinoza argues that an Aristotelian-scholastic doctrine of final cause gets the order of causes “backward.” It “makes that which is by nature first to be last.” In other words, “[i]t regards as an effect that which is, in fact, a cause, and vice versa.” So, for example, the fact that a certain vegetable is nourishing to humans causes humans who consume it regularly to have better health. Lacking adequate ideas of, say, the natural dietary causes of better human health, one supposes that the effect (health-conducive nutrition for humans) is the cause, an intended purpose or end built into the nature of a being who acts as humans perceive themselves as acting. Humans are conscious of “adopting purposes” that seem to have the character of a mental “decree,” but without any awareness of the causes of the desires that actually bring these actions about.¹⁰ As a result of this mistaken reversal in the perceived order of causes, those people, for example, who suffer from the causal effects of poor nutrition in ways that are visual (obesity, say) are blamed and derided for causing their own unhealthy condition through their undisciplined dietary choices.

⁹ For Spinoza’s argument that imputing ‘free will’ as Descartes understands it, to subjects intensifies hatred of them, see E3def.em.7 & 9.

¹⁰ See E1appx., as well as E2p35s and E2p48.

The interest in Spinoza's thoroughgoing naturalism and its radical and still-suggestive edge abide especially in the ethical conclusions Spinoza draws from this account. One of these conclusions is that, if we approach human affects as movements of bodies that are part of the common order of nature, then we overcome not only hatred of human nature, but a principal motivation for the hatred and abuse of individuals. Another conclusion is that blame is an abusive form of hatred, and the abuse that it motivates is expressed through conventional moral ideas. A third conclusion is that this abuse weakens a person, and it often has motivational purchase through an individual's passively affirming others' hateful ideas about the individual and so imitating others' affects. Humility, shame, and penitence, in particular, come about in this way, and blame enjoins them. This is exactly how Spinoza thinks conventional moral motivation works at the causal and affective level. Those who obey moral rules or "law" through the motivation of these affects (fear, penitence, humility, hatred) are "in bondage," and they "obey" through the power of another. Hence, one lives "under the law." It is for this reason that Spinoza's ethic paradoxically posits a 'genealogy of morals' as a slave morality, and seeks to offer a model of the human good as transcending bondage to any form of hatred and fear.¹¹ Spinoza's approach to ethics aims to motivate doing good or practicing virtue for its own sake, and not by way of avoiding evil out of fear or any form of sorrow (E4p63s1).

Spinoza famously defines good as "what we certainly know to be useful to us" and bad (or evil) as "what we certainly know to be an obstacle to our attainment of some good" (E4defs1 & 2). He goes on to claim (in E4p8) that "knowledge of good and evil is nothing other than the emotion of pleasure (*laetitia*) or pain (*tristitia*) insofar as we are conscious of it." And (in E4p68) if humans were truly free, they would form no conceptions of good and evil. And yet, in ways that have seemed to many readers to be in tension with these claims, if not contradictory, Spinoza goes on to claim that there is a "highest good" (knowledge of God), and (especially in *Ethics* part 4) that many other kinds of action are seemingly objectively good or evil—namely, genuinely advantageous or disadvantageous for human beings. Like all pain, conceiving of anything as evil registers a change in one's essential natural striving to a state of lesser perfection, which is necessarily the effect of an external cause, but one of which one has only an inadequate idea. As such, having an idea of anything as evil (or even as good) is always an "inadequate idea" that one would not form under conditions of genuine freedom from bondage to hatred (E4p68dem). It follows that obeying the law and upholding claims of justice are good, and failing to do so are evil, only within these parameters. Acting obediently is good only in the sense that it engenders one's perfection or "genuine advantage," which is to persevere in being as the individual one is, and to increase one's strength of mind, so as to be able to act "from the necessity of one's nature" and not only from the power of another.

Notions of duty and justice, and the idea that moral precepts are law require, as a necessary condition, a real, historical exercise of sovereign power.¹² The motivation to follow moral precepts is, for most people, a function of buying into the fiction that they are law, to which Spinoza refers (in Letter 19) as a prophetic "parable, depicting God as a king and lawgiver." The binding power of law comes to be internalized and customary, so moral beliefs motivate those who affirm such beliefs intersubjectively.

Perhaps the great paradox—and also the critical power—of Spinoza's ethical thought is that he nonetheless takes a shockingly Augustinian turn ethically and politically. He does not deny the bloody nature of law and its motivations, but still regards it as necessary and justified. Human beings, whose

¹¹ Spinoza associates motivation to act as moral rules require through these affects with enslavement in a letter of 1671 to Jacob Ostens, concerning Lambert Veltheussen's critical response to the TTP. (See Shirley, Letter 43, p. 879).

¹² Steinberg (2018, p. 41). Steinberg points out that Spinoza is recapitulating a longstanding tradition in natural law theory that distinguishes between 'indicative' and 'prescriptive' components. Steinberg notes, as precedents and examples of the intellectualist tradition, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIae 57.1 (Aquinas 1981). Aquinas claims that "right reason" grasps "*ius*." But only being promulgated by an authorized legislator turns "*ius*" into "*lex*." Francesco Suárez claims that right reason "indicates" but only the command of a sovereign power can make precepts "binding" as "law." See also Suárez, *De Legibus*, II.6.4 (Suarez 1612). Spinoza, likewise, distinguishes between moral "precepts" and "law," and insists, like Aquinas and Suarez, that no injunction is law unless it is prescribed by a sovereign. Mosaic law is law only because Moses, who had the power to compel obedience through punishment, enjoined it.

whole encounter with the world and each other is by way of the imagination and affects, cannot but live ‘under the law.’¹³ Moral motivations are given shape and internalized through the gripping fictions of a God, painted in the prophets’ imaginations with human features, who gives laws and judges, and who demands payment for wrongdoing and rewards obedience. These are the ways in which moral reasons acquire their subjective purchase, a binding force of law that is internal and psychological in nature.

(ii) *Spinoza on living ‘under the law’*

On Spinoza’s view, “debt” in any literal sense is a “social creation” that can rise to view only as an artefact of a historical exercise of sovereign power. We see this most clearly in Spinoza’s related accounts of law (both descriptive or ‘natural,’ and prescriptive) and in his definitions of justice. What little Spinoza does say about “owing” is said in the context of his definitions of justice and its relation to law. “Justice,” “owing,” and “owning” necessarily arise together. The idea of a universal moral law as ‘divine command,’ is a powerful notion—a fiction—that, in Spinoza’s own day and in ours, derived its motivational salience or normative force through images of God, yielded up by prophetic imagination, as an all-knowing lawgiver and judge. Only this image is powerful enough to hold most humans in line, who obey whatever laws they obey under its subjective thrall. Spinoza acknowledges that this fact about the subjective, motivational power of law makes it possible for “prophets” to manipulate subjects (in both senses of the word) into obedience.¹⁴ There is, however, really no moral law apart from civil law and the accretions of custom and psychological associations growing up around it over time.

(w)e saw that every man must surrender his natural right and that they must all transfer that right to the whole community, or to a number of men, or to one man. And not until then did we obtain a clear idea of what is justice and injustice, right and wrong. Therefore, justice and, in sum, all the precepts to true reason, including charity toward one’s neighbor, acquire and, in sum, all the precepts to true reason, including charity toward one’s neighbor, acquire the force of law and command only from the right of the state, that is (referring back to TTP 14), only from the decree of those who possess the right to command. And since (as I have already shown) God’s kingdom consists simply in the rule of justice and charity, or true religion, it follows (as we asserted) that God has no kingdom over men save through the medium of those who hold sovereignty. (TTP 19, Shirley, p. 559, GIII/229-30.)

Spinoza countenances there being moral precepts apart from law, which indicate what he often calls the “guidance of reason.”¹⁵ But they do not bind as law. Here is Spinoza’s genealogy of morals in all its deconstructive power.¹⁶

Spinoza’s definition of justice in the late and unfinished *Political Treatise (PT)*§3 [23] links justice explicitly and directly to “owning” and being “owed.” “(A) man is called just who has the constant will to render to each man his own; and he is called unjust who endeavors to appropriate to himself

¹³ On Spinoza’s interpretation of Adam’s sin and fall, see E4p68s, and in TTP4.26. Ravven (2001) and Sharp (2011b). See also Montag (2009) on Adam’s imitation of the affects of beasts.

¹⁴ E4p54s is the place where he makes this claim most clearly. the force of law and command only from the right of the state, that is [referring back to TTP 14], only from the decree of those who possess the right to command. And since [as I have already shown] God’s kingdom consists simply in the rule of justice and charity, or true religion, it follows [as we asserted] that God has no kingdom over men save through the medium of those who hold sovereignty (TTP 19, Shirley, p. 559).

¹⁵ TTP 5. implicitly distinguishes between ‘true moral doctrine’ and ‘law’ that ‘binds’. “Now if men were so constituted by nature to do nothing but what is prescribed by true reason, society would stand in no need of any laws. Nothing would be required but to teach men true moral doctrine, and they would then act to their genuine advantage of their own accord, whole-heartedly and freely.” (Shirley, p. 438) See also Spinoza’s argument that the teachings of Christ aim to ‘improve men’s minds’ in contrast to uttering his guidance as ‘law’, which would contradict the ‘law’ of Moses. TTP7, (Shirley, p. 461). See TTP 19, (Shirley, p. 559) where Spinoza explicitly claims that all the precepts of true reason, including the love commands, “acquire the force of law and command only from the right of the state.”

¹⁶ Spinoza also anticipates Nietzsche’s better known ‘genealogy of morals’ by associating ‘conventional morality’—what Hegel will go on to call ‘moralität’—with slavery. He does this in correspondence, where he comments on the response of a vociferous critic of his *TTP*, Veltheussen. See Letter 43, of 1671, to Jacob Ostens. (Shirley, p. 879).

what belongs to another.” The claim about injustice signals that readers are not to construe what is “each man’s own” as a case of conventional deserving. There can be no injustice unless something “belongs” to another. Thus, what is “each man’s own” is inconceivable outside the bounds of civil law. Only if someone owns something can she permit another to use it; and only then can the one who is permitted to use it owe it to another, i.e., have a legally enforceable obligation to return it to its owner, and possibly to compensate the owner for permission to use. Accounting for “owing” as Spinoza has done is necessarily to distinguish possessing anything from owning it. Possession is a relationship between an individual and ‘objects’ over which the individual can extend exclusive individual power or control, to use as that individual desires. Property, on the other hand, is a relationship between individuals (as it is also for Hobbes, for example), as subjects and citizens in a civil society, under the civil law, in virtue of which possession can be recognized as licit or illicit, and protected by way of the state’s power to punish or subordinate those who defy it by disregarding its laws.¹⁷ In sum, owing implies duty or obligation and ownership, without which there can be no debt, period. Spinoza’s earlier definition of justice in TTP 4 & 16 also emphasizes the necessary link to notions of “civil right” or “being owed” anything, and law. “Justice is a set disposition to render to every man what is his by civil right. Injustice is to deprive a man, under the guise of legality, of what belongs to him by true interpretation of the law” (Shirley 2002, p. 532).

Talk of a “constant will” and “set disposition” to render to each man what he is owed reveals Spinoza’s commitment to the idea that justice, or a disposition to act justly, is virtuous. But again, there are no debts apart from the enactments of a sovereign power. All other “debt” is construed by Spinoza as a matter of extending this IOU sort of debt metaphorically or analogically. Only in light of law and civil right, and thus, of the actual exercise of civil power, can notions such as sin, wrongfulness, or obligation even be conceived (E4p35c1 and PT§2.19).¹⁸ Spinoza claims, most explicitly, in TTP 16 that:

[C]ivil right depends only upon (the sovereign power’s) decree, while natural right depends only on the laws of Nature, which are adapted not to religion (whose sole aim is the good of man) but to the order of Nature as a whole, that is, to God’s eternal decree, which is beyond our knowledge”. (TTP 16, Shirley, p. 534, GIII 199/200)

To “owe” is for someone or something else to have a “right.” What are we to make, then, of the notion that justice demands or requires that a wrongdoer ‘repay’ a debt (perhaps of ‘guilt’) created by her wrongdoing, in the form of being punished, or that this debt may be ‘remitted’ by forgiveness? If, as Spinoza implies, “debt” can rise to view only in light of laws that turn possession into property, and insure the fulfillment of promises made under certain circumstances, then we must suppose that it is “projected” into scenes of wrongdoing and punishment. Why so? Consider Spinoza’s deflationary, if not bracing, comments about punishment, which implicitly reject the idea that punishment pays a debt created by a person’s willful wrongdoing. He readily admits that a threat of punishment is an indispensable and warranted means employed by sovereign power to secure obedience to law by those who can be moved to do so only by fear. Punishing is done for the sake of peace and justified by the right of war. Its warrant abides partly in the fact that it redounds to the “genuine advantage” even of

¹⁷ See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 29: Property is a “right that excludes the right of every other subject,” and, as a “right,” exists only insofar as it is defended by the sovereign’s power. See Olsthoorn (2015).

¹⁸ See E4p37s2, where Spinoza makes even more explicit his argument that “in a state of nature, nothing can be said to be just or unjust; this is so only in a civil state, where it is decided by common agreement what belongs to this or that man.” His extension of the argument to moral rules and ideas is also clearer. “This in a state of nature, wrongdoing cannot be conceived, but it can be in a civil state where good and bad are decided by common agreement and everyone is bound to obey the state.” See Steinberg (2018, p. 41, fn. 11) above. See also Olsthoorn (2016), who brings this claim to bear more specifically on Spinoza’s definitions of justice. There is no natural ‘ius’ or ‘justice’ that ‘precedes’ the real commands of a sovereign power, and that one can appeal to as a ‘higher law’.

those whom it “defeats” and forces into submission to the state.¹⁹ It is also clear that punishment functions to prevent those who refuse to submit to civil society to be empowered by their disobedience. It does this by preventing the wrongdoer from “rejoicing in his wickedness.” Remember that ‘joy’ (*laetitia*) is consciousness of one’s power being strengthened. A wrongdoer who rejoices in his sin is conscious of its empowering effects, thus constituting him a greater danger to the peace of the civil community. Punishment must take away this power and effect a consciousness of weakening through some form of loss, such as loss of name or public standing (what Spinoza calls honor) or the imitation of others’ affects and ideas of oneself as hateful: humility, shame, or penitence.²⁰

It is clear enough, however, that Spinoza thoroughly rejects the idea that punishment is justified because it is justly deserved, or that God punishes in any literal sense at all. Punishment does not rebalance or restore some order of ‘original justice’ or equilibrium undone or ‘disturbed’ by wrongdoing. There is, therefore, no ‘account’ from which the wrongdoer draws. Spinoza’s most extended remarks about the justification of punishment occur in two responses to critics, who insisted that his rejection of free will entails that punishment can never be justified or deserved. In both responses, he subsumes punishment under “naturally” defensive actions. In the *Appendix concerning metaphysical thoughts*, he likens punishment to killing a poisonous snake to avoid the danger it poses.

You will again ask, why then are the impious punished, since they act by their own nature, and in accordance with the divine decree. But I reply, it is also as a result of the divine decree that they are punished. And if only those ought to be punished whom we suppose to be sinning from free will alone, why do men try to destroy poisonous snakes? For they sin only from their own nature, and can do no other. (*Appendix*, Shirley, p. 201, GI/265)

Spinoza knows that his interlocutors do not think a poisonous snake “sins.” Nor need he doubt that they regard its destruction as justified. Here, the “divine decrees” that account for punishment have nothing at all to do with “divine command.” “Divine law” simply refers to descriptions of patterns of exceptionless regularity within the inexorable, necessary unfolding of efficient causes in nature.²¹ It encompasses the “striving” or movement of each individual thing that unfolds, like all motion of extended bodies, entirely in terms of the laws of nature within a plenum of efficient causes. It is in terms of this “divine law” that any individual “endeavors” to resist or overcome anything that threatens it, thereby persevering in its being.²² Sinner and judge alike cannot but ‘obey’ this law. It is purely a matter of the laws of nature that the community’s power, to whom individuals ‘transfer’ and ‘join’ their individual power, counters the destructive power of resisting individuals who thereby put the state’s perseverance at risk.

We should note, as well, that Spinoza’s view implies that there is no such thing as ‘divine punishment.’ Spinoza makes this point clearly enough in correspondence with a reader of his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, who communicates other readers’ objection that Spinoza’s thoroughgoing determinism implies that punishment for wrongs could never really be deserved, and God’s punishing would be cruel. Spinoza responds (in Letter 19: of 5 January 1665, to Willem van Blyenbergh)²³ that God’s command to Adam was really nothing more than revealing to Adam the causal effect of eating

¹⁹ See TTP16: “(t)he state’s right against one who does not recognize its sovereignty by any kind of treaty is the same as its right against one who has done it an injury, or it can rightly compel him either to submit or enter into alliance by any means.” (Shirley, p. 533).

²⁰ TTP 7, (Shirley, p. 461).

²¹ See James (2009), Belaief (1971), and Rutherford (2010) on Spinoza’s view of the nature of law.

²² This conception of divine law, subsuming laws of nature, hearkens back to scholastic conceptions of divine law like that of Aquinas, who sees the natural tendency of any living thing to seek out what it needs for survival and well-functioning (natural love) and a tendency to repel or seek to destroy anything which threatens survival or dimensions of flourishing (natural hatred), as acting toward ends “decreed” by God in creation. Even though Spinoza thoroughly rejects the final ends teleology that underwrites the older view, it survives as ‘descriptive’ laws that ‘describe’ patterns of motion in the unfolding of efficient causation. See Sharp (2011a, pp. 360–61) on love and hatred in Descartes’s *Passions of the Soul*, and his functional way of defining passions.

²³ See Shirley, pp. 807–10.

the fruit of the tree. Death, which resulted from Adam's eating the fruit from the tree, was merely a causal effect of eating it. Adam, and all those who interpret his story through the lens of the prophets' imagination, apprehend a causal effect as an 'intentional' punishment imposed by God, imagined as a judge.²⁴

Spinoza also makes it clear enough that what other thinkers and commentators on human nature regard as vices, he is more inclined to view as forms of 'madness' (*Ethics* 4p44s). His reference not only to killing a venomous snake, in remarks about punishment, but also to a horse and to the suffocation of a rabid man, appear calculated to liken punishment to other cases or examples of resisting an 'enemy' that his interlocutors would embrace as justified, even though they would not dream of attributing 'freedom of will' to the 'enemy.'²⁵ They are the sorts of cases where Spinoza's interlocutors would also be just as likely to deny that 'warrant' had anything to do with desert or retribution. The implication, then, is that notions of deserving retribution—of punishment as 'payback'—beyond the bare, objective specifications of civil law, are fictions that are beside the point, as justifications for punishing wrongdoers. In fact, such ideas themselves stand in need of a causal explanation.

If one takes Spinoza's naturalistic approach seriously, then debt as a duty or obligation necessarily comes first as an artefact of social power—a 'social construction.' It may then, but only then, become the foundation for stories—fictions in Spinoza's sense—about wrong or guilt as a sort of debt or condition which demands repayment or satisfaction. Why, however, do we tell this story, or buy into this fiction of wrongdoing as debt?

(iii) *Stories that satisfy*

Repayment of any debt, however mundane, brings about *satisfaction—satisfying* or *fulfilling* the terms of a promise, contract, or obligation. It may also assuage affects, that is, satisfy a thirst for revenge or anger, that can readily be narrated as 'payback.' The one paying the debt has its burden lifted from his shoulders by resolving the debt or undergoing a loss that satisfies his offence. One whose property is returned, or for whom a wrong is 'righted' need no longer be anxious about the security of his property and no longer has reason for anger or resentment. Perhaps 'payback' in the form of punishment assuages the anger or indignation of those who have been wronged, satisfying their disaffection. Being in the position of creditor, in any of these stories, sets one up for indignation or anger, especially where repayment is not forthcoming. Perhaps these mundane examples help to explain why debt as a social, legal construction—the original debt—is so readily extended in so many stories, with so much affective power. Perhaps the intuitive power of some of these stories renders invisible their origin and real nature as fictions.

Spinoza's naturalistic approach to ethics, with its social constructionist account of debt already implicitly calls into question the projection and generalization of the idea of debt as a feature of moral life. This would hardly be an interesting point were it not for the fact that Spinoza implicates blame and a will to punish—to conceive punishment as retributive payback, and to take satisfaction in it—as "abuses."²⁶ He is, moreover, deeply critical of the very idea of blame as a response to wrongdoing, and he poses his own account of ethical response to wrongdoing as a contrast. Along with blame, he denies the longstanding status of humility, shame, and especially penitence as *ever* genuinely virtues.²⁷

²⁴ See Verbeek (2003) for a discussion of the 'will' of God in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*.

²⁵ See Letter 78, to Henry Oldenburg, of 7 February 1676, (Shirley, pp. 952–53).

²⁶ In the earlier *Short Treatise* (KV II§10, G I 73/Shirley, 75) Spinoza claims that penitence and humility are "pernicious," that blame "injures," and that "censuring vice" weakens the spirit rather than strengthening the mind of the wrongdoer. In the *Ethics* (E3p55c1), he claims that exposure to blame checks one's striving, and so causes pain. "acting from the power of another." In E4p52s, he argues that exposure to blame "increasingly disturbs" (*vituperio magis magisque turbatur*) contentment with oneself (*acquiescentia in se ipso*). In E3pref. and E4app13 and 25, he argues that the assumption that actions are free leads to "abuse", and he warns against "censuring" or "talking about vices." We have already seen that punishing is nothing more than diminishing the power of 'enemies' by colluding in, or with sovereign power.

²⁷ Spinoza's two definitions of blame (*vituperium*) are found in E3p29s and *Political Treatise* 2 §24. The first is "the sorrow/pain with which we dislike another's action." The second is "pain/sorrow accompanied by human weakness as the cause." Since

The reason is that blame is a form of hatred (pain, or consciousness of a weakening of one's power to persevere as the being one is, along with an inadequate idea of the cause of the weakening) that passes weakening along, as it were, as an affect that others with a weaker *anima* are prone to imitate.²⁸ And since hatred is one primary form of this weakness or impotence of 'spirit', along with fear, these are conditions rife with the potential of violence and atrocity.

The retributivists with whom Spinoza contended were, for the most part, Christians of a Calvinist or Collegiant bent who, each in differing degrees, echoed Augustine and his theological legacy as it was developed by the scholastics. They reacted with horror to Spinoza's denial of free will and the status of humility, penitence, and shame as virtues. Many of Spinoza's Dutch interlocutors were entirely willing to embrace the thoroughly mechanistic image of the world of extended bodies motivated by the likes of Galileo and articulated by Descartes; but their insistence that Descartes' system did not corrode theology or morals hinged, at least in part, on Descartes' account of the will as uncaused or absolutely free.²⁹ For them, Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*, in particular, was a "book forged in hell." But why the intensity of their reaction to Spinoza's exposure of, among other things, punishment as payment?

Up to the reformation, notions of retribution were closely bound up with the notion of *satisfaction*, which subsumed many aspects of punishment and the sense of its justification. Atwood aptly recalls the pertinent features of the plot of this story of sin and guilt as debt. Human beings, among all that exists, are the perfectly gratuitous creation of a perfect God. Out of the fullness of God's love, they bear, as bearers of a free will, the very image of God in their shared nature as rational and free beings. Yet, enabled by that very attribute, humans 'turn away' in a supreme act of spiritual infidelity. And in the temerity of that turn, humans exhibit, one and all, supreme ingratitude—a failure to acknowledge their debt to God for the very fact of their life and whatever good fortune they happen to enjoy. In the creation accomplished by a perfect God, a demand is created for satisfaction or 'payback' that no human being can ever make. All subsequent wrongdoing is then driven by the disordered and unfaithful affective motivations resulting from the original 'turning away' in the sin of Adam and Eve. These motivations alone will lend specificity to the wrongs for which each individual is said to stand in need of satisfaction. Even with the rejection of the medieval economy of satisfaction mediated by the church through a system of purgation and indulgence, the idea abides that the death and resurrection of Jesus is an atoning sacrifice because (in the inexorable order of things) only God himself has the standing to make the demanded satisfaction. Only in a cosmos where punishment is deserved, and where it is inexorably *satisfied* through atonement, could there be Divine justice in a perfect God's creation.³⁰

Spinoza's unease about blame and other features of conventional morality that are narrated in terms of debt and repayment abides in his deep suspicion of the very *satisfaction* such stories afford. To see why, we can do no better than to revisit Spinoza's own revisionary account of Adam's "sin," viewed in light of his naturalistic psychology of the affects, and the contrast he draws between "superstition" and *vero religio* or "true religion." Spinoza treats the story of Adam's fall in both the *Ethics* and the *TTP*. The first treatment comes as concomitant to his argument that if human beings were born "free"—free, that is, from the painful affects—they would form no conception of good and evil, at least so long as they remained free. So Spinoza takes to task those who argued that Adam was born "free." The argument of the demonstration goes like this. A human being is free only if they are "guided solely

hatred is defined as sorrow/pain with the idea of an external cause, it is clear that blame is a form and expression of hatred See Green (2013).

²⁸ See Green (2013) for an argument that blame, as Spinoza conceives it, is a form of hatred.

²⁹ Douglas (2015) discusses at length the reactions of Dutch Cartesians.

³⁰ The most outstanding philosophical endorsement of this conception of how the atoning death of Jesus makes satisfaction is Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*. Central to the argument of this text is that only God himself, incarnate as a human being, who can bear or undergo punishment, has the standing to make satisfaction—quite literally, to 'repay' the 'debt' created by any sin against God. There is no reason to suppose that Spinoza knew this text directly. But it remained widely influential in scholastic theology, even in Protestant circles.

by reason.” But if they were so guided, they would have only adequate ideas, and thus no conception of evil, and “consequently, no conception of good (for good and evil are correlative).” No human, however, lives solely by the guidance of reason, and thus ‘good’ and ‘evil’ have been conceived—on Spinoza’s view as whatever has, or fails to have, utility (usefulness) to us. Although Spinoza questions the Mosaic authorship of the Torah in other places, he supposes that Moses intended to communicate that human beings form notions of good and evil because they are not free. He recounts the story of Adam, with the detail that if he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would fear death instead of desiring to live. Without the guidance of reason, and adequate ideas of the cause of death, Adam interprets a natural consequence of eating something that is toxic as a penalty imposed by a personal God who is punishing him for eating it. It is this very sort of confusion that Spinoza describes in the appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics*, where he implies that it is implicated in the bondage of sorrowful affects from which ethical reflection is a way to liberation. Adam lost his freedom also in losing sight of Eve’s nature’s “agreement” with his own, and imitating the affects of beasts.³¹ What we get here is the idea that one who sees all things ‘in nature’ in terms of the inexorable unfolding of efficient causes is in not exempted from these causal effects. It is rather that such a one does not see the effects that they yield as “evil,” even when they are painful; accordingly, one does not see the effects that satisfy or are pleasurable, by assuaging or satisfying sorrow or pain, as “good.”

Spinoza expands upon elements of this interpretation in several passages in the TTP. In (3.31), he argues that God was to Adam, as God is to every human being, “according to the power of his understanding.” So God was not revealed to Adam as omniscient and omnipresent, but as a person who commands and judges, and from whom Adam hid, and sought to excuse his sin. All Adam knew of God is that he was “the maker of all things.” Later (in TTP 4.29), Spinoza argues that what he said about Adam is also true of the prophets, who did not perceive God “adequately” in terms of “eternal truths.”³² They imagined God in personal, vividly anthropomorphic terms, and “wrote laws in the name of God.” The prophets perceived God’s bringing together of Israel as a nation, not as the upshot of eternal truths or adequate ideas of efficient causes unfolding inexorably in nature, but as the result of “precepts and institutions” prescribed as laws by God, figured or fictionalized as a lawgiver and judge.³³ The prophets, like Adam, perceive an efficient causal outcome of eating a fruit with a punishment imposed by a judge.³⁴

Adam, on Spinoza’s reading, is a *type* for human beings only in being vulnerable, through his inadequate ideas, both to powers mediating their effects upon him by way of his affects and desires, and to “superstition.” The latter is a term that Spinoza, like other early modern Europeans in the Enlightenment such as Hume, employ as a contrast to “true religion.” We should recall, from a brief look at the appendix to part 1 of the *Ethics*, above, that superstition, as Spinoza understands it, involves the following elements, and is deeply bound up with what we call moral normativity or motivation. Superstition imputes free will to human beings because humans are aware of “adopting purposes” and having desires, but they are insufficiently aware of the causes. It involves embracing inadequate ideas of God as personal that, in fact, have a natural history, and then supposing that it is a result of God’s intention, either as creator or judge, that human beings enjoy moments of good fortune, for God created a world in which everything has ends subordinated to those of human beings. Here, Spinoza’s interlocutors, Calvinist and Catholic alike, impute suffering and ill fortune to God’s ‘permissive’ will, or to God’s judgment for ‘sin.’ More to the point, however, moral precepts (love your neighbor as yourself) are encountered as ‘law’ because they are supposed commanded by a personal (as well as perfect) God. And the punishment already due human sinners for the temerity of their original turning

³¹ See Montag (2009).

³² See Fraenkel (2006) for a discussion of Spinoza’s philosophical conception of God.

³³ See Rosenthal (1997) on Spinoza’s deployment of an account of the origins of the Hebrew state in the TTP.

³⁴ See Batnitzky (2003).

away, as well as God's authorization of 'the magistrate,' motivate obedience just as the law laid down by human sovereign powers does, through fear of punishment and hope for reward.

Spinoza readily admits that prophets, among others, may engender obedience to otherwise reasonable laws by capitalizing on the liability of weak souls/minds to passively affirm others' hateful ideas of them, and imitate their affects. The imitations of others' hatred take the form of humility, shame, and penitence, which in most Christian accounts of the virtues, are accounted as virtues. Spinoza refuses to embrace them as part of his "idea of a man to which we may look as a model of human nature," even though the obedience they motivate may redound to the persevering of weakly-animated individuals.³⁵ But since, in such cases, actions that redound to one's perseverance are motivated and brought about by causes "external" to one's own nature, they do not represent one's own nature or its power, except insofar as it is the bearer of effects. Spinoza regards humility and penitence as symptoms of a weak mind for just this reason. One's own obedience to civil law says nothing good about the powers or strengths of one's own mind or nature. One is still not *sui iuris* (a law unto oneself), but one instead lives "under the law."³⁶ Penitence (*pœnitentia*) is really punishment "internalized;" yet it encompasses any moral motivation that arises from exposure to blame, and it motivates blaming others. The penitent is vulnerable, first of all, to passively imitating others' hateful ideas of himself. He is liable to impute painful ideas of himself to others even when others do not have them. And he passively affirms, or accepts as true, the painful ideas of himself *in virtue of which* others are believed to hate him.³⁷ On Spinoza's view, one cannot even form and affirm painful ideas of oneself "from the necessity of one's own nature," but only as an effect of more powerful "contrary" natures acting upon one's own.

Given Spinoza's denial that humility and penitence are virtues, even when they motivate obedience and otherwise reasonable actions, it should not surprise us that Spinoza disparages the 'monkish virtues' just as assiduously as Hume. When we approach his reasons for doing so, we will finally see why he would surely regard the idea of sin as debt as a dangerous fiction. It is in the process of arguing that hatred can never be good (E4p45s) that he makes this point clearly:

Certainly nothing but grim and gloomy superstition forbids enjoyment. Why is it less fitting to drive away melancholy than to dispel hunger and thirst? The principle that guides me and shapes my life is this: no deity, nor anyone but the envious, takes pleasure in my weakness and my misfortune, or does he take to be a virtue our tears, sobs, fearfulness, and other such things that are a mark of a weak spirit. On the contrary, the more we are affected with pleasure (joy-laetitia), the more we are passing to a state of greater perfection; that is, the more we participate in the divine nature". (Shirley, pp. 344–45)

"Superstition" manipulates forms of pain/hatred, which is nothing more than a confused consciousness of one's own essential, natural "striving" to "persevere in one's being" being diminished, to yield obedience to "law", conceived as divine command. Superstition is an investment in the idea that the likes of humility or penitence are virtues of individuals. But the forms of affect on which superstition rests are dangerous because they conduce psychologically to envy, derision, contempt, anger, revenge—all related, potentially socially destructive forms of hatred. Spinoza claims that whatever we want as a result of these emotions is "'base," and he notes that in the context of a political state, they motivate injustice. "He who rightly knows all things follow from the necessity of the divine nature and happen in accordance with eternal laws and rules of Nature will surely find nothing deserving of hatred, derision, contempt, nor will he pity (feel the distress of) anyone else" (E4p50s).

³⁵ Spinoza claims that we "desire to form an idea of a man" that functions as a "model of human nature" in E4pref. It remains a matter of scholarly debate whether this is a description of one of his aims in the *Ethics*, especially in descriptions of the 'free man' in Part 4.

³⁶ See Steinberg (2008; 2018, pp. 176–77), and Green (2019) on being '*sui iuris*'.

³⁷ See Green (2016).

It is worthwhile to reflect further on how Spinoza sees the association of hateful forms of moral motivation, superstition, and envy.

Although self-abasement is the opposite of pride, the self-abased man is very close to the proud man (a man who thinks too well of himself). For since his pain arises from judging his own weakness by (comparison to) the power or virtue of others, his pain will be assuaged, that is, he will feel pleasure, if his thoughts are engaged in contemplating other people's faults. On the other hand, he will be more pained in proportion as he thinks himself lower than others. Hence it comes about that the self-abased are more prone to envy than all others, and that they, more than any, endeavor to keep watch on men's deeds with a view to criticizing rather than correcting them, and they end up praising only self-abasement and exulting in it even will still preserving the appearance of self-abasement". (E4p57s, Shirley, pp. 349–50, GII/252)

Those who deeply bemoan their own sinful condition and actions are suffering pain, and it is a pain that is assuaged—*satisfied*—only by comparing themselves to others. Penitents and self-abasing individuals are liable to passively affirm ideas of others as sinful or wicked, or indebted, that satisfy or assuage their pain. This can take the form of seeing others as evil or worse than themselves. On the other hand, self-abasing or self-hating individuals are ready to affirm others' satisfying ideas of themselves as a source of others' pleasure/joy. Spinoza describes this condition as "double weakness of mind" (see exposition of E3def.em.29 and E3p55). Those who see themselves as weak, in these senses, are envious of others who do not suffer the same pains or sorrow. Spinoza defines envy as "hatred, itself" and "hatred, insofar as it affects a man that he is pained at another's good fortune and rejoices at another's ill-fortune." And envy is a most dangerous affect, because it motivates actions that aim to weaken and destroy those who are envied/hated.

(iv) Epilogue

Now, perhaps, we can see how Spinoza's account of moral motivation implicates the idea of punishment as the payment of a debt or the idea of duty as a debt. If being punished is paying a debt, then how much does one owe? Spinoza's account of blame as a form of hatred, and its impulsion to envy, suggests that punishments that "satisfy" the aggrieved or wronged will be those which bring the wrongdoer down to the level of the victim's power, and reverse any advantage of fortune wrongdoing affords. But the question of 'how much' demands other considerations as well. If justice is nothing more than enjoyment of civil rights afforded by law, then why should the same "price" be attached in similar cases to the same form of wrongdoing? Spinoza's response would surely be twofold. First, "charging a different price" to different wrongdoers who have committed the same offence or violated the same law, under relevantly similar circumstances, could be justified only in reference to a different degree or application of power required to "defeat" them. Anything more could have no rational justification; it would simply express a gratuitous desire to harm, which would reveal the motivation as nothing more than another form of hatred. A consistent "price," however, if it suffices to secure obedience, is at least less likely to create additional conditions for envy.³⁸ But conceiving of unpunished wrongdoing as 'owing' or 'wracking up a debt' that is not acknowledged or paid engenders the envy and anger of those who conceive themselves as 'paying a price' through their obedience and humility. The closest Spinoza ever comes to conceptualizing the impulse to 'put a specific price' on wrongdoing is in a letter about a critic of 'the book forged in hell,' his *Theologico-Political Treatise*. This critic (Lambert Veltheussen) claimed to Spinoza's friend, Jacob Ostens, that "to avoid the accusation of superstition, (Spinoza) has renounced all religion." Spinoza responds (and I quote at length):

³⁸ Consider, in this connection, Spinoza's argument, in PT 10.1 that all men, both rulers and the ruled, have to be restrained by fear of punishment or loss (Shirley, p. 747).

What he understands by religion and what by superstition I do not know. Does that man, pray, renounce all religion who declares that God must be acknowledged as the highest good, and that he must be loved as such in a free spirit? And that in this alone does our supreme happiness and our highest freedom consist? And further, that the reward of virtue is virtue itself, while the punishment of folly and weakness is folly itself? And lastly, that everyone is in duty bound to love his neighbor and obey the commands of the sovereign power? I not only said this explicitly, but also proved it with the strongest arguments. But I think I see in what mire this man is stuck. He finds nothing to please him in virtue itself and in intellect, and would choose to live under the impulsion of the passions were it not for one obstacle, his fear of punishment. So he abstains from evil deeds and obeys the divine commands like a slave, reluctantly and waveringly, and in return for this servitude he expects to reap rewards from God far sweeter to him than the Divine Love itself, and the more so he dislikes the good that he does, and does it unwillingly. Consequently, he believes that all who are not restrained by fear live unbridled lives and renounce all religion". (Letter 43, of 1671{?}, to Jacob Ostens, Shirley, p. 879, GIV/221b)

Here, Spinoza aptly describes the affective economy within which so many of the stories of debt recounted by Atwood 'trade.' Where one lives 'under the law,' the motivation to obey comes by way of fear of punishment or hope for a reward for one's obedience. These, according to Spinoza, are motivations that are the mark of servitude, whatever the source of fear that inspires obedience.³⁹ As Spinoza's Christian interlocutors would have it, everyone already owes a debt for their very existence that they could never satisfy; and original sin compounds an already unpayable debt. A purely gratuitous, perfect, and sufficient payment has been made by one who not only did not owe anything, but by the creditor himself. One who refuses to obey from fear, or to acknowledge and repent of one's sin, appears to refuse to recognize his debt, let alone its gratuitous repayment. Such a person appears to live an "unbridled life" and, indeed, to "renounce religion." Those who repay the debt through grudging obedience and humility envy them. So through the other's persistence in wrongdoing, apparent or real, or refusal to acknowledge a debt spawns unremitting envy/hatred. There is little doubt that this is a hatred that lends legitimacy and gravitas to all sorts of perfectly atrocious spectacles of 'collection.' We can also see that it lends pathos both to stories of the spectacular, apocalyptic defeat of evil, and to stories of 'redemption' as the undeserved payment of debts that one has incurred through a life of sin.

When Spinoza's psychology of affects and 'genealogy of morals' is put alongside Atwood's account of the relation of debt and sin, we get only an intimation of the affective economy within which notions of sin create debt. Or, perhaps, Spinoza motivates a different view of the 'pawnshop of the soul.' Spinoza seeks to locate this economy within the common order of nature. Yet he emphatically resists imputations and charges of atheism.⁴⁰ Even though Spinoza regards investing God with anthropomorphic features as 'fictions' or imaging God as a lawgiver and judge as a 'parable' (in Letter 19, for example), he articulates his own interpretation of these fictions as necessary beliefs to the end of piety, obedience, and at least a degree of blessedness. As we have seen in his response to the charge of atheism coming from Veltheussen, he distinguishes "true religion" from the "superstition" that trades upon (and legitimates) hatred as a source of moral motivation. Spinoza introduces his list of the five "marks" of true religion (in TTP 14), that is, a religion that motivates those whose minds are not strong enough to make them *sui iuris* to do, nonetheless, what redounds to their genuine advantage and perseverance in their being. Here, we can see that Spinoza appreciates the power of a story; and we should note that he enjoins "confessing" claims that are really parables, and are not true in any philosophical sense, but that motivate obedience, charity, and justice by way of the affects and

³⁹ On the character of servility, see [Steinberg \(2009, p. 49ff\)](#).

⁴⁰ See [Rosenthal \(2012\)](#) for a discussion of Spinoza's response to the charge of atheism.

imagination. The first tenet of true religion is “that there is a Supreme Being who loves justice and charity, whom all must obey in order to be saved, and (whom one) must worship by practicing justice and charity to their neighbor.” In the third tenet, Spinoza finds grounds for affirming the perfection (the omnipresence and omniscience) of God from the need not to be “unaware of the universality of the justice wherewith he directs everything.” And finally, in the seventh tenet, Spinoza affirms the necessity of holding that God “forgives repentant sinners.” These images of God, if confessed, motivate acting in ways that engender one’s own flourishing and (*ipso facto*) that of the neighbor, whose nature “agrees” with one’s own. The warrant of this confession, however, abides in their motivational salience, and does not consist in actively affirming such claims and images as philosophical truths.

When Spinoza claims, in the *Ethics*, that he aims to redirect ethical reflection and moral effort to focus on seeking good, rather than avoiding evil, he is not renouncing religious ethics as such. His ethical and political writings are pervaded by a consistent distinction and contrast between “true religion” and other forms of “religion” that Spinoza denominates and criticizes as “superstition.”⁴¹ Spinoza’s argument in the TTP is that a religion that invests “faith” in the tenets of true religion enjoins piety, that is, love of neighbor and a commitment to uphold the claims of justice. It is the promotion of piety that warrants a given religion. It is precisely by way of fiction that true religion motivates obedience to law. Spinoza clearly appreciates the power of fictions to enjoin obedience and piety, and to secure the peace in civil communities. Indeed, he claims that it is in being used (reread and interpreted) in a civil community to enjoin charity and justice that stories acquire their canonical status as ‘sacred’ stories (TTP 12, Shirley, p. 505).

The stories of the Bible were the inheritance of diverse traditions within Spinoza’s own civil community, some of which apparently engendered or embodied superstition, in his view. He clearly recognizes that contested interpretations of biblical stories mattered ethically and politically for the peace of a community. In several texts, especially in his most extended comments about superstition in the preface to the TTP, Spinoza emphasizes the implication of superstition in the image of God as judge, the collective motivation of rebuke, and the massaging of hatred, humility, and penitence. Yet he claims:

However, I will not level the charge of impiety against those sectaries simply because they adopt the words of Scripture to their own beliefs. Just as Scripture was once adopted to the understanding of the people of that time, in the same way, anyone may now adopt it to his own beliefs if he feels that this will enable him to obey God with heartier will in those matters that pertain to justice and charity. (TTP 14, Shirley, p. 514.)

Spinoza, we should recall, regards the meanings of words as a function of their usage over time.⁴² So interpreting the stories of Scripture involves “adopting” them “to one’s own beliefs.” And the norm that governs interpretation is that it “enable one to obey God with a heartier will.” Again, it is justice and charity that mark obedience to God. So the ‘cash value’ of stories of ‘payback’ and the interpretations of those will be whether they are useful fictions in motivating justice and charity.

In a way, Atwood does what Spinoza urges us to consider: we must ask ourselves why the stories that we tell and retell ‘satisfy’ us. Which payback stories satisfy us in that they assuage our envy and represent a fantasy of defeat and revenge? Upon what senses of ownership do these stories trade? Which stories hold our attention because we are seeking to direct our lives around seeking to avoid evil, rather than loving the good? Stories of divine vengeance, of the defeat of evil, and even some stories of everyone’s need for a redeemer who pays sinners’ unpayable debts through a sufficient atoning

⁴¹ The contrast between ‘religion’ or ‘true religion’ and ‘superstition’ is perhaps clearest in correspondence. See especially Letter 73 (of December 1675, to Henry Oldenburg), where Spinoza distinguishes between ‘religion,’ which he claims is ‘founded on reason,’ and ‘superstition,’ which is ‘founded on ignorance’ (Shirley, p. 942). We should note Spinoza’s imputation of the idea of ‘trinity’ to ‘superstition,’ implying that he rejects those elements of Christian theology that are necessary constituents of notions of Jesus’s death as an atoning sacrifice that ‘pays the penalty’ for sin. TTP 12; Shirley, p. 505.

⁴² TTP12.11, Shirley, p. 505.

sacrifice of himself, can be dangerous stories even if they cower the wrongdoer into obedience. In some retellings (or as Spinoza has it, ‘usages’) they can mobilize envy and legitimate rage and revenge.

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