

SPINOZA'S THEOLOGICAL PROJECT

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With the benefit of hindsight, many of us see Spinoza as the first among the philosophers to understand the depth of the clash between ancient religion and the modern worldview. Descartes, Leibniz, Malebranche, and even Locke found ways of accommodating the God of Abraham in their philosophies. Each of them laid down limits to what natural reason can know, fencing in the truths of reason, and at the same time opening up unbounded pastures of revelatory knowledge, which reason can neither demonstrate nor comprehend. They saw no conflict in doing so, since reason and revelation are so neatly marked off from one another on these views, and there consequently seems to be little danger of the fence breaking down and allowing the strange breeds to intermingle. But Spinoza recognized early on that reason, by its very nature, does not tolerate fences very well. Whenever we believe anything, whether natural or supernatural, we can ask why we believe it, and whether there are more reasonable things we should believe. We philosophers thus always find ourselves returning to what Kant later called a tribunal of reason, where reason sits “as an appointed judge who compels the witnesses to answer questions which he himself has formulated” (*CPR* preface, B xiii; Kemp Smith translation). And when our witnesses can only reply that something is known “through the eyes of faith,” the judge is not impressed.

So Spinoza let his reason roam freely over the landscape, and by the end of the day covered the world with a logical structure as rigid and exceptionless as the deductive machinery of the *Ethics*. We know what he discovered: a single, eternal, necessarily-existent substance, call it God or Nature, which somehow, out of its own abundance, brings everything into existence with all the inevitability of a conclusion dropping out from a set of premises. This is what you get, he thought, when you let reason push for the explanations it requires. There is no room here for the God of Abraham, who sends Adam and Eve out of Eden and commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. There is no room for free actions that are not at the same time determined by antecedent causes and laws of nature, and there is no promise of heaven or of perfect justice either in this world or out of it. The world is as reason says it must be. And the modern worldview, essentially, is that our reason is up to the task of understanding the world, and that we should embrace its conclusions. So much the worse, it would seem, for ancient religion.

This is a radical conclusion, even today. But what should be most surprising to us is that Spinoza did not go even further. For he did, in the end, affirm the existence of a divine being. Moreover, he demonstrated that this being is infinite, absolutely perfect, eternal, free, indivisible, and that it sustains and conserves creatures. True, he also demonstrated heretical propositions, such as that God is corporeal, and that God is not the sort of being that loves us in any meaningful way. But the point is that he advanced a particular concept of God, and did not simply dispense with God-talk altogether. Spinoza did not say, as he well could have, "In truth, God does not exist. There is a deep unity in nature, which has features that match ones traditionally ascribed to God, but this deep unity is so impersonal that we would be better off not calling it 'God' at all, so as to avoid

unnecessary confusion.” Spinoza could have been an outright and plain-spoken atheist who found a thrilling but non-divine unity in the natural world. That daring position would not have been more problematic than the one he did espouse. But instead he sought to salvage as much as he could from ancient religion, and *correct* our notion of God rather than abandon it. This is surprising: why didn’t Spinoza go the way of Nietzsche?

Thus I think it is reasonable to attribute to Spinoza a certain *theological project*, or a campaign to promote a conception of God that is more profound and more accurate than the traditional one which is based chiefly on claims of revelation. The aim of this essay is to clarify the overall nature of this theological project, and consequently (I believe) the overall trajectory of his philosophy. According to this view, Spinoza is not to be seen as “an enemy from without,” or the atheistic Jew of Amsterdam who attacks the rationality of religion overall; but instead as “an enemy from within,” perhaps, who strives to reform religion in such a radical way as to make it consonant with the chief aims and attitudes of the modern philosophical naturalism. Spinoza’s goal, in other words, is to find something divine in the world that a good modernist can still believe in.

An imaginative device will help to establish a framework for the rest of this essay. Let us conceive a scale of religiosity ranging from the far right (characterized by Biblical literalism, belief in a god with humanlike aspirations and passions, and prizing piety over philosophical reason) to the far left (characterized by a thoroughgoing naturalism with respect to the Bible, humanity, and the rest of the world). In short, let us imagine a scale with someone like Jerry Falwell on the far right and Friedrich Nietzsche on the far left. (Who would have ever dreamed to find this pair on a single scale?!) Spinoza, I shall

suggest, advocates for a position somewhere between these two extremes. As we all know, he pulls against the right, arguing for a naturalistic approach to Scripture and a conception of God that is far less anthropomorphic. But he pulls also against the left, arguing that there is something in nature that truly is divine, something which the ancient prophets were in fact beginning to know and love, albeit in confused and primitive ways.

Pulling against the right: making scripture natural

There should be no controversy in claiming that Spinoza, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, seeks to “naturalize” scripture. Rather than pulling it out of the sky, Spinoza picks it up off the ground. He insists that the proper study of scripture requires a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew language, culture, and history, together with a natural history of the various documents that have come to be assembled into the Bible. Armed with this expertise, he concludes that “the Word of God is faulty, mutilated, adulterated and inconsistent, that we possess it in only fragmentary form, and that the original of God’s covenant with the Jews has perished” (ch. 12; Shirley, p. 149). In short, Spinoza anticipates the conclusions which later characterized the 19th-century “higher criticism” of the Bible, including the denial of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Moreover, Spinoza demonstrates, at least to his own satisfaction, that the visions of prophets varied according to their temperaments and occupations, which of course suggests that their writings were simply expressions of their own fanciful imaginations. And indeed, Spinoza explicitly concludes that the prophets had, at best, a muted apprehension of the truth, and that the value of their writings lies not in the primitive and childish metaphysics they offer, but in the way that they prompt ignorant folks to live piously.

But, for all that, Spinoza does seem (at least superficially) to regard scripture as conveying some important truths. The orientation of his project, as he describes it in the preface, is not to discredit religions based on scripture, but to rescue religion from timid and despondent superstitions which have calcified around it. “Happy indeed would be our age,” Spinoza writes in a later chapter, “if we were to see religion freed from all superstition” (ch. 11; Shirley, p. 148). What are these superstitions? Spinoza does not list them in a single place, but from his various discussions throughout the *Treatise* we know that they include at least the following: (1) that God imparts commands in the manner of a lawgiver or ruler, (2) that God really appears to humans in finite and changeable guises, (3) that God performs miracles violating the laws of nature, and (4) that scripture is a sure indicator of truths about nature (such as the origin or shape of the world, or astronomical matters, or teleological claims about the fate of humanity). In Spinoza’s view, these superstitions have led to dogma that seems to have the aim of “utterly extinguishing the light of reason” (preface; Shirley, p. 4). Once we remove these superstitions, we will find, as he writes, that scripture teaches nothing that is not in agreement with the intellect (preface; Shirley, p. 6), and we will have a religion that good rationalistic naturalists can accept.

But what is left of religion shorn of these superstitions? It amounts to this: a belief that God exists and necessitates everything that happens. There can be neither miracles nor divine responses to petitional prayers, and the love of God consists merely in gaining knowledge of metaphysical truths and natural truths and taking deep delight in our capacity to do so. Our knowledge will demonstrate to us that the happy or blessed life is the one characterized by love for one’s neighbor and delight in our own knowledge. Or, if

this sort of knowledge is for whatever reason unavailable to us, we can at least follow the prescriptions of scripture and come to the same conclusions:

He who abounds in these fruits -- charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control... he, whether he be taught by reason alone or by Scripture alone, is in truth taught by God, and is altogether blessed. (ch. 5; Shirley, p. 71)

Given Spinoza's view of God, this claim that we are all "in truth taught by God" seems to be a bit of subterfuge, inasmuch as Spinoza's God does not really teach anybody in the usual sense of the term. He is not saying much more than that we can all come to the same conclusion about what sort of human life is best, whether we figure it out rationally or stumble across it in a curious old book.

Is this in any sense religious? It is, though it may not seem so, since many of us think of religion in exactly the way that Spinoza is trying to avoid. We think religion must offer truths which go beyond the bounds of reason, in some sense, or touch our hearts in ways reason cannot. But Spinoza's theological project is to get us to reconceive religion along rationalistic and naturalistic lines. In an attempt to show the continuity between old-time religion and his own, Spinoza might tell the following kind of story:

Ancient people were largely ignorant of nature and metaphysics. So they imagined God in ways that were familiar to them -- as a powerful ruler who established laws, punished transgressors, and rewarded obedience. They thought

this ruler had supernatural powers and employed human history as a means to some special end. But now that we have advanced knowledge of nature and metaphysics, we see that none of this can be true. We see that the natural world flows necessarily from an eternal, impersonal substance, that this substance's laws are inviolable, and that our highest happiness consists in coming to know this and adjust our lives accordingly. Amazingly enough, those ancient people did come to the right conclusions, broadly, about how we should live, and so the books they wrote can still be of great use to us -- not as metaphysics, of course, but as practical guides for living.

In short, the prophets saw through a glass darkly, and now we see face to face. Once we subtract the superstitions from scripture, we are able to see the genuine religious truths -- which are alternatively demonstrable through reason. Indeed, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza advocates using natural knowledge to "correct" scripture, in a certain sense, in order to discern the real word of God. In his discussion of miracles, Spinoza writes that "If anything can be found in Scripture which can be conclusively proved to contravene the laws of Nature, ... we have to believe that this was inserted into Holy Scripture by *sacrilegious* men" (chapter 6; Shirley, p. 82; emphasis added). So what cannot be naturalized turns out to be not scriptural, properly speaking. And, somewhat more mysteriously, he also revisits his earlier claim that scripture comes to us in forms that are faulty, corrupted, and mutilated. Scripture, he says, *as it is properly thus called*, is none of these things. For the central teaching of scripture -- to love God above all else and love one's neighbor as oneself -- is absolutely essential to it: so long as the ancient

texts we have promote this teaching, they truly are scripture, whatever the complications of authorship and transmission of texts (chapter 12; Shirley, p. 155). Scripture, in this sense, has not been corrupted in the least. And everything else said in the ancient writings is not properly called scripture, and so even if it does seem faulty and corrupted, it is not scripture itself that has these faults. Furthermore, since this central teaching of scripture is taught by reason as well, reason is also capable of making the same distinction between what counts as scriptural and what does not.

It is important to recognize that nothing recounted so far about Spinoza's view of scripture is in any sense "hidden" in the *Treatise*. It is all very explicit. His explicit recommendation is to take a natural approach to the ancient texts constituting the Bible, and endorse only those teachings in conformity with what reason can demonstrate. We can identify those teachings as "sacred," if we like, since they certainly do pertain to God (but of course, on Spinoza's view, what doesn't?). We can also identify them as "sacred" or "divine" according to Spinoza's explicit definition of those terms: namely, as what promotes piety and religion (chapter 12; Shirley, p. 150). What we find here, I suggest, is not exactly a covert attempt to render religious language empty, but an explicit recommendation to reinterpret traditional religious vocabulary in ways that are friendly to scientific naturalism. His project is one of reinterpretation, not abandonment. His aim is to get his readers to understand their old ways in a new light.

Pulling against the left: making science divine

It's not controversial to say that Spinoza pulls against those who advocate Biblical literalism. (Though it is perhaps contentious to claim that he does not ultimately seek to

do away with religious language altogether.) It is more controversial to claim that something divine -- on the traditional understanding of the term -- is at work in his scientific account of nature. He often seems like a hard-headed scientific naturalist, as in this passage from the appendix to *Ethics* I:

Hence it happens that one who seeks the true causes of miracles, and is eager, like an educated man, to understand natural things, not to wonder at them, like a fool, is generally considered and denounced as an impious heretic by those whom the people honor as interpreters of nature and the Gods. For they know that if ignorance is taken away, then foolish wonder, the only means they have of arguing and defending their authority, is also taken away. (Curley, pp. 443-4)

Such disdain for foolish wonder (actually, “*sublata ignorantia, stupor*,” or “joyous ignorance, stupidity”) certainly suggests an intolerance for fuzzy thinking. Spinoza is least likely to be the one to tell us to drop our critical reasoning and take simple-minded joy in the wonders unfolding before us.

But though he is no enthusiast of simple-minded joy, Spinoza does of course recommend the intellectual joy which accompanies the third kind of knowledge, that is, in experiencing the joy that comes with understanding the ways in which particular things are in God. And certainly the language in which Spinoza describes this joy, or the intellectual love of God, sounds very much like the language mystics employ to describe the joy they experience in contemplating the divine. But, one may object, when the mystics experience their joy, it is because they believe themselves to be uniting with

some special holistic entity, whereas Spinoza only believes himself to be coming to understand the deterministic forces of nature. To see that in fact these two descriptions amount to the same thing, we must turn to Spinoza's physics.

Spinoza writes in a letter to Tschirnhaus that he finds that "Descartes's principles of natural things are of no service, not to say quite wrong" (Ep 81; Shirley, p. 352). For, as he says, Descartes conceives extension as an inert mass, with no principle of motion inherent to it. Spinoza's conception of extension is quite different. In the discussion of physics following 2p13s, Spinoza provides an organic conception of extension, which maintains that each and every body strives to preserve its own existence by maintaining a certain pattern or *ratio* of motion and rest. Moreover, each body is also a component of a larger body, which in some way employs the lesser body's motion as a means to preserve its own existence. The extended plenum as a whole is an infinite individual, which preserves its own pattern of motion and rest, and its striving is the cause of the universal laws of motion described by science. The resulting picture is quite different from Descartes's mechanistic view. Whereas Descartes accounts for bodily motion through collisions and invariant laws of nature, Spinoza accounts for the laws of nature themselves on the basis of organisms striving to maintain themselves over time. There is a holism at work in Spinoza's metaphysics (and perhaps even a teleology): bodies move as they do so as to help preserve the patterns of motion in larger bodies containing them. Spinoza's "worm in the blood" analogy (Ep. 32; Shirley, p. 193-4) makes this abundantly clear:

Now all bodies in Nature can and should be conceived in the same way as we have here conceived the blood; for all bodies are surrounded by others and are reciprocally determined to exist and to act in a fixed and determinate way, the same ratio of motion and rest being preserved in them taken all together, that is, in the universe as a whole. Hence it follows that every body, insofar as it exists as modified in a definite way, must be considered as part of the whole universe, and as agreeing with the whole and cohering with the other parts.

If this were true, then Cartesian physics would indeed be “of no service.” For though Descartes does employ universal conservation laws, he does not take into account the ways in which bodies must be forced to move in order to preserve the nature of the universe as a whole.

The universe as a whole is identified by Spinoza as some sort of intermediary between the one substance and the finite modes of the one substance. He calls it an “infinite individual,” or a mediate infinite mode, or even the *facies totius universi*, or the “face of the whole universe.” This last term is especially interesting, as it connotes the Jewish notion of the shekinah, or the face of God, a term employed when it seems necessary to put some distance between the divine nature and the various ways in which that nature might appear to human beings. The whole universe, for Spinoza, is an appearance or mode of God, though he would want to put some distance between it and the one substance. But the upshot of all this is that if you want to do physics, you will have to factor in God.

Thus God, in Spinoza's physics, is actually doing some work, and in fact more work than in Descartes's or Leibniz's physics. Descartes may have believed that God is actually providing the causal force at every instance of body-body interaction, and Leibniz may have believed that God pre-established quantities of *vis viva* in each and every body, but the fact remains that in either metaphysical picture, one need know very little about God in order to get the physics right. Not so with Spinoza. He believes that if you focus only on bodies and laws of motion, you will end up with a useless physics. One must take into account the ways by which the appearance or "face" of God maintains its own identity over time, since these ways will be crucial in understanding why bodies move as they do. Spinoza's physics is inherently theological.

Conclusion

Though it is clear that Spinoza's theological project was not welcomed by the faithful as "just what the doctor ordered" with respect to the inevitable clash between ancient religion and modern science, his philosophy needs to be understood as an effort in that direction. As I have argued, he pulled the principles of Biblical interpretation in the direction of naturalism -- so far, in fact, that he claimed that scripture, properly understood, does not teach anything in conflict with what reason tells us. He also pulled natural science in the direction of a kind of theism or deism -- so far, in fact, that physics becomes impossible without factoring in the causal influence of some manifestation of the one substance. His project, in all, was to effect a compromise between what are otherwise completely irreconcilable positions. And, alas, as with all compromises, it failed to satisfy either of the two parties.