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How to Read Spinoza Without Pentimento: An Alternative to Strauss[1]

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Abstract

I critique the theological-philosophical assumptions that Leo Strauss uses to justify his controversial method of reading Baruch Spinoza, and I conclude by justifying an alternative interpretive method. Strauss's method suggests that Spinoza's texts intentionally contradict themselves so to couch his more controversial views in established dogma, thereby skirting the censorship of authorities. Strauss argues that reading "between the lines" allows the more astute of Spinoza's readers to decipher an encrypted pentimento that reveals an esoteric or hidden aspect of his philosophy. Although Strauss's method is divisive within the scholarship, Edwin Curley – a leading Spinoza translator and commentator – has, on more than one occasion, signaled his support for Strauss's method despite expressing a sympathy with Strauss's critics. I argue that Curley's analysis of the issue does not fully engage the problem posed by Strauss's elitism. I deny that Strauss and his proponents offer a viable strategy for interpreting Spinoza's writings because they recapitulate the interpretive principles of Plato's "philosopher-king" which Spinoza explicitly rejects in the *Theological Political Treatise* (TPT) through his critique of Maimonides. I argue that Spinoza's writings should be interpreted according to the same method of biblical interpretation that he pioneers in the TPT. Accordingly, a text – whether sacred or profane – cannot be adequately interpreted on the basis of standards extrinsic to the text itself, including the unilateral judgement of the reader. But neither can a text be adequately interpreted

[1] This work is an adaptation of a chapter from my (2023) book Spinoza's ethics of interpretation: Interpreting the paradoxical singularity of Spinoza's ontological argument, Ethics International Press.

without the judgment of the reader, as if its truth were hidden within the text itself independent of the minds that strive to interpret it. Therefore, in exactly the same way that Spinoza interprets the Bible through a socio-historical method, so also should Spinoza's writings be interpreted through a socio-historical method that encounters and modifies the differences between author, text, and reader through a logic that is common to all three and private to none.

Keywords: Spinoza, Leo Strauss, method, reason and faith, interpretation.

Introduction

The socio-political context in which an author writes has significant implications for the way scholars interpret their work because it can offer an evaluative standard with which to better understand what the author has in mind.[1] In Spinoza's case, however, there is relatively little that is known about his private life and so it is notoriously difficult for scholars to ascertain particular aspects of his writing. We know that Spinoza was excommunicated from the Jewish community of Amsterdam at the young age of twenty-three; that the anti-Cartesian movements in the Dutch universities,[2]

[1] Unless specifically noted otherwise, all references to, and quotations from, Spinoza's writings are taken from Edwin Curley's two volumes of The Collected Works of Spinoza, of which Prof. Curley is also the translator and editor. When citing passages from texts other than the Ethics, I shall provide the chapter and paragraph number. I make an effort in my quotations of Spinoza's texts to correct for gendered language where possible without obscuring Spinoza's original meaning. See note 79 of this study for an explanation of this approach.
Titles shall be abbreviated as follows:

E	Ethics
TPT	Theological-Political Treatise

The Ethics citations shall be abbreviated as follows:

A	Axiom	Post.	Postulate
D	Definition		
P	Proposition	DA	Definition of the affects of Part III
Schol.	Scholium		
Cor.	Corollary		
L	Lemma		
Dem.	Demonstration		

[2] While describing this set of circumstances, Steven Nadler connects Spinoza's excommunication and the anti-Cartesian movement to a widespread concern to suppress the deviation from expected orthodoxies:
"[The Jewish community of Amsterdam's] use of the ban, in addition to its function in maintaining internal discipline, was a public act that was meant to communicate to the Dutch authorities the message that the Jews ran a well-ordered community; that they – in accordance with the conditions laid down when the city granted them the right to settle openly – tolerated no breaches in proper Jewish conduct or doctrine…The Jewish leaders may also have wanted to make it clear to the Dutch that the community was no haven for Cartesians either. In the 1640s, open battles over Descartes's philosophy raged in the Dutch universities. The conflict eventually spread across intellectual, religious, and political society at large and created schisms not unlike those caused by the Remonstrant controversy … In 1646, The University of Leiden followed [Utrecht's condemnation of Descartes's philosophy], decreeing that only Aristotelian philosophy should be taught to its students. The university's senate forbade its professors in the faculties of philosophy and theology from even mentioning Descartes and his novel ideas in their theses and debates" (Nadler, 2018, pp. 177–78).

and the Remonstrant controversies of the Dutch United Provinces would have been in full swing during his adult years;[1] we know that Spinoza published the TPT anonymously, and requested that his magnum opus, the *Ethics*, be published posthumously. These events give us a glimpse into the socio-political conditions of Spinoza's thinking, but they also raise what Edwin Curley (a leading Spinoza translator and commentator) describes as "a major interpretive issue" (2016, p. 53). How should Spinoza's readers relate the socio-political context of Spinoza arguments to the actual arguments themselves? Given the considerable persecution that Spinoza faced in communicating his ideas, Curley asks "to what extent can we take Spinoza to be writing candidly" (p. 53) in works like the TPT? This question of interpretation was first proposed by Leo Strauss, and it has had what I consider to be undesirable vestigial effects in the scholarship. In this section of my study, I critique the theological-philosophical assumptions that Strauss uses to justify his method, I argue that its proponents perpetuate the problematic elitism of Maimonides' theory of interpretation that Spinoza explicitly rejects in the TPT, and I conclude by justifying the interpretive method that I prefer.

In his editorial preface of the TPT, Curley (2016) cautions the reader against taking everything in Spinoza's text with equal weight because the socio-political conditions of persecution meant that Spinoza would not have written with perfect candor.

In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Strauss 1988) Leo Strauss argued that Spinoza was writing at a time when he ran the risk of persecution if he ventured too far from orthodoxy; so he had to deploy the art of "writing between the lines," that is, writing in such a way that readers would have to read between the lines to fully understand what he was saying. The reader might find Spinoza saying things apparently quite orthodox, which he nevertheless doesn't believe, but expects his most astute readers to recognize that he doesn't believe. (p. 53)

Curley (2016) acknowledges that "many contemporary Spinoza scholars – probably most of them – reject Strauss's position. They find his arguments weak and think that encouraging people to read between the lines of Spinoza's works gives them too much license to attribute to Spinoza doctrines he did not hold" (p. 53). But Curley does not count himself as one of these contemporaries, although he admits a "good deal of sympathy with that reaction" (p. 53). Even so, Curley sides with Strauss on the basic issue: "I think Strauss often argued badly for his views, and made oracular

[1] The Remonstrant controversies refers to a period of religious and socio-political instability in the Dutch United Provinces during the 17th century. The first half of the controversy was characterized by a popular uprising in the cities of Utrecht and The Hague in 1610 that would exacerbate the socio-political tensions fomenting in the republic. "Johannes Wtenbogaert and forty-three other followers of Jacob Arminius submitted a remonstrance to the States of Holland. In it they declared their adherence to a formulation of the doctrine of predestination that left more scope to human free will than any other formulation then current within the Dutch Reformed Church. … Protesting their own orthodoxy, Wtenbogaert and the others asked the States to protect them against attempts by the majority of Reformed ministers and elders to discipline them. This request opened a new phase in a controversy already raging within erudite circles. Remonstrant and Contra-Remonstrant parties formed, clashing in print and sermon, in the council chamber, and eventually on the street" (Kaplan, 2011, p. 230).

pronouncements which a more self-critical author would not have made. But I do think he was right about the fundamental point he was trying to make" (p. 53). Although Curley further develops this position in support of Strauss's method in his article "Resurrecting Leo Strauss" (Curley, 2015) his defense there is basically the same. Curley writes that he does not "endorse *everything* that Strauss seems to have in mind," (p. 130) and that he is even aware of "an unpleasant elitism" (p. 131) implied by Strauss's arguments, but his description of the case against Strauss's method does not fully engage how problematic Strauss's elitism actually is.

In my view, Strauss's method is problematic not simply because of some slippery-slope of misrepresentation, it is problematic because it perpetuates antiquated and fundamentally unethical models of thought that Spinoza is explicitly critical of. In particular, Strauss's method perpetuates the delusional pretensions of infallible authorities, the only difference is that it exchanges pontiffs for philosopher-kings. So, instead of overcoming the very modes of thinking that produce oppositions and hierarchies, Strauss and his proponents seem to interpret Spinoza as a thinker who accepts and simply reverses the terms of an inherited opposition. I suggest we leave Strauss's method of interpretation behind and support the method proposed and practiced by scholars like Nancy Levene (2001, pp. 57–110) and Brayton Polka (2007). Their studies show that if readers do not closely follow how Spinoza's ideas are modified by later developments, readers will misunderstand the way Spinoza resolves apparent contraries into divergent expressions of a unity, and they will tend to wrongly explain this divergence through the imposition of hierarchical relations. The issue with Strauss, however, is not so much one of misrepresentation, although that is a secondary concern, it is mostly a problem of appropriation. The problem with Strauss' method of studying Spinoza is not that it represents Spinoza's as *x* when really Spinoza is *y*, the problem (tragedy?) is that it reads into Spinoza's thinking the very problems that it otherwise resolves – the simultaneously philosophical, religious, and political problems of hierarchy and separation.

Before I proceed further, there is an important point of clarification that I think should be emphasized. It is not my contention to argue that Spinoza did not accommodate his language to the venues of his discourses. Spinoza clearly communicated his ideas in different ways to different people at different times and places, it would be ridiculous to suggest that Spinoza spoke with perfect candor at all times and places. For example, despite Spinoza's praise of the freedoms afforded by the Dutch Republic in which he lived,[1] that freedom was not as complete as Spinoza described it. The Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century was indeed remarkably free for a European country at the time, but it did not allow complete freedom of thought and expression, nor was there *complete* freedom of worship – Catholic worship was banned even if it was not always rigorously enforced. So clearly Spinoza was not

[1] "Since, then, we happen to have the rare good fortune – that we live in a Republic in which everyone is granted complete freedom of judgment, and is permitted to worship God according to his mentality, and in which nothing is thought to be dearer or sweeter than freedom…" (TPT preface.12).

immune to the benefits of diplomatic phrasing or softening the corners of his more controversial ideas. But do these accommodations establish contradictions that imply a two-tiered mode of communication designed to deceive the less scrutinizing? Does Spinoza "lie" or write deceptively when he praises the freedoms of the United Provinces? I think the answer is simply no. An accommodation is not a contradiction of what one would otherwise say and is therefore distinct from deception. My contention is that if we confuse the principles of accommodation with those of contradiction, then we also confuse Spinoza's contribution to the history of modern thought with those of antiquity and, as a result, we loose the most valuable contributions of Spinoza's thinking.

Strauss first presented his method of studying Spinoza in an article called "How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise" (Strauss, 1947, pp. 69–131). In it, Strauss claims that Spinoza was led…

…to assert that at least some of the Biblical contradictions are conscious or deliberate, and therewith to suggest that there is an esoteric teaching of the Bible, or that the literal meaning of the Bible hides a deeper, mysterious meaning… We may say that Spinoza uses the sketch of his exoteric interpretation of the Bible for indicating the character of his own exoteric procedure.[1] (pp. 107–108)

Spinoza's "exoteric procedure," according to Strauss is to condescend to the undiscerning masses who have somehow found themselves reading a copy of his book. For Strauss, the "scholarly" method of studying Spinoza's "esoteric" meaning then, as opposed to the vulgar exoteric one, is to catalogue the instances of Spinoza's contradictory statements and to privilege those critical of orthodox views. But where would Strauss have us draw the line? Where does heterodoxy begin and orthodoxy end? Indeed, *who* gets to draw this line? As far as I can tell, for Strauss these terms simply recapitulate the more general opposition between heterodoxic philosophy and the conventional dogmas of orthodox theology. But this is an entirely relative standard that asserts nothing of itself since the heterodoxy of philosophy is relative to the orthodoxy of theology, and no theological dogma is in-itself orthodox but is so only relative to the religious conventions of place and time. It seems, therefore, entirely up to the relative opinion of the reader to decide which of Spinoza's statements are orthodox, which are heterodox, and what is even meant by these terms. This relativity is symptomatic of Strauss's way of thinking about the relation

[1] Full quote: "… it was possible to assert that in the Bible, a superior mind or superior minds condescend to speak in the language of ordinary people, and that there occur in the Bible a number of statements which contradict those Biblical statements that are adapted to vulgar prejudices. Spinoza was thus led to assert that at least some of the Biblical contradictions are conscious or deliberate, and therewith to suggest that there is an esoteric teaching of the Bible, or that the literal meaning of the Bible hides a deeper, mysterious meaning. By contradicting this ultimate consequence, he leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to the ironical or exoteric character of his assertation that the statements of the Bible are consciously adapted by its authors to the capacity of the vulgar… We may say that Spinoza uses the sketch of his exoteric interpretation of the Bible for indicating the character of his own exoteric procedure" (Strauss, 1947, pp. 107–108).

between philosophy and theology in general, but it does not at all reflect the absolute standards that characterize Spinoza's thinking.

Strauss tends to argue that the philosophical analysis of religious belief always fails because philosophy, as he understands it, expresses the finite nature of human knowledge and so cannot legitimately claim to make itself commensurate with the knowledge of a whole (God). His point is that philosophy can neither affirm nor deny the existence of God or the truth of religious revelation because human knowledge always operates within a partial, finite, and incomplete context. This idea of philosophical knowledge includes empirical notions of materialist science and history because the frames of reference on which their subjects depend can only exhibit small fractions of a whole at a time. But, at the same time, theology is powerless to evaluate the truths of philosophy, for Strauss, because faith, he argues, is prior to and unrelated to rational judgment. And so, one either blindly believes or one does not, but in either case the affirmation or negation is made without sufficient reason.

If philosophy cannot attain the knowledge of an absolute whole, as Strauss argues, then it has to presuppose an arbitrary system of valuation – and this is precisely the epistemological function that Strauss attributes to faith. Thus, "the serious argument in favor of revelation," for Strauss, is not one based on a universally shared understanding, it is one based only on the subjective and inner testimony of the believer. Strauss (1997) calls this "the experience, the personal experience, of man's encounter with God" (pp. 123–24). That is, since faith does not have a necessary relation to reason, for Strauss, the convincing elements of a faith are determined entirely at the level of subjective feeling and inner experience. But the subjective argument in favor of belief raises the problem of how we understand the relationship between God – the whole – and humanity – apparently a mere part of a whole. According to Strauss' argument for the testimony of subjective feeling, does the religious affirmation of a faith then vanish when the ephemeral inner feelings of sublimity and inspiration dissipate? Further, if the contents of a faith are determined by the inner recesses of private feeling alone, then in what sense can faith be expressed or externalized in communication and community with others?

If we base the standard of religion solely on the subjectivity of experience, as Strauss does, then we will inevitably confront the insurmountable problem of distinguishing between the subjective, and therefore relative, aspects of a faith and its absolute, and therefore universal, content and dictates. In other words, we will be unable to distinguish by mere subjective and relative authority what is a revealed truth of God and what is merely "a 'human interpretation' of God's action," in which case it "is no longer God's action itself" (p. 124). Strauss seems to be aware of the problem but unable to overcome it. He acknowledges that the diversity of religious faith is often expressed and interpreted "in radically different manners . . . Yet only one interpretation can be the true one. There is, therefore, a need for argument between the various believers in revelation, an argument which cannot help but allude *somehow* to objectivity" (p.124, emphasis added). Strauss is thus aware that some sort

of standard is necessary to qualify the contents of a faith but he cannot distinguish this "objectivity" from the relative subjectivity in which it is situated.

If, as Strauss suggests, faith must *somehow* allude to objectivity then it follows that the intellectual elite are the ones who have the scrutinizing powers capable of approximating that objectivity and so can be better trusted with interpretive responsibility. André Tosel, in support of this view, writes in "Superstition and Reading": "The Platonic philosophy of the 'Republic' and the 'Laws' permits this problem to be resolved: the Philosopher-Legislator is identified with the Philosopher-King" (Tosel, 1997, p. 152). Tosel is even aware that "this is a 'philosophical' tendency illustrated by Maimonides" yet he does not acknowledge that Spinoza's critique of Maimonides disqualifies this as a viable interpretive method for Spinoza (p. 152). According to Tosel, the heterodoxy of philosophical interpretation is not a practice in democracy since the philosophical interpreter opposes two antagonizing forces that threaten the pursuit of objectivity – the fickle multitude and the dogmatic theologians. In Tosel's view, philosophers must conceal their true ideas and obscure them in the status-quo so to thwart the censorship of authorities. "The philosopher is then condemned to live according to two regimes, to speak two languages" (p. 152). Ultimately, according to Strauss and Tosel, philosophers can only entrust their ideas to other like-minded philosophers. Consequentially, the rich encounters with difference that facilitate and propel the act of interpretation is reduced from dialogue to monologue, from colloquium to lecture. Philosophers who dare to challenge orthodoxy must then pander to their would-be dissenters while using this pandering rhetoric "to make it speak [their] own heretical views" (p. 152). Tosel describes the duplicity of the situation as a political compromise in which the philosopher accepts "the mode of life of the theological-political community to which he belongs" but at the same time forms "a 'party' of disciples, which constitutes the kernel of a new community in the midst of the superstitious city" (p. 152). So, in Tosel's view, the true philosopher does not strive to enlighten the dark corners of the world that he already happens to inhabit, but to become the philosopher-king of a rival city. Strauss and Tosel thus reduce the democracy of interpretation to an aristocracy of philosophical priests. Their method of interpretation explicitly re-enacts the Platonic ideal of the philosopher-king which Spinoza clearly rejects through his critique of Maimonides in the TPT. Strauss's method and those who follow it cannot offer a fruitful approach to studying Spinoza because it installs separation and hierarchy in Spinoza's interconnected and democratic theory of interpretation.

In chapter fifteen of the TPT,[1] Spinoza describes the alternatives to his method as those proposed by skeptics and dogmatists. "The skeptics, who deny the certainty of

[1] "Showing that Theology should not be the [ancillary] of Reason, nor Reason the [ancillary] of Theology, and the reason which persuades us of the authority of the Holy Scripture" (TPT15).
I replace Curley's translation of "handmaiden" with my preferred term "ancillary" which I place in square brackets. I prefer this translation because while ancilla/ancillae is the singular/plural of Spinoza's Latin which translates to "handmaid," it is also the etymological root of the English word "ancillary" which signifies the same thing without the pejoratively gendered language.

reason, defend the accommodation of reason to Scripture. The dogmatists defend the accommodation of Scripture to reason" (TPT15.1). Spinoza associates Maimonides' method in *Guide of the Perplexed* with the dogmatic position because it purports to explain Hebraic theology through (non-Hebraic) Aristotelian logic (Maimonides, 1952). Maimonides' dogmatism of reason, like Plato and Aristotle before him, conceives of reason in terms of its final-ends which, coincidentally, just so happen to resemble his own appetites and prejudices. If Aristotelian logic is the measure of Hebrew Scripture, then it suddenly requires the unerring authority not of pope but of a "philosopher king" – namely, an expert in Aristotelian thought.

Again, if this opinion were true, it would follow that the common people, who for the most part have no knowledge of demonstrations, and don't have time for them, wouldn't be able to accept anything about Scripture except on the authority and testimonies of those who philosophize. They'd have to suppose that the Philosophers can't err concerning the interpretation of Scripture. This would obviously introduce a new authority into the Church, and a new kind of priest, or a High Priest, which the people would mock rather than venerate. (TPT7.79)

Spinoza goes on to deny Maimonides' method from an etymological, ethical, and historical point of view, but the point of relevance here is Maimonides' dogmatism of reason. What alarms Spinoza about Maimonides' method is not only the "useless" absurdity of its premise but more specifically the very real harm that this method can do. Maimonides' position, and Strauss's by extension, is that philosophers are entitled to interpret the ideas of others according to their own philosophically preconceived schemas. His "method completely takes away all the certainty the common people can have about the meaning of Scripture from a natural reading of it, and which everyone can have by following another method. So we condemn Maimonides' opinion as not only useless, but harmful and absurd" (TPT7.87).

An obvious rebuttal to my argument is that philosophical and theological texts are not supposed to be read in the same way since philosophy is interpreted according to logical demonstration and theology according to faith. Of course, Spinoza is no prophet, and his texts are not holy Scriptures. So, "the common people," whatever we mean by the term, may not necessarily be "obligated" to have a first-hand understanding of Spinoza's ideas as they might otherwise have in regard to, depending on their religious denomination, the Torah, the Bible, the Quran, etc. But this counter-point does not stand because Spinoza's theory of interpretation posits an indissociable link between reason and judgement which therefore includes the conditions for belief and faith. It is precisely this link between reason and judgement that I call interpretation. Interpretation is so pivotal to Spinoza's thinking because it establishes the prerequisite conditions of autonomous action and moral responsibility necessary for an ethics of belief but without recourse to a false notion of "freewill." If there was no necessary connection between *how* we think and *what*

we think, if neither affects nor ideas had to the power cause individuals to self-consciously reflect on the processes through which they think what they think, and believe what they believe, then Spinoza's entire ethical project would be indistinguishable from the positions he critiques. Curley touches on this problem in his article *Descartes, Spinoza & the Ethics of Belief* but, as far as I understand him, he interprets Spinoza's ethics of belief in a way opposed to the way I do here. On the one hand, Curley (1975) argues that Spinoza's philosophy does not permit an ethics of belief because it denies that belief is a voluntary action (pp. 162–163). But, on the other hand, Curley concludes that "Spinoza's view of the nature of belief is not really an obstacle to the project of developing an ethics of belief. But … I find it difficult to see that there are any absolute principles which can validly govern our acquisition and maintenance of our beliefs" (p. 184). Contrary to Curley's interpretation, I argue that Spinoza's critique of freewill does not preclude the ethical and evaluative responsibilities we have to ourselves and others. I also argue that Spinoza's critique of false universals in the preface to part four of the *Ethics* should be read in light of his critique of teleology or "final-ends" in the appendix to part one. Thus, contrary to Curley, I argue that Spinoza's ethics of belief (or what I call interpretation) is an essential component of the ideas presented in the *Ethics*, and that this ethic is indeed determined by absolute principles through which we can acquire, develop, and maintain adequate beliefs.

Hence, Spinoza does not have to be a prophet, nor do his texts need to be "holy scriptures" for their adequate interpretation to require a personal and unmediated reading, but this is precisely what is lost, or at least significantly undermined, if Spinoza wrote in the duplicitous way that Strauss, Curley, and Tosel suggest. Of course, Spinoza's "geometrical" or deductive way of writing does require readers to have at least some "knowledge of demonstrations" – namely, at least a basic understanding of inductive and deductive logical procedures – even though his method of biblical interpretation does not. But this does not separate a mathematical kind of certainty from a moral kind of certainty because, in either case, Spinoza consistently argues that certainty can only be conceived as its own standard (EIIP43schol). In other words, the morally certain cannot be deduced from the mathematically certain, nor can the mathematically certain be induced from the morally certain. Certainty is necessarily its own standard, and it is a standard which is absolutely universal and immanent to the human mind. Therefore, no one authority can make an esoteric or exclusive claim to that standard without obscuring and appropriating universal rights and powers for themselves. Thus, we should abandon Strauss' method of interpreting Spinoza for the same reasons that Spinoza implores his readers to abandon Maimonides' method of interpreting the Bible. Both obscure the fundamental principle that since belief always involves individual interpretation, and since interpretations always involve and express reason and judgement, there is a necessary, reciprocal, and indissociable relationship between reason and faith.

So how then do I justify the strategy with which I propose to interpret Spinoza's ideas as a paradoxical unity of opposites? I justify it as a natural extension or application of the theory of interpretation that Spinoza himself uses to interpret the Bible in the TPT to the interpretation of his own writings. In exactly the same way that Spinoza (paradoxically) demonstrates that we could not know that Scripture itself was replete with errors if we did not also have available to us the standard of its absolute certainty, so also does my preferred method of reading Spinoza allow both reader and text to account for, thereby becoming responsible for, their own respective errors.[1] However, since I treat this topic in greater depth in the study that I have adapted this article from,[2] I will give here only a very brief outline of the way I interpret Spinoza's theory of interpretation.

Spinoza begins his inquiry into the problem of biblical interpretation by posing the question of prophets and their revelations. He first considers a conventional definition of prophecy as "one who interprets God's decrees to others to whom they have not been revealed, and who, in embracing them, rely only on the authority of the prophet" (TPT1.4.n4.). But he quickly corrects this conventional definition which, prima facie, would otherwise condone Strauss's and Maimonides' methods. Spinoza realizes that prophets cannot properly be described as "spokespersons" who interpret God's decrees *for others* who cannot because this assumes a privileged insight into the mind and nature of God. If this were the case, we should expect more agreement between canonical prophets who are not always even consistent amongst themselves. Instead, what we find when we examine the matter is that the gift of prophecy did not relieve prophets of their particular prejudices and biases,[3] which is what we would otherwise expect if they did enjoy some sort of privileged insight into the mind and nature of God. Therefore, Spinoza concludes that "the Prophets were not endowed with a more perfect mind, but rather with a power of imagining unusually vividly" (TPT2.1). In this way, prophecy is thus more akin to something like artistic expression, for Spinoza, than it is to a philosophical expression of truth. But this difference does not thereby mean that prophecies are inherently false so long as their modes of expression are not confused with those of philosophy, and vice versa.

[1] "For no one who has a true idea is unaware that a true idea involves the highest certainty. For to have a true idea means nothing other than knowing a thing perfectly, or in the best way. And of course, no one can doubt this unless he thinks that an idea is something mute, like a picture on a tablet, and not a mode of thinking, namely, the very [act of] understanding. And I ask, who can know that he understands some thing unless he first understands it? That is, who can know that he is certain about something unless he is first certain about it?" (EIIP43schol).

[2] For a fuller discussion of my views on Spinoza's method of interpretation, see chapter three of my (2023) book, Spinoza's ethics of interpretation: Interpreting the paradoxical singularity of Spinoza's ontological argument.

[3] "Because the certainty the Prophets had from signs was not mathematical – i.e., a certainty which follows from the necessity of the perception of the thing perceived or seen – but only moral, and the signs were given only to persuade the Prophet, it follows that the signs were given according to the opinions and capacity of the Prophet. So a sign which would render one Prophet certain of his Prophecy could not at all convince another, who was steeped in different opinions. That's why the signs varied in each Prophet. [13] Similarly, the revelation itself varied in each Prophet, as we have said, according to the disposition of his bodily temperament, according to the disposition of his imagination, and according to the opinions he had previously embraced" (TPT2.12-13).

So, Spinoza denies that the prophets had a private insight into the nature of God because the many discrepancies and inconsistencies contained in Scripture demonstrate that their prophecies were expressed through the particular socio-historical lens of their personal imagination. In other words, the means of prophetic communication are specific to the particular images and words that circulate within and between particular communities. But since the unusually vivid (artistic?) power of imagination that characterizes prophets is not a difference in *kind* but only a difference of degree (the same as that between the artistically inclined and declined), prophets cannot really be described as "spokespersons" who speak for the speechless or who imagine for the imageless. But this implies a new problem. Although the socio-political conditions in which prophecy was communicated explains the historical specificity of its theological imagery, it does not explain how the prophets themselves could have been certain about what they prophesized or how we, thousands of years and many mistranslations later, can have that certainty either.[1]

The novelty of Spinoza's method of interpretation is to have perceived a distinction in this inquiry that resolves the certainty of the prophets and our interpretation of that certainty into two separate but inter-related questions. On the one hand, we have the question regarding our faith or confidence in the true divinity of Scripture – a question that equally applies to the prophets themselves – and, on the other hand, we have the question of the socio-historical interpretation of particular languages and imageries long since eroded by violence and time. In other words, we have one question concerning the status of religious doctrine, and we have a different but interrelated question concerning how its authors and audience would have interpreted an idea in a particular way through the mediation of their socio-historically situated imaginative powers. Thus, Spinoza's pioneering contribution to biblical interpretation is to have established a distinction between the *truth* and the accommodated *sense* or *meaning* of a particular expression.[2] Although these questions appear separate since one does not seem to depend on the other, they are in fact interrelated in a simultaneously religious and philosophical interpretative endeavor. For, if we are to have faith in the divinity of Scripture then we must be able to testify without prejudice that it teaches *true* moral doctrine, but in order to know what it teaches we must also know what it means.

As for the moral teachings also contained in the Bible, although they can be demonstrated from common notions, still, it cannot be demonstrated from these notions that Scripture teaches them. This can only be established by Scripture itself.

[1] As Curley puts it in his fourth note in chapter seven of the TPT: "…if we are to have confidence in the truth of the moral teachings we find in Scripture, we must first establish that our hearts are inclined toward the right and the good. If we assume that knowing that our hearts are so inclined requires at least a basic knowledge of the right and the good, this seems to entail that Scripture cannot be our sole, or even our most fundamental, source of moral knowledge" (2016, p. 172).

[2] "In order not to confuse the true meaning with the truth of things, we must seek that meaning solely from linguistic usage, or from reasoning which recognizes no other foundation than Scripture" (TPT7.17).

Indeed, if we want to testify, without prejudice, to the divinity of Scripture, we must establish from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrines. For only from this can its divinity be demonstrated. We have shown that the Prophets' certainty is known chiefly from the fact that they had a heart inclined toward the right and the good. So it's necessary to establish the same thing for us, if we're to be able to have faith in them. (TPT7.11)

Who, however, determines the standard of true moral doctrine? If we must be able to establish that both our own hearts *and* those of the prophets are inclined towards the right and the good, then clearly it has no unilateral standard. Instead, the standard of true moral doctrine must be accessible and verifiable to both prophet and interpreter, author and reader. If it was accessible only to the private recesses of the prophetic mystery, then we could never be certain of the things they prophesize and true faith would be indistinguishable from blind-faith. Thus "it's certainly true that Scripture ought to be explained by Scripture, so long as we're only working out the meaning of the statements and the Prophet's intention. But once we've unearthed the true meaning, we must, necessarily, use judgement and reason to give it our assent" (TPT15.8.). There is, therefore, a necessary and inextricable link between philosophical (mathematical) and theological (moral) reason. At the same time that Spinoza separates and distinguishes philosophy from theology by allocating each to a specific "domain" he also shows that they are inextricably united through the paradox of interpretation.[1]

If the domains of philosophy and theology were dichotomously cleaved, which Strauss has to presuppose to justify the esoteric and exoteric procedures involved in his method, readers would never really know if Spinoza's concept of moral certainty were pious or seditious. We would need an esoteric class of elites to confirm our interpretations of his texts. But what Spinoza's analysis of the relationship between philosophy and theology actually shows is that "reason" belongs neither to philosophy nor to theology if it cannot belong to both at once. Theology "determines the doctrines of faith only so far as is sufficient for obedience. But precisely how those doctrines are to be understood, with respect to their truth, it leaves to be determined by reason, which is really the light of the mind, without which it sees nothing but dreams and inventions" (TPT15.23). Reason, as an expression of the force by which human beings persevere in their being, belongs equally to philosophical and theological modes of thinking. If it is removed from one, it is removed from both.

To summarize the principles and methods of Spinoza's theory of biblical interpretation, the prophets did not require a super-human insight in order to prophesize, and if they did it would be precisely the esoteric nature of this insight that would render faith and atheism indistinguishable. Esoterism and mystification cannot serve as standards for either philosophy or theology because "belief in it would make us doubt everything and would lead to Atheism" (TPT6.21). Therefore, the moral

[1] "…reason's domain is truth and wisdom; Theology's is piety and obedience" (TPT15.21).

standards according to which religious faiths are evaluated must be universal, transparent, and immanent to the believer in order for that faith to be certain. In other words, the standards of interpretation must be common to both author, reader, and text if adequate interpretations are to be possible in the first place. Otherwise, a hierarchy will inevitably subordinate the interpretations of readers to the dogmatic reason of authors, or, inversely, that will subordinate the author's intent to the skepticism of readers. The point is that the meaning or sense of a person's words cannot be based on the predispositions of private reason but only on the historical basis of that person's usage. It is only when we know the particular genius (*genium*) and temperament (*ingenium*) of other people – philosophers and prophets included – that we can be in a position to interpret them. In other words, "the better we know someone's spirit and mentality, the more easily we can explain [their] words" (TPT7.24). Therefore, for the same reasons that Spinoza does not condone "reading between the lines" of holy Scripture, modern readers of Spinoza's writings should not privilege Spinoza's esoteric silences over his explicit statements and arguments.

So how then can Spinoza's method of biblical interpretation be applied to a philosophical one? The question only stands if we have remained immune to the argument. Although Spinoza explicitly separates philosophy from theology, he only does so to prevent the subordination of one to the other. In one version of this subordination, we have philosopher-kings and in the other version we have pontiffs but both follow from essentially identical conceptual structures of separation and hierarchy. Therefore, if reason is indispensable to both theological and philosophical interpretation, and if reason is a universal power of human thought, then the same principles and methods apply to the interpretation of a philosophical text as to those of a theological one. The ideal of private insight fundamentally obscures the inherent democracy of interpretation which is essential to both.

In conclusion, the advantage of this method of interpretation is that by interpreting the differences inherent to Spinoza's thinking as paradoxical unities that unfold in particular endeavors, we apply Spinoza's theory of interpretation to his own writings. In other words, Spinoza must be read from Spinoza alone in exactly the same way that Spinoza argues Scripture should be interpreted through Scripture alone. This is not to say that everyone should interpret Spinoza's thinking in the same way, it is to suggest the reverse. But for these differences to become profitable or used in a way that establishes a greater shared understanding of Spinoza's thinking, we must abandon the antiquated ideal of private and esoteric insight. Strauss cannot contribute to this shared understanding because where there is no coherent community, there is also no coherent communication.

By divorcing the cognitive functions of reason and faith, Strauss makes it impossible to have reasons for one's faith, and equally impossible to have faith in one's reasons. Spinoza, however, demonstrates in both the *TPT* and the *Ethics* that reason and faith are not two opposed expressions of human nature. On the contrary, both texts show that neither a knowledge of nor a faith in God is possible without both a knowledge of

and faith in the many distinct peoples whose equally faithful practices usher in the kingdom of God and constitute its sovereignty. Given this connection between the freedom of thought and the freedom of belief, Spinoza shows that one faithful religious interpretation is true only if all faithful and yet differing interpretations are equally true. In other words, Spinoza's ethics of interpretation demonstrates that no interpretation is truly adequate unless it can recognize itself in the different yet equally true faiths of others. Not only does the elitist and esoteric aspects of Strauss' method make this impossible, he consistently exports the standards of reason and faith to something or someone outside the individual mind who interprets and practices their ideals in their daily lives. So, when we allow philosophers and theologians to treat the idea of God as a "sanctuary for ignorance" (EI, appendix) like in the way Strauss does, we risk forfeiting the standards with which we distinguish the true from the false, religion from superstition, and philosophy from hearsay. But, as Spinoza consistently reminds his readers, if we had no knowledge of the true, we could have no knowledge of the false. This is why Spinoza is convinced that every human being, whether they consciously recognize it or not, has a true idea with which to establish adequate interpretations for themselves.[1] If this is the case, then philosopher-kings and pontiffs who claim to enjoy some kind of private or esoteric access to universal rights are not only uselessly redundant, they are harmful.

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[1] "For when we say that an idea in the human mind follows from ideas which are adequate in it, we are saying nothing but that in the divine intellect there is an idea of which God is the cause, not insofar as he is infinite, nor insofar as he is affected with the ideas of a great many singular things, but insofar as he constitutes only the essence of the human mind [NS: and therefore, it must be adequate]" (EIIP40dem).

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