

Rhetoric, Theology and Politics: The case of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico Politicus*

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Abstract Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* offers a very unlikely way of solving political conflicts. He purports to show that Bible criticism, a revolutionary hermeneutics that separates meaning from truth, will put an end to linguistic conflict over the Bible as an object, and to ontological conflicts that come from conflating meaning and truth and making the Bible into an esoteric work of philosophy rather than something available to everyone. Confining ourselves to the meaning of the Bible is equivalent to confining our practical thinking to the imagination rather than reason or, in his terms, adequate ideas. The prophets had vivid imaginations, not exceptional intelligence, and we should follow them and limit our religious thinking to our relation to God and not to God's actual nature, and then that relation to God, and the meaning of the Bible, are reduced to treating others with justice and charity. Not only will a correct method of hermeneutics remove most of the grounds for conflict, but it will lead to freedom.

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1. Rhetoric and Conflict

Rhetoric began in silence. According to one of its genealogies, when Siracusa was ruled by the tyrants Gelon and Heiron, speech was forbidden so that the tyrants could fully monopolize all power, especially the power of speech. The tyrants avoided political conflict by destroying the possibility of linguistic conflict through silencing all their subjects. The people responded to their silencing by communicating through physical gestures. When the tyrants were overthrown and replaced by a democracy, the people could speak again. But they liked their gestures and didn't want to give them up. So they incorporated them into speech, and this is the source of figures of speech and other persuasive rhetorical devices. This is rhetoric as style and performance. Gestures didn't produce conflict, but as soon as they were incorporated into speech, and sophists taught people how to use these conventions, rhetorical conflict begins.¹

In a later origin story that Plato has Protagoras tell, and then again appears at the beginning of Cicero's *de Inventione*, some wise man invented rhetoric as a way of

¹ For details, see Farenga, 1979.

peacefully settling conflicts; eloquence was the route from a state of nature which was a war of all against all into the civil state with conflicts settled by law.²

Neither of those stories is uncontested. Aristotle denigrates those who, like Gorgias, think that rhetoric is an art of style rather than of argument. *Anyone* can be proficient at a rhetoric of style. You don't need to be a citizen, and so the rhetoric of style is uncivil. Being silent, silencing and not listening can be as much rhetorical performances as persuasive speech.

Cicero's origin story, too, is always threatened the golden age of Plato's *Statesman* and *Laws*, Hesiod and Ovid, and Rousseau's opposite picture in the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, that people lived without conflict in the state of nature, where they were indifferent to each other, and it's only in society that people begin to fight over property, over owning the most attractive women, over positions of domination over others.³ Whether persuasion is an alternative to coercion or a form of it is a perennial issue. Rhetoric is about both speech and silence, silence and silencing, and about persuasion and deception. Speech and silence, persuasion as coercion or its alternative—all these can be the cause or the remedy for conflict.

2. Rhetoric and Hermeneutics

I want turn to what should seem a most unlikely text, Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*.⁴ The *TTP* is a response to a situation where political conflict was at least as violent and apparently intractable as our own times, and explicitly tied to linguistic and ontological conflicts. His project is a rhetorical project—certainly not under that name—of confronting and removing or managing political, ontological, and linguistic conflict, and his particular argument is especially worth engaging with because of his particular configuration of those three kinds of conflict. Rhetoric is about faith, credit, credulity, accommodation, signs, and obedience, all key terms the *TTP*.

Rhetoric is about the production of discourse, and interpretation and hermeneutics are about discourses' receptions. Interpretation of signs is a political, ontological, and linguistic act. Both the power of speaking and the power of interpretation, making and interpreting signs, are bound up with powers of authority. I want to highlight the connection between hermeneutics and rhetoric, since those parallels help to show how interpretation is as productive as persuasion in both generating and reducing conflict.

3. Spinoza and Linguistic, Ontological and Political Conflict

Spinoza continues to be relevant not only because the Bible continues to be central to today's religious conflicts, but because, the most intractable, non-negotiable, and violent conflicts are about the sacred and symbolic—abortion, marriage, national identity are all loci for fighting about the sacred, and since all nations now have written constitutions, political argument and persuasion take the form of interpretation. We argue about what

² Cicero, *de Inventione*, I.2.

³ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, Peter Constantine, and Leopold. Damrosch. *The Essential Writings of Rousseau / Jean-Jacques Rousseau ; Translated by Peter Constantine ; Edited by Leo Damrosch*. Modern Library pbk. ed. New York: Modern Library, 2013.

⁴ I will refer to the *Theologico-Political Treatise* as the *TTP* for brevity. References to the *TTP* are to chapter numbers followed by the page number in the standard Gebhardt edition, and are quoted in Curley's English translation. References to Spinoza's *Ethics* are quoted in Curley's translation, with part number followed by the number of the proposition, and sometimes by the number of a corollary or scholium. E.g., 4p31s refers to the scholium to proposition 31 in Part 4.

to do in the future by arguing about words written in the past, and by doing so the past becomes as indeterminate as the future, and in need of interpretation.

Spinoza doesn't think that practical conflicts are going to be solved by making people more rational.

Reason [might] recommend peace without reservation" (Annotation 34 for chapter 16, 263), but the imagination comprises ideas of how we are affected, and therefore come with emotions attached.⁵ Unlike reason, the imagination can drive people apart. "It is dread that makes people irrational" (Preface, 5), and "dread is the cause of superstition" (6).

«Different people can be affected in different ways by one and the same object, and one and the same person can be affected by one and the same object in different ways at different times» (*Ethics* 3p51) «Insofar as people are subject to passive emotions, to that extent they cannot be said to agree in nature» (*Ethics* 4p32) «People differ in nature insofar as they are assailed by emotions that are passive, and to that extent one and the same person can, too, by variable and inconstant» (*Ethics*, 4p 33)

But the imagination, the only kind of ideas most people have, the *TTP* argues, can also promote peace and freedom, turning this diversity into acts of interpretation and accommodation. I want to see how the *TTP* can pull this off.

4. Conflict and the Imagination

The Preface begins with a dark picture of human nature:

If men were always able to regulate their affairs with sure judgment, or if fortune always smiled upon them, they would not get caught up in any superstition. But since people are often reduced to such desperate straits that they cannot arrived at any solid judgment and as the good things of fortune, for which they have a boundless desire are quite uncertain, they fluctuate wretchedly between hope and fear. This is why most people are quite ready to believe anything. (Preface, 5).

Since we aren't governed by reason, we vacillate between hope and fear, which leads to superstition and credulity. Religion and theology, and tyrannical government, exploit, or satisfy, these boundless desires. Bringing ontology into practical conflicts makes them ideological, because people's beliefs are fortified by further beliefs about divine nature. Religion, especially religion based in Scripture, and especially Christianity, make practical conflicts worse still, with its broad gap between word and deed, to the detriment of both.

I have often been amazed to find that people who are proud to profess the Christian religion, that is [a religion of] love, peace, moderation and good will to all me opposing each other with extraordinary animosity and giving daily expression to the bitterest mutual hatred (Preface, 8).

Religious conflict not only makes people's reason slave to their passions, but slaves to their rulers. The "highest secret of monarchical government" is to "disguise the fear that sways them with the specious name of religion, so that they will fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for their own deliverance" (Preface, 7).

If this is how people are, at what point in this story could Spinoza intervene? The simple answer is through removing linguistic conflict from the interpretation of the

⁵ We form ideas "from individual things presented to us through the senses in a mutilated and confused manner," and "from symbols. "Both these ways of regarding things I shall..refer to as "knowledge of the first kind, opinion, or imagination." *Ethics* 4p40s2.

Bible, and so removing ontological conflict as well, rejecting superstition and theology in favor of a moral, yet still biblical, religion. An equally simple answer: the imagination consists in ideas of how we are affected. If things appear to me in a certain way, that doesn't make how they affect you false. Trouble comes only when I think that my imaginative ideas represent a reality independent of me; then, if we disagree you must be wrong, ignorant or immoral. That's the deadly intrusion of ontology into the practical world.

That rhetoric, persuasive speech, can be both an alternative to conflict and itself a mode of conflict is obvious. But the topics that revolve around silence are just as productive in thinking about speech and conflict, whether it's silencing others or silencing oneself.

Spinoza silences most of the Bible through linguistic evidence that makes doubtful there is such a thing as the Bible as a well-defined entity. He destroys the authority of the Bible by destroying the Bible itself. That destruction of the Bible leads to a silencing of ontological conflict because there is nothing to fight about.

This, then, is a short version of Spinoza's elaboration of my two simple answers, first that removing linguistic conflict will remove ontological conflict, and therefore much of political conflict, and second that practical relativism, the attitude that we should all be practically satisfied with imaginative ideas of how things appear to each of us, renouncing pretensions to infer from how things to look to me to how they really are. But of course these two quick arguments need a lot of development before they can be plausible. Given human nature, again, how can Spinoza intervene to produce justice and peace?

5. The Prophetic Imagination

Starting the *TTP* with prophecy is a brilliant way of presenting a unique understanding of rhetoric and conflict. Prophecy takes no special intellectual gifts. We all share the ability to interpret signs and produce further signs for further interpretation. Prophets are worth listening to because of their moral message, inseparable from their own moral status. They have authority—are worth listening to—without command and without sanction. They are not lawgivers. Because their authority is practical, and ethical, and neither legal nor scientific, their authority increases rather than decreases the power of the faithful, unlike his theologians and monarchs.

The biblical prophets illustrate a diversity of messages that accommodate a diversity of circumstances, so there is no reason to take that diversity as conflict.

Prophecy or revelation is certain knowledge about something revealed to men by God. A prophet is someone who interprets things revealed by God (*qui Dei revelatarum iis interpretatur*) to those who cannot themselves achieve certain knowledge of them and can therefore only grasp them by simple faith (*mera fide*) what has been revealed (1, 15).

What better definition of rhetoric, and the distinction between rhetorical argument and teaching, could there be?

And so, reenacting the distinction between persuading and teaching: «Prophetic authority does not permit participation in argument, for whoever seeks to confirm his dogmas by means of reasons is thereby submitted them to the judgment of each individual for decision» (11, 152). What we see and hear through the imagination has to be interpreted by the imagination. Listening to the teachings of philosophers, we can become philosophers, but we don't become prophets by listening to them, and we certainly don't become theologians by submitting to their authority. And yet, because

prophecy depends on imagination and not reason, anyone can be a prophet if they meet his three criteria.

All prophetic certainty [also called moral certainty] was grounded upon three things: (1) that the matters were very vividly imagined, as we are affected by objects when we are awake; (2) upon a sign; and (3) most importantly, that the minds of the prophets were directed exclusively to what is right and good (2,31). It is up to every man to hold to the opinion about them that he feels best enables him to subscribe with all his mind to the cult and religion of God. (6,96.)

Like the rhetorical realm, the imagination is adequate for practical purposes, and the putative injection of reason can only make things worse, as the interventions of theologians, corrupted by Greek philosophy, illustrates. Things outside the imagination, real things, do exist, and we learn about them in the *Ethics*, and there even how to make them part of our lives, but in the *TTP* they can do no good and so we can put an end to conflict by not listening—silencing—to ontological claims and especially the political power theologians aspire to. On the other hand, philosophers make the most and obedient loyal citizens, just because they know that obedience is always better than conflict. People guided by reason don't need to be coerced.

The shadows in Plato's allegory of the cave are signs par excellence, but any Socratic ascent from the world of signs to the world of things cannot make us safer, more moral, or more free. People who have to be forced back into the cave after seeing the light have become inept at the practical task of citizens of the cave, guessing which image will come next. Not only can they no longer see in the darker world, but they have lost the pleasure of competition. Spinoza has us stay within the cave, although we will avoid conflict by having no interest in rivalrous goods.

True joy and happiness lie in the simple enjoyment of what is good and not in the kind of false pride that enjoys happiness because are excluded from it...Anyone who takes pride in this way is enjoying another's misfortune, and to that extent is envious and malign, and does not know true wisdom of the peace of the true life (3, 44).

It is in everyone's nature to strive to bring it about that others should adopt his attitude to life; and while all strive equally to this end, they equally hinder one another, and in all seeking the praise or love of all, they provoke mutual dislike (*Ethics* 3p31s).

The intervention of the *TTP* into the sorry state of humanity consists in keeping the imagination in its place, without the aspirations—call them theological or philosophical—that lead to attempts at domination. In Cicero's story, persuasion is the preferred alternative to violence, but Spinoza's—and Aristotle's—additional distinction between persuasion and teaching suggests that teaching, while apparently more rational, can be its own form of conflict and violence. Camus puts it better than I possibly could: [A]n interminable subjectivity which is imposed on others as objectivity, that that is the philosophic definition of terror.

6. Conflict and Practical Reasoning

Imagination creates conflict, we've seen, when it presumes to represent things as they are. Reason creates conflict when people think it has practical value. Divine law, we

learn in Chapter 4, is nothing but rational necessity, and while we, like everything in the universe, is subject to it, it isn't the sort of law we can obey or do anything about.

Realizing that we are all confined, for practical purposes, to the imagination will make us better at practical reasoning. That the domain of the practical and the imaginative is self-sufficient means that signs are signs of preceding and further signs and interpretations are interpretations of prior and further interpretations. There is no escaping to a reality free from these human acts and their objects into a more real world of things that are not signs to be interpreted.

«We plainly have no knowledge as to the actual co-ordination and interconnection of things—that is, the way in which things are in actual fact ordered and connected—so that for practical purposes it is better, indeed, it is essential, to consider things as contingent» (4, 48-49).

We ought to define and explain things by their proximate causes, and a general consideration and necessity and the connectedness of causes cannot help us at all in the formation and ordering of particular things, that is, of how things are really ordered and connected, and therefore it is better and indeed necessary for the conduct of life, to regard things as possible (4, 58).

Not only are imagination and reason distinct, they are at odds with each other in the mind, exactly as rhetoric and philosophy are often taken to be. For rhetoric and practical reasoning, the self-sufficiency of the imaginative word of signs is a strength, for philosophy it is a fatal weakness.

«Those who are most powerful in imagination are less good at merely understanding things those who have trained and powerful intellects have a more modest power of imagination and have it under better control, reining it in, so to speak, and not confusing it with understanding» (2,29).

The difference between imagination and reason is a barrier that cannot be crossed:

This is how human beings are constructed: whatever they conceive purely with their intellects, they also defend purely with intellect and reason, while, on the other hand, whatever opinions they derive from their passions, they defend with their passions (7, 98).

Now if anyone says that, while there is no need to understand God's attributes, there is a duty to believe them straightforwardly without proof, he is plainly talking nonsense. In the case of things invisible which are objects only of the mind, proofs are the only eyes by which they can be seen; therefore those who do not have such proofs can see nothing at all of these things. So when they merely repeat what they have heard of such matters, this is no more relevant to or indicative of their mind than the words of a parrot or a puppet speaking without meaning or sense (*quae sine mente et sensu loquuntur*) (13,170).

Life would be very simple if we could make ourselves have a more powerful intellect by dampening down our imaginations. We need a different solution, a solution that uses the powers of the imagination itself to lead to lives of peace and freedom. Part of the solution, which can fairly be called anti-ontological, consists in the imagination seeing itself as practically sufficient and not improved by appealing to reason. For practical purposes, what the imagination knows is real and what reason asserts is illusory just because it is impractical. Scientific proof of the age of the shroud of Turin will convert

no one, and Valla's proof that the Donation of Constantine is a forgery destroyed no one's allegiance to the Bishop or Rome.

Since the *TTP* isn't a work of philosophy—it supposedly aims at persuading rulers—it doesn't present definitions of imagination and reason, or adequate ideas, but developing their contrast drives the entire argument, from prophecy vs teaching, through to faith vs philosophy, and obedience vs understanding; all distinctions between rhetoric and interpretation on the one hand and philosophy and reasoning on the other. Prophecy is a work of a lively imagination, not wisdom, and the pronouncements of the prophets are meant to persuade, not teach. While prophecy requires a sign:

«Nobody who has a true idea is unaware that a true idea involves absolute certainty....Indeed, nobody can doubt this, unless he thinks that an idea is some dumb thing like a picture on a tablet, and not a mode of thinking, to wit, the very act of understanding» (*Ethics* II.43s, see too IIp49s).

The *TTP* displays the imagination exactly thinking that an idea is some dumb thing like a picture on a tablet, and doesn't try, as the *Ethics* did, to correct this image. The imagination treats ideas and the world around us as signs to be interpreted as we do pictures, representations of something of which they are signs. For practical purposes, ideas *are* dumb things. All ideas of the imagination are interpretations; the activity of the imagination is to interpret what is given to it.

7. Prophecy and Diversity

The imagination, like rhetorical argument, represents common knowledge. Prophecy, unlike teaching, needs a sign. But a moral sign, not a supernatural one. Everyone can judge moral signs, not supernatural ones. Therefore moral signs and their recognition are within civic knowledge. All three grounds of prophecy are signs we interpret to determine whether someone is a prophet. It is we, not the prophet and not the Bible, who have the authority to trust someone as a prophet. This democratization of prophecy is a step away from conflict and towards freedom.

Rationality is knowledge by experts, which has nothing to do with any particular community; expertise creates ontological conflict by being apolitical and anti-political. Hence the suspicion that the sophists in Plato's dialogues report. The philosopher's behavior is the same in any community: she behaves with absolute obedience and so is a good citizen. In Plato's dialogues, this alien wisdom is represented by the travelling sophists, who aren't citizens. In the *TTP*, it's the theologians, and those who think that prophets offer esoteric wisdom. Theologians are expelled while prophets endowed with great imagination, like Plato's poets, rather than powerful intellects are welcome in Spinoza's inversion of *Republic* X. Where Plato has philosophers rule the best city, and expels the poets, Spinoza allows philosophers to remain as long as they keep to themselves and don't try to rule, and makes the Bible a work of poetic imagination of the prophets.

The diversity of the biblical prophets is a model for a diversity of free citizens in the contemporary world, his and ours. Spinoza discounts the features of the Bible that cause controversy and invite ontological speculation and conflict, so that we are left with a universal creed, something that is both imaginative and universal, how things *must* appear to us if we are to be moral and faithful beings. But we are also left with a picture of how that universal creed can be interpreted in different ways without conflict, so that those interpretations can be signs for further interpretation, again diverse without conflict. The universal creed represents in propositional form the moral actions that lead to salvation: this is the identity of faith and works. No one has to profess the universal creed in its verbal form. The seven articles of faith are nothing but a

representation and sign of the works of justice and charity. Those works, and therefore the universal creed, require no argument or teaching; persuasion and faith suffice. Relativism, contra ontology, can lead to a common object of imagination, a common faith.

«The only tenets that belong to universal faith are those that are absolutely required for obedience to God, ignorance of which makes obedience quite impossible. As for the rest, every person, knowing himself better than anyone else, should believe whatever he considers best for strengthening his love of justice» (14, 177).

«Faith requires not so much true dogmas as pious dogmas, that is, such as move the heart to obedience; and this is so even if many of those beliefs contain not a shadow of truth, provided that he who adheres to them knows not that they are false» (14, 161).

8. Diversity and accommodation

The TTP is about both speech and silence as ways of resolving or eliminating conflict. It is about the freedom to speak and about how some forms of authority should limit people's speech, and others should not.

Everyone must adapt (*accomodare*) these doctrines of faith (*fidei dogmata*) to his own understanding and to interpret (*interpretare*) them for himself in whatever way seems to make them easier for him to accept unreservedly and will full mental assent (*pleno animi consensu obediat*). For, as we have pointed out, faith was only revealed and written according to the understanding and beliefs of the prophets and of the common people of their time, and in the same manner everyone in our day must adapt faith to their own views (14, 178-9).

[Just as the Bible] was once adapted to the understanding of the common people, so also anyone may adapt it for his own beliefs if he sees that in this way, he can obey God with fuller mental assent in matters concerning justice and charity. We do accuse them, however, of refusing to grant the same liberty to others (14, 173).

That people shouldn't impose their beliefs on others means that these impositions should be silenced; I don't have to listen to them.

The interpretation of a sign is a judgment about its meaning. The interpretation of a text doesn't have to be another text. It can be an action. His method of interpretation, we will see, separates meaning from truth, one the province of imagination and the other of intellect. Peaceful politics depends on this separation, keeping the practical imagination within its proper bounds. Conflict comes from thinking that imaginative ideas are rational ones, or thinking that imaginative ideas are not sufficient for practical purposes, and life would be improved by admitting rational ideas into common practical life. When people, whether led by theologians or not, think that we need to know God's nature as well as how God relates to us and we to God, then deadly theological conflicts will arise from religions that, like reason, preach peace.

Once we learn that the utterances of the prophets were accommodated to their audience, we not only remove conflict among them, but we are now free to interpret them as is best for us. *We become prophets*, prophets whose only audience is ourselves. This is the crux of the entire TTP, and how it differs from other pleas for toleration.

9. Biblical hermeneutics as a Revolution in Interpreting Signs

I need to show how this reflexivity unfolds in Spinoza's argument, by seeing how he develops the initial distinction between prophecy and teaching as a difference between

different kinds of signs and their interpretation. A complete development of this project would involve reenacting the entire argument of the *TTP*, and in this presentation I will have to sketch rather than trace that argument.

We can become reflective thinkers, while remaining in the world of the imagination, by distancing ourselves and reflecting on the relation between the Bible and us as an act of accommodation. Without transcending itself and becoming reason, our imagination can still reflect on itself, and therefore there can be a method of interpretation. Instead of being a sign of either the intentions of its authors or some truth it signifies, the Bible becomes a sign of itself, and interpreting it means making it into a whole with a unified meaning. This is his version of *sola scriptura*. We now have a self-signifying object, which will lead to the community of believer as self-interpreting people.

Spinoza's method consists in interpreting the Bible's meaning rather than judging its truth, or measuring its statements against what reason says. "We are concerned here only with the meaning and not the truth" of passages of Scripture (7, 100). That meaning is open to all, like the common knowledge on which rhetoric, persuasion, and prophecy is based.

«We can readily discover the meaning (*mentem*) of the Bible's moral teaching from the history of it that we are able to construct, and be certain about its true sense (*sensu*). For the teachings of true piety are expressed in the most everyday language, since they are very common and extremely simple and easy to understand» (7, 111).

The practical world of signs and interpretation is a world of meanings. The subjects who can undertake interpretation and construct the world of meanings, and so a practically autonomous world. We can then purge practical reasoning and discourse of ontology, which pretends to reason rather than imagination, by replacing ontological pretenses with the purely imaginative language of relativism and freedom. Separating meaning from truth, finding meaning in the Bible and truth within oneself, separates signs from what they signify.⁶ The prophets don't see themselves separating meaning from truth. They don't follow the method of interpretation, so we understand the prophets better than they did themselves.

10. Hermeneutics as a Moral Activity

Linguistic conflict disappears. Faith is measured solely by works, as each individual interprets for herself the biblical meaning of faithful works. Spinoza's argument finally moves the locus of interpretation from the intention of the Bible's author, to the Bible itself, and now to the moral effects it has on each of us. «Nothing is sacred or profane, or impute, absolutely and independently of the mind but only in relation to the mind» (*nihil extra mentem absolute, sed tantum respective ad ipsam, sacrum aut profanum aut impurum esse*) (13, 160).

The meaning of the Bible uncovered by the method must be a moral meaning, since the Bible as an imaginative idea is moral and practical, and anything that doesn't teach people to act justly is not part of its meaning, not easily understood by everyone. Looking back, this narrowing of the Bible's meaning was prefigured in the identification of a prophet through her vivid imagination, a sign, and, most important that "the minds of the prophets were directed exclusively to what is right and good" (2, 31). What was

⁶ "By obscure expressions I mean those whose *sense* is difficult to elicit from the context of a passage while those whose *meaning* is readily elicited I call clear. I am not now speaking of how easily or otherwise their *truth* is grasped by reason; for we are concerned only with their *meaning*, not with their *truth*...In order not to confuse the genuine sense of a passage's sense with the *truth* of things..." (*TTP*, ch. 7, 100).

true for individual prophets in chapter 2 becomes true for the Bible thanks to the method.

If we want to attest the divine character of Scripture objectively, we must establish from the Bible alone that it offers true moral doctrines. For we have shown that this is principally what the assurance of the prophets derive from, that their minds were attuned to the right and the good; and this is what we need to be convinced of ourselves, if we are to have confidence (*fidem*) in them (7, 99).

Figuring out the meaning of a sign, such as a passage in the Bible, by measuring it against truth inevitably means against one's own version of truth, mistaking how something appears to me for what it is, creating conflict. In Spinoza's exposition, Maimonides is emblematic of this error. If interpretation consists in finding meaning without considering truth, then people's interpretations will be, if not identical, harmonious. There is no reason for unanimity, because as long as people act with justice and charity, they should be free to interpret the Bible in any way that strengthens their moral desire. I can and often should silence another simply by not listening to her because what moves her to justice and charity may not move me. I am the authority for judging how to fulfill the command to act with justice and charity.

«As men's ways of thinking vary considerably and different beliefs are better suited to different men...everyone should be allowed freedom of judgment and the right to interpret the basic tenets of faith as he thinks fit» (Preface, 7).

In modern terms, silence takes the form of privacy, something others can't see because someone doesn't speak about it, or a part of one's identity that is unspeakable. Spinoza puts everyone in a position where they can legitimately close their minds to persuasion because it threatens their identity, and can make them subordinate to the persuader. This free aspect of our minds has no sign. This is another form of freedom, freedom *from* interpretation.

Moreover, my recognition that the mind is filled with imaginative, not rational, ideas is a reason for me to silence myself. Relativism leads to silence, not conflict, a silence that returns from Cicero's world with rhetoric's civilizing mission back to Rousseau's noble savages, where each was indifferent to what others did or valued. Not only can I not be open to being persuaded by others, I can keep silent and not try to persuade others to see the world as I do. Except that most people can't be silent. «Not even the most consummate statesmen, let alone the common people, possesses the gift of silence. It is a universal failing in people that they communicate their thoughts to others, however much they should keep quiet» (20 240).

Developing the imagination doesn't lead to reason but obedience and faith are the highest condition in terms of actions. Reason, he says, always leads to peace, but here he has found a form of the imagination that always leads to peace. The philosopher has no advantage over the pious believer. (In the final chapter, the philosopher is a better and more loyal citizen and obeys the ruler with all his heart, mind, and might, this in spite of the fact that the ruler is concerned only with external actions, not what the mind freely thinks).

11. Interpretation and Freedom

Parallel to the distinctions between imagination and reason, practice and theory, what is true for me vs what is really true, prophets vs teachers, is the difference between faith on the one hand and knowledge on the other. The shift from knowledge to obedience reduces conflict not because it produces uniform behavior—it does not; it only

produces uniform belief—and not because there are sanctions for disobedience—they are significantly absent from the statement of the universal creed—but because, obedience is limited to good works, and good works are an expression of obedience. «We are not obliged by Scripture to believe anything other than that is absolutely necessary to fulfill this command [to love one’s neighbor]» (14, 174). We are then not obliged to believe or obey the purely ceremonial laws that differentiate one sect from another and invite conflict. Differences in interpretation, including actions beyond loving one’s neighbor, aren’t a site of conflict.

We should certainly not accept, therefore, that beliefs considered as such, in isolation and without regard to actions entail anything of piety or impiety at all. We must rather assert that a person believes something piously or impiously, only insofar as they are moved to obedience by their beliefs....Hence if anyone is rendered disobedient by believing the truth he truly has an impious faith; insofar, on the other hand, as he becomes obedient through believing what is false, has truly a pious faith. (13, 172)

People’s acts of justice and charity will vary with their imaginations, and the universal creed is a universal sign of that variety. Once the word of God is not found in the Bible but in human hearts and minds, interpretation is an act of self-accommodation. The Bible is a sign which I interpret by judging what it means to me; interpretation demands relativism. The Bible means whatever helps me to act morally. I am now the authoritative interpreter of the Bible, and of morality. The distinction in the method of interpretation between meaning and truth becomes the distinction, and mutual non-interference, between faith and philosophy, imagination and understanding. This is a new birth of freedom within the imagination itself.

12. How Signs and Meanings Come Apart

Rhetorically, the Bible is a set of endoxa, common opinions that are the sources of practical reasoning. The public knowledge on which practical political life depends has to rely on the identity of what seems to me with what is the case. How things seem to me is how things are, to me. Appearance *is*, for practical purposes, reality. This is common sense. Such relativism might seem to drive people apart, but in fact it allows us to live together, joyfully being chained in the cave and competing at guessing which shadow comes next. We live in a world of signs and their interpretations, not things and their necessary demonstrations.

Once, though, we worry about whether endoxa and appearances are true, and not just widely held, they are no longer the common possession of the community, and become subject to conflicts over which are true representatives of the reality of which they are now signs. We argue about what is real and who has the authority of endoxa and common sense. We have left the practical world of signs for the sunlight of philosophy. We live practically in a world of signs and their interpretations, not things and their necessary demonstrations, and leave it only at our own risk. Creating a distance between what everybody knows—endoxa, common sense—and what is true can be an act of violence. The Bible, then, is only an aid to piety and justice for people who can’t stand a stronger stimulant. There’s nothing wrong with being a relativist, but being *called* a relativist is a violation of decorum and an ontological source of political conflict.

His argument neatly turns on itself, which is how it leads to freedom. Freedom is the cause of conflict in the prelapsarian state before Cicero’s heroic man of eloquence, or Protagoras’ Hermes, leads us into society; but if natural freedom is was cause of

conflict, freedom of interpretation is its solution. The argument dissolves the distinction between rhetoric and hermeneutics, between the production and interpretation of discourse. Persuasion is designed to lead to action. Spinoza shows how interpretation leads to action as well. Interpretation becomes a method of self-persuasion as it is a method of self-understanding. We have to know, as best we can, what words and images, what signs, will move us to act with justice and charity. Autonomy is as much a duty as a newly-opened possibility. As the age of prophecy has ended, the age of democracy begins because each of us can do just what the biblical prophets did, interpret the divine word. Under the method of interpretation, the meaning of the Bible and its prophecies is limited to morality if and only if the purpose of interpretation is obedience, not science, history, or philosophy. The linguistic difficulties and instability of biblical text that Spinoza highlights both before and after the statement of the method do not affect obedience and faith.

13. Spinoza's Solution to Problems of Conflict: Too Good to be True?

I have to end on a corrective note. Throughout, if we can't all be philosophers, Spinoza recommends freedom as the solution to problems of conflict. The intervention the *TTP* presents provides an outline that could and should be realized in human morality, religion and politics. But the argument rejects any *deus ex machina* or its human equivalent in a savior or an enlightened despot, or Spinoza's argument.

Just as in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Spinoza regards most believers and citizens as both incorrigibly driven by emotion and also endowed with an innate knowledge of justice and charity. The human condition presented in the Preface is likely to persist in spite of Spinoza's depiction of a way out through a new understanding of meaning, interpretation and signs, and consequently of the Bible and the state.

Still, to temper that pessimism with some hope, I quote from chapter 14, which shows how we can have diversity without conflict, neatly holding together ontological, linguistic and political diversity and conflict:

«Every person, knowing himself better than anyone else, should believe whatever he considers best for strengthening his love of justice. On this basis, I think no scope is left for disputes within the church» (14, 177).

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