

Ideas Clearly Indistinct: Spinoza, Augustine, and the Search for Biblical Certainty

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“Whoever...thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build up the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand them at all.”

St. Augustine

“And whatever is found about these things in Sacred Writ which is obscure or ambiguous is to be explained and determined by Scripture’s universal teaching.”

Benedict Spinoza

Philosophy in Troubled Times

At the time of the writing of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, the 30-year’s war was still fresh in everyone’s mind and the extended bloodbath was hardly the only instance of religious wars. No less present in everyone’s mind was the condemnation of Galileo and the difficulties encountered by Kepler with religious authorities. Europe at the time seemed to be the place of war on the “heretic” and suppression of the philosopher. However, the “certainties” which led men to war and suppression seemed to the philosopher to be anything but certain. Indeed, suspicion of religious “certainty” was, by Spinoza’s time, a long established tradition in Europe. William of Ockham had been dead 300 years before Spinoza began to write. Best known for “Ockham’s razor,” of more importance to us is Ockham’s sword, the sword of nominalism, which severed faith from reason and left obedience to the arbitrary will of God, interpreted by competent authority, as the only proper basis of faith. With reason and faith now split men would need to choose one or the other, or, if choosing both, must keep their souls in

separate compartments. Luther, disgusted with the rationalism of the schoolmen, would opt for the religion of blind faith to the will of the arbitrary and ineffable God.

The Philosophers were not so sure. Although the scholastics presented a view of the rational to the world, it was still rooted firmly in faith, a faith that now seemed arbitrary and uncertain. New philosophers, especially Descartes and Bacon, sought for certainties that might arise either within the mind alone or depend only on empirical data. They sought ideas which would be “clear and distinct” and therefore undeniably true, although why error should lack the appearance of clarity and distinctiveness is never really explained. But what is foremost in the minds’ of the philosophers is that certainty in the mind and peace in the republic were intimately connected. If the mind could be compelled by reason, there would be no excuse to compel it by force of arms. But as long as the Bible, the Christian source of “certainty,” was subject to so many conflicting interpretations which themselves were beyond reason, there seemed no way to achieve rational certainty or religious tolerance.

Augustine also wrote in a time of uncertainty, when the very foundation of civic order, Rome, was tottering on its own foundations under the blows of the barbarians. Religious authority was under attack from, among other sources, the Manicheans, who delighted in pointing out the contradictions in the Bible, contradictions which, for the critics of the Scriptures, demonstrated their evident absurdity. Augustine couldn't do much about the fall of Rome, but he could address the "contradictions." His response was to develop a method which (arbitrarily) divided the Bible into "literal" and "figurative" statements not on the basis of the literary value of the passage, but solely on each passage's relation to the law of charity toward God and neighbor. Thus the all of the texts could be "harmonized" by adopting a principle with, although extrinsic to most of the texts, was intrinsic to traditional interpretation of the Church. Augustine can thus achieve a "certainty" about what the Bible says by the simple expedient of imposing a particular reading on the Scriptures; any passage that doesn't *literally* support the dual charity is converted into a *figure* that does, thus creating a hermeneutic circle. This method held sway in Christianity for 1200 years, right up until the time of Spinoza. It is precisely this method that Spinoza will simultaneously adopt and subvert; on the one hand, the dual charity will be as important to Spinoza as to Augustine, but on the other hand, he will use it to drain the Scriptures of any authority beyond what can be independently verified by the scientific method of Descartes using only the tools of natural reason.¹

¹ It is perhaps worth noting in passing that

The *TPT* and Certainty

The *Theological-Political Treatise* can be discussed under the headings of both method and strategy; by the former Spinoza hopes to examine Scripture in a way that removes from it any "truth" not "clear and distinct," which, for Spinoza, meant available to philosophy without the aid of Scripture. By the later, he moved the argument onto his opponents' own ground, adopting all of their words while changing all of their meanings. The method of Spinoza derives from both Descartes and Bacon. From Descartes, Spinoza derives a methodological doubt which proceeds through three stages to achieve judgments that "presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I had no occasion to call it in to doubt."² Note that although the method *begins* in skepticism, it ends in the "certainty" of clear and distinct ideas; the doubts are never turned towards the method itself; skepticism is reserved for all *other* sources of authority. The Cartesian method requires Spinoza to break down the "problem" into the smallest "parts" possible, and then to reassemble them, starting with the most obvious and progressing to the most complex.³

Spinoza's central "philosophical" truth, charity, is neither philosophic nor scientific at all. Reason cannot reach as far as charity unless enlightened by faith. Charity is never the product of a chain of syllogisms, but arises from an attitude of love. Further, it is only in Christianity that charity assumes an ontological dimension, becoming identified with the very being of God.

² René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One's Reason Well and for Seeking the Truth in Science*, class handout, p.18.

³ Of course, it begs the question of what the smallest part of the Bible might be. As Professor Yaffee notes, it is like determining what is the

The “data” for this analysis will come from a kind of Baconian methodology which starts from the “empirical” data of the “the Bible alone.” “The universal rule for interpreting Scripture is therefore not to attribute anything to Scripture as its lesson which we do not find to be made transparent in the greatest possible degree from its history” (TPT 7.1.23). This “history” is composed by three rules: first, a linguistic analysis to clarify the meanings of all the words; second, a reduction of the “tenets” into overall headings that connect passages speaking of the same matters; and finally a history of the fortune of each book, along with the sources for its “canonization.” After enumerating his method, however, Spinoza deals with the difficulties, a discussion he begins with a disclaimer, one that *a priori* limits Scriptural knowledge to solely that which yields itself to Spinoza’s methods:

Since this whole method of ours (which is based on the notion that knowledge of Scripture is to be sought from it alone) is the single and true one, whatever it will not be able to achieve in acquiring a full knowledge of Scripture, is plainly to be despaired of. (TPT 7.5.30)

In other words, what cannot be known by Spinoza’s method cannot be known at all, or at least not with the certainty which the method requires. The method is therefore “self-proving,” a hermeneutic circle. As Leo Strauss

smallest part of a tree. Merely taking the statements as “propositions” to be reassembled under a series of “headings” rips them out of context, and it is only in context that any human statement can have meaning.

notes, “Spinoza’s rules of reading derive from his belief in the final character of his philosophy as *the* clear and distinct and, therefore, *the* true account of the whole.”⁴

Since the difficulties in the method are manifold, by Spinoza’s own reckoning, most of the “meaning” is simply beyond us and cannot be recovered. We simply do not have enough information about the language and history of the books, about what words may have meant when they were written and what “corruptions” may have been introduced. Further, we may not introduce reason as a guide, as did Maimonides and indeed the entire Christian interpretive tradition. If a passage does not yield to “the method,” we cannot impose a logic on the text not arising from the text itself.

So in the end, what *can* be known of the Bible by this method? Not much, as it turns out. Only seven statements survive the methodological gauntlet to attain the certainty of “dogma.” Faith itself is reduced to whatever moves us to obedience to the dual charity, which alone is piety. For all the rest, it is left to the private conscience of each believer. This last point forms what might be called the “punch line” of the treatise: for if the major content of belief is a matter of private interpretation, it cannot therefore be a matter of public policy or governance. It is at this point that the treatise becomes “political.” Faith in the main is marginalized and politics becomes both supreme and supremely pious. Or as Spinoza puts it, “it is also

⁴ Leo Strauss, *How to Study Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise*, class handout, p. 190.

impious to do something by one's own decision contrary to a decree of the supreme power whose subject he is-- inasmuch as, if everyone were allowed to do so, the ruin of the republic would necessarily follow from it (TPT 20.4.9)."

Spinoza the Strategist

It were as easy to find contradictions in Spinoza's thought as it is for Spinoza to find contradictions in the Bible. Yet such an effort misses the point. It is quite true that Spinoza's whole schema, far from arising *sola scriptura*, is actually imposed *a priori*. It is precisely the adoption of the terms of his opponents that makes the work so powerful. By adopting "scripture alone" as his basis, he flanks the Calvinists. His literalism cannot be faulted by even the purest of the fundamentalists, and his refusal to subject the Scriptures to the dictates of reason disarms the rationalists and pleases the Calvinists, or at least a certain strain of Calvinism. It is precisely by adopting scriptural literalism that he is able to highlight the contradictions of the Scriptures, and by these "contradictions," to show that most of it cannot be taken as "certainties." Of course, Spinoza is just as aware as any other reader that when the Bible speaks of the "hand of God," it is meant as metaphor and not as a philosophical opinion about the substance of God. But in adopting this artificial stance he is able to drain the Bible of any connection to both reason or public authority.

But the real target of Spinoza is Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, whose interpretive schema of an arbitrary dichotomy between the literal and figurative held sway in Christian interpretation. Spinoza adopts the same schema to divide the certain from the uncertain, and he uses the same "razor"

as Augustine: the dual charity. The same razor that for The Bishop of Hippo divides the literal from the figurative divides for the sage of Amsterdam the certain from the uncertain, and leaves very little certainty. As a result, he is able to make the commercial Republic of Holland into a kind of *City of God*, albeit a rather impotent and irrelevant God whose decrees are subject to the will of the majority.

Hermeneutics and the Search for Certainty

Both Augustine and Spinoza are mightily concerned with eliminating the "contradictions" in the scriptures, the former by "harmonizing" them, the later by making them into irrelevancies. And yet, one wonders whether both haven't missed the point. For it is not certainty that the Scriptures communicate, but faith. Moreover, one must ask if the ineffable God can ever appear to finite man as anything but paradoxical. If this is indeed the case, he will always be present to us not as a series of "certainties," but as a succession of mysteries. Certainly, the mysteries can be penetrated by ratiocination, but can never be subsumed in that way, can never be rendered "clear and distinct;" there will always be a residue left for the heart and mind to explore.

Christianity itself is a poor religion for those who demand certainties; it presents itself as paradoxical: The God who is three in one; the divinity that becomes human; the impassible God that suffers the passion; water that becomes wine, wine that becomes blood, bread that becomes body. As much as we may subject these propositions to rational analysis, they remain always just beyond the reach of reason; they remain the content of faith

which knowledge can never exhaust. This being the case, we can grasp more easily why the Bible is as it is. For we must assume that God, the giver of all good gifts, always gives us the best gifts he can. If “scientific” knowledge were the highest gift, then we would expect a Scripture written in Summa and Treatise. But instead we have a scripture of praise, poetry, and prayer, of psalm, history, and sermon. It is in the language of metaphor, the language of “contradiction,” that the infinite God who is always beyond our grasp must appear to our finite minds. It is the task of hermeneutics to see not contradiction, but paradox, a paradox that underlies the very structure of both being and of faith.