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Spinoza on Prophetic Certainty

One of the most controversial issues in interpreting Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is its affirmative treatment of prophetic certainty, and the certainty of salvation in particular. The 'universal faith' that Spinoza puts forward in Chapter 14, which he claims should be accepted by everyone, sets out the dogma: '[A]ll who obey God by following this way of life'—that is, by doing justice and charity—and only those, are saved'.¹ Does Spinoza mean it? The claim seems at first sight to be relatively implausible, given that Spinoza is a rationalist who identifies God with Nature, and rejects any idea of a God of commandment, and is therefore often regarded as an atheist.

Spinoza identifies a dilemma that the readers he has in mind would eventually come to face, which is, 'If we accept this principle [i.e., the dogma of salvation] without reason, blindly, then we too are acting foolishly without judgment; if on the other hand we assert that this fundamental principle can be proved by reason, then theology becomes a part of philosophy, and inseparable from it.'² In either case reason decides the issue, and theology that is based on prophetic authority will be dismissed as talking nonsense, or as simply redundant. Is this a sly allusion to the victory of reason over theology? Arguably, no, in that Spinoza, rather startlingly perhaps to those who take him to be an atheist, offers a solution by which theology avoids such a dilemma:

To this I reply that I maintain absolutely that this fundamental dogma of theology cannot be investigated by the natural light of reason, or at least that nobody has been successful in proving it, and that therefore it was essential that there should be revelation. Nevertheless, we can use judgment in order to accept with at least *moral certainty* that which has been revealed.³

In what follows, we examine the idea of 'moral certainty' (*certitudo moralis*) noted here. According to Spinoza, we should accept, with *moral certainty*, a prophetic doctrine as 'authentic' (*verum*),⁴ the truth of which, however, we cannot—and should not be able to—investigate or prove by reason. Spinoza's position here is based on two arguments, one negative and the other positive. The negative argument centers upon a communicational condition in which the prophets had to 'accommodate' their language to common use. The positive argument, on the other hand, deals with the conditions by which the prophets could come to believe in revelation. The certainty in question

¹ TTP, pp.177-178.

² TTP, p.185.

³ TTP, p.185. The emphasis is mine.

⁴ TTP, p.187.

must be sought in these two arguments, each of which we will examine in detail.

1 Accommodation Theory

The readers of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* could not fail to have been struck by its seemingly contradictory positions: while accepting prophecy as sure knowledge, Spinoza describes the prophets as being as ignorant as ordinary people. ‘Prophecy, or Revelation,’ he claims, ‘is the sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to man,’ and a prophet is ‘one who interprets God’s revelations to those who cannot attain to sure knowledge of the matters revealed, and can therefore be convinced of them only by simple faith.’⁵ Other lines seem to conflict with this position: ‘Solomon, Isaiah, Joshua and the others were indeed prophets: but they were also men, subject to human limitations’; furthermore, with regard to important, revealed matters, ‘the prophets could have been, and in fact were, ignorant without prejudice to their piety.’⁶ Spinoza acknowledges that the prophets unanimously professed God’s existence, uniqueness, omnipotence, and providence; however, at the same time he notes that they were seldom in agreement on ‘what God is, in what way he sees and provides for all things and similar matters.’⁷ Is Spinoza consistent in setting out these seemingly conflicting positions? Paul Vernière’s remark, in his erudite study on the topic, is interesting in that it describes how ambiguous Spinoza’s treatment of prophecy appeared to French intellectuals at that time. Spinoza’s doctrine, he says, appeared simultaneously repellent to some, and too dogmatic to others. Does Spinoza believe in the prophets or simply hold them in derision? No one understood Spinoza, commented Vernière, and what was worse, he was identified, thoughtlessly, among the libertines.⁸ The situation would be no different today were we unable to elucidate his meaning.

One thing is certain. Spinoza admits of no special cognitive virtue on the part of the prophets. ‘The prophets perceived God’s revelations with the aid of the imaginative faculty alone,’ he contends.⁹ The idea that the prophets were gifted with unusual powers of imagination is not the most bewildering part of his position here. A similar idea had been professed by Maimonides, a respected Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, whose *Guide for the Perplexed* was a relatively widely used work of reference among the scholars of Spinoza’s time. Maimonides described the prophets as individuals gifted with extraordinary powers of imagination and perfect intellect, whereby they perceived immediately, by means of their visions, ultimate truth, a thing barely accessible to

⁵ TTP, p.15.

⁶ TTP, p.37.

⁷ TTP, pp.102-103.

⁸ Vernière, 1954, p.206.

⁹ TTP, p.28.

philosophers by means of reason alone. The prophets, in his eyes, were super-philosophers.¹⁰ Spinoza offers a contrast to Maimonides in denying the prophets perfect intellect. According to Spinoza, the prophets could have been, and in fact were, ignorant of highbrow matters. They perceived revelations with the aid of the imaginative faculty ‘alone’. He maintains that there was no such thing as supernatural knowledge in prophecy, but only a vivid, albeit confused, imaginative faculty. Is Spinoza mocking the prophets? Many have believed so.¹¹

The reason why Spinoza describes the prophets as ignorant is simple. If they had, in fact, delivered such lofty truths, they would have failed in being prophets. Given that each prophecy may be traced back to the delivering utterance of a prophet, a speech act if you like, this speech act must have been successfully achieved in the presence of the common people, making it certain that prophetic language and reasoning ‘had to be adapted to the understanding of the common people’ who, being unable to follow a long chain of reasoning, took pleasure only in narratives, which motivated them, in turn, to live a truly pious life.¹²

Thus, Spinoza rules out all truth-claims—supernatural or natural—with respect to prophetic matters. Spinoza wondered why people were so quick to convince themselves that the prophets knew everything attainable by human intellect. Such a presumption necessarily fails to admit of any form of ignorance with respect to prophecy and, consequently, leads them either to suppose an enigmatic message of supernatural truth in simple yet cryptic passages, or to distort them and see them as metaphorical expressions of philosophical truth. If either of these options is permissible, ‘we can bid Scripture farewell’. For, ‘if that which is absolutely clear can be accounted obscure and incomprehensible or else interpreted at will, it will be vain for us to try to prove anything from Scripture.’¹³ It is clear that Spinoza’s contention of ignorance is not a joke. He maintains that such truth assumptions will necessarily lead to the ruination of the true message of the Prophets, which must have been such that an ordinary, common audience would have been capable of understanding it and taking it to their heart. So, it is folly to even attempt to establish agreement among the prophets on metaphysical questions such as what God really is, how he knows and acts upon men and the universe, and how prophecy and salvation are realised, amongst others. To regard the prophets as professing metaphysics is a ridiculous position. This may also be understood as offering another explanation as to why the seeming obscurity of their language can be minimised in light of the study of the common-language use of ancient Hebrew.¹⁴

¹⁰ On Maimonides’ account, see Zac, 1965, ch. 3, *passim*.

¹¹ For example Limborch. See Philippe Limborch, Letter to Olivarius Doiley, 23 June 1671, Freudenthal, 1899, p.292.

¹² TTP, p.77.

¹³ TTP, p.35.

¹⁴ See the exemplary explanation Spinoza provides for the expression: ‘the Spirit of God’. Spinoza reminds us that the ancient Hebrew related anything extraordinary to ‘God’. The word ‘spirit’ on the other hand stood for wind, mind, or breath, according to the context. So there is no need to suppose an obscure mystery in the

However, this remains a negative argument, for it may be objected that the necessity of accommodation does not necessarily imply that the prophets were themselves ignorant. In fact, in Spinoza's time the 'accommodation theory' was usually employed to defend the view that the prophets did know the truth of the matters they spoke of, despite their unlearned way of talking. It was a favourite trick of liberal Cocceio-Cartesians to explain Scriptural passages likely to conflict with a scientific view by saying that the prophets, although knowing the truth of the matters, adapted their language to the restricted understanding of the common people in ancient times. This 'accommodation theory' had been part of a number of fierce debates since the mid seventeenth century. Their opponents, orthodox Voetians, criticised the theory on the basis that it implied an ineptness or indifference on the part of the Holy Spirit with respect to delivering truth. The Cocceian rejoinder appealed to a pedagogical need on the part of the prophets to meet the ignorance of the people, preserving thereby the prophets from suspected ignorance.¹⁵

The Spinozan version of 'accommodation theory' must have been embarrassing to the Cocceio-Cartesians, as it devastated such a defence. Consider the following:

...God adapted his revelations to the understanding and beliefs of the prophets, who may well have been ignorant of matters that have no bearing on charity and moral conduct but concern philosophic speculations, and were in fact ignorant of them, holding conflicting beliefs. Therefore knowledge of science and of matters spiritual [*cognitio rerum naturalium, & spiritualium*] should by no means be expected of them.¹⁶

According to Spinoza, the revelations were adapted to the no less ordinary understanding of the prophets as well. To prove this somewhat disturbing point, Spinoza sets out a further, positive argument, to be examined next.

2 Conditions for prophecy

The prophets were ignorant, yet certain, says Spinoza. If ignorant of truth, what could they be certain of, and how? Spinoza draws the answer from a close examination of the positive conditions under which the prophets came to be assured of revelation. Spinoza derives three necessary conditions: imagination, sign, and truthfulness.

expression 'the Spirit of God'. TTP, pp.21-28.

¹⁵ The accommodation theory was a hot issue in the Voetian-Cocceian controversy. See Van Bunge, 1999, pp.312-314.

¹⁶ TTP, p.42.

1) Imagination

That the prophecies are full of fantasies is obvious from scripture. It shows how differently God revealed matters to each of the prophets, in accordance with their imaginative dispositions and temperaments. Moses heard God's voice as from between two cherubim; Samuel heard God speaking in a voice resembling the familiar voice of Eli. Joshua saw an angel with a sword, as if about to lead his army, and heard the angel speaking God's words. Isaiah saw God, the thrice holy, sitting on his throne on high, and the Israelites stained with the filth of their sins, sunk in foulness. Micaiah also saw God as seated, Daniel saw him as an old man clothed in white garments, and Ezekiel perceived him as fire. The Apostles saw the Holy Spirit as tongues of flame, Paul, at his conversion, as a great light, and so on. All this, observes Spinoza, is in full agreement with the common imagination at that time of God and spirits, with the proviso that the prophets' imagination would have been unusually vivid.¹⁷

Whether the prophets really heard or saw such things matters little for Spinoza, for, as he shows in his *Ethica*, imagination, by its nature, can present imaginary things as real in certain circumstances.¹⁸ Suffice it to say that they perceived those things as we do in our waking hours. The prophets may also have perceived much that is beyond the limits of intellect, because 'many more ideas can be constructed from words and images than from merely the principles and axioms on which our entire natural knowledge is based.'¹⁹ This explains why revelation appeared to them as enigmatic. 'Now we see,' says Spinoza, 'why the perceptions and the teachings of the prophets were nearly all in the form of parables and allegories, and why all spiritual matters were expressed in corporeal form; for this is more appropriate to the imaginative faculty.'²⁰ This also explains that the gift of prophecy did not remain with the prophets for long, nor did it occur often. The imaginative faculty, being fleeting and inconstant, 'was very rare, manifesting itself in very few men, and infrequently even in them.'²¹

Now, unlike a clear and distinct idea, imagination by itself 'does not of its own nature carry certainty with it.'²² If we attain certainty with respect to what we imagine, we need rational reasoning as well, which is not the case with prophecy. The prophets seem to have had no means by which to reason out how the revealed matter would come true; they 'did not envisage future events as the result of natural causes, but as God's will and decrees.'²³ In fact, they declared at all points that they were speaking at God's command, which is clear from their phrases, 'thus saith the Lord', 'the Lord

¹⁷ TTP, p.17, pp.20, 28-29.

¹⁸ E 2P17.

¹⁹ TTP, p.28.

²⁰ TTP, p.28.

²¹ TTP, p.29.

²² TTP, p.30.

²³ TTP, p.162.

of hosts saith', 'the commandment of the Lord', and so on. This way of speaking shows that they are not reasoning out their position but simply see themselves as mediating God's commands. 'The prophetic writings...contain only dogma and decrees, for they represent God as speaking not like one who reasons, but one who makes decrees issuing from the absolute power of his nature.'²⁴ This is a decisive point for determining the nature of prophecy. Given that no reasoning basis was available, 'prophecy cannot of itself carry certainty'.²⁵ The certainty it carries, therefore, is derived externally.

2) Sign

The certainty in question had to be obtained through a '*signum*' issued by God, which, as Spinoza points out, would have been superfluous if the prophets had possessed any sort of mathematical certainty about the matter.²⁶ Examples abound. When Abraham heard God's promise, he asked for a sign (Gen. ch. 15 v.8). 'He did indeed believe in God, and he did not seek a sign so as to have faith in God, but to know that this was God's promise to him.' So did Gideon, saying, 'show me a sign (that I may know) that it is Thou who talkest to me' (Judges ch.6 v.17). To Moses, too, God says, 'and let this be a sign that I have sent thee' (Exod. ch.3 v.12).

Signs were usually given as a more or less prodigious emergence, and varied considerably, depending on the prophet. 'A sign that would validate his prophecy for one prophet might fail to convince another who held different beliefs, and so the signs varied in the case of each prophet.'²⁷ It will, therefore, be in vain to seek among the various forms that signs took for an intrinsic nature that would make them true signs. Spinoza points out that the prophets themselves had no such knowledge. Moses warned (Deut. ch.13 v.3): 'The Lord also worketh signs and miracles to try his people.' Ezekiel clearly tells us that God sometimes deceives men by false revelations, 'and when a prophet (that is, a false prophet) is deceived and hath spoken a thing, I, the Lord, have deceived that prophet' (ch.14 v.9). Prophesying is thus a risky mission. A sign, without which a vision would be difficult to distinguish from mere delirium, may yet be deceptive and, as Moses stipulates, a false prophet must be condemned to death even if he has confirmed his teaching with a sign. For this reason, concludes Spinoza, the certainty afforded by prophecy 'was not a mathematical certainty, but only a moral certainty.'²⁸

The next question, then, is, How could a prophet rely on so risky a thing as a sign? How could he convince himself that he was not 'deceived by God'? Again, the Bible gives the answer.

²⁴ TTP, pp.151, 152.

²⁵ TTP, p.30.

²⁶ TTP, p.30.

²⁷ TTP, pp.31, 32.

²⁸ TTP, p.30.

3) Truthfulness

Spinoza states:

Although this seems to prove that prophetic revelation is a matter open to much doubt, it nevertheless did possess a considerable degree of certainty, as I have said. For God never deceives the good [*pii*] and his chosen ones: in accordance with the ancient proverb (1 Samuel ch.24 v.13), and as is clearly shown by the story of Abigail and her speech, God uses the good as the instruments of his goodness [*pietas*] and the wicked [*impii*] as the executors and tools of his wrath.²⁹

‘This is also quite clear from the case of Micaiah,’ adds Spinoza, ‘although God had resolved to deceive Ahab through prophets, he employed only false prophets, whereas to the good [*pious*] prophet he revealed the matter as it was and did not forbid him to proclaim the true things.’³⁰ What counts most in warranting the veracity of a revelation is the ‘piety’ of a prophet. If a sign could serve as a moment of certainty for the prophet, it was not that the prophet was gifted with a special faculty of reception, but that he had a mind that was directed exclusively towards equity and good; if this were not the case, the sign would not serve to assure him. Spinoza remarks elsewhere that ‘those who are conscious of their own probity do not fear death as criminals do, nor do they beg for mercy, for they are not tormented with remorse for shameful deeds.’³¹ A prophet is a man of probity, ready to submit his clear conscience to the judgement of God who, he believes, cannot possibly deceive the pious. It was by such ethical conviction that a prophet could trust a risky sign.

This explains the unmistakably heteronomous nature of prophetic certainty. Prophetic revelation possessed ‘a considerable degree of certainty,’ but it was ‘only of a moral kind,’ since, as Scripture tells us, ‘nobody can justify himself before God, or boast that he is the instrument of God’s goodness.’³² The reason that the prophets could be certain of the revealed matter, despite their ignorance of its truth condition, is now clear. The certainty in question was based exclusively on their truthful obedience to Gods’ unquestionable moral commandment and was hence justifiable only by emitted signs of approval of their truthful mind.

Spinoza concludes thus:

Therefore the certainty of the prophets was based entirely on these three considerations: —

1. That the things revealed were most vividly imagined, just as we are wont to be affected by objects in our waking hours.
2. The occurrence of a sign.

²⁹ TTP, p.31.

³⁰ TTP, p.31.

³¹ TTP, p.245.

³² TTP, p.31.

3. Lastly and most important, that the minds of the prophets were directed exclusively towards equity and good.³³

The three conditions—assertability conditions, if you like, in contrast with truth conditions³⁴—sufficiently indicate that whatever the prophets could be certain of, it would have something to do with command and obedience. For imagination and signs would be nothing without a prophet's entire devotion to God. It is interesting to note here that a command in general has no truth condition, as is usually the case with a propositional statement. While the statement 'A cat is on the mat' is true or false according to the case that obtains, the command, 'Keep the door open for the cat' has no truth conditions, as it does not refer to a state of affairs that may obtain. It can only be questioned, as to whether it is a command to be followed. Accordingly, while a statement 'God is invisible' may be true or false according to the case obtained—we do not argue here how it may be obtained—a commandment, 'Do no murder,' for example, can only be accepted as a 'truthful' command to follow, or else rejected as 'wrongful'. No special intelligence is needed to see that what the commandment tells us to do is *prima facie* right in this case, and that the commanding authority cannot possibly be wicked. Command requires obedience, and obedience simply requires ordinary understanding.

The conclusion Spinoza draws seems sound: the aim of Scripture 'is simply to teach obedience,' which, 'surely no one can deny'.³⁵ The prophets had no need of theological erudition to admonish people of God's command and the possible outcome of their obedience or disobedience. As the '*historia*' or the critical evidence of Scripture abundantly shows, 'they won such praise and repute not so much for sublimity and pre-eminence of intellect as for piety and faithfulness'.³⁶ As Spinoza points out, this fits with the fact that the prophets were seldom in disagreement on moral matters, while their beliefs (*opiniones*) concerning speculative matters differed considerably. Samuel, for example, believed that God never repents of any decision he has made (1 Sam. ch.15 v.29), while to Jeremiah it was revealed (ch.28 v.8, 10) that God turns back from his decree, provided that men also change for the better or worse from the time of his sentence.³⁷ To prophets who believed in the follies of omens, God's decree was revealed as unchangeable. To prophets who believed that men act from free will and from their own power, God was revealed as one who is aloof and unaware of future human actions, and so on.³⁸ So, it should be admitted that, 'the prophets held various, even

³³ TTP, p.31.

³⁴ On this contrast, we permit ourselves to refer to Kripke's discussion on Wittgensteinian's shift from truth conditions to assertability conditions. See Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein: On Rules and Private Language*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, pp.72-75.

³⁵ TTP, p.174.

³⁶ TTP, p.37.

³⁷ TTP, p.42.

³⁸ TTP, pp.32, 33.

contrary beliefs, and various prejudices.³⁹ But this need not trouble us at all, says Spinoza, for the object and the substance of revelation consist in an admonishment to live the true life, not in teaching philosophical doctrines on free will and predestination.⁴⁰

So this all comes down to one thing: the prophets were ignorant of what is in reality the Divine Being and his work. They could well be ignorant in such speculative matters without prejudice to their piety and, therefore, without prejudice to their ‘moral certainty’. Their mission was to teach obedience, and the certainty they possessed had to be suitable for accomplishing this mission.⁴¹

This brings us to the second point: if there are doctrines universally taught by the prophets, despite their ignorance, what ‘sure knowledge’, specifically, do these doctrines consist of? In the following section we will see how Spinoza identifies those doctrines in light of an assertability condition, not the truth condition.

3 Incorruptible teachings

Prophecy, as Spinoza sees it, has a structure consisting of two main parts: the ‘base’ (*fundamentum*), which is the fundamental commandment of God, and the ‘fabric’ (*fabrica*) that it sustains. The latter, again, consists of two heterogeneous components: the ‘moral doctrines’ and the ‘speculative matters’. As a whole, they constitute the substance of a prophetic doctrine.

Our examination in the previous section showed that the purpose of prophecy consists of teaching obedience, and nothing else. What commandment, then, did the prophets believe obedience (or disobedience) linked to, one that would be certain to realise a predicted future consequence? There may be several, but there is one essential commandment that Spinoza has little difficulty identifying; it was, and has always been, the commandment of love towards God and one’s neighbour:

³⁹ TTP, p.35.

⁴⁰ TTP, p.43

⁴¹ Cf. TTP, p.171: ‘We see, then, that Jeremiah, Moses and John sum up very briefly the knowledge of God which it is the duty of every man to have, and they hold it to consist simply in what we asserted, that God is supremely just and supremely merciful, that is, the one perfect pattern of the true life. Furthermore, Scripture never expressly gives a definition of God, nor does it enjoin on us the acceptance of any other attributes than those I have just described, nor does it formally commend other attributes as it does these. All this leads us to the conclusion that the intellectual knowledge of God which contemplates his nature as it really is in itself — a nature which men cannot imitate by a set rule of conduct nor take as their example — has no bearing on the practice of a true way of life, on faith, and on revealed religion, and that consequently men can go far astray in this matter without sinning.’

...from Scripture itself we learn that its message, unclouded by any doubt or any ambiguity, is in essence this, that to love God above all, and one's neighbour as oneself.⁴²

Such a commandment may seem to constitute a gross platitude, and it is. Everyone has heard of it, no matter how little or much he or she has learned. It falls under the rubric Spinoza dubs '*res perceptibiles*', or things easy to be perceived, which are so impeccably known to all that 'we are wont to accept with moral certainty and to hear without surprise, although they can by no means be proved.'⁴³ Another sign of mockery on Spinoza's part? On the contrary, Spinoza considers this unproved platitude the irrefutable sign of having come down through an authentic tradition: the doctrine of charity, which commands one to love God and one's neighbour, is so important a platitude that it has remained an irrefutable core, impermeable to adulteration over the long course of scriptural tradition.

This incorruptible nature is by no means a trivial fact for Spinoza since, as amply shown by his critical examination, the tradition of biblical documents is far from flawless.⁴⁴ The Word of God, regarded as written words passed down by generations, is 'faulty, mutilated, adulterated and inconsistent,' so that 'we possess it only in fragmentary form'.⁴⁵ The books of the prophets are only assembled fragments, containing prophecies gathered from other books. And, what is worse, those who selected, assembled and approved the texts—a council of Pharisees—probably did not lack the audacity to conceal some material from the public.⁴⁶ Yet, the central doctrine of obedience and charity has remained untouched:

There can be no adulteration here, nor can it have been written by a hasty and errant pen; for if doctrine differing from this is to be found anywhere in Scripture, all the rest of its teaching must also have been different. For this is the basis of the whole structure of religion; if it is removed, the entire fabric crashes to the ground, and then such a Scripture would not be the sort of thing we are now discussing, but a quite different book.⁴⁷

Spinoza contrasts here the material flaws of Scripture with the certainty and consistency of this doctrine. Granted that Scripture has been generally mutilated and adulterated, the doctrine of obedience and charity has remained the same for, as he says above, 'if it is removed, the entire fabric [*fabrica*] crashes to the ground' and makes of Scripture 'a quite different book'. The point is worth noting: the core teaching, which is a *sine qua non* for the book to be regarded as holy scripture, puts a constraint on the rest of Scripture, a constraint such that no one, be he learned or ignorant, can pretend he is interpreting or transmitting the Word of God if he contradicts the core teaching of love.

⁴² TTP, p.165.

⁴³ TTP, pp.111, 252.

⁴⁴ See TTP, Chapter VIII, IX, and X.

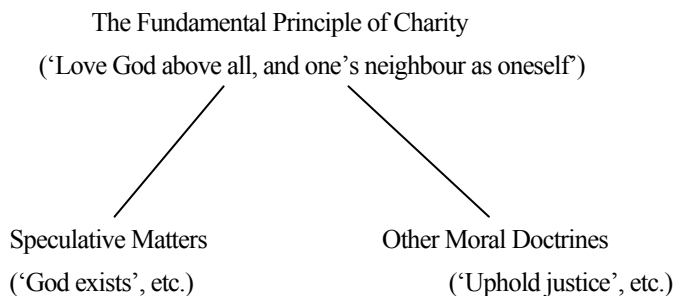
⁴⁵ TTP, p.158.

⁴⁶ TTP, p.142.

⁴⁷ TTP, p.165.

‘It is, then, incontestable,’ continues Spinoza, ‘that this has always been the teaching of Scripture, and therefore no error capable of corrupting this meaning can have entered without its being immediately observed by all, nor could anyone have deliberately corrupted it without his evil intent being at once detected.’⁴⁸

The term *‘fabrica’*, then, is more than a metaphor. Spinoza denotes thereby the whole fundamental structure, which consists of a specific number of statements on God and other moral doctrines that are based on the core doctrine of charity, or the *‘fundamentum’*, in such a logical manner that—to echo Spinoza—they ‘indisputably’ or ‘clearly’ follow from it. There are theological beliefs that Scripture ‘was at all times bound to teach if all the rest of its teachings were not to be vain and without foundation’. Such teachings included ‘God exists’, ‘He provides for all things’, ‘He is omnipotent’, ‘by His decrees the good prosper and the wicked are cast down’, and ‘our salvation depends solely on His grace’; there were also other moral doctrines that ‘clearly follow’ from the same universal base, such as ‘to uphold justice’, ‘to aid the weak’, ‘to do no murder’, ‘to covet no man’s goods’, and so on. As a whole, they hang together on the core doctrine of charity, whose elimination would entail their entire collapse. Conversely, if any part of these teachings is deleted, the core doctrine will at once demand that it be restored. ‘None of these,’ claims Spinoza, ‘could have been corrupted by human malice or destroyed by time’s decay; for if any part of them had disappeared, the underlying universal principle would at once have restored it, especially the doctrine of charity, which is everywhere commended in the highest degree in both Testaments.’⁴⁹ So, we obtain the *fabric* of scriptural doctrines as an incorruptible whole, which looks like the following:



Needless to say, Spinoza is not committed to the standard theological belief, which holds that God, by some singular act of providence, has preserved all the Sacred Books uncorrupted. On the contrary, he points to the paradox in such a presumption of an uncorrupted whole, a presumption that would constitute the very source of temptation to adulterate scriptural passages so as to make them

⁴⁸ TTP, p.165.

⁴⁹ TTP, pp.165-166.

consistent with the putative unity of truth.⁵⁰ Nor does he think that the vast majority of the common people were perpetually pious enough to preserve the '*fabrica*' from corruption. Such a supposition would be, obviously, contrary to history, as men were no better in times past than they were in Spinoza's time. 'All men,' says Spinoza, 'Jews and Gentiles alike, have always been the same, and in every age virtue has been exceedingly rare.'⁵¹ The incorruptibility that Spinoza has in mind must be based on something else. Our supposition is that Spinoza conceives of it in terms of the linguistic activities of the multitude, a *language game* if you like, where deviations barely succeed in surviving.

Spinoza declares that critical exegesis should be based on study of the '*usus linguae*' (linguistic usage). Although the putative tradition that the Pharisees claimed to have developed, following on immediately from the prophets, should be regarded with the utmost suspicion, we can be quite confident says Spinoza, in accepting as 'uncorrupted' a certain tradition of the Jews, namely, 'the meaning [*significatio*] of the words of the Hebrew language'. For, while it may occasionally have been in someone's interest to alter the sense of some passages, 'it could never have been to anyone's interest to change the meaning of a word.'⁵² The reason Spinoza puts forward for this is worth quoting.

Indeed, this is very difficult to accomplish, for whoever would try to change the meaning of a word would also have to explain all the writers who wrote in that language and used that word in its accepted meaning, in each case taking account of the character and intention of the writer; or else he would have to falsify the text, a task requiring much circumspection. Then again, a language is preserved by the learned and unlearned alike, whereas books and the meaning of their contents are preserved only by the learned. Therefore we can readily conceive that the learned may have altered or corrupted the sense of some passage in a rare book which they had in their possession, but not the meaning of words. Besides which, if anyone should wish to change the meaning of a word, he would find it difficult to maintain consistency thereafter both in his writing and in his speaking.⁵³

Manipulation of the meaning of a word scarcely pays, as it is determined by its collective use in the community.⁵⁴ The same applies to the chief historical narratives of Scripture: we cannot doubt, says Spinoza, that they have been transmitted to us in good faith, because 'they are well known to all [*notissimae omnibus*]', given that it was the custom of the Jewish people in ancient times to chant their nation's history in psalms. The same holds with respect to the chief facts of the life of Christ and his Passion, in that it immediately spread abroad throughout the whole Roman Empire. 'It is therefore impossible to believe that, without the connivance of a large part of men—which is quite

⁵⁰ See TTP, p.135.

⁵¹ TTP, pp.159-160.

⁵² TTP, p.105.

⁵³ TTP, pp.105-106.

⁵⁴ This view seems very similar to the point made by Wittgenstein: namely, that the meaning of a word is its use in the language game. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1953, especially paragraph 43.

inconceivable—later generations handed down a version of the main outlines of these events different from what they had received.⁵⁵ The same is all the more true for the moral doctrines of Scripture, for they are expressed ‘in quite ordinary language [*verba usitatissima*], and being directed to the generality of people they are therefore straightforward and easy to understand.’⁵⁶ They are so manifestly expressed throughout Scripture that ‘no one can deny that he who by God’s commandments loves his neighbour as himself is truly obedient and blessed according to the Law, while he who hates or takes no thought for his neighbour is rebellious and disobedient.’⁵⁷ It is obvious that Spinoza applies the same logic of persistence to both cases. No one can juggle or manipulate the ‘*res perceptibiles*’, since they are so commonly known to all, i.e., everyone knows that everyone knows that everyone knows.

This brings us to the idea in Spinoza’s text that it is the anonymous power of the multitude⁵⁸ that has been effecting grammatical constraints on words and deeds in the community. Another passage with the same line of argument is still more clear on this point:

Furthermore, although there is no crime so abominable as not to have been committed by someone, there is no one who, to excuse his crimes, would attempt to destroy the law or to introduce some impiety as eternal doctrine and the road to salvation. For we see that human nature is so constituted that any man (be he king or subject) who has committed a base action seeks to cloak his deed with such outward show as to give the impression of having done nothing contrary to justice and decency.⁵⁹

Human malice cannot alter the doctrines based on the core teaching, as even wrong doers need to appeal to them as a pretext. It is likely that Spinoza thinks a similar pressure was exerted upon those councils (both of Pharisees and of Christians) when they, reluctantly, left some books untouched that otherwise they would have rejected and excluded from the canon, on their authority. He assumes that the book of Ecclesiastes narrowly escaped this fate only because it referred to the Divine Law, or the fundamental teaching of charity.⁶⁰ Thus, somewhat surprisingly to those who regard this philosopher as a blasphemer, Spinoza speaks in defence of the authenticity of the biblical tradition: ‘We may accept,’ he says, ‘without reservation that the universal Divine Law, as taught by Scripture, has reached us uncorrupted.’⁶¹ Spinoza does not hesitate to call the core teaching of love the genuine Word of God, which constitutes so well-known and encompassing a platitude that practically no one has dared to question it. Moreover, as far as this teaching and other derivative moral precepts are

⁵⁵ TTP, p.166.

⁵⁶ TTP, p.111.

⁵⁷ TTP, p.174.

⁵⁸ ‘*Multitudinis potentia*’, which plays an important role in the later *Tractatus Politicus*. See Chapter 1, sections 16 and 17. We discussed the notion in detail in: Ueno, , 269-296.

⁵⁹ TTP, p.166.

⁶⁰ TTP, pp.142, 150, 164.

⁶¹ TTP, p.166.

concerned, sane reason has nothing to say against revelation.⁶² There is no doubt that Spinoza is talking about the practical irrefutability of the moral teachings over the long course of a language process that people have been engaged in over time. We should note that the prophetic imagination, signs, and moral virtue had to be such that the prophets 'were wont to convince the people of their authority thereby.'⁶³ If the prophets could ever be certain of anything speculative at all, it was not because they were gifted with divine knowledge but because they were under the same logical constraint of a common language process involving the idea of piety, which I permit myself to call *the language game of piety*.

4 The doctrine of salvation among speculative matters

The seven 'dogmas of the universal faith' displayed in Chapter fourteen of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* recapture another component of the '*fabrica*', namely the speculative matters:

- '1. God, that is, a Supreme Being, exists, supremely just and merciful, the exemplar of true life.'
- '2. God is one alone.'
- '3. God is omnipresent, and all things are open to him.'
- '4. God has supreme right and dominion over all things.'
- '5. Worship of God and obedience to him consists solely in justice and charity, or love towards one's neighbour.'
- '6. All who obey God by following this way of life, and only those, are saved; others, who live at pleasure's behest, are lost.'
- '7. God forgives repentant sinners.'⁶⁴

As I pointed out elsewhere,⁶⁵ these dogmas are designed to specify a certain grammar of faith and, consequently, need not be true statements of God. Spinoza holds them to be logically derived from the definition of faith to the effect that: 'the holding of certain beliefs about God such that, without these beliefs, there cannot be obedience to God, and if this obedience is posited, these beliefs are necessarily posited.'⁶⁶ In other words, they articulate a minimum requisite for God's commands to make sense. Hence, the articles of faith are identified by the type of reasoning: were it not for that belief there could not be obedience. Dogma 1 ('God exists') is a necessary condition for obedience,

⁶² TTP, p.186.

⁶³ TTP, pp.185-186.

⁶⁴ TTP, pp.177-178.

⁶⁵ See Ueno, 2001.

⁶⁶ TTP, p.175.

without which one cannot know whom to obey. Similarly, without the belief of Dogma 2 ('God is one alone'), exclusive devotion would be impossible. Credence in justice would be groundless without Dogma 3 ('God is omnipresent'), so would be the demand for unexceptional obedience without Dogma 4 ('God has supreme right and dominion over all things'). Again, if Dogma 6 ('Only those who obey God are saved') disappears, there will no longer be any reason to obey God, and if there were no chance to be forgiven as stated in Dogma 7, no reason, either, to believe in God's mercy. As for Dogma 5 ('Obedience to God consists solely in love towards one's neighbour'), Spinoza spells out no explication. This exceptional treatment can be fully explained by the fact that Dogma 5 is the restatement of the fundamental commandment itself, which is to be taken as an unquestionable basis for obedience, otherwise, as we observed earlier, 'the entire fabric crashes to the ground.'

The doctrine of salvation figures in the sixth position. The prophets were grammatically constrained to teach it alike, for, 'if men did not firmly believe this, there is no reason why they should obey God rather than their desires.'⁶⁷ As the doctrine is among the logical requisites for the unquestionable commandment which is alien to the truth condition, it makes no sense to demand a proof of the matter. Though it is true that the command 'Keep the door open for the cat' makes no sense unless there is a cat around, this by no means makes the existence of the cat true. Put simply: those who obey the command are supposed to have a belief that the cat is there. The same is true for the doctrine of salvation, which 'cannot be investigated by the natural light of reason, or at least that nobody has been successful in proving it,' and, 'therefore it was essential that there should be revelation.'⁶⁸

Spinoza is hence quite consistent: prophecy was necessary because it had to teach matters that are, by nature, alien to the realm of demonstrable truth. The point is also confirmed by Note 31 to the same passage, which reads: '...it is not reason but revelation that can teach us that it is enough for blessedness or salvation for us to accept the divine decrees as laws or commandments, and that there is no need to conceive them as eternal truths.'⁶⁹ I agree with Richard Mason when he claims that Spinoza's repeated view about revelation was 'not that it was inaccurate or metaphorical, but that it was necessary,' and that, accordingly, Spinoza did not think that the balance between faith and philosophy was 'a matter of wrong and right understanding, of worse or better understanding, or of less or more understanding.'⁷⁰ There is much to agree with in this view.

⁶⁷ TTP, p.178.

⁶⁸ TTP, p.185.

⁶⁹ TTP, p.263.

⁷⁰ Mason, 1997, p.201.

5 The ground for accepting the doctrine

Now that the full meaning has been elucidated it is easier to understand why ‘the prophetic certainty was not a mathematical certainty, but only a moral certainty.’⁷¹ The prophets were certain of revelation in a manner that differed from that of perceiving a demonstrable truth. But the reason why ‘we’, the ‘philosophical reader’, should also accept the same revelation, and with similar certainty, is not immediately clear. The preceding discussion moves toward the view that Spinoza may think that the reader himself—no matter how he conceives of ‘God’—should acknowledge the same grammar, insofar as he takes part in the same language game. Let us see if this holds.

Spinoza’s last argument centres around the question of whether there is any sound reason for us to accept the doctrine of salvation, apart from verifiable truth conditions.

It would be folly to refuse to accept, merely on the grounds that it cannot be proved with mathematical certainty, that which is abundantly confirmed by the testimony of the prophets, that which is the source of so much comfort to those less gifted with intelligence, and of considerable advantage to the state, and which we can believe without incurring any peril or hurt. Could we live our lives wisely if we were to accept as authentic [*verum*] nothing that could conceivably be called into doubt on any principle of scepticism? Are not most of our actions in any case fraught with uncertainty and hazard?⁷²

Spinoza is not saying that we should accept the doctrine for the sake of certain advantages. Though it is ‘folly’ to throw away those practical advantages together with revelation, this by no means implies that it is those advantages that make the doctrine morally certain. Those who accuse Spinoza of ‘ethical Machiavellism’ fail to see this point. The same holds with regard to another reason that Spinoza offers, one mentioned above, that the doctrine is abundantly confirmed by the testimony of the prophets. We will credit prophetic authority blindly unless we know the grounds for their testimony.

There may be an objection to this on the basis that Spinoza himself emphasised the ‘benefit and necessity’ (*utilitas & necessitas*) of revelation.⁷³ So he does. But we must not forget that it is its moral certainty that makes revelation beneficial and necessary, and not vice versa. This is clear from the following passage, in which Spinoza specifies the reason why he esteems Scripture and revelation so highly: ‘For since we cannot perceive by the natural light that simple obedience is a way to salvation, and since only revelation teaches us that this comes about by God’s singular grace, which we cannot attain by reason, it follows that Scripture has brought very great comfort to mankind.’⁷⁴ Revelation is factually necessary and beneficial because it teaches with moral certainty

⁷¹ TTP, p.30.

⁷² TTP, p.187.

⁷³ TTP, p.188.

⁷⁴ TTP, p.188.

things that we cannot prove by reason. Given that all men are capable of obedience, but there are only a few who acquire a virtuous disposition under the guidance of reason alone, 'did we not have the testimony of Scripture, the salvation of nearly all men would be in doubt.'⁷⁵

It must also be said that an appeal to practical advantage is completely alien to prophetic discourse. We can hardly imagine the prophets convincing the people of their authority by appealing to such 'Machiavellian' advantages. The point is not unimportant, for Spinoza clearly states that the foundation of our own certainty should not be different from that on which the prophets based their certainty:

So those who attempt to prove Scripture's authority by demonstrations of a mathematical order go far astray, for the authority of the Bible is dependent on the authority of the prophets, and can thus have no stronger arguments to support it than those by which the prophets of old were wont to convince the people of their authority. Indeed, our own certainty as to this authority can have no other foundation than that on which the prophets based their certainty and authority.⁷⁶

And that foundation is based on the following:

Now we have shown that the certainty of the prophets rested entirely on these three factors—first, a distinct and vivid imagination, second, a sign, third and most important, a heart turned to what is right and good. They based their claims on no other considerations, and so there are no other considerations by which their authority could be proved either to the people to whom they once spoke face to face, or to us to whom they speak in writing.⁷⁷

The vivid imagination being an exceptional endowment of a prophet, our certainty 'can rest, and ought to rest, entirely on the other two, the sign and the doctrine they taught.'⁷⁸ As we saw earlier, these two conditions were given to confirm the truthfulness of the prophets: had they not the 'sincere conviction' that prompted them to teach that men may achieve blessedness by obedience and faith alone, they could not have confirmed it by means of signs. So we, the readers of Scripture, can be sure that 'they were not speaking at random nor in insanity'. This is further confirmed by the fact that 'all their moral teaching is in full agreement with reason'. So, 'it is no accident that the Word of God proclaimed by the prophets agrees in all respects with the Word of God that speaks in our hearts.'⁷⁹ Spinoza has therefore good reason to bring the reader to the same linguistic foundation on which the Jews of old stood. 'The Bible, I say, conveys to us this certainty just as well as did the living voice of the prophets to the Jews of old. For we showed...that Scripture has come down to us

⁷⁵ TTP, p.188.

⁷⁶ TTP, pp.185-186.

⁷⁷ TTP, p.186.

⁷⁸ TTP, p.186.

⁷⁹ TTP, p.186.

uncorrupted in respect of its doctrine and its chief historical narratives.’⁸⁰ It is certainly folly to reject the doctrine of salvation because of a lack of mathematical certainty, for to do that is not only to throw away the practical advantages it carries with it but also, and above all, to deny, in vain, its grammar, which we are bound by. ‘Therefore,’ concludes Spinoza, ‘although this fundamental principle underlying all theology and Scripture cannot be demonstrated with mathematical exactitude, we yet accept it with sound judgement.’⁸¹

6 Remaining questions

Some questions remain. Does Spinoza, arguably a non-believer, accept the doctrine? Is it not unlikely that a philosopher, once excommunicated from the synagogue of Amsterdam on a charge of denying the immortality of the soul, and one who came to be absorbed in the composition of a book on ethics in geometrical order, a book that would turn out to contain no word of ‘charity’ (*Charitas*), a philosopher, in short, reputed to be an atheist, would seriously accept the doctrine of ‘salvation by simple obedience’? After all, is not this whole argument a meticulously elaborated machinery of disguise, dissimulating a destructive purpose? Leo Strauss, for example, contends that the repeated assertion that Spinoza makes, that prophecy as certain knowledge of truths surpassing the capacity of human reason is possible, is not to be held as truthful. For, ‘there is no reason why a sincere believer in revealed and supra-rational teachings should declare that man has no access whatever to truth except through sense-perception and reasoning, or that reason or philosophy alone, as distinguished from revelation or theology, possesses and justly claims for itself the realm of truth, or that belief in invisible things which cannot be demonstrated by reason is simply absurd, or that what are said to be teachings “above reason” are in truth dreams or mere fictions and “by far below reason.”’⁸² I believe this claim to be already refuted by the preceding discussions. Had he asserted revelation to be ‘truths’, Spinoza would have been contradicting himself by confining the realm of truth to philosophy alone. However, this is not the case. According to Spinoza, although revelation does not tell truths about what is actually the case, it nevertheless has its own grounds for being accepted. Spinoza is not contradicting himself, although he may not be ‘a sincere believer’.

The same applies to the supposition that Alexandre Matheron makes in his minute analysis of *‘le salut des ignorants’*. He considers as indispensable for the defence of Spinoza’s intellectual integrity the supposition that Spinoza holds the doctrine of salvation as one that tells the truth. What conditions could Spinoza have in mind so that salvation would come true? Matheron’s answer may

⁸⁰ TTP, p.186.

⁸¹ TTP, p.187.

⁸² Strauss, 1952, pp.169-170.

sound somewhat bizarre. According to him, Spinoza had a hypothesis on reincarnation. Assuming the possibility of increased social improvement through moral obedience and, in consequence, of an enhanced intellectual improvement on the part of individuals, all those who obey God's commandment have a good chance of being reborn someday in a better future society and a better chance of becoming a philosopher and, thus, of attaining an intellectual love of God, which constitutes salvation in its genuine Spinozan sense. This hypothesis, claims Matheron, is completely compatible with Spinoza's philosophy, which supposes an eternal essence of human body. Moreover, a conversation with Tschirnhaus reported by Leibniz suggests that Spinoza probably did entertain just such an idea of transmigration. So, there is no reason to doubt that Spinoza takes the salvation of the ignorant seriously. Though it is undemonstrable to us, because of our generally limited intellect, it is not impossible, according to the Spinozan theory of imagination, that the unusually vivid imagination of the prophets could apprehend in some manner this future possibility. Their testimony is not to be denied, therefore, in Spinoza's system.⁸³

Matheron's defence seems to reduce the question of moral certainty to that of probability, in a more or less mathematical sense. As there is a strong probability that it will rain tomorrow, so salvation in the future for those who obey is also a strong possibility. Though we cannot demonstrate it coming true necessarily, everything indicates that it is very likely, so we can be morally certain that it will happen. This solution might be destructive to Spinoza's own context. Recall that, in Spinoza's view, prophetic knowledge had nothing to do with a mechanism of possibility in the universe that would explain revealed salvation as a strong probability in the future. The prophets could well have been ignorant of such conditions, and yet certain of their doctrine. We need to remind ourselves of the fact that Spinoza never raises questions as to the possibility or impossibility of salvation throughout the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Spinoza's aim, as I have argued elsewhere, was to release faith from the devastating truth claim, which was totally alien to prophetic certainty.⁸⁴

However, another question remains. There is no doubt that Spinoza himself had no need to believe the prophetic doctrine for his own salvation. It is enough to refer to the fifth part of the *Ethica*, where he states that salvation exists 'in a constant and eternal Love of God, or in God's Love for men,' and that this salvation by intellectual love is strictly confined to 'the wise'. 'The wise man, insofar as he is considered as such,' he says, 'is hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind.'⁸⁵ He knows he has no need of faith, and he knows his intellectual love, or understanding of the total reality, has nothing to do with faith. In the *Tractatus Theologico-*

⁸³ Matheron, 1971, p.242, p.208, pp.227-242, pp.242-248.

⁸⁴ On the intellectual crisis spawned by Cartesio-Cocceianism, See Israel, 1995, pp.890-892. For more discussion on Spinoza's position, see Ueno, 1997.

⁸⁵ E 5P36S, 5P42S.

Politicus he declares that the intellectual knowledge of God, ‘which contemplates his nature as it really is in itself—a nature which men cannot imitate by a set rule of conduct nor take as their example—has no bearing on the practice of a true way of life, on faith, and on revealed religion’.⁸⁶ True, as he confesses at the end of the *Ethica*, the way to intellectual salvation is no easy one. But Spinoza believes that it can be found.⁸⁷ Why, then, should he accept the doctrine of the prophets?

That salvation by obedience has no bearing on salvation by intellectual love does not imply that the wise have good reason to reject it as false. On the contrary, the whole object of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* consists in a disabling of such radical rationalism that goes against the grammar of piety. Indeed, the condition of acceptance is, according to Spinoza, universal, regardless of the quality of those who accept it; be he wise or ignorant, everyone who refers to scriptural authority ‘is bound’ without exception ‘to accept’ (*‘unusquisque amplecti tenetur’*) the dogmas of the universal faith⁸⁸, or else he violates the grammar of piety and talks nonsense, with or without reason.

I do not deny thereby that Spinoza might have had certain *‘arrière-pensées’* in making such a proposal to the ‘philosophical reader’. He might have thought it helpful to neutralise his reputation of being an atheist; additionally, it may be useful for Cartesian readers to follow his example so as not to be trapped in sterile controversies. He may have thought that the moral obedience of the multitude will eventually contribute to peace in the Republic, or, as some ontological interpretations have had it⁸⁹, he may have appreciated such obedience as a joyous, active human practice that forms part of the perfecting power of the Spinozan Nature-God. It is even likely that he could have explained the favourable effect of faith on human existence in terms of his theory of affect that we find in the *Ethica*. It is also very likely, as we suggested above, that he had in mind a certain physical ground—the power of the multitude—as the basis for a language process. One thing, however, is certain, these ‘hidden’ reasons, however likely they may be, play no role in his argument justifying the foundation of ‘moral certainty’. If our preceding discussion holds, the certainty with which Spinoza thinks everyone is bound to accept the doctrine is, and should be, the same for everyone who draws on scriptural authority, himself included. And this is why, I think, he calls the dogmas of faith ‘universal’. However, there remains the question, What is the point in saying that a non-believer ‘accepts’ a doctrine of faith? Is not faith, after all, a belief in truth? Much more could be said on this question, but I leave the matter open for the moment.

⁸⁶ TTP, p.171.

⁸⁷ E 5P42S.

⁸⁸ TTP, p.174.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Rousset, 1968, pp.218-219, 221.

Abbreviations

TTP = *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: with page-numbers according to *Spinoza Opera*, Bd.3.

E = *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*: with citation conventions commonly used in *Studia Spinozana*. (P: propositio, C: corollarium, S: scholium, etc.)

This paper develops in much greater detail some of the themes sketched in my '*Spinoza no yogen-ron: Shingaku-seijiron dokkai ni mukete*, [in Japanese: 'Spinoza on Prophecy: a New Reading of *The Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*'], *Critical Space*, Vol.II-18, 1998, and will constitute part of a monograph on Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The text followed is: Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Künrath, 1670; in *Spinoza Opera*, Im Auftrag der Heiderberger Akademie der Wissenschaften hrg. von Carl Gebhardt, Carl Winter, 1925; 2. Auflage, 1972, Bd.3. For citation I used the translation by Shirley: Benedictus de Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, translated by Samuel Shirley, E. J. Brill, 1991.

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