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Ordinary and Usual Things, or Common Belief in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*¹

Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), which was published anonymously in 1670, created controversy. It was suspected of preaching atheism in the guise of religious piety—a suspicion understandable if we take a look at one of its claims in Chapter VII “On the interpretation of Scripture.” It reads,

As far as the common people of today, are concerned, we have already shown that they can readily grasp in any language everything necessary for salvation as this is all entirely ordinary and usual (*adeo communia & usitata*), even if they are ignorant about the reasons for what is required; and the common people rely on this understanding, and certainly not on the testimony of interpreters.²

According to Spinoza the teachings of true piety are expressed in “the most everyday language” since they are “very ordinary and extremely simple” and “easy to understand”.³ That is why, he says, unlearned, common people could easily grasp the meaning of the prophets, who would have been ignorant themselves. There is no difficulty or ambiguity for us, either, in discerning the essence of the Holy Writings, which comes down to the most familiar teaching: “To love God above all things and one's neighbour as oneself.”⁴

This seemingly flat and shallow interpretation of Scripture cannot fail to go against the grain of those who believe in a secret meaning behind purely literary texts. Emanuel Levinas, a Spinoza antagonist of our day, once blamed Spinoza for disregarding another dimension of meaning by subordinating sacred verses to the rules of philology. “The Holy Scriptures, admittedly, have another secret, an additional essence that purely literary texts have

¹ Based on Osamu Ueno, “Spinoza no kyōyū-shinnen-ron : Shingaku-Seijiron ni okeru kiwamete heibon de arifureta mono” in Japanese [Spinoza's Theory of Common Belief: ‘Ordinary and Usual Things’ in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*], *Journal of the Literary Society of Yamaguchi University*, Vol.7, pp.61-80, and rewritten in English for the present version. 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, and Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* in *op. cit.*, Bd. 2. For citation I used the translation by Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel for the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and that by Edwin Curley for the *Ethica*.

² TTP VII, p.115.

³ TTP VII, p.111.

⁴ TTP XIII, p.165.

perhaps lost. ...Spinoza's critique makes no mention at all of this 'ontology' of meaning."⁵ If Levinas is right, Spinoza's mention of the authority of Scripture would be no more than words, concealing his real intention to subvert it, just as his contemporary, Lambertus van Velthuysen, accused him of, shortly after the publication of the *TTP*.⁶

But the case is not that simple. In this paper I will discuss Spinoza's serious concern about "entirely ordinary and usual" things, to show that it may not be unreasonable to say he had a sense for a certain mystery of ordinary things. Though my attempt will not satisfy his antagonists, it will nevertheless do justice to Spinoza's defence of the authority of Scripture.⁷ As Spinoza does not address expressly the problem of "very common and extremely simple" things, his implicit theory must be brought to light all the more because it seems to be the underlying basis of his whole argument in the *TTP*. The theory of imagination and affect in the *Ethica* will be referred to for this purpose. Finally, we shall determine what Spinoza had in mind when talking about the "ordinary and usual" in the theologico-political context.

THE PROBLEM OF COMMON BELIEF IN THE *TTP*

We shall start from the striking contrast Spinoza makes in commenting on prophecy and prophets. He shows by textual examinations that, while the prophets all agree in their teaching that there is a God, one and omnipotent, who alone is to be adored and cares for all men, loving most those who worship Him and who love their neighbour as themselves, etc., they have no agreed view about what God is, and how he sees all things and provides for them, and so on.⁸ Spinoza takes this as evidence that the prophets could be, and perhaps were, ignorant of the truth of speculative matters and yet could never fail in saying the right thing concerning faith, i.e., to obey God by doing justice and charity. Spinoza holds that they had a "moral certainty" (*certitudo moralis*), which is completely different in nature from "mathematical certainty" (*certitudo mathematica*), the latter of which is based on proof according to reason.⁹ As I have discussed elsewhere, Spinoza takes this prophetic certainty seriously, in that it is a *sui generis* certainty external to the capacity of reason. He draws

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Subject: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*. Trans. Gary D. Mole, Bloomington, in: *Indiana University Press*, 1994 [Emmanuel Levinas, *L'au-delà du sujet: lectures et discours talmudiques*. Paris, France: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982], pp.171-172.

⁶ Cf. Ep 42.

⁷ Cf. *TTP* XII, p.160: "However, to remove every scruple, I must show on what grounds Scripture, or any inarticulate object, could be called sacred and divine. After that, I must prove what the word of God really is and that it is not contained in a certain number of books. Finally I must demonstrate that, Divine law and the word of God in so far as the Bible teaches what is requisite for obedience and salvation, it could not have been corrupted."

⁸ *TTP* VII, pp.102-103.

⁹ *TTP* III, p.30.

from his close examination of Scripture the triple conditions without which no prophecy could have been made: the unusually vivid imaginations of the prophets, occurrence of a sign, and their truthful mind for justice. Under these conditions, the prophets always gained their certainty from outside, as if from the Other, for they could never make a prophecy unless an external sign had been revealed that approved their truthfulness and convinced them of the authority to speak out before their people. And the people, too, demanded from them a sign, to share the same certainty that the word of God had come down through their mouths.¹⁰ It is hard not to discern there the presence of a certain communal force working on the imagination of those involved, in the form of an irresistible righteousness of the word of God. This form of common belief underlying moral certainty is our present concern.

It is interesting that Spinoza holds that this belief is something universal, which makes it possible for us to share the same prophetic certainty. The prophets, he says, offered no moral teaching which is not in accord with reason, nor is it coincidental that the word of God from the prophets “agrees completely with the actual word of God speaking in us”. He continues:

These things, then, we infer from the Bible with just as much certainty as the Jews in their time understood them from the living voice of the prophets. For...the Bible has descended to us unadulterated as regards its doctrine and the main historical narratives.¹¹

It is the same bedrock of belief that underlies the certainty held by the ancient Jews and the certainty we have in interpreting Scripture. By its persisting force, Scripture has been preserved from adulteration with regard to its core moral teaching. If this is the case, the “ordinary and usual” things should be considered on this basis. What is this form of common belief Spinoza envisages? What creates its self-preserving force? And what import will it have for our understanding of the *TTP*? These are the questions we shall address in the following sections.

THE FORM OF COMMON BELIEF

That the belief in question is not based on a perception of demonstrable truth is obvious from the fact that the prophets needed an external sign to convince themselves.¹² As I have discussed elsewhere, they were convinced not of an ontological or other truth of matters

¹⁰ *TTP* II, p.31. See Osamu Ueno, “Spinoza on Prophetic Certainty,” *Philosophia OSAKA* No.2, 2007, 63-83.

¹¹ *TTP* XV, pp.186-187.

¹² *TTP* II, p.30.

but of the undeniable righteousness of the command of God, for which—as is the case for any command—one cannot provide a truth-condition. In other words the belief underlying prophetic certainty is a non-cognitive one. Its compelling force consists of unquestionable righteousness in urging people to obey the divine command to do the right thing. And this uprightness was enough to convince those commoners who were ready to understand the point. But this does not mean that Spinoza imagines a fair-minded people. On the contrary, being fair-minded is always an exceptional quality credited to very few people, such as prophets. “All men alike, both Jews and gentiles, have always been the same, and in every age virtue has been very rare.”¹³ So Spinoza never imagined it was fair and equitable minds that had preserved the moral teachings of Scripture. The fact, in his eyes, is precisely the opposite. Here is what Spinoza has to say:

Furthermore, while it is impossible to imagine a crime so appalling that it has not been committed by somebody somewhere, yet there is no one who would attempt to abolish the Law to excuse their own crimes or present a malicious thing as an eternal and salutary doctrine. For human nature is evidently so fashioned that anyone (whether king or subject) who has committed any wrong, tries to present their actions in such colors that it will be believed that they have done nothing contrary to right and justice.¹⁴

Spinoza’s contention is challenging. That the mind which is “exclusively directed towards equity and good”¹⁵, like that of the prophets, has been very rare among men, does not hinder us from thinking about the perpetual presence of a common belief in justice and charity. On the contrary, it is very likely that the belief in question has been kept firm by being embedded in the language game of justification that people are engaged in, where those who are far from virtue are nevertheless compelled to present their actions under the guise of “right and justice”.

There is no doubt that Spinoza qualifies the common belief in a dimension which is neither that of truth nor that of personal moral creed—a dimension where everyone knows that everyone knows it right to say one must love God above all things and one’s neighbour as oneself. Though everyone is ignorant of the reason why he believes that everyone else unanimously acknowledges it to be right, he nevertheless feels it impossible to deny it. If Scripture, otherwise full of possible corruptions, has come down to us intact regarding its moral commandment, it is because of the impossibility of disbelief in this common belief that preserves it from degeneration. “Thus, no one can question that in this sense we have

¹³ *TTP* XII, p.160.

¹⁴ *TTP* XII, p.166.

¹⁵ *TTP* II, p.31.

received the divine law, uncorrupted", he concludes.¹⁶

Such is the form of common belief Spinoza presupposes in his biblical interpretation. It is a form of belief apart from any mathematical certainty and perhaps philosophically false—for it involves the popular image of a human-like God¹⁷—and yet remains stable in communal life in every age. Although it is a postulate of the arguments in the *TTP*, its theoretical account is not given there by the author—probably because it goes beyond the scope of the treatise. I think it is available from his prominent work, the *Ethica*, namely from his theory of imagination and affect.

BELIEF IN THE LIGHT OF THE THEORY OF IMAGINATION

The *Ethica* Part II contains a theory of imagination that explains how a belief persists without true knowledge of what is believed. According to Spinoza, having a true, adequate idea involves certainty itself, whereas a false idea, insofar as it is false, does not, for falsity consists only in the privation that mutilated and confused ideas involve. So,

When we say that a man rests in false ideas, and does not doubt them, we do not, on that account, say that he is certain, but only that he does not doubt, or that he rests in false ideas because there are no causes to bring it about that his imagination wavers.¹⁸

Spinoza explains this persistence in false ideas by an example. Conceive a child imagining a winged horse, and not perceiving anything else. Since this imagination involves the existence of the horse, and the child does not perceive anything else that excludes the existence of the horse, he will necessarily regard the horse as present. Nor will he be able to doubt its existence, though he will not be certain of it.¹⁹ His theory is unusual in that it conceives perception as imagination consisting in the idea of the affection of the body. "If the human Body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the Body is affected by an affect that excludes the existence or presence of that body."²⁰ Spinoza underlines the fact that things imagined do not disappear through the presence of true

¹⁶ *TTP* XII, p.165.

¹⁷ Cf. E2P3S: "Again, if it were agreeable to pursue these matters further, I could also show here that that power which ordinary people fictitiously ascribe to God is not only human (which shows that ordinary people conceive God as a man, or as like a man), but also involves lack of power. ...For no one will be able to perceive rightly the things I maintain unless he takes great care not to confuse God's power with the human power or right of Kings."

¹⁸ E2P49CS.

¹⁹ E2P4CS.

²⁰ E2P17.

knowledge.²¹ Acquiring knowledge in astronomy, for instance, does not affect our perception of the appearance of the Sun itself. “For we imagine the sun so near not because we do not know its true distance, but because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by the sun.”²² We cannot help seeing the Sun at the distance less far than the true distance astronomy tells us. So, if a man rests in false ideas, we do not say he is certain but simply that he lacks doubt.

If doubt does not arise from false ideas themselves, it should come from elsewhere. Spinoza tells us that a doubt results from what he calls “vacillation of the imagination” (*imaginationis fluctuatio*) brought about by conflicting images within the system of memory²³. “Memory” defined by Spinoza is a system of associations of images or traces in the body.

If the human Body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the Mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also.²⁴

We follow Spinoza’s example given in the scholium of proposition 44, Part II. Let us suppose a child, who saw Peter for the first time yesterday in the morning, saw Paul at noon, Simon in the evening, and today again saw Peter in the morning. It is clear from the mechanism defined above that as soon as he sees the morning light, he will imagine the sun taking the same course through the sky as he saw on the preceding day, or he will imagine the whole day, and he will think of Peter together with the morning, Paul with noon, and Simon with the evening. Thus, he has developed an association between the image of the sunlight and the images of the person. But if it should happen at some time that on some other evening he sees James instead of Simon, then on the following morning, when he thinks of the evening, he will imagine now Simon, now James, but not both at once. His imagination will vacillate and he will imagine now this one, now that one, with the future evening time, i.e., he will regard neither of them as certainly future, but both of them as contingently future.²⁵ Now he has a doubt.

To put it the other way around, we may also say that the child would never have a doubt if he did not come across a conflicting case. He would rest in his former belief, however contingent and without ground it is, only because there is no cause to bring about a waver in his imagination. In other words, a man can rest in a belief without any “mathematical

²¹ E4P1S.

²² E2P35S.

²³ E2P44S.

²⁴ E2P18.

²⁵ E2P44S.

certainty” as long as he fails to come across any case that may cause him to doubt. However long a man acquiesces in a belief, it by no means entails that his belief be true, even if, possibly, he says he is certain.

That was the first point to be made; what comes next is the question of how a doubt could be absent in the communal dimension. There must be some mechanism that conjugates the “memory” of each person so that the imagination of each may be preserved from doubt in a collective manner. This mechanism is, I believe, discernible from Spinoza’s theory of affect in the *Ethica*, Part III.

BELIEF IN THE LIGHT OF THE THEORY OF AFFECT

Let us look at the mechanism Spinoza calls “the imitation of affects”. Here is the proposition.

If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect.²⁶

Remember that the images of things are affections of the human body whose ideas involve the nature of our body and, at the same time, the present nature of the external body. If the nature of the external body is like the nature of our body, then the idea of the external body we imagine will involve an affect of our body like the affect of the external body. Consequently, if we imagine someone to be affected with joy, we are affected with joy, and if we imagine someone to be affected with sadness, we are affected with sadness.²⁷ This is the imitation of affects.

The imitation of affects does not necessarily imply compassion. What is remarkable is that Spinoza shows that the same mechanism produces separation and adhesion simultaneously. Consider the following proposition.

If we imagine that someone loves, desires or hates something we ourselves love, desire, or hate, we shall thereby love, desire or hate it with greater constancy. But if we imagine that he is averse to what we love, or the opposite, then we shall undergo vacillation of mind.²⁸

This proposition marvellously shows the fundamental ambiguity of the affect Spinoza calls “ambition”, deriving from the imitation of affects. The more we imagine others to love what we love and hate what we hate, the more we feel stable, for this imagination enhances

²⁶ E3P27.

²⁷ E3P27D.

²⁸ E3P31.

the affect we have by the imitation of the same affect. So we shall strive to do whatever we imagine men to love, or to look on with joy, etc.. “This striving to do something (and also to omit doing something) solely to please men is called Ambition, especially when we strive so eagerly to please the people that we do or omit certain things to our own injury, or another’s.”²⁹ In contrast, we feel uneasy when imagining someone is averse to what we love, or loves what we are averse to, because of the conflicting affect caused in us by the imitation of affects. So each of us strives, so far as he can, for everyone to love what he loves, and hate what he hates. This striving, Spinoza says, is really “ambition”. Ambition is therefore ambiguous in nature. As each of us, by our nature, wants others to live according to our own temperament, each is like an obstacle to the other, and as all wish to be praised, or loved, by all, they come to hate one another.³⁰ Thus result separation and adhesion at the same time: separation from each other in rivalry; and adhesion of each to the imaginary desire of all.³¹ Ambition is therefore “an excessive desire for esteem” by which all the affects are encouraged and strengthened. “As long as a man is bound by any Desire, he must at the same time be bound by this affect.”³²

Thus, with ambition each strives to convert rivals to his opinion, by appealing to the would-be approval of all. The question is, then, if there is an irreducible diversity of opinion, how can each imagine the desirable view all would hold? This is inconceivable unless there is a common belief that everyone knows and that everyone knows everyone knows. Such a belief is plausible, when it concerns justice and charity. Let us take a look at another proposition Spinoza draws from the imitation of affects, a proposition that is interesting in that it gives an account of the affective base for justice and charity.

If we imagine that someone toward whom we have had no affect affects a thing like us with Joy, we shall be affected with Love toward him. On the other hand, if we imagine him to affect it with Sadness, we shall be affected with Hate toward him.³³

The demonstration goes like this. If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect, by the imitation of affects. But in this case, the joy or sadness thus brought about by the imitation of affects is supposed to be accompanied by the idea of an imaginary external cause, that

²⁹ E3P29S.

³⁰ E3P31S.

³¹ See Osamu Ueno, “*Res Nobis Similis*: Desire and the Double in Spinoza” in *Desire and affect : Spinoza as psychologist ; papers presented at the third Jerusalem conference (Ethica III)*, New York : Little Room Press, 1999.

³² E3AD44, exp.

³³ E3P27C1.

is, someone who affects the thing like us. But we strive—the striving or *conatus* being our actual essence—to imagine things that delight us and repel images that bring us sadness. Therefore, we shall be affected with love or hate toward that someone we imagine to affect a thing like us with joy or sadness, respectively. Spinoza thereby defines “pity” as sadness that has arisen from injury to another, and “indignation” as hatred toward him who has done evil to another.³⁴ Since those images involved here are both by supposition personally neutral to us, our pity and indignation are impartial in nature. We have no doubt that whosoever afflicts a thing like us shall never be favoured. He shall be held in indignation by everyone. It is commonly known to everyone, not by demonstration of reason, but just because it cannot be imagined otherwise, for the imagination itself undergoes the same process the demonstration lays out. Imagination provides the demonstration, so to speak. This is the reason why our philosopher holds that the teachings of true piety are “very ordinary and extremely simple and easy to understand,” and thus “expressed in the most everyday language”.³⁵ In fact, he calls these teachings “intelligible things” (*res perceptibiliae*), by which he means, “Not only things which are correctly demonstrated but also those that we regularly accept *with moral certainty* and hear without surprise.”³⁶ Just as everyone comprehends some simple propositions of Euclid before they are demonstrated, the propositions derived from the imitation of affects are intelligible to everyone before they are demonstrated in the *Ethica*.

So, we are now at the bedrock of common belief. Each of us acquiesces in the same belief in justice and charity solely because there are no causes to bring it about that our imagination wavers. To put it another way, the belief persists in virtue of the absence of doubt in the communal dimension. We may think, in Spinoza’s wake, that the narratives on miracles and histories in Scripture have always been the vehicle of this common belief. Spinoza says,

Scripture explains and teaches things in such a way that anyone may grasp them. It does not deduce and derive them from axioms and definitions, but speaks simply, and to secure belief in its pronouncements, it confirms them by experience alone, that is, by miracles and histories narrated in a language and style designed to influence the minds of the common people.³⁷

³⁴ E3P22S.

³⁵ *TTP* VII, p.111.

³⁶ *TTP* Adnot. 8, p.253. Emphasis is mine. As to the “*res perceptibiliae*”, C. De Deugd equates them to the “*res simplicissimae*” (the simplest things) in the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* on ground that, though they belong to the different kinds of knowledge, they both agree in respect of their infallible simplicity. Cf. C. De Deugd, *The Significance of Spinoza’s First Kind of Knowledge*, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966, p. 186. This interpretation, however, might blur the distinction between *certitudo moralis* and *certitudo mathematica*, and consequently could lead to overlook the question of common belief that could be philosophically false.

³⁷ *TTP* XIII, p.167.

We are now in a position to appreciate his conclusion that biblical teaching contains no elevated theories or philosophical doctrines but “only the simplest matters comprehensible to even the very slowest.”³⁸ Contrary to the claim Levinas made, the secret is not behind the literary texts. It is to be sought, instead, in the persistence of the texts of holy platitude.³⁹

COMMON BELIEF IN THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

As the *Ethica* was still in progress at the time, it is no surprise that the *TTP* includes no reference to it. But it is all the more intriguing to see the theory we extracted above illuminate much about its peculiarity. Spinoza’s contentions in the *TTP* are everywhere two-fold. He defends the authority of Scripture for its incorruptible moral teaching, while denying that Scripture is designed to teach the truth of matters. While he declares his confidence in the prophets, he also considers them to be utterly ignorant. Again, his biblical interpretation reveals that the Holy Writings are irremediably altered and falsified everywhere, and he pretends to uncover the firm foundation of true religion. These seemingly paradoxical theses have often been taken as the sign of concealed atheism. I think otherwise. Our previous analysis seems to attest to the philosopher’s integrity in those seemingly contradicting theses.

Let us recapture the context of the *TTP*. As we discussed elsewhere, the problems the *TTP* was addressing were the burning controversies of the day on piety and impiety.⁴⁰ Its attempt was, in our terms, to draw a clear line between the language game of truth the philosophers and theologians of the time were engaged in, and the language game of piety the prophets and the people in Scripture were engaged in. As for biblical interpretation, Spinoza rejects both the rational reading of the philosophers and its opposing interpretation, the super-rational reading of theologians, on the grounds of their common fallacy of presupposing Scripture to be telling truth. The presupposition led the theologians to accuse the philosophers of reason, who were, for the same reason, in constant fear of contradicting Scripture. Prophetic certainty, however, belongs to another language game, the game of piety in our terms, which requires, not the understanding of truth but only the verification of one’s

³⁸ *TTP* XIII, p.167.

³⁹ As to the persistence of the Holy Writings, Alexandre Matheron offers an intriguing interpretation. According to him, Scripture is a Spinozan individual consisting in two parts, namely, all the circulating copies of the Bible and all the humans being inspired by them. The two parts reproduce one another as if by virtue of the *conatus* of Scripture considered as an individual. Cf. Alexandre Matheron, “Le statut ontologique de l’Écriture sainte et la doctrine spinoziste de l’individualité,” *Travaux et documents*, No. 4: *L’Écriture sainte au temps de Spinoza et dans le système spinoziste*, Groupe de recherches spinozistes, Presse de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1992, reprinted in Alexandre Matheron, *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophies de l’âge classique*, ENS Éditions, 2011, p.414.

⁴⁰ See Osamu Ueno, “On the ‘Credo Minimum’ in Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,” *Journal of the Literary Society of Yamaguchi University*, Vol.10, 47-74.

own virtue through obedience to God. Contrary to the tenet of the time, it was the prophets' own ignorance that preserved their truth from rational inquisition. Spinoza takes this language game of piety as an ideological requisite for the Republic whose power is destined to make justice and charity effective by means of civil laws.

So, Spinoza has no qualms about declaring to defend the Word of God while denying it is telling truth. On the contrary, it was the postulation of truth that was undermining the biblical authority and, consequently, the basis for the true religion for peace and freedom. In Spinoza's eyes, Scripture has its own truth, such that its moral teaching has been preserved from corruption in virtue of the unaware human nature at work in collective, which is, for Spinoza, nothing other than part of the absolute power of God or Nature. The philosopher is no exception to the rule of common belief, as he is not himself immune to the affects of pity and indignation. He knows why he should be so: imaginings and the imitation of affects do not disappear through the presence of true knowledge. We conclude that Spinoza had a notion of Scripture that told, without knowledge of the reality, the right words on its own. It is not unreasonable, then, to say that Spinoza was one who could perceive the secret of the ordinary and usual things.

Abbreviations

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

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

Ep = *Epistolae*: with serial number according to *Spinoza Opera*, Bd.4.

