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Abstract

Spinoza's Bible: The importance of the Bible to Spinoza's Contract Based Society

This lecture will challenge two of the main readings of Spinoza's critical approach to the Bible. In the first part of the lecture I will focus on Spinoza's critical reading of the Bible. Most of Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* (TTP) is dedicated to a critical reading of the Bible according to a new historical method of reading, which Spinoza introduces in the TTP. In twofold manner Spinoza introduces his method of interpretation.

1. The refutation of the *truths* expressed in the Bible — Spinoza criticizes various schools who claim that the Bible expresses *truth*. According to Spinoza, the Bible is neither the source of philosophical *truths*, nor the source of scientific ones. Moreover, the source of prophetic knowledge is the imaginative cognition; imaginative cognition according to Spinoza's epistemology cannot yield valid and certain knowledge. Thus, Spinoza's criticism is directed at two distinct and opposing views, namely, it is directed at those who believe that biblical stories and phrases teach literally the truth about the world; at the same time Spinoza fiercely criticizes Maimonides who claimed that a metaphorical reading of the Bible can reveal that the bible expresses metaphysical valid views in figurative ways. Those who look for the truth in the Bible are wrong twice: they are wrong philosophically (misunderstanding the source of truth), and they are wrong theologically (misunderstanding the kind of knowledge revelation is).
2. The rejection of claims to interpretative authority — In his critical polemics, Spinoza aims at two main interpretative approaches — the Rabbinic interpretation of the Bible (based on tradition) and the Catholic one (based on the Holy Spirit relations to the church). According to Spinoza, none of them can establish a valid claim to interpretative authority.

The second half of the twentieth century saw a growing interest in what is called Spinoza's secularism, or Spinoza's naturalism from various perspectives; in that sense, Spinoza's reading of the Bible was at the centre of several influential works in Spinoza's scholarship. In Spinoza's scholarship, there are two dominant approaches; both approaches sees in Spinoza's critical approach to the Bible, the expression of his secularism and naturalism. The first approach sees Spinoza's critical approach as a work that is supposed to pave the way of a public discourse which is liberated from religion. The second approach accepts the view that Spinoza is dismissing the Bible from the philosophical discourse; yet, the latter attributes to Spinoza the view that the Bible can play an important role in society, because the *multitude* is unable to achieve the philosophical understanding of the world.

Although there is a grain of truth in both approaches, in this lecture I will challenge the view that Spinoza's aim was 'to do away' with the Bible. Those approaches, I claim, do not do justice to the TTP' text; on top of that such approaches miss the philosophical core of the TTP. In contrast, I will suggest that the TTP's critical reading of the Bible is connected with the very foundation of Spinoza's political philosophy (at the time he composed the text). In a later stage of his philosophy Spinoza neglected this approach on the basis of his new understanding of ontology.

The second part of my lecture will focus on explaining the political philosophical problem that Spinoza is struggling with, and on the kind of solution the Bible-reading offers. The philosophical problem Spinoza struggled at that time is related to TTP's fundamental thesis concerning the role of the social-contract. Despite the fact that in the TTP, Spinoza accepted the

thesis on social-contract, he still struggled with the question of human action on 'good faith'. The original social contract cannot account according to Spinoza for this human behavior ('good faith behavior') which is essential to the stability of society according to Spinoza. Spinoza dismisses the Hobbesian arguments on the absolute status of the original contract. Instead, I will suggest, Spinoza finds a support in a certain obedience which is the product of the reading of the Bible. Whereas Hobbes' comments suggest on occasion that biblical interpretation is a right handed to the sovereign to manipulate citizens, Spinoza shifts the focus of the philosophical question. To wit, Spinoza inquires the kind of power that the Bible has in society. In this lecture, I will show that Spinoza's discussions of biblical interpretation aim to clarify this kind of knowledge that the reading of the Bible yields within Society; a knowledge which results in good faith. Spinoza's explication of the power that the reading of the Bible has within human society paved the way to the understanding of human interaction which supports the original contract in a new way; the human activity of reading the Bible is disclosed to result in a human interaction which is based in *good faith*. Accordingly, I will claim that the Bible has a decisive role in Spinoza's (TTP) political philosophy.

In the third part of the lecture, I will focus on the role of the *reader*. I will suggest that major political theses of the TTP, such as freedom of thought and freedom of speech are tightly connected to the central role of the reader in Spinoza's philosophy. I will conclude this section with the explication of Spinoza's political philosophy (the TTP) as a protestant philosophy.

In the conclusion, I will discuss shortly the Spinoza's mature views (the *Ethics* and the TP), namely the dismissal of the TTP's political philosophy based on his new radical ontology which at its centre stands the criticism of the cartesian subject — one the results of Spinoza's criticism of Cartesianism, I will claim, is the rejection of Spinoza's early theses on the social contract.