

How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*

I

Before attempting to answer the question of how to proceed in a particular historical investigation, one must clarify the reasons why the investigation is relevant. In fact, the reasons which induce one to study a particular historical subject immediately determine the general character of the procedure. The reason why a fresh investigation of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*¹ is in order, is obvious. The chief aim of the *Treatise* is to refute the claims which had been raised on behalf of revelation throughout the ages; and Spinoza succeeded, at least to the extent that his book has become *the* classic document of the "rationalist" or "secularist" attack on the belief in revelation. The study of the *Treatise* can be of real importance only if the issue discussed in it is still alive. A glance at the present scene is sufficient to show one that the issue which, until a short while ago, was generally believed to have been settled by Spinoza's nineteenth-century successors once and for all, and thus to be obsolete, is again approaching the center of attention. But we cannot help noticing that the most fundamental issue—the issue raised by the conflicting claims of philosophy and revelation—is discussed in our time on a decidedly lower level than was almost customary in former ages. It is with a view to these circumstances that we open the *Treatise* again. We shall therefore listen to Spinoza as attentively as we can. We shall make every effort to understand what he says exactly as he means it. For if we fail to do so, we are likely to substitute our folly for his wisdom.

To understand the words of another man, living or dead, may mean two different things which for the moment we shall call interpretation and explanation. By interpretation we mean the attempt to ascertain what the speaker said and how he actually understood what he said, regardless of whether he expressed that understanding explic-

itly or not. By explanation we mean the attempt to ascertain those implications of his statements of which he was unaware. Accordingly, the realization that a given statement is ironical or a lie belongs to the interpretation of the statement, whereas the realization that a given statement is based on a mistake, or is the unconscious expression of a wish, an interest, a bias, or a historical situation, belongs to its explanation. It is obvious that the interpretation has to precede the explanation. If the explanation is not based on an adequate interpretation, it will be the explanation, not of the statement to be explained, but of a figment of the imagination of the historian. It is equally obvious that, within the interpretation, the understanding of the explicit meaning of a statement has to precede the understanding of what the author knew but did not say explicitly: one cannot realize, or at any rate one cannot prove, that a statement is a lie before one has understood the statement in itself.

The demonstrably true understanding of the words or the thoughts of another man is necessarily based on an exact interpretation of his explicit statements. But exactness means different things in different cases. In some cases exact interpretation requires the careful weighing of every word used by the speaker; such careful consideration would be a most inexact procedure in the case of a casual remark of a loose thinker or talker.² In order to know what degree or kind of exactness is required for the understanding of a given writing, one must therefore first know the author's habits of writing. But since these habits become truly known only through the understanding of the writer's work, it would seem that at the beginning one cannot help being guided by one's preconceived notions of the author's character. The procedure would be more simple if there were a way of ascertaining an author's manner of writing prior to interpreting his works. It is a general observation that people write as they read. As a rule, careful writers are careful readers and vice versa. A careful writer wants to be read carefully. He cannot know what it means to be read carefully but by having done careful reading himself. Reading precedes writing. We read before we write. We learn to write by reading. A man learns to write well by reading well good books, by reading most carefully books which are most carefully written. We may therefore acquire some previous knowledge of an author's habits of writing by studying his habits of reading. The task is simplified if the author in question explicitly discusses the right manner of reading books in general, or of reading a particular book which he has studied with a great deal of attention. Spinoza has devoted a whole chapter of his *Treatise* to the question of how to read the Bible, which he had read and reread with very great care.³ To ascertain how to read Spinoza, we shall do well to cast a glance at his rules for reading the Bible.

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wie die Tabak... wie die Auftrags...
die Bibel... mit Religion...
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Spinoza holds the view that the method of interpreting the Bible is identical with the method of interpreting nature. The reading of the book of nature consists in inferring the definitions of natural things from the data supplied by "natural history." In the same way, the interpretation of the Bible consists in inferring the thought of the biblical authors, or the definitions of the biblical subjects qua biblical subjects, from the data supplied by "the history of the Bible." The knowledge of nature must be derived solely from data supplied by nature herself, and not at all from considerations of what is fitting, beautiful, perfect, or reasonable. In the same way the knowledge of the Bible must be derived solely from data supplied by the Bible itself, and not at all from considerations of what is reasonable. For we have no right to assume that the views of the biblical authors agree with the dictates of human reason. In other words, the understanding of the biblical teaching and the judgment on whether that teaching is reasonable or not, have to be kept strictly separate. Nor can we identify the thought of the biblical authors with its traditional interpretation unless we prove first that that interpretation goes back to oral utterances of the biblical authors. Besides, seeing that there is a variety of biblical authors, we have to understand each of them by himself; prior to investigation we have no right to assume that they all agree with each other. The Bible has to be understood exclusively by itself, or nothing can be accepted as a biblical teaching if it is not borne out clearly by the Bible itself, or the whole knowledge of the Bible must be derived exclusively from the Bible itself.⁴

"The history of the Bible," as Spinoza conceives of it, consists of three parts: a) thorough knowledge of the language of the Bible; b) collection and lucid arrangement of the statements of each biblical book regarding every significant subject; c) knowledge of the lives of all biblical authors, as well as of their characters, mental casts, and interests; knowledge of the occasion and time of the composition of each biblical book, of its addressees, of its fate, etc. These data or, more specifically, the collected and properly arranged biblical statements understood in the light of grammar, paleography, history, etc., are the basis of the interpretation proper, which consists in inferring, by legitimate reasoning, from the data mentioned, the thought of the biblical authors. Here again one has to follow the model of natural science. One has to ascertain first the most universal or most fundamental element of biblical thought, i.e., what all biblical authors explicitly and clearly present as a teaching meant for all times and addressed to all men; thereafter one has to descend to derivative or less universal themes, such as the biblical teaching about less general subjects, and the teachings peculiar to the individual biblical authors.⁵

Spinoza's formulation of his hermeneutic principle ("the whole knowledge of the Bible must be derived exclusively from the Bible itself") does not express precisely what he actually demands. In the first place, the knowledge of the language of the Bible has to be derived primarily, as he maintains, not from the Bible, but from a certain tradition.⁶ Besides, as for the knowledge of the lives, etc., of the authors, and of the fate of their books, it may not be impossible to derive it partly from the Bible, but there is certainly no reason why it should be an indispensable duty to derive it exclusively from the Bible; Spinoza himself welcomed every reliable extraneous information shedding light on matters of this kind.⁷ Furthermore, he does not say a word to the effect that the biblical statements regarding the various significant subjects must be arranged according to principles supplied by the Bible itself; there are reasons for believing that his own arrangement of biblical subjects would have had no biblical basis whatever, but would have corresponded to what he considered the natural order of the subjects in question.⁸ Above all, the interpretation proper, as he conceives of it, consists in ascertaining the definitions of the subjects dealt with by the Bible; but these definitions are admittedly not supplied by the Bible itself; in fact, qua definitions they transcend the horizon of the Bible; thus the interpretation of the Bible consists, not in understanding the biblical authors exactly as they understood themselves but in understanding them better than they understood themselves. We may say that Spinoza's formulation of his hermeneutic principle is not more than an exaggerated and therefore inexact expression of the following view: the only meaning of any biblical passage is its literal meaning, except if reasons taken from the indubitable usage of the biblical language demand the metaphorical understanding of the passage; certainly the disagreement of the statement of a biblical author with the teaching of reason, of piety, of tradition, or even of another biblical author, does not justify one in abandoning the literal meaning. Spinoza's exaggeration is sufficiently justified by the power of the position which he challenges: he had to make himself heard amidst the clamor raised by the myriads of his opponents.

There is a certain agreement between Spinoza's hermeneutic principle ("the Bible must be understood exclusively by itself") and the principle to which we adhere ("the Bible must be understood exactly as it was understood by its authors, or by its compilers"). His demand that the interpretation of the biblical teaching and the judgment on the truth or value of that teaching be kept strictly separate, partly agrees with what we meant by distinguishing between interpretation and explanation. Yet, as we have indicated, the difference between the two

principles is fundamental. According to our principle, the first questions to be addressed to a book would be of this kind: what is its subject matter, i.e., how is its subject matter designated, or understood, by the author?; what is his intention in dealing with his subject?; what questions does he raise in regard to it, or with what aspect of the subject is he exclusively, or chiefly, concerned? Only after these and similar questions have found their answer, would we even think of collecting and arranging the statements of the author regarding various topics discussed or mentioned in his book; for only the answers to questions like those we have indicated would enable us to tell what particular topics referred to in his book are significant or even central. If we followed Spinoza's rule, we would start to collect and to arrange the biblical statements regarding all kinds of subjects without any guidance supplied by the Bible itself as to what subjects are central or significant, and as to what arrangement agrees with the thought of the Bible. Furthermore, if we followed Spinoza, we would next look out for the most universal or most fundamental teaching of the Bible as a teaching clearly presented everywhere in the Bible. But is there any necessity, or even likelihood, that the most fundamental teaching of a book should be constantly repeated? In other words, is there any necessity that the most universal or most fundamental teaching of a book should be its clearest teaching? Be this as it may, we need not dwell on what we consider the deficiencies of Spinoza's biblical hermeneutics. For any objection which we could raise against that hermeneutics would be based on the premise that the Bible is substantially intelligible, and Spinoza denies that very premise. According to him, the Bible is essentially unintelligible, since its largest part is devoted to unintelligible matters, and it is accidentally unintelligible since only a part of the data which could throw light on its meaning is actually available. It is the essential unintelligibility of the Bible—the fact that it is a "hieroglyphic" book—which is the reason why a special procedure has to be devised for its interpretation: the purpose of that procedure is to open up an indirect access to a book which is not accessible directly, i.e., by way of its subject matter. This implies that not all books, but only hieroglyphic books require a method of interpretation that is fundamentally the same as that required for deciphering the book of nature. Spinoza is primarily concerned with what the Bible teaches clearly everywhere, because only such a ubiquitous teaching could supply a clue to every hieroglyphic passage that might occur in the Bible. It is because of its essential unintelligibility that the Bible must be understood exclusively by itself: the largest part of the Bible is devoted to matters to which we have no access whatever except through the Bible.¹⁰ For the same reason it is

impossible merely to try to understand the biblical authors as they understood themselves; every attempt to understand the Bible is of necessity an attempt to understand its authors better than they understood themselves.

There is probably no need for proving that Spinoza considered his own books, and in particular the *Treatise*, intelligible and not hieroglyphic. Hieroglyphic subjects, he indicates, are a matter of curiosity rather than useful, whereas the subjects of the *Treatise* are eminently useful.¹¹ In order to find out how he wants his own books to be read, we must therefore turn from his biblical hermeneutics to his rules for reading intelligible books.

He does not think that there can be any difficulty that might seriously obstruct the understanding of books devoted to intelligible subjects, and hence he does not see any need for elaborate procedures conducive to their understanding. To understand a book of this kind, one does not need perfect knowledge, but at most "a very common and, as it were, boyish knowledge" of the language of the original; in fact, reading of a translation would suffice perfectly. Nor does one have to know the life of the author, his interests and character, the addressee of his book, its fate, nor the variant readings, etc. Intelligible books are self-explanatory. Contrary to what Spinoza seems to say, not hieroglyphic books, to whose subjects we have no access through our experience or insight, but intelligible books, to whose understanding the reader naturally contributes by drawing on his experience or insight "while he goes," can and must be understood by themselves. For while the meaning of hieroglyphic books must be inferred indirectly from data which are not necessarily supplied by the book itself (the life of the author, the fate of the book, etc.), the meaning of intelligible books can and must be ascertained directly by consideration of its subject matter and of the intention of the author, i.e., of things which become truly known only through the book itself.¹² If we apply this information, as we must, to Spinoza's own books, we realize that according to his view the whole "history" of his works, the whole historical procedure as employed by the modern students of his works, is superfluous; and therefore, we may add, rather a hindrance than a help to the understanding of his books.

We add a few words of explanation. Spinoza says that for the understanding of intelligible books knowledge of the variant readings is superfluous. But he also says that there never was a book without faulty readings. He must have thought that errors which have crept into books or passages dealing with intelligible matters will easily be detected and corrected by the intelligent reader "while he goes."¹³ Spinoza says that

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for the understanding of intelligible books knowledge of the character or mental cast of an author is superfluous. But when discussing the intention of Machiavelli's *Prince*, which he could not have considered a hieroglyphic book, he comes to a decision only by taking into account the author's "wisdom" or "prudence," as well as his love of political liberty.¹⁴ Spinoza would probably answer that he based his decision not on any previous or at any rate extraneous knowledge of Machiavelli's life and character, but on what every intelligent reader of the *Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* would notice. Spinoza says that even obscure presentations of intelligible matters are intelligible. But he doubtless knew that no negligible number of authors dealing with intelligible matters contradict themselves. He probably would reply that, if an author contradicts himself, the reader does well to suspend his judgment on what the author thought about the subject in question, and to use his powers rather for finding out by himself which of the two contradictory assertions is true. Consideration of whether the usage of the author's language permits the metaphorical interpretation of one of the two contradictory assertions is clearly out of place in the case of intelligible books, since for their understanding it is not even necessary to know in what language they were originally composed.¹⁵

Our study of Spinoza's rules of reading seems to have led to an impasse. We cannot read his books as he read the Bible because his books are certainly not hieroglyphic. Nor can we read them as he read Euclid and other intelligible books, because his books are not as easily intelligible to us as the nonhieroglyphic books which he knew were to him. If an author of Spinoza's intelligence, who speaks with so much assurance about the most important biblical subjects, simply confesses that he does not understand the Bible, we on our part have to confess that it cannot be easy to understand him. His rules of reading are of little or no use for the understanding of books that are neither hieroglyphic nor as easy of access as a modern manual of Euclidean geometry. One could say of course that by laying down rules for the two extreme cases Spinoza has given us to understand how books of moderate difficulty have to be read: books of this kind are neither absolutely intelligible nor absolutely unintelligible without "history"; "history" is required for the understanding of a book to the extent to which the book is not self-explanatory. But, if one does not want to suppress completely the spirit of Spinoza's statements, one would have to add in the most emphatic manner that according to him the contribution of "history" to the understanding of truly useful books cannot but be trivial.

The modern interpreter of Spinoza on the other hand considers it most useful, and even necessary, to understand Spinoza's books, and is

at the same time convinced that "history" makes a most important contribution to their understanding. The interpreter thus contradicts Spinoza in a point which, apparently, is of no small importance: he holds that Spinoza's books cannot be understood on the basis of Spinoza's own hermeneutic principles. Thus the question becomes inevitable, whether it is possible to understand Spinoza on the basis of the rejection of these principles. One's answer will depend on what importance one attaches to the controversial issue. If it is true that the problem of "history," fully understood, is identical with the problem of the nature of philosophy itself, the modern interpreter is separated from Spinoza by a fundamental difference of orientation. The modern interpreter takes it for granted that in order to be adequate to its task, philosophy must be "historical," and that therefore the history of philosophy is a philosophic discipline. He presupposes then from the outset—by the very fact that he is a philosophic historian of philosophy and not a mere antiquarian—that Spinoza's whole position as Spinoza himself presented and understood it, is untenable because it is manifestly not "historical." He lacks then the strongest incentive for attempting to understand Spinoza's teaching as Spinoza himself understood it, that incentive being the suspicion that Spinoza's teaching is *the* true teaching. Without that incentive no reasonable man would devote all his energy to the understanding of Spinoza, and without such devotion Spinoza's books will never disclose their full meaning.

It would seem then that one cannot understand Spinoza if one accepts his hermeneutic principles, nor if one rejects them. To find a way out of this difficulty, we must first understand why Spinoza could rest satisfied with his unsatisfactory remarks about the manner in which serious books must be read. It does not suffice to say that he was exclusively concerned with *the* truth, the truth about the whole, and not with what other people taught about it. For he knew too well how much he was indebted for his grasp of what he considered *the* truth to some books written by other men. The true reason is his contempt for that thought of the past which can become accessible only through the reading of very difficult books. Other things being equal, one needs more of "history" for understanding books of the past than for understanding contemporary books. If a man believes that the most useful or important books are contemporary ones, he will hardly ever experience the need for historical interpretation. This was the case of Spinoza. The only book which he published under his name is devoted to the philosophy of Descartes. The only books (apart from the Bible) on which he ever wrote extensively, were books by Descartes and Boyle, i.e., by contemporaries. The authority of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to say nothing

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of their followers, did not carry much weight with him. He admired Epicurus, Democritus, Lucretius and their followers much more.¹⁶ Yet there are hardly any unambiguous traces of his having studied their works, or the remnants of their works, with any assiduity; he had easy access to their teaching through the writings of Gassendi, a contemporary. As regards political philosophy in particular, he flatly declares that all political philosophy prior to his own is useless.¹⁷ He confesses to owe much to certain "outstanding men who have written many excellent things about the right way of life, and who have given counsels full of wisdom to mortals";¹⁸ he probably has in mind authors like Seneca and Cicero; but the doctrines to which he refers are by their nature easy for everyone to understand. Regarding a much more difficult and basic teaching, viz. the thesis that God is the immanent cause of all things, he surmises that he says the same thing as "all ancient philosophers, although in a different manner," and as "all ancient Hebrews, as far as one can conjecture from some traditions, which however have been adulterated in many ways." This is not the way in which one would speak of definite literary sources. Besides, he was probably more sincere when he indicated that his doctrine of God deviated radically from all other teachings which he knew.¹⁹ Naturally, he had read a considerable number of old books, especially in his youth; but the question is what importance the mature Spinoza attached to them and to their study. His attitude is not surprising: the conviction that they were achieving a progress beyond all earlier philosophy or science, a progress condemning to deserved oblivion all earlier efforts, was rather common among the men who were responsible for the emergence of modern philosophy or science. → *Spinoza nicht mehr antike/altgriechische sondern typisch modern.*

But Spinoza, who wrote for posterity rather than for his contemporaries, must have realized that the day would come when his own books would be old books. Yet, if they contain *the true*, i.e., *the clear and distinct account of the whole*, there seems to be no reason why they should not be directly intelligible at all times, provided they survive at all. This very reply however seems to prove conclusively that Spinoza did not consider a crucial possibility which to us is so obvious: the possibility that the whole orientation of a period may give way to a radically different orientation, and that after such a change has taken place one cannot bridge the gulf between the thought of the later age and that of the earlier age but by means of historical interpretation. From Spinoza's point of view one would have to retort that he denied, not the possibility of such a change occurring after the emergence of his doctrine, but its legitimacy. The abandonment of his approach in favor of a radically different one would have been in his eyes a manifest blun-

der, and not more than a new example of the frequently experienced relapse of human thought into the servitude of superstition.

Spinoza's rules of reading derive from his belief in the final character of his philosophy as *the* clear and distinct and, therefore, *the* true account of the whole. If we reject Spinoza's belief *a limine*, we will never be able to understand him because we will lack the necessary incentive for attempting to understand him properly. On the other hand, if we open our minds, if we take seriously the possibility that he was right, we can understand him. Apart from the fact that we would have the indispensable incentive, we would be in a position to correct his insufficient rules of reading without having to fear that in doing so we would deviate radically from his fundamental principles. For if these principles are sound, questions of hermeneutics cannot be central questions. More precisely, the need for a correction of Spinoza's hermeneutics follows directly from the assumption that his teaching is *the* true teaching. On the basis of this assumption, the true teaching is accessible to us only through certain old books. Reading of old books becomes extremely important to us for the very reason for which it was utterly unimportant to Spinoza. We shall most urgently need an elaborate hermeneutics for the same reason for which Spinoza did not need any hermeneutics. We remain in perfect accord with Spinoza's way of thinking as long as we look at the devising of a more refined historical method as a desperate remedy for a desperate situation, rather than as a symptom of a healthy and thriving "culture."

Our argument implies the suggestion that today *the* truth may be accessible only through certain old books. We still have to show that this suggestion is compatible with Spinoza's principles. Spinoza knew that the power of the natural obstacles to philosophy which are the same at all times, can be increased by specific mistakes.²⁰ The natural and sporadic outbursts against philosophy may be replaced by its deliberate and relentless suppression. Superstition, the natural enemy of philosophy, may arm itself with the weapons of philosophy and thus transform itself into pseudophilosophy. Of pseudophilosophies there is an indefinitely large variety, since every later pseudophilosopher can try to improve on the achievements, or to avoid certain blunders, of his predecessors. It is therefore impossible even for the most far-sighted man to foresee which pseudophilosophies will emerge, and gain control of the minds of men in the future. Now, not indeed philosophy, but the way in which the introduction to philosophy must proceed, necessarily changes with the change of the artificial or accidental obstacles to philosophy. The artificial obstacles may be so strong at a given time that a most elaborate "artificial" introduction has to be completed before the "nat-

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ural" introduction can begin. It is conceivable that a particular pseudophilosophy may emerge whose power cannot be broken but by the most intensive reading of old books. As long as that pseudophilosophy rules, elaborate historical studies may be needed which would have been superfluous and therefore harmful in more fortunate times.

Before we consider whether the dominant thought of the present age would have to be described from Spinoza's point of view as a pseudophilosophy of this kind, we shall venture to express our suggestion in terms of the classic description of the natural obstacles to philosophy. People may become so frightened of the ascent to the light of the sun, and so desirous of making that ascent utterly impossible to any of their descendants, that they dig a deep pit beneath the cave in which they were born, and withdraw into that pit. If one of the descendants desired to ascend to the light of the sun, he would first have to try to reach the level of the natural cave, and he would have to invent new and most artificial tools unknown and unnecessary to those who dwelt in the natural cave. He would be a fool, he would never see the light of the sun, he would lose the last vestige of the memory of the sun, if he perversely thought that by inventing his new tools he had progressed beyond the ancestral cave-dwellers.

According to Spinoza, the natural obstacle to philosophy is man's imaginative and passionate life, which tries to secure itself against its breakdown by producing what Spinoza calls superstition. The alternative that confronts man by nature is then that of a superstitious account of the whole on the one hand, and of the philosophic account on the other. In spite of their radical antagonism, superstition and philosophy have this in common, that both attempt to give a final account of the whole, and both consider such an account indispensable for the guidance of human life. Philosophy finds itself in its natural situation as long as its account of the whole is challenged only by superstitious accounts and not yet by pseudophilosophies. Now, it is obvious that that situation does not exist in our time. The simplicity and directness of the two original antagonists, who fought their secular struggle for the guidance of mankind on the one plane of truth, has given way to a more "sophisticated" or a more "pragmatic" attitude. The very idea of a final account of the whole—of an account which necessarily culminates in, or starts from, knowledge of the first cause or first causes of all things—has been abandoned by an ever-increasing number of people, not only as incapable of realization but as meaningless or absurd. The authorities to which these people defer are the twin-sisters called Science and History. Science, as they understand it, is no longer the quest for the true and final account of the whole. Accordingly, they are

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used to distinguish between science and philosophy, or between the scientist and the philosopher.²¹ Thus they (tacitly) and sometimes even openly, admit the possibility of an unphilosophic science and of an unscientific philosophy. Of these two endeavors, science naturally enjoys a much higher prestige: it is customary to contrast the steady progress of science with the failure of philosophy. The philosophy which is still legitimate on this basis would not be more than the handmaid of science called methodology, but for the following consideration. Science, rejecting the idea of a final account of the whole, essentially conceives of itself as progressive, as being the outcome of a progress of human thought beyond the thought of all earlier periods, and as being capable of still further progress in the future. But there is an appalling discrepancy between the exactness of science itself and the quality of its knowledge of its progressive character as long as science is not accompanied by the effort, at least aspiring to exactness, truly to prove the fact of progress, to understand the conditions of progress, and therewith to secure the possibility of future progress. Science in the present-day meaning of the term is therefore necessarily accompanied by history of human thought either, as originally, in a most rudimentary form or, as today, in a much more elaborate form. It is the history of human thought which now takes the place formerly occupied by philosophy or, in other words, philosophy transforms itself into history of human thought. The fundamental distinction between philosophy and history, which was implied in the original meaning of philosophy, gives way to a fusion of philosophy and history. If the history of human thought is studied in the spirit of modern science, one reaches the conclusion that all human thought is "historically conditioned," or that the attempt to liberate one's thought from one's "historical situation" is quixotic. Once this has become a settled conviction constantly reinforced by an ever-increasing number of new observations, the idea of a final account of the whole, of an account which as such would not be "historically conditioned," appears to be untenable for reasons which can be made manifest to every child. Thereafter, there no longer exists a direct access to the original meaning of philosophy, as quest for the true and final account of the whole. Once this state has been reached, the original meaning of philosophy is accessible only through recollection of what philosophy meant in the past, i.e., for all practical purposes, only through the reading of old books.

As long as the belief in the possibility and necessity of a final account of the whole prevailed, history in general and especially history of human thought did not form an integral part of the philosophic effort, however much philosophers might have appreciated reports on

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History as ancillary: cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*

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earlier thought in their absolutely ancillary function. But after that belief has lost its power, or after a complete break with the basic premise of all earlier philosophic thought (has been effected) concern with the various phases of earlier thought becomes an integral part of philosophy. The study of earlier thought, if conducted with intelligence and assiduity, leads to a revitalization of earlier ways of thinking. The historian, who started out with the conviction that true understanding of human thought is understanding of every teaching in terms of its particular time or as an expression of its particular time, necessarily familiarizes himself with the view, constantly urged upon him by his subject matter, that his initial conviction is unsound. More than that: he is brought to realize that one cannot understand the thought of the past as long as one is guided by that initial conviction. This self-destruction of historicism is not altogether an unforeseen result. The concern with the thought of the past gained momentum, and increased in seriousness, by virtue of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century critique of the modern approach, of modern natural science and of the moral and political doctrines which went with that science. Historical understanding, the revitalization of earlier ways of thinking, was originally meant as a corrective for the specific shortcomings of the modern mind. This impulse was however vitiated from the outset by the belief which accompanied it that modern thought (as distinguished from modern life and modern feeling) was superior to the thought of the past. Thus, what was primarily intended as a corrective for the modern mind was easily perverted into a confirmation of the dogma of the superiority of modern thought to all earlier thought. Historical understanding lost its liberating force by becoming historicism, which is nothing other than the petrified and self-complacent form of the self-criticism of the modern mind.

We have seen how one has to judge of the predominant thought of the present age in the light of Spinoza's principles, or how one can enlarge, in strict adherence to his principles, his view regarding the obstacles to philosophy and therewith to the understanding of his own books. One thus acquires the right in reading his books to deviate from his own rules of reading. One realizes at the same time that one cannot simply replace his rules of reading by those actually followed by numerous modern historians. It is true that what today is frequently meant by historical understanding of Spinoza's thought, viz. the understanding of his thought in terms of his time, could be described as a more elaborate form of what he himself would have called the "history" of his books. But it is also true that he limited the need for "history" to the understanding of hieroglyphic books. We have no right simply to disregard

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etc.

his view according to which books like his own can and must be understood by themselves. We merely have to add the qualification that this must be done within the limits of the possible. We have to remain faithful to the spirit of his injunction. Contrary to what he implies, we need for the understanding of his books such information as is not supplied by him and as is not easily available to every reasonable reader regardless of time and place. But we must never lose sight of the fact that information of this kind cannot have more than a strictly subordinate function, or that such information has to be integrated into a framework authentically or explicitly supplied by Spinoza himself. This holds of all knowledge which he did not supply directly and which he did not therefore consider relevant for the understanding of his books: information regarding his life, character, and interests, the occasion and time of the composition of his books, their addressees, the fate of his teaching and, last but not least, his sources. Such extraneous knowledge can never be permitted to supply the clue to his teaching except after it has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt that it is impossible to make head and tail of his teaching as he presented it. This principle creates from the outset a healthy suspicion against the attempts, so vastly different among themselves, to understand Spinoza's teaching as a modification of the Kabbala or of Platonism, or as an expression of the spirit of the barocco, or as the culmination of medieval scholasticism. Every deviation from that principle exposes one to the danger that one tries to understand Spinoza better than he understood himself before one has understood him as he understood himself; it exposes one to the danger that one understands, not Spinoza, but a figment of one's imagination.

Historical understanding, as it is frequently practiced, seduces one into seeing the author whom one studies primarily as a contemporary among his contemporaries, or to read his books as if they were primarily addressed to his contemporaries. But the books of men like the mature Spinoza, which are meant as possessions for all times, are primarily addressed to posterity. Hence he wrote them in such a manner as not to require for their understanding the previous knowledge of facts which, to the best of his knowledge, could be really relevant and easily accessible only to his contemporaries. The flight to immortality requires an extreme discretion in the selection of one's luggage. A book that requires for its adequate understanding the use, nay, the preservation of all libraries and archives containing information which was useful to its author hardly deserves being written and being read at all, and it certainly does not deserve surviving its author. In particular, there must have been facts and teachings which were very important to Spinoza during his formative years when he was naturally less capable

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than later of distinguishing between the merely contemporary—which from Spinoza's point of view probably included much of what he knew of medieval philosophy—and what he considered deserving preservation. Information about his "development" can justly be regarded as irrelevant until it has been shown that Spinoza's final teaching remains mysterious without such information. Since his teaching is primarily addressed to posterity, the interpreter has always to be mindful of the difference in specific weight of the books of the mature Spinoza and his letters. The letters are primarily addressed, not to posterity, but to particular contemporaries. Whereas the works of his maturity may be presumed to be addressed primarily to the best type of readers, the large majority of his letters are obviously addressed to rather mediocre men.

The need for extraneous information derives from the fact that a man's foresight as to what could be intelligible to posterity is necessarily limited. To mention only the most striking and at the same time most important example: Spinoza could not have foreseen, or at any rate he could not have taken effective precaution against the fact, that the traditional terminology of philosophy, which he employed while modifying it, would become obsolete. Thus the present-day reader of Spinoza has to learn the rudiments of a language which was familiar to Spinoza's contemporaries. To generalize from this, the interpreter of Spinoza has to reconstruct that "background" which from Spinoza's point of view was indispensable for the understanding of his books but could not reasonably be supplied through his books, because no one can say everything without being tedious to everyone. This means that in his work of reconstruction the interpreter must follow the signposts erected by Spinoza himself and, secondarily, the indications which Spinoza left accidentally in his writings. He must start from a clear vision, based on Spinoza's explicit statements, of Spinoza's predecessors as seen by Spinoza. He must pay the greatest attention to that branch of "the philosophic tradition" that Spinoza himself considered most important or admired most highly. For instance, he cannot disregard with impunity what Spinoza says about Plato and Aristotle on the one hand, and about Democritus and Epicurus on the other. He must guard against the foolish presumption, nourished by unenlightened learning, that he can know better than Spinoza what was important to Spinoza, or that Spinoza did not know what he was talking about. He must be willing to attach greater weight to mediocre textbooks quoted by Spinoza than to classics which we cannot be sure that Spinoza has even known of. In attempting to interpret Spinoza, he must try his utmost not to go beyond the boundaries drawn by the terminology of Spinoza and of

his contemporaries; if he uses modern terminology in rendering Spinoza's thought, or even in describing its character, he is likely to introduce a world alien to Spinoza into what claims to be an exact interpretation of Spinoza's thought. Only after one has completed the interpretation of Spinoza's teaching, when one is confronted with the necessity of passing judgment on it, is one at liberty, and even under the obligation, to disregard Spinoza's own indications. Spinoza claims to have refuted the central philosophic and theologic teaching of the past. To judge of that claim, or of the strength of the arguments in support of it, one must naturally consider the classics of the tradition regardless of whether or not Spinoza has known or studied them. But the understanding of Spinoza's silence about a fact or a teaching with which he must have been familiar, and whose mention or discussion would have been essential to his argument, belongs to the interpretation proper. For the suppression of something is a deliberate action.

II

According to Spinoza, his rules for reading the Bible are not applicable to the study of his own writings for the additional reason that the Bible is addressed to the vulgar, whereas his own writings are addressed to philosophers. In the preface to the *Treatise* he explicitly urges the vulgar to leave that book alone, and he explicitly recommends the book to "the philosophic reader" or "the philosophers."²² Books addressed to the vulgar must be adequately intelligible if read in the way in which the vulgar is used to read, i.e., their substance must disclose itself to very inattentive and careless reading. In other words, in vulgar books written for instruction the most fundamental teaching must be written large on every page, or it must be the clearest teaching, whereas the same does not hold of philosophic books.

Spinoza held that intelligible books can be fully understood without the readers knowing to whom they are addressed. By stressing the fact that the *Treatise* is addressed to a specific group of men, he supplies us with the first clue to the specific difficulty of the work. He says that the work is meant especially for those "who would philosophize more freely if this one thing did not stand in the way, that they think that reason ought to serve as handmaid to theology." Those who think that reason or philosophy or science ought to be subservient to theology are characterized by Spinoza as skeptics, or as men who deny the certainty of reason, and the true philosopher cannot be a skeptic.²³ Thus, the *Treatise* is addressed, not to actual philosophers, but to potential philoso-

Spinoza = Rambam
 as: Sp = Rambam & Aristotle

phers. It is addressed to "the more prudent sort" or to those who cannot easily be duped,²⁴ i.e., to a class of men which is clearly more comprehensive than, and therefore not identical with, the class of the actual philosophers.

The potential philosophers to whom the *Treatise* is addressed believe in the authority of theology, i.e., of the Bible. By the Bible Spinoza understands the Old Testament and the New Testament.²⁵ The *Treatise* is then addressed to the potential philosophers among Christians. According to Spinoza's explicit declaration, it was the contrast between Christian belief and Christian practice that induced him to write that work.²⁶ If we could trust numerous explicit statements of Spinoza, his addressing Christian potential philosophers would have to be explained as follows. Christianity, and not Judaism, is based on the most perfect divine revelation. Both its universalist and its spiritual character, as contrasted with the particularist and carnal character of Judaism in particular, explain why the ascent to philosophy is easier or more natural for the Christian than for the Jew, who as such "despises" philosophy. Moreover, Spinoza's aim is to liberate philosophy from the theological domination which culminates in the persecution of philosophers by theologians and their disciples. If Christianity is the religion of love par excellence, whereas the Old Testament commands "thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy," Spinoza's plea for toleration is more naturally addressed to Christians than to Jews.²⁷

In spite of this, the subject matter of the *Treatise* is obviously much more Jewish than Christian. Not only does Spinoza speak more fully of the Old than of the New Testament; he also refers in numerous cases, either polemically or approvingly, to Jewish commentators in the widest sense of the term, and hardly, if ever, to Christian ones. Moreover, he is much more indebted for his interpretations to Jewish than to Christian sources. He indicates that he is so well versed in Jewish lore that he can safely rely on his memory when speaking of Jewish subjects, or of what he had ascertained about them "a long time ago." Probably the most striking example of this Jewish background of the *Treatise* is the fact that, in illustrating the two opposed views of the relation between Bible and philosophy, Spinoza refers only to the two men whom he considered the leaders of the two camps within Judaism. He explains his refraining from philologic examination of the New Testament by his insufficient knowledge of the Greek language.²⁸ Generalizing from this remark, we may explain the preponderance of Jewish subject matter in the *Treatise* by the fact that Spinoza was much more versed in the Jewish than in the Christian tradition. One may go a step further in the

same direction and surmise that he incorporated into that work a considerable amount of materials which he had originally used for justifying his defection from Judaism. Certain incongruities which strike the reader of the *Treatise* do not seem to admit of any other explanation. For our purpose it suffices to mention the two most outstanding examples. Spinoza says that the subject of the third chapter (the election of the Jews) is not required by the guiding purpose of the work; and one could consider applying this statement to the fourth and fifth chapters as well, which culminate in the critique of the Jewish ceremonial law. Chapters III-V would thus appear to be relics of a work primarily addressed to Jews. Besides, the *Treatise* stands or falls by the principle that the true meaning of any biblical passage has to be established exclusively out of the Bible, and not at all with regard to the philosophic or scientific truth. But in discussing the question of miracles, Spinoza asserts, in striking contradiction to that principle, that the biblical teaching fully agrees with the philosophic teaching, and that any biblical passage which contradicts the philosophic teaching has to be rejected as a sacrilegious addition to Holy Writ. This method of solving the conflict between philosophy and Bible had been used with particular energy by Spinoza's older Jewish contemporary Uriel da Costa. It would seem that Spinoza's occasional use of that method is another relic of his youthful, as it were intra-Jewish, reflections.

The assertion that Spinoza incorporated into his *Treatise* parts of his youthful apology for his defection from Judaism is at best a plausible hypothesis. Besides, no author who deserves the name will incorporate into a book parts of an earlier writing which do not make sense in the new book. Every concern with the question, of what parts of the *Treatise* might have been taken from Spinoza's early apology, seduces the interpreter into escaping from his plain duty, to understand the book as composed and published by Spinoza, to the questionable pleasures of higher criticism. While it can only be surmised what parts, if any, of the *Treatise* were taken from an earlier writing of Spinoza, it can be known what function these parts fulfill in the *Treatise* itself. Let us discuss from this point of view the two difficulties to which we have referred.

Spinoza says that his principal aim in the *Treatise* is the separation of philosophy from theology, and that this aim requires the discussion of "prophets and prophecy" but does not require the discussion of the questions as to whether the prophetic gift was peculiar to the Jews and as to what the election of the Jews means.²⁹ This is perfectly correct as far as the surface argument of the *Treatise* is concerned. Yet the deeper argument requires the proof, as distinguished from the assertion,

that prophecy is a natural phenomenon. The proof offered in the first two chapters of the *Treatise* remains unsatisfactory as long as it has not been shown that prophecy is a universal phenomenon, i.e., that it is not peculiar to the Jews. This in its turn cannot be demonstrated without previous discussion of what kind of phenomena can possibly be peculiar to a nation, or a discussion of the privileges to which a nation as nation can be chosen. Not only the third chapter, however, but the fourth and fifth chapters as well are indispensable for the fully understood argument of the *Treatise*. The largest part of the work is in fact devoted more directly to an investigation of the Old rather than of the New Testament. In his discussion of the Old Testament, or of Judaism in general, Spinoza quite naturally follows a traditional Jewish arrangement of the subject matter. According to the tradition in question (which ultimately goes back to the Islamic *kalam*), what we may call "theology" is divided into two parts, the doctrine of God's unity and the doctrine of God's justice. The doctrine of divine justice deals especially with prophecy, law, and providence. This order is necessary because providence, or divine reward and punishment, presupposes the existence of a divine law, and the divine law in its turn presupposes divine revelation or prophecy. It is this order which underlies the plan of the first six chapters of the *Treatise* as one sees at once if one considers the connection, clearly indicated by Spinoza, between "miracles" and "providence."³⁰

It is equally possible to understand from the context of the *Treatise* why Spinoza disregards in his discussion of miracles the principle of his biblical hermeneutics. For reasons which we shall state later, Spinoza tries to present his views about theological subjects with a great deal of restraint. There is, however, one fundamental point regarding which he consistently refuses to make any unambiguous concessions, and this is precisely the possibility of miracles as supranatural phenomena. Whereas he speaks without hesitation of suprarational teachings, he consistently rejects the possibility of miracles proper. If he had always rejected the possibility of suprarational teachings, he would have had no choice but either simply to identify the biblical teaching with the rational teaching—and this would have been fatal to the separation of philosophy from theology—or else simply to deny all truth to all biblical teachings as revealed teachings. The utmost he could dare was not always to deny the fact of suprarational revelation but always to deny its supranatural or miraculous character, and he could not do this consistently or conveniently without denying the possibility of miracles proper altogether. To avoid the break with the Bible in the crucial point, he had to assert that the possibility of miracles proper is denied by the

Bible itself. To maintain this assertion in the presence especially of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus—of accounts which, as Spinoza admitted, are incompatible with his spiritualistic interpretation of Christianity—, he had no choice but to suggest that any biblical accounts of miracles proper cannot be really biblical but must be sacrilegious additions to Holy Writ.³¹

There are no valid reasons for doubting that the *Treatise* and all its parts are addressed to Christians. As a consequence, one does not sufficiently explain the preponderance of Jewish subject matter in the *Treatise* by referring to the fact that Spinoza had greater knowledge of the Jewish than of the Christian tradition. For this very fact would disqualify him from speaking with authority to Christians on the central subject of Christianity. The peculiarly "Jewish" character of the work must be understood in the light of Spinoza's guiding intention. If one assumes that he believed in the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, one cannot help suggesting that he wanted to give to Christians the following counsel: that they should abandon the Jewish carnal relics which have defaced Christianity almost from its beginning, or that they should return to the purely spiritual teaching of original Christianity. If the chief aim of the *Treatise* is the liberation of Christianity from its Jewish heritage, Jewish subjects will quite naturally be in the foreground of the discussion, and the author's qualification as a teacher of things Christian to Christians will be enhanced rather than diminished by the fact that he is more deeply versed in the Jewish than in the Christian tradition.

The modern historian is inclined to interpret the purpose of the *Treatise*, and therewith to answer the question regarding its addressees, in terms of the particular circumstances of Spinoza's life or of his time. There are even some statements of Spinoza which apparently support such an approach. But the statements in question are necessarily misunderstood if they are not grouped around the central fact that the *Treatise* is not addressed to Spinoza's contemporaries in particular. It is addressed to potential philosophers who are Christians. Men of this kind, and hence Spinoza's problem as well as its solution, are coeval with Christianity, and not peculiar to Spinoza's age. This does not do away with the fact that, according to Spinoza's explicit statement, not only philosophy and the subject matter itself, but "the time" as well required of him the investigations presented in the *Treatise*.³² We have to see how this agrees with what one might call the timeless character of the purpose, and of the thesis, of the work.

Spinoza starts from the contrast between the Christian preaching of universal love and the Christian practice of persecution, especially the

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persecution of philosophers. This contrast existed at all times except at the very beginning of Christianity. For the decline of Christianity began very early, and its primary cause was not any guilty action. Since the Gospel was unknown to their contemporaries, the apostles were compelled to introduce it by appealing to views that were well-known and accepted at that time. Thus they laid the foundation for that fusion of faith and philosophy that contradicts the original intention of the Gospel and justifies the persecution of philosophy in the name of religion. Since the power of errors increases with the length of the time during which they remain uncontested, things became worse and worse as time went on and, but for certain facts to be mentioned immediately, the situation is worse in Spinoza's time than it had ever been before. Still, there are reasons for hoping that just in "our age" Christian society will return for the first time to the pure teaching of the Gospel. This hope is grounded on facts such as these: there are now in existence Christian republics or democracies, i.e., societies which by their nature require freedom of public discussion; there are no longer any prophets whose authoritative demeanor is incompatible with urbanity; the unitary ecclesiastical system of Christianity has been dissolved.³³ All this does not mean more, however, than that the chances of a general acceptance by Christian society of the true Christian teaching in its purity, or the possibilities of its publication, are greater in Spinoza's time than ever before. It does not mean at all that that teaching was not equally accessible to the free minds of all ages since the beginnings of Christianity.

III

The theological part of the *Treatise* opens and concludes with the implicit assertion that revelation or prophecy as certain knowledge of truths which surpass the capacity of human reason is possible. This assertion is repeated, explicitly or implicitly, in a considerable number of other passages of the work.³⁴ Yet there are also passages in which the possibility of any suprarational knowledge is simply denied.³⁵ Spinoza contradicts himself then regarding what one may call the central subject of his book. To suspend one's judgment on what he thought about that subject would be tantamount to throwing away the *Treatise* as a completely unintelligible book. Now, there is no reason why a sincere believer in revealed and suprarational 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." This observation by itself solves the difficulty: Spinoza did not admit the possibility of any suprarational teachings. Yet we cannot dispense with a more detailed discussion of Spinoza's self-contradictions. For there occur in the *Treatise* a considerable number of them, some of which cannot be disposed of as easily as the one just mentioned. We are in need of an exact and universal rule that would enable us to decide with certainty in all cases which of two given contradictory statements of Spinoza expresses his serious view.

We shall first enumerate a few additional examples of important contradictions. Spinoza asserts that once philosophy and theology (or reason and faith) are radically separated from each other or restricted to their peculiar realms, there will be no conflict between them. Philosophy, and not theology, aims at truth; theology, and not philosophy, aims at obedience. Now, theology rests on the fundamental dogma that mere obedience, without the knowledge of the truth, suffices for salvation, and this dogma must be either true or untrue. Spinoza asserts that it is a suprarational truth. But he also asserts that suprarational truths are impossible. If the second assertion is accepted, it follows that the very foundation of theology is an untruth.³⁶ Hence, philosophy and theology, far from being in perfect accord with each other, actually contradict each other. Another form of the same contradiction is presented by the assertions that theology (or the Bible or prophecy) is not authoritative regarding any merely speculative matters, and that theology is authoritative regarding some merely speculative matters.³⁷ —Spinoza asserts that the biblical teaching regarding providence is identical with the philosophic teaching. On the other hand, he asserts that only philosophy (and hence not the Bible) teaches the truth about providence; for only philosophy can teach that God cares equally for all men, i.e., that one fate meets the just and the unjust;³⁸ in other words, that there is no providence at all. This agrees with the implicit thesis that there is a fundamental antagonism between reason and faith. —Spinoza uses "prophecy" and "Bible" as virtually synonymous terms, and he asserts that the only source for our knowledge of the phenomenon of prophecy is the Bible. But he also asserts that the augurs of the pagans were true prophets,³⁹ and thus implies that the first book of Cicero's *De divinatione*, for example, would be as good a source for the study of prophecy as the Bible.

The contradictions regarding Christianity, or the New Testament, require a somewhat more extensive treatment. Spinoza asserts first that

no one except Jesus (whom he regularly calls Christ) has reached the superhuman excellence sufficient for receiving, without the aid of the imagination, revelations of suprarational content; or that he alone—in contradistinction to the Old Testament prophets in particular—truly and adequately understood what was revealed to him. He is therefore prepared to say that the wisdom of God has taken on human nature in Christ, and that Christ is the way of salvation.⁴⁰ These statements must be understood, i.e., corrected, in the light of Spinoza's denial of supranatural phenomena. Since the laws of nature in general, and of human nature in particular, are always and everywhere the same, or since there is never anything radically "new," the mind of Jesus, who had a human body, cannot have been superhuman.⁴¹ In other words, since man has no higher faculty than reason, or since there cannot be suprarational truths, Jesus cannot possibly have been more than the greatest philosopher who ever lived. The second of the two thematic treatments of Jesus which occur in the *Treatise* fully confirms this conclusion. If Spinoza affirms "with Paul" that all things are and move in God, he can be presumed to have believed that his own doctrine of God as the immanent cause of all things goes back to Jesus himself. He even proves that Jesus' knowledge was of necessity purely rational, because Jesus was sent to teach the whole human race and therefore he had to conform to the opinions common to the whole human race, i.e., to the fundamental principles of reason; whereas the Old Testament prophets had to conform merely to the opinions of the Jews, i.e., to a particular set of prejudices.⁴² Or, more precisely, whereas the Old Testament prophets were themselves under the spell of the popular prejudices, Jesus and the apostles only adapted freely the expression of their rational thoughts to the popular prejudices.⁴³ Not indeed the exoteric teaching of the New Testament but its esoteric teaching is genuinely philosophic. This conclusion is, however, strikingly at variance with the chief purpose of the *Treatise*. The radical separation of philosophy and Bible would be a preposterous demand if the esoteric teaching of the New Testament were the peak of philosophic wisdom. Besides, when Spinoza affirms "with Paul" that all things are and move in God, he adds that the same view was perhaps held by all ancient philosophers and by all ancient Hebrews. He speaks with high regard of Solomon's teaching about God and he calls Solomon simply "the philosopher." Yet philosophy, as Spinoza conceives of it, presupposes the knowledge of mathematics, and Solomon had hardly any mathematical knowledge; moreover, the people accepted Solomon's sayings as religiously as those of the prophets, whereas the people would deride rather than respect philosophers who lay claim to authority in religious

matters. Thus it would be more accurate to ascribe to Solomon, not philosophy, but popular wisdom, and accordingly to apply the same description to the teaching of Jesus.⁴⁴ This agrees with the facts that, according to Spinoza, the doctrine of "the Scripture," i.e., of both Testaments, contains "no philosophic things but only the most simple things," and that he probably regarded his teaching, i.e., the true philosophic teaching, about God as opposed to all earlier teachings.⁴⁵ The rational teaching that Spinoza would seem to have seriously ascribed to Jesus, was hardly more than rational morality. Yet he does not consistently maintain that the true moral teaching was discovered, or preached for the first time, by Jesus. To say nothing of the fact that it is by nature accessible to all human beings at all times, it was certainly known to, and preached by, the prophets and wise men of the Old Testament.⁴⁶ The teaching that is characteristic of Jesus or of the New Testament in general is not rational morality itself but its combination with such a "history" as permitted its being preached to the common people of all nations. In other words, the substance of the teaching of the two Testaments is identical. They differ only in this: the Old Testament prophets preached that identical teaching by virtue of the Mosaic Covenant, and therefore addressed it only to the Jews, whereas the apostles preached it by virtue of the passion of Jesus, and therefore addressed it to all men.⁴⁷ Now the combination of rational morality with a "historical" basis of either kind implies that the rational morality is presented in the form of a divine command, and hence that God is presented as a lawgiver. Thus the New Testament demands obedience to God as does the Old, and therefore both Testaments are equally in conflict with the philosophic teaching according to which God cannot be conceived as a lawgiver. "To know Christ according to the spirit" means to believe that God is merciful; but philosophy teaches that it does not make sense to ascribe mercy to God.⁴⁸ In short, the New Testament is not more rational than the Old. There is then no reason why the apostles, for example, should have been more emancipated from the prejudices of their age than the Old Testament prophets had been. In defending his *Treatise* in one of his letters, if not in the *Treatise* itself, Spinoza admits that all apostles believed in the bodily resurrection of Jesus and hence were under the spell of popular prejudices.⁴⁹ There may be more of reasoning in the New Testament than in the Old, and the greatest Old Testament prophet may never have produced a single legitimate argument; but this does not mean of course that there are no illegitimate arguments in the New Testament.⁵⁰ Philosophic statements occur especially in Paul's Epistles, but no more than in the writings ascribed to Solomon. Paul's philosophic utterances could be traced to his desire to

be a Greek with the Greeks, or to make the Gospel acceptable to a multitude tainted by philosophy; the most philosophic utterances of the New Testament would thus appear to be simply borrowings from Greek philosophy. Furthermore, since these utterances were made in deliberate accommodation to the prejudices of their addressees, they do not necessarily agree with Paul's own views. Above all, Paul's pedagogic use of philosophy seems to have laid the foundation for the fatal fusion of philosophy and theology against which the whole *Treatise* is directed. Certainly Paul's teaching of justification "by faith alone" contradicts what Spinoza considers the central and most useful teaching of the Bible.⁵¹ One could think for a moment that by insisting on the universalistic character of the New Testament, as distinguished from the particularistic character of the Old, Spinoza denies the identity, which he elsewhere asserts, of the moral teaching of the two Testaments. Yet he quotes the statement "love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy" in order to prove, not the difference, but the basic identity of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount with that of Moses. The difference between the commands "hate thine enemy" (i.e., the foreigner) and "love thine enemy" is exclusively due to the changed political circumstances of the Jewish people: Moses could think of the establishment of a good polity, whereas Jesus (just as Jeremiah before him) addressed a people which had lost its political independence.⁵² Spinoza does not consistently grant that what the New Testament teaches in regard to private morality is superior to the Old Testament teaching. But even if he did, this would be outweighed in his opinion by the fact that Christianity, owing to the circumstances of its origin, offers much stronger support for the dualism of spiritual and temporal power, and therewith for perpetual civil discord, than the Old Testament teaching, which was originated by Moses, who was king in fact if not in name. For the safety of the community is the highest law.⁵³ To sum up: Spinoza's identification of the teaching, or the esoteric teaching, of the New Testament with the true teaching is contradicted in numerous passages of the *Treatise*.

Our last example shall be a contradiction which we have been forced to imitate in our own presentation and which has the advantage that we can resolve it by having recourse to Spinoza's own explanation of a similar difficulty. In one set of passages of the *Treatise* Spinoza suggests that the Bible is hieroglyphic, i.e., unintelligible on account of its subject matter. In accordance with this view, he explicitly says in one of his letters that he simply does not understand the Bible. This view exposes him to the danger of being forced to admit that the Bible is rich in mysteries and requires for its understanding suprarational illumination;⁵⁴ it is at any rate incompatible with the whole meaning and

purpose of the *Treatise*. There is another set of passages in which Spinoza says with equal definiteness that the Bible is easily intelligible on account of its subject matter, that all difficulties obstructing its understanding are due to our insufficient knowledge of the language, the poor condition of the text and similar causes,⁵⁵ and that almost all these difficulties can be overcome by the use of the right method: there is no need whatsoever for suprarational illumination nor for an authoritative tradition. What then does he mean by saying that he does not understand the Bible? When mentioning in the *Treatise* the Christology of "certain Churches," he says that he does not speak at all about these things nor deny them, "for I willingly confess that I do not understand them." In what is the authentic commentary on this passage, he first repeats his statement that he does not understand the Christology of "certain Churches," but then adds that, "to confess the truth," he considers the doctrines in question absurd, or evidently self-contradictory.⁵⁶ Accordingly, he says that he does not understand the Bible because he does not want "to confess the truth" that he regards the biblical teaching as self-contradictory. His view concerning the intelligibility of the Bible must then be stated as follows: since one cannot realize that the teaching of a book is absurd if one does not understand that teaching, the Bible is certainly intelligible. But it is easier to understand a book whose teaching is lucid than a book whose teaching is self-contradictory. It is very difficult to ascertain the meaning of a book that consists to a considerable extent of self-contradictory assertions, of remnants of primeval prejudices or superstitions, and of the outpourings of an uncontrolled imagination.⁵⁷ It is still more difficult to understand a book of this kind if it is, in addition, poorly compiled and poorly preserved. Yet many of these difficulties can be overcome by the use of the right method.

Spinoza, who regarded the Bible as a book rich in contradictions, has indicated this view in a book that itself abounds in contradictions. We have to see whether his treatment of biblical contradictions does not supply us with some help for the understanding of his own work. We must limit ourselves to what he has to say about contradictions between nonmetaphoric statements of one and the same speaker. His rule is that in such cases one has to suspend one's judgment as to what the speaker thought about the subject in question, unless one can show that the contradiction is due to the difference of the occasion or of the addressees of the two statements.⁵⁸ He applies this rule to the (real or alleged) contradiction between certain views of Jesus and Paul: while one of the views is addressed to the common people, the other is addressed to the wise. But Spinoza goes beyond this. The mere fact that Paul says on some occasions that he speaks "after the manner of man,"

induces Spinoza to dismiss all statements of Paul which agree with what Spinoza considers the vulgar view, as mere accommodations on the part of Paul, and to say of them that they are spoken "after the manner of man."⁵⁹ If we reduce this procedure to its principle, we arrive at the following rule: if an author, who admits, however occasionally, that he speaks "after the manner of man," makes contradictory statements on a subject, the statement contradicting the vulgar view has to be considered as his serious view; nay, every statement of such an author which agrees with views vulgarly considered sacred or authoritative must be dismissed as irrelevant, or at least it must be suspected even though it is never contradicted by him.⁶⁰

Spinoza himself is an author of this kind. The first of the three "rules of living" which he sets forth in his *Treatise on the Improvement of the Understanding* reads as follows: "To speak with a view to the capacity of the vulgar and to practice all those things which cannot hinder us from reaching our goal (sc. the highest good). For we are able to obtain no small advantage from the vulgar provided we make as many concessions as possible to their capacity. Add to this that in this way they will lend friendly ears to the truth,"⁶¹ i.e., the vulgar will thus be induced to accept such truths as the philosopher may wish to communicate to them, or they will not resent occasional heresies of the philosopher. At any rate, Spinoza means not merely that the choice of the form of his external worship, or of his religious affiliation, is a matter of mere expediency for the philosopher, but, above all, that he will adapt the expression of his thought to the generally accepted opinions by professing, as far as it is possible or necessary, these very opinions, even though he considers them untrue or absurd. That this is the correct interpretation of the phrase "ad captum vulgi loqui" appears from what Spinoza says on the subject in the *Treatise*. For in the *Treatise* he teaches that God, and Jesus and Paul as well, in speaking to men who held vulgar opinions, accommodated themselves to the capacity of their addressees by professing or at any rate not questioning those opinions. Even in the case of Moses Spinoza suggests that he may have taught things which he did not believe ("Moses believed, or at least he wished to teach . . .").⁶² And he calls this kind of communication to speak "ad captum vulgi" or, more frequently, "ad captum alicuius." For to speak with a view to the capacity of the vulgar necessarily means to argue *ad hominem*, or to accommodate oneself to the particular prejudices of the particular vulgar group or individual whom one happens to address.⁶³ The author or authors of the Bible speak "ad captum vulgi" by communicating a salutary or pious teaching, while not only not questioning but even professing, and thus confirming, the untrue or absurd principles or premises of the addressees.⁶⁴

of Bulhauer: between the dit. of the Vulgar, the Jews, and the

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It is no accident that practically the only authentic information about the precise character of Spinoza's method of communication is supplied by the *Treatise*. A full and direct explanation of this subject was, for obvious reasons, out of the question. But it was possible to assert that in the Bible a superior mind or superior minds condescend to speak in the language of ordinary people, and that there occur in the Bible a number of statements which contradict those biblical statements that are adapted to vulgar prejudices. Spinoza was thus led to assert that at least some of the biblical contradictions are conscious or deliberate, and therewith to suggest that there is an esoteric teaching of the Bible, or that the literal meaning of the Bible hides a deeper, mysterious meaning. By contradicting this ultimate consequence,⁶⁵ he leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to the ironical or exoteric character of his assertion that the statements of the Bible are consciously adapted by its authors to the capacity of the vulgar. But the temporary device has fulfilled its most important function, which is to supply the reader with an urgently needed piece of information. We may say that Spinoza uses the sketch of his exoteric interpretation of the Bible for indicating the character of his own exoteric procedure.

There must be scholars who believe that "to speak with a view to the capacity of the vulgar" merely means to express oneself in not too technical a language, and who argue that the alternative interpretation would be a reflection on Spinoza's character. Those scholars are requested to consider that, if their reason were valid, Spinoza would impute to the author or authors of the Bible a morally questionable practice. Whatever may be the sound moral rule, Spinoza had certainly no compunctions to refrain from "confessing the truth," or to reveal his views while hiding them behind more or less transparent accommodations to the generally accepted opinions. When he says that the wise man will never, not even in the greatest danger, act *dolo malo*, he does not mean that the wise man will never employ any ruses; for he explicitly admits that there are good or legitimate ruses.⁶⁶ If the statesman is under an obligation to employ all kinds of ruses in the interest of the material welfare of the ruled,⁶⁷ the same duty must be incumbent on those to whom nature has entrusted the spiritual guidance of mankind, i.e., on the philosophers, who are much more exposed to the suspicions of the multitude⁶⁸ than statesmen, and therefore in greater need of caution than anyone else. "Caute" was the inscription of Spinoza's signet. By this he did not primarily mean the caution required in philosophic investigations but the caution that the philosopher needs in his intercourse with nonphilosophers. The only reason which he can find for showing that the reading of histories is most useful is that we may learn

through their study "to live more cautiously among men and more successfully to accommodate our actions and our life, within the limits of reason, to their way of thinking."⁶⁹ For he considered caution, and especially caution in speech, extremely difficult: "not even the most learned or experienced, to say nothing of the common people, know how to be silent. This is a common vice of men, to confide their intentions to others, even though silence is needed." If it is of the essence of the wise man that he is able to live under every form of government, i.e., even in societies in which freedom of speech is strictly denied, it is of his essence that he is able to live without ever expressing those of his thoughts whose expression happens to be forbidden.⁷⁰ The philosopher who knows the truth must be prepared to refrain from expressing it, not so much for reasons of convenience as for reasons of duty. Whereas truth requires that one should not accommodate the words of the Bible to one's own opinions, piety requires that everyone should accommodate the words of the Bible to his own opinions,⁷¹ i.e., that one should give one's own opinions a biblical appearance. If true religion or faith, which according to him requires not so much true dogmas as pious ones, were endangered by his biblical criticism, Spinoza would have decided to be absolutely silent about this subject; nay, he would have gladly admitted—in order to escape from all difficulties—that the deepest mysteries are hidden in the Bible.⁷² That is to say, he would have suppressed the truths in question and asserted their contraries, if he had felt that these truths could do harm to the mass of readers.

If we disregard, as we must, Spinoza's references to his alleged biblical models, the only man to whom he almost explicitly refers in the *Treatise* as a predecessor regarding his technique of presentation is Abraham ibn Ezra, of whom he speaks with unconcealed respect. Ibn Ezra "did not dare to explain openly" what he thought about the authorship of the Pentateuch, but indicated his view "in rather obscure words." One cryptic statement of ibn Ezra, that is quoted by Spinoza, ends with the words: "He who understands, should be silent." A certain allusion made by Spinoza himself ends with the words that he wished to remain silent on the subject in question for reasons which the ruling superstition or the difficult times do not permit to explain, but that "it suffices to indicate the matter to the wise."⁷³ Spinoza did not indicate what he owed to Maimonides, to whom he refers more frequently than to ibn Ezra, although in a much less friendly tone. But when saying that Moses "believed or at least wished to teach" that God is zealous or angry, he merely makes explicit what Maimonides had implied when intimating that the belief in God's anger is required, not for man's ultimate perfection, but for the good ordering of civil society.⁷⁴ For Moses,

whom Maimonides considered the wisest of all men, was necessarily aware of the particular character of the belief in question, to which he gave so forceful an expression. In his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides presents his teaching by using deliberate contradictions, hidden from the vulgar, between nonmetaphoric statements; it is in this way that he reveals the truth to those who are able to understand by themselves, while hiding the truth from the vulgar. He raises the question as to whether the same kind of contradiction is also used in the Bible, but he does not answer it.⁷⁵ If he has answered it in the affirmative—as, in a sense, he necessarily did—the *Guide* would be the model for Spinoza's sketch of an exoteric interpretation of the Bible, an interpretation according to which the Bible consists partly of vulgar statements and partly of philosophic statements which deliberately and secretly contradict the vulgar ones. At any rate, there can be no doubt that, generally speaking, Maimonides' method of presentation is meant to be an imitation of what he declared to be the method of the Bible. Maimonides in his turn was indebted for his method to "the philosophers" of his period. The typical philosopher, as presented in Yehuda Halevi's *Kuzari*, considered it perfectly legitimate for the philosopher to adhere in his speeches as well as in his actions to a religion to which he does not adhere in his thought, and he took it for granted that the philosophic teaching proper is necessarily accompanied by an exoteric teaching. Farabi, whom Maimonides regarded as the greatest philosophic authority of his period, virtually denied all cognitive value to religion, and yet considered conformity with the laws and the beliefs of the religious community in which one is brought up as a necessary qualification for the future philosopher.

But it would be a mistake to think that one has to look for Spinoza's models exclusively in Islamic philosophy. Farabi himself traces the procedure to which we have referred to Plato. Practically the same expression that Spinoza applies to Moses ("he believed, or at least he wished to teach . . .") is applied to Socrates by Lessing, who had studied Spinoza very closely, and who stated that there is no other philosophy than that of Spinoza. According to Lessing, Socrates "believed in eternal punishment in all seriousness, or at least believed in it to the extent that he considered it expedient to teach it in words that are least susceptible of arousing suspicion and most explicit." Lessing held that "all ancient philosophers" had made a distinction between their exoteric and their esoteric teaching, and he ascribed the same distinction to Leibniz.⁷⁶ Spinoza's rules of living which open with "ad captum vulgi loqui" are modeled on the rules of Descartes' "morale par provision" which open with the demand for intransigent conformism in every-

Lessing
Socrates

thing except in the strictly private examination of one's own opinions.⁷⁷ We can barely allude to the question of Descartes' technique of writing, to a question which seems to baffle all his students because of the extreme caution with which that philosopher constantly acted. The traditional distinction between exoteric (or "disclosed") and esoteric (or "enigmatical") presentation was accessible to Spinoza also through Bacon, who insisted especially on the "secret and retired" character of the science of government. The student of Spinoza must pay particular attention to Bacon's principles regarding the use of terms: "it seemeth best to keep way with antiquity *usque ad aras*; and therefore to retain the ancient terms, though I sometimes alter the uses and definitions, according to the moderate proceeding in civil government; where although there be some alteration, yet that holdeth which Tacitus wisely noteth, *Eadem Magistratum vocabula*."⁷⁸ It is well-known how much Spinoza silently complied with this politic rule. He seems to allude to it when saying that if a man wishes to alter the meaning of a term to which he is accustomed, he will not be able "without difficulty" to do it consistently in speech and in writing.⁷⁹ We merely have to remember the fact that "all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare."

Spinoza's caution or thrift in communicating his views is far from being excessive if we judge his procedure by the standards admitted by a number of earlier thinkers. In fact, judged by these standards, he proves to be extraordinarily bold. That very bold man Hobbes admitted after having read the *Treatise* that he himself had not dared to write as boldly. Spinoza was very bold insofar as he went to the extreme to which he could go as a man who was convinced that religion, i.e., positive religion, is indispensable to society, and who took his social duties seriously. He was cautious insofar as he did not state the whole truth clearly and unequivocally but kept his utterances, to the best of his knowledge, within the limits imposed by what he considered the legitimate claims of society. He speaks then in all his writings, and especially in the *Treatise*, "ad captum vulgi." This is not at variance with the fact that the *Treatise* is explicitly addressed, not to the vulgar, but to philosophers. For Spinoza was not in a position effectively to prevent the Latin-reading part of the vulgar from reading the *Treatise* and from thus becoming obnoxious to him. Accordingly, that book serves the purpose, not merely of enlightening the potential philosophers, but also of counteracting the opinion which the vulgar had of Spinoza, i.e., of appeasing the *plebs* itself.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the *Treatise* is addressed, not so much to philosophers simply, as to potential philosophers, i.e., to men who, at least in the early stages of their training, are deeply imbued with the vulgar prejudices: what Spinoza considers the basic prejudice

of those potential philosophers whom he addresses in the *Treatise* is merely a special form of the basic prejudice of the vulgar mind in general.⁸¹

In the *Treatise* Spinoza addresses potential philosophers of a certain kind while the vulgar are listening. He speaks therefore in such a way that the vulgar will not understand what he means. It is for this reason that he expresses himself contradictorily: those shocked by his heterodox statements will be appeased by more or less orthodox formulae. Spinoza boldly denies the possibility of miracles proper—in a single chapter. But he speaks of miracles throughout the work without making it clear in the other chapters that he understands by miracles merely such natural phenomena as seemed to be strange to the particular vulgar thinkers who observed or recorded them. To exaggerate for purposes of clarification, we may say that each chapter of the *Treatise* serves the function of refuting one particular orthodox dogma while leaving untouched all other orthodox dogmas.⁸² Only a minority of readers will take the trouble of keeping firmly in mind the results of all chapters and of adding them up. Only a minority of readers will admit that if an author makes contradictory statements on a subject, his view may well be expressed by the statements that occur least frequently or only once, while his view is concealed by the contradictory statements that occur most frequently or even in all cases but one; for many readers do not fully grasp what it means that the truth, or the seriousness, of a proposition is not increased by the frequency with which the proposition is repeated. One must also consider “the customary mildness of the common people,”⁸³ a good-naturedness which fairly soon shrinks from, or is shocked by, the inquisitorial brutality and recklessness that is required for extorting his serious views from an able writer who tries to conceal them from all but a few. It is then not misleading to say that the orthodox statements are more obvious in the *Treatise* than the heterodox ones. It is no accident, for example, that the first sentence of the first chapter is to the effect that prophecy or revelation is such certain knowledge of any subject as is revealed by God to human beings. We may call the more or less orthodox statements the first statements, and the contradictory statements the second statements. Of the two thematic statements about Jesus, the first is definitely nearer to the orthodox Christian view than is the second one.⁸⁴ This rule must be taken with a grain of salt: the conclusion of the theological part of the *Treatise* is hardly less orthodox than its opening. The “second statements” are more likely to occur—according to a rule of forensic rhetoric⁸⁵—somewhere in the middle, i.e., in places least exposed to the curiosity of superficial readers. Thus even by presenting his serious view in one set of explicit state-

ments, while contradicting it in another set, Spinoza could reveal it to the more attentive readers while hiding it from the vulgar. But not all of Spinoza's contradictions are explicit. In some cases, not the explicit statements, but the necessary consequences from explicit statements contradict other explicit statements. In other cases, we are confronted with a contradiction between two explicit statements, neither of which is necessarily heterodox or expresses directly Spinoza's view on the subject; but the incongruity presented by the contradiction points to an unexpressed and unambiguously heterodox view, by which the surface contradiction is resolved, and which thus proves to be obliquely presented by the surface contradiction.⁸⁶

The sound rule for reading the *Treatise* is that, in case of a contradiction, the statement most opposed to what Spinoza considered the vulgar view has to be regarded as expressing his serious view; nay, that even a necessary implication of a heterodox character has to take precedence over a contradictory statement that is never explicitly contradicted by Spinoza.⁸⁷ In other words, if the final theses of individual chapters of the *Treatise* (as distinguished from the almost constantly repeated accommodations) are not consistent with each other, we are led by the observation of this fact and our ensuing reflection to a consistent view that is no longer explicitly stated, but clearly presupposed, by Spinoza; and we have to recognize this view as his serious view, or as the secret *par excellence* of the *Treatise*. Only by following this rule of reading can we understand Spinoza's thought exactly as he himself understood it and avoid the danger of becoming or remaining the dupes of his accommodations.

Since Spinoza states the rule "*ad captum vulgi loqui*" without any qualification, there is a reasonable presumption that he acted on it also when writing his *Ethics*. This presumption cannot be disposed of by reference to the "geometric" character of that work, for "*ad captum vulgi loqui*" does not mean to present one's thoughts in a popular garb, but to argue *ad hominem* or *ex concessis*, i.e., from a covered position. Spinoza presented the teaching of Descartes' *Principia* also in "geometric" form, although he did not even pretend that that teaching was the true teaching.⁸⁸ Nor is the strictly esoteric or scientific character of the *Ethics* guaranteed by the fact that Spinoza did not explicitly address that work to a human type other than actual or mature philosophers, for there are many other ways in which an author can indicate that he is speaking "*ad captum alicuius*." To mention one of them, there has scarcely ever been a serious reader of the *Ethics* who has not also read the *Treatise*; those for whom indications suffice understood from the *Treatise* what Spinoza seriously thought of all positive religions and of

the Bible, and they recognized at once from the pious references to biblical teachings which occur in the *Ethics*⁸⁹ that this book is by no means free from accommodations to the accepted views. In other words, one cannot leave it at the impression that while the *Treatise* is, of course, exoteric, the *Ethics* is Spinoza's esoteric work simply, and that therefore the solution to all the riddles of the *Treatise* is presented explicitly and clearly in the *Ethics*. For Spinoza cannot have been ignorant of the obvious truth which, in addition, had been pointed out to him if not by Plato, at any rate by Maimonides,⁹⁰ that every book is accessible to all who can read the language in which it is written; and that therefore, if there is any need at all for hiding the truth from the vulgar, no written exposition can be strictly speaking esoteric.

In the absence of statements of Spinoza which refer specifically to the manner of communication employed in the *Ethics*, most students will feel that the question regarding the esoteric or exoteric character of that work can be settled only on the basis of internal evidence. One of the most learned contemporary students of Spinoza speaks of "the baffling allusiveness and ellipticalness of (the) style" of the *Ethics*, and he notes that in that work "statements are not significant for what they actually affirm but for the denials which they imply." He explains Spinoza's procedure by the circumstance that Spinoza, a Jew, lived in a non-Jewish environment in which he "never felt himself quite free to speak his mind; and he who among his own people never hesitated to speak out with boldness became cautious, hesitant, and reserved." In the spirit of this "historical" reason (i.e., of a reason primarily based, not on Spinoza's explicit statements, but on the history of the author's life), he finally asserts: "Little did he understand the real cause of his own behavior," i.e., he admits that he is trying to understand Spinoza better than he understood himself. Apart from this, one can hardly say that Spinoza "never" hesitated to state his views when speaking to Jews; for only while he was very young did he have normal opportunities of conversing with Jews, and caution is not a quality characteristic of youth. On the principle expressed by Spinoza himself, he would have had to be extremely "cautious, hesitant, and reserved" "among his own people" if he had lived in an age when the separation from the Jewish community was impossible for a self-respecting man of Jewish origin, who was not honestly convinced of the truth of another religion. Professor Wolfson also explains the particular style of the *Ethics* by Spinoza's talmudic and rabbinic training, and he accordingly demands that one must approach the study of the *Ethics* in the spirit "in which the old rabbinic scholars approach the study of their standard texts." He admits, however, by implication the very limited value of this approach

This Y. must be used to apply to Spinoza's procedure in the Ethics.

by saying that "we must constantly ask ourselves, with regard to every statement he makes, what is the reason? What does he intend to let us hear? What is his authority? Does he reproduce his authority correctly or not?"⁹¹ For, clearly, Spinoza did not know of any authorities in philosophic investigation. There is all the difference in the world between an author who considers himself merely a link in the chain of a venerable tradition, and for this very reason uses allusive and elliptical language, i.e., language that is intelligible only on the basis of the tradition in question, and an author who denies all value to tradition and therefore uses various stylistic means, especially allusive and elliptical language, in order to eradicate the traditional views from the minds of his best readers. Wolfson indicates a much more adequate reason for the particular style of the *Ethics* by stating that Spinoza's "'God' is merely an appeasive term for the most comprehensive principle of the universe," or that it was merely a "literary pretension that his entire philosophy was evolved from his conception of God." For it is easily understandable that Spinoza could not neutralize accommodations of this magnitude but by allusions, ellipses, or similar devices. In other words, if, as Wolfson consistently suggests, Spinoza's doctrine of God is fundamentally nothing but an "internal criticism" of traditional theology,⁹² one has to admit, on the basis of Spinoza's explicit demand for, and authentic interpretation of, "ad captum vulgi loqui," that Spinoza's doctrine of God—apparently the basis or starting point of his whole doctrine—belongs as such to a mere argument *ad hominem* or *ex concessis*, that rather hides than reveals his real starting point. To express this in technical language, what Spinoza presents in his *Ethics* is the "synthesis," whereas he suppresses the "analysis" which necessarily precedes it.⁹³ That is, he suppresses the whole reasoning, both philosophic and "politic," leading up to the definitions by which the reader is startled and at the same time appeased when he opens that book. If it is true that Spinoza's "'God' is merely an appeasive term," one would have to rewrite the whole *Ethics* without using that term, i.e., by starting from Spinoza's concealed atheistic principles. If it is true that Spinoza's "'God' is merely an appeasive term," one certainly has no longer any right to assume that, according to Spinoza, the idea of God, to say nothing of God's existence, is "immediately known as an intuition,"⁹⁴ and therefore the legitimate starting point for philosophy. However this may be, Spinoza's general principle of accommodation to the generally accepted views imposes on the interpreter the duty to raise the question as to what are the absolute limits to Spinoza's accommodation; or, in more specific terms, as to what are the entirely nontheological considerations that brought Spinoza into conflict with materialism,

and to what extent these considerations vouch for the explicit teaching of the *Ethics*. In other words, one has to see whether there are not anywhere in Spinoza's writings indications, however subtle, of a strictly atheistic beginning or approach. This is, incidentally, one reason why the *Treatise* should be read, not merely against the background of the *Ethics*, but also by itself. Precisely the more exoteric work may disclose features of Spinoza's thought which could not with propriety be disclosed in the *Ethics*. While former generations publicly denounced Spinoza as an atheist, today it is almost a heresy to hint that, for all we know prior to a fresh investigation of the whole issue, he may have been an atheist. This change is due not merely, as contemporary self-complacency would have it, to the substitution of historical detachment for fanatical partisanship, but above all to the fact that the phenomenon and the causes of exotericism have almost completely been forgotten.

To return to the *Treatise*, we are now in a position to state the true reasons for certain features of that work which have not yet been sufficiently clarified. The *Treatise* is addressed to Christians, not because Spinoza believed in the truth of Christianity or even in the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, but because "ad captum vulgi loqui" means "ad captum hodierni vulgi loqui" or to accommodate oneself to the ruling opinions of one's time, and Christianity, not Judaism, was literally ruling. Or, in other words, Spinoza desired to convert to philosophy "as many as possible,"⁹⁵ and there were many more Christians in the world than there were Jews. To this one may add two "historical" reasons: after his open and irrevocable break with the Jewish community, Spinoza could no longer with propriety address Jews in the way in which, and for the purpose for which, he addresses Christians in the *Treatise*; in addition, there existed in his time a considerable group of Christians, but not of Jews, who were "liberal" in the sense that they reduced religious dogma to a minimum, and at the same time regarded all ceremonies or sacraments as indifferent, if not harmful. At any rate, Spinoza was "a Christian with the Christians" in exactly the same way in which, according to him, Paul was "a Greek with the Greeks and a Jew with the Jews."⁹⁶ It is the political and social power of Christianity which also explains why the subject matter of the *Treatise* is Jewish rather than Christian. It was infinitely less dangerous to attack Judaism than to attack Christianity, and it was distinctly less dangerous to attack the Old Testament than the New. One has only to read the summary of the argument of the first part of the *Treatise* at the beginning of the thirteenth chapter in order to see that while the explicit argument of that part is chiefly based upon, or directed against, the Old Testament, the conclusions are meant to apply to "the Scripture," i.e., to both

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Spinoza's understanding of the nature and nature of the Jewish community. He is not a philosopher of the Jewish community.

Testaments alike.⁹⁷ When Spinoza criticizes at relatively great length the theological principle accepted by "the greatest part" of the Jews, he clearly has in mind "the greatest part" of the Christians as well, as appears from his reference, in the passage in question, to the doctrine of original sin, and from parallels elsewhere in the *Treatise*.⁹⁸ After having indicated the doubtful character of the genealogies of Jeconiah and Zerubbabel in 1 Chronicles 3, Spinoza adds the remark that he would rather have wished to remain silent on this subject, for reasons which the ruling superstition does not permit to explain. Since he had not felt any hesitation to point out the doubtful character of other Old Testament records of a similar nature, his cryptic remark can only refer to the connection between the genealogy in question and the genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew.⁹⁹ The preponderance of Jewish subject matter in the *Treatise* is then due to Spinoza's caution rather than to his insufficient knowledge of Christianity or of the Greek language.¹⁰⁰ His relative reticence about specifically Christian subjects could be expected to protect him against persecution by the vulgar, while it was not likely to disqualify him in the eyes of the "more prudent" readers, who could be relied upon to understand the implication of his attack on Judaism, and especially on the Old Testament.

From Spinoza's authentic interpretation of "ad captum vulgi loqui" it follows that he cannot have meant the exoteric teaching of the *Treatise* as a "timeless" teaching. But for the same reason the *Treatise* is linked to its time, not because Spinoza's serious or private thought was determined by his "historical situation" without his being aware of it, but because he consciously and deliberately adapted, not his thought, but the public expression of his thought, to what his time demanded or permitted. His plea for "the freedom of philosophizing," and therefore for "the separation of philosophy from theology," is linked to its time in the first place because the time lacked that freedom and simultaneously offered reasonable prospects for its establishment. In another age, or even in another country, Spinoza would have been compelled by his principle of caution to make entirely different proposals for the protection of philosophy, without changing in the least his philosophic thought. The weakening of ecclesiastical authority in Christian Europe, the great variety of Christian sects in certain Protestant countries, the increasing unpopularity of religious persecution, the practice of toleration in Amsterdam in particular, permitted Spinoza to suggest publicly "the separation of philosophy from theology" in the interest, not merely of philosophy or of the philosophers, but of society in general; and to suggest it, not merely on philosophic grounds, but on biblical grounds

as well.¹⁰¹ Spinoza's argument is linked to his time especially because his plea for "the freedom of philosophizing" is based on arguments taken from the character of the biblical teaching. For, as is shown by his references to classical authors, he believed that the legitimation of that freedom on social grounds alone was also possible in classical antiquity, and hence would be possible in future societies modeled on the classical pattern. More exactly, Spinoza considered this particular kind of legitimation of the freedom of inquiry a classical rather than a biblical heritage.¹⁰² Apart from this, it follows from our previous argument that the exoteric teaching of the *Treatise* is not meant to be "contemporaneous" with Christianity. The *Treatise* is "contemporaneous" not with the specific assumptions which it attacks, but with those to which it appeals. The assumptions to which Spinoza appeals, in the most visible part of the argument of the *Treatise*, are these: the good life simply is the practice of justice and charity, which is impossible without belief in divine justice; and the Bible insists on the practice of justice and charity combined with the belief in divine justice as the necessary and sufficient condition of salvation. At the moment these assumptions cease to be publicly defensible,¹⁰³ the exoteric teaching of the *Treatise* would lose its *raison d'être*. *⇒ agreeable to the reasoning*

Almost everything we have said in the present essay was necessary in order to make intelligible the particular complexity of the argument of the *Treatise*. A considerable part of that argument is actually an appeal from traditional theology to the Bible, whose authority is questioned by the other part of the argument. The hermeneutic principle that legitimates the whole argument, and thus blurs the fundamental difference between its heterogeneous parts, is expressed by the assertion that, as a matter of principle, the literal meaning of the Bible is its only meaning. The return to the literal sense of the Bible fulfills an entirely different function within the context of the criticism, based on the Bible, of traditional theology on the one hand and within the contrary context of the attack on the authority of the Bible on the other. Arguing from the conceded premise that the Bible is the only document of revelation, Spinoza demands that the pure word of God be not corrupted by any human additions, inventions, or innovations, and that nothing be considered a revealed doctrine that is not borne out by explicit and clear statements of the Bible.¹⁰⁴ The hidden reason for this procedure is twofold. Spinoza considers the teaching of the Bible partly more rational and partly less rational than that of traditional theology. Insofar as it is more rational, he tries to remind traditional theology of a valuable heritage which it has forgotten; insofar as it is less rational, he indicates to the more prudent readers the precarious character of the very basis of all

actual theology. He thus leads the reader insensibly toward the criticism of the authority of the Bible itself. This criticism requires the return to the literal meaning of the Bible for the additional reason that the Bible is a popular book: a popular book meant for instruction must present its teaching in the most simple and easily accessible manner.¹⁰⁵ The opposition of the two approaches finds what is probably its most telling expression in the opposite ways in which Spinoza applies the term "ancient" to the Bible: viewed as the standard and corrective for all later religion and theology, the Bible is the document of "the ancient religion"; viewed as the object of philosophic criticism, the Bible is a document transmitting "the prejudices of an ancient nation."¹⁰⁶ In the first case, "ancient" means venerable; in the second case, "ancient" means rude and obsolete. The confusion becomes still greater since Spinoza gives in the *Treatise* the outlines of a purely historical interpretation of the Bible. In fact, his most detailed exposition of hermeneutic rules might seem exclusively to serve the purpose of paving the way for a detached, historical study of the Bible. One is therefore constantly tempted to judge Spinoza's use of the Bible as an authoritative text, as well as his use of the Bible as the target of philosophic criticism, by what he himself declares to be the requirements of a "scientific" study of the Bible; and one is thus frequently tempted to note the utter inadequacy of Spinoza's arguments. Yet one must never lose sight of the fact that the detached or historical study of the Bible was for Spinoza a *cura posterior*. Detached study presupposes detachment, and it is precisely the creation of detachment from the Bible that is Spinoza's primary aim in the *Treatise*. The philosophic criticism of the biblical teaching, and still more the appeal from traditional theology to the authority of the Bible, cannot be judged in terms of the requirements of the historical study of the Bible, because both uses of the Bible essentially precede that historical study. Whereas the historical study of the Bible, as Spinoza conceives of it, demands that the Bible not be taken as a unity, his two primary purposes require just the opposite; for the claims, to which he either defers or which he attacks, are raised on behalf of the Bible as a unitary whole. The first six chapters of the *Treatise*, which lay the foundation for everything that follows, and especially for Spinoza's higher criticism of the Bible, do not in any way presuppose the results of that criticism; in fact, they contradict these results; in these basic chapters, Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch is taken for granted. *Mutatis mutandis* the same applies to Spinoza's attempt to utilize the Bible for political instruction (chapters XVII-XIX).¹⁰⁷ The possible value of Spinoza's philosophic criticism of the biblical teaching is not impaired by this apparent incongruity; for regardless of who were the authors of

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the various theological theses asserted in the Bible, or the originators of the institutions recorded or recommended in the Bible, the proof of the absurdity or unsoundness of the theses and institutions in question is the necessary and sufficient condition for the rejection of biblical authority.

The validity of Spinoza's philosophic criticism of the Bible certainly requires that he has grasped the intention of the Bible as a whole. It is at this point that the distinction between his use of the Bible as authority and his use of the Bible as the target of philosophic criticism becomes decisive for the understanding of the *Treatise*. For it is possible that what Spinoza says about the intention of the Bible as a whole belongs to the context of his appeal from traditional theology to the authority of the Bible. It would certainly not be incompatible with Spinoza's principle "ad captum vulgi loqui" if he had used the Bible in that exoteric context in the way in which counsel for defense sometimes uses the laws: if one wants to bring about an acquittal—the liberation of philosophy from theological bondage—one is not necessarily concerned with ascertaining the true intention of the law. We cannot take it for granted then that Spinoza really identified the fundamental teaching of the Bible with what the Bible teaches everywhere clearly, or that he really believed that the moral teaching of the Bible is everywhere clearly expressed and in no way affected by defective readings and so on.¹⁰⁸ The fact that he teaches these and similar things regarding the general character of the Bible does not yet prove that he believed them; for, not to repeat our whole argument, he also asserts that there cannot be any contradictions between the insight of the understanding and the teaching of the Bible because "the truth does not contradict the truth,"¹⁰⁹ and we know that he did not believe in the truth of the biblical teaching. In addition, there is some specific evidence that supports the particular doubt we are raising. In his list of those biblical teachings which allegedly are presented clearly everywhere in the Bible, Spinoza mentions the dogma that in consequence of God's decree the pious are rewarded and the wicked are punished; but elsewhere he says that, according to Solomon, the same fate meets the just and the unjust, the pure and the impure.¹¹⁰ He enumerates among the same kind of teachings the dogma that God takes care of all things; it is hard to see how this can be taught in the Bible everywhere clearly if, as Spinoza maintains, the Bible teaches in a number of important passages that God is not omniscient, that He is ignorant of future human actions, and that He takes care only of His chosen people. He also lists among the teachings in question the dogma that God is omnipotent; again, it is hard to see how this can be taught in the Bible everywhere clearly if, as Spinoza

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suggests, Moses himself believed that the angels or "the other gods," as well as matter, are not created by God.¹¹¹ Furthermore, Spinoza says that charity is recommended most highly everywhere in both Testaments, and yet he also says that the Old Testament recommends, or even commends, hatred of the other nations.¹¹² Above all, Spinoza makes the following assertions: the only intention of the Bible is to teach obedience to God, or the Bible enjoins nothing but obedience; obedience to God is fundamentally different from love of God; the Bible also enjoins love of God.¹¹³ Precisely because Spinoza openly abandoned in the *Treatise* the belief in the cognitive value of the Bible, his maxim to speak "ad captum vulgi" forced him to assign the highest possible value to the practical or moral demands of the Bible. It is for this reason that he asserts that the practical teaching of the Bible agrees with the true practical teaching, i.e., the practical consequences of philosophy. For obvious reasons, he had to supplement this assertion by maintaining that the practical teaching of the Bible is its central teaching, that it is everywhere clearly presented in the Bible, and that it could not possibly be corrupted or mutilated by the compilers and transmitters of the Bible.

The *Treatise* is primarily directed against the view that philosophy ought to be subservient to the Bible, or against "skepticism." But it is also directed against the view that the Bible ought to be subservient, or to be accommodated, to philosophy, i.e., against "dogmatism."¹¹⁴ Furthermore, while the work is primarily directed against Christianity, it is also directed against Judaism. The *Treatise* is then directed against these four widely different positions: Christian skepticism, Christian dogmatism, Jewish skepticism, and Jewish dogmatism. Now, arguments which might be decisive against one or some of these positions, might be irrelevant if used against the others. For example, arguments taken from the authority of the New Testament might be conclusive against one or the other form of Christian theology, or even against all forms of Christian theology, but they are clearly irrelevant if used against any Jewish position. Hence, one should expect that Spinoza would criticize each of the four positions by itself. But with very few exceptions he directs one and the same criticism against what might appear to be a fantastic hybrid constructed *ad hoc* out of Judaism and Christianity, and of dogmatism and skepticism. His failure to distinguish throughout between the various positions which he attacks, and to pay careful attention to the specific character of each, might seem to deprive his criticism of every claim to serious attention. For example, he prefaces his denial of the possibility of miracles by such an account of the vulgar view on the subject as probably surpasses in crudity everything ever said or suggested by the most stupid or the most obscurant smatterer in

Jewish or Christian theology. Here, Spinoza seems to select as the target of his criticism a possibly nonexistent position that was particularly easy to refute. Or, to take an example of a different character, he prefaces his denial of the cognitive value of revelation by the assertion that "with amazing rashness" "all" writers have maintained that the prophets have known everything within the reach of the human understanding, i.e., he imputes to all theologians a view which is said to have been rejected "by all important Christian theologians of the age."¹⁵ The view in question was held by Maimonides, and Spinoza seems, "with amazing rashness," to take Maimonides as the representative of all theologians. Here, he seems to select as the target of his criticism an actual theological position for the irrelevant reason that he had happened to study it closely during his youth.

The *Treatise* remains largely unintelligible as long as the typical difficulties represented by these two examples are not removed. We intend to show that these difficulties cannot be traced to Spinoza's caution, and thus to express our agreement with the view, which we never contradicted, that Spinoza's exotericism is not the only fact responsible for the difficulties of the *Treatise*. We start from the observation that a certain simplification of the theological issue was inevitable if Spinoza wanted to settle it at all. He effects the necessary simplification in two different ways which are illustrated by our two examples. In the first example, he starts from the implicit premise that all possibly relevant Jewish and Christian theologies necessarily recognize the authority, i.e., the truth, of the thematic teaching of the Old Testament; he assumes moreover that the true meaning of any Old Testament passage is, as a rule, identical with its literal meaning; he assumes finally that the most fundamental teaching of the Old Testament is the account of creation. Now, Moses does not explicitly teach creation *ex nihilo*; Genesis 1:2 seems rather to show that he believed that God has made the visible universe out of preexisting "chaos"; his complete silence about the creation of the angels or "the other gods" strongly suggests that he believed that the power of God is, indeed, superior to, but absolutely different from, the power of other beings. To express Moses' thought in the language of philosophy, the power of nature (which is what he meant by "chaos," and by which he understood a blind "force or impulse") is coeval with the power of God (an intelligent and ordering power), and the power of nature is therefore not dependent on, but merely inferior or subject to, the power of God. Moses taught that uncreated "chaos" precedes in time the ordered universe which is the work of God, and he conceived of God as king. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that he understood the subordination of the power of nature to the

power of God as the subjugation of the smaller by the greater power. Accordingly, the power of God will reveal itself clearly and distinctly only in actions in which the power of nature does not cooperate at all. If that only is true which can be clearly and distinctly understood, only the clear and distinct manifestation of God's power will be its true manifestation: natural phenomena do not reveal God's power; when nature acts, God does not act, and vice versa. It does not suffice, therefore, for the manifestation of God's power, that God has subjugated and reduced to order the primeval chaos; He has to subjugate "the visible gods," the most impressive parts of the visible universe, in order to make His power known to man: God's power and hence God's being can be demonstrated only by miracles. This is the core of the crude and vulgar view which Spinoza sketches before attacking the theological doctrine of miracles. The seemingly nonexistent theologian whom Spinoza has in mind when expounding that view is none other than Moses himself, and the view in question is meant to be implied in Genesis 1, in a text of the highest authority for all Jews and all Christians.¹¹⁶ Spinoza does then not go beyond reminding his opponents of what he considers "the original" of their position. As is shown by the sequel in the *Treatise*, he does not claim at all that that reminder suffices for refuting the traditional doctrine of miracles. To conclude, our example teaches us that Spinoza tries to simplify the discussion by going back from the variety of theologies to the basis common to all: the basic doctrine of the Old Testament.

To turn now to the second example, in which Spinoza identifies the view of all theologians with the view of Maimonides, Spinoza here starts from the implicit premise that not all theological positions are of equal importance. He certainly preferred "dogmatism," which admits the certainty of reason, to "skepticism," which denies it: the former ruins the Bible (i.e., it commits only a historical error), whereas the latter ruins reason (i.e., it makes brutes out of human beings).¹¹⁷ Furthermore, I take it that Spinoza rejected *a limine* the view according to which the teaching of reason is simply identical with the teaching of revelation; for this view leads to the consequence that, in the first place the philosophers, and indirectly all other men, would not need revelation, revelation would be superfluous, and an all-wise being does not do superfluous things.¹¹⁸ His critical attention was thus limited to the view that the teaching of revelation is partly or wholly above reason but never against reason, or that natural reason is necessary but not sufficient for man's salvation or perfection. At this point he was confronted with the alternative that the process of revelation is, or is not, above human comprehension. Certain biblical accounts satisfied him

that the phenomenon of revelation or prophecy is, in principle, intelligible, i.e., that revelation is effected, not directly by the divine will, but by the intermediacy of secondary causes. Accordingly, he had to seek for a natural explanation of the fact that certain human beings, the prophets, proclaimed a teaching that was partly or wholly above reason but never against reason. The only possible natural explanation was that the prophets were perfect philosophers and more than perfect philosophers. This view of prophecy was explicitly stated in part, and partly suggested, by Maimonides.¹⁹ When Spinoza says that "all" theologians have asserted that the prophets have known everything within the reach of the human understanding, he then simplifies the controversial issue by limiting himself, not to the theological position which was easiest to refute, or which he just happened to know best, but to the one which he regarded as the most reasonable and therefore the strongest.

All the difficulties discussed in the preceding pages concern the reasons with which Spinoza justifies the practical proposals made in the *Treatise*. These proposals themselves are very simple. If they were not, they could not reach many readers, and hence they would not be practical. The practical proposals are supported by both the obvious and the hidden reasoning. The practical proposals together with the obvious reasoning are that part of the teaching of the *Treatise* that is meant for all its readers. That part of the teaching of the *Treatise* must be understood completely by itself before its hidden teaching can be brought to light.

Notes

1. The *Theologico-Political Treatise* will be cited as "the *Treatise*" in the text and as "Tr." in the notes. In the notes, Roman figures after Tr. indicate the chapters of the work, Arabic figures following the comma and preceding the brackets indicate the pages in Gebhardt's edition of the *Opera omnia*, and Arabic figures within the brackets indicate the §§ [paragraph numbers] inserted by Bruder in his edition.

2. Consider the following statement of Spinoza (*ep.* 15): "... ubi pag. 4. lectorem mones, quâ occasione primam partem composuerim, vellem ut simul ibi, aut ubi placuerit, etiam moneres me eam intra duas hebdomadas composuisse. hoc enim praemonito nemo putabit, haec adeo clare proponi, ut quae clarius explicari non possent, adeoque verbulo uno, aut alteri, quod forte hic illic ofendent [sic], non haerebunt."

3. Tr. IX, 135 (§31).