

DID SPINOZA LIE TO HIS LANDLADY?*

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In his biography of Spinoza, Colerus recounts the following exchange:

It happened one day that his landlady asked him whether he believed that she could be saved in the religion she professed: He answered, "Your Religion is a good one, you need not look for any other, nor doubt that you may be saved in it, provided, whilst you apply yourself to Piety, you live at the same time a peaceable and quiet life." (Colerus 1906: 41)

As biographical tales go, this one is pretty reliable. The biographer, Johannes Colerus, was a German Lutheran minister who took over pastoral duties at the local Lutheran church in the Hague some sixteen years after Spinoza's death. The Van der Spycks, Spinoza's landlord and landlady for the last six years of his life, were members of Colerus' congregation, and the pastor seems to have been intrigued by the contrast between the stories that they told of their quiet, pleasant, upright tenant and the execrable blasphemies and impieties that the preacher found in Spinoza's writings. In writing the biography, Colerus used those of his parishioners who had known Spinoza personally as sources for a number of details, and we can be quite sure that he got the report of the above exchange straight from mevrouw Van der Spyck herself.

We cannot know, of course, how precisely mevrouw Van der Spyck remembered Spinoza's specific words, but it is likely that Colerus would have urged her to think carefully and to be as accurate as possible in her recollection. He was something of a stickler when it came to precise wording, as evidenced by the very great lengths to which he went in his efforts to get the exact text of the pronouncement whereby Spinoza was banned from the synagogue in Amsterdam. Perhaps mevrouw Van der Spyck found the exchange sufficiently noteworthy that she wrote it down in her day-book when it happened. Or perhaps she told others about it at the time, and could thereafter draw on their memories as well. In truth, we do not know how reliable her account is, but we can be confident that she was the source of the report and that Colerus tried to get as accurate a version as possible.

However exact the report may be in the details of its wording, I find that the statement attributed to Spinoza has a strong ring of authenticity to it. In part this is a function of tone -- the gentle tone of authority with which he responds to his landlady's query. But it is also a matter of the content of his reply. These words *sound* like precisely the sort of thing that we would expect Spinoza to say to mevrouw Van der Spyck in such an exchange.

The Problem

But why does it sound like just the sort of thing we would expect Spinoza to say? Is it (1) because we think that he believes it, and we would expect him naturally to tell his landlady what he honestly believes? Is it that (2) she seems to be seeking reassurance, and that we expect him generously (if patronizingly) to accommodate her by telling her what she wants to hear (even though he does not believe it)? Or is it that (3) we expect him to tell her what she

wants to hear (although he does not believe it) in order not to anger or offend a person with some power over him (since she is, after all, his landlady)? Or is it perhaps (4) that we recognize in his words clever equivocation that allows him to say (and mean) one thing, knowing full well that she will understand him to have said something else -- and that we expect this sort of equivocation from Spinoza when he talks with non-philosophers about their religions?

Spinoza scholars will recognize that the interpretive alternatives offered in the prior paragraph have application not only to the conversation with mevrouw Van der Spyck, but to Spinoza's overall treatment of "revealed religion" in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. In that enigmatic work Spinoza often speaks very highly of revealed religions (especially Christianity) even as he appears to undermine the scriptural bases that have traditionally been thought to provide the chief warrant for belief in those religions. Cagily couched affirmations and carefully reserved denials follow on the heels of one another, leaving some reader with an impression of inconsistency, of confusion or of evasion. Commentators have charged Spinoza with naivete, with irony and with mendacity.

Where the *TTP* seems evasive, it is sometimes possible to get clearer on Spinoza's views by focusing on his direct one-on-one exchanges with specific individuals. In this paper I will approach some of the larger interpretive questions that surround the *TTP* by focusing on the modest exchange between the philosopher and his landlady. I do not assume that Spinoza spoke more openly to her than to his intended readership in the *TTP*. But I hope that the directness of her question might help to narrow the interpretive target, and, since we know whom he was addressing, perhaps we can dispense with some of the confusing questions about intended audience. He was not writing a treatise to influence the political future of the Netherlands; he was answering mevrouw Van der Spyck's question. He was not "addressing potential philosophers while the vulgar listened" (as Strauss describes Spinoza's project in the *TTP*); he was talking with his landlady.

My plan is to consider each part of Spinoza's statement in sequence, asking what it means, to what extent he might have believed it, and why. In each case, we will consider the *prima facie* grounds for thinking that Spinoza could not have meant what he said in a simple, straightforward way. In each case, we will assess the force of those considerations, and if need be will ask what else he might have meant by the words in question -- and whether he in fact believed his own words, so interpreted. If all other interpretive efforts fail, we will regretfully conclude that he was simply lying to his landlady. It may come to that, but if so it will be the interpretive hypothesis of last resort.

Spinoza's response to mevrouw Van der Spyck falls naturally into three parts: (1) The positive assessment of her religion; (2) the assurance that she can be saved in her religion; (3) additional (behavioral) requirements for her salvation. The second and third of these cannot really be dealt with fully in isolation from each other, but we will begin by looking at each of the claims seriatim.

"Your religion is a good one, you need not look for any other..."

The Van der Spycks were Lutherans. Lutherans attribute considerable importance to two of the traditional sacraments; Spinoza believes that such religious ceremonies "contribute nothing to blessedness" and do not "have any holiness in them." (*TTP* 5 p.76) Lutherans believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; Spinoza does not. Spinoza

does not believe in salvation by faith alone. Perhaps most importantly, Lutherans attribute anthropomorphic psychological states to God and tend to think of God's laws as similar to the edicts of a human prince. This final view is not only false, according to Spinoza, but likely to lead one to experience conduct in accordance with divine law as an onerous obligation rather than as active and free self-expression. (*TTP* 2 p.41)

This list could go on, but the point here is that Spinoza's endorsement of mevrouw Van der Spyck's religion is not the result of an overall agreement with the tenets and practices of the Lutheran faith. Indeed, Spinoza holds a number of these tenets and practices to be superstitious. Why then does he say that her religion is a good one and that she need not look for any other?

Spinoza plays down the importance of the specific beliefs of any given sect regarding sacraments and interpretation of scripture. (*TTP* 14 p.173) The main point and purpose of religion is to encourage piety, peace and loving kindness -- and presumably the Lutheran church is, as a rule, as effective as any other in this regard. Spinoza also had specific knowledge of how the gospel was preached in the Van der Spycks' own neighborhood church, for he occasionally attended services with the family. Apparently he thought very highly of Pastor Cordes' sermons and "... esteemed particularly [the pastor's] learned way of explaining the Scripture, and the solid applications he made of it." (Colerus 1906: 41) So, as institutionalized religions go, mevrouw Van der Spyck's was indeed, by Spinoza's lights, a good one, and she would have been unlikely to find a better faith had she gone looking for one. Moreover, for her to have undertaken such a search would have been a sign of the unfortunate inconstancy that so often attends superstitious belief in the hearts of the fearful. (*TTP* Preface p.6)

Of course mevrouw Van der Spyck was not interested primarily in Spinoza's general assessment of her religion. Rather, her question was quite specific and direct. She wanted to know if he believed that she could be saved in her faith. Spinoza's answer seems similarly direct:

"...nor [need you] doubt that you can be saved in [your faith]"

She asked; he answered affirmatively. What could be more straightforward?

Unfortunately, we have reason to believe that insofar as Spinoza's answer really was affirmative, it could not have been an answer to the question she asked. We can be pretty sure what mevrouw Van der Spyck had in mind when she asked if she could be saved in her faith. She was concerned about being saved from damnation -- salvation from an afterlife of everlasting punishment for her sins. As a general rule, an affirmative answer to a question suggests acceptance of the presuppositions that underlie the question. But Spinoza's answer to his landlady violates this general rule, since he accepts almost none of what we may reasonably assume to be her presuppositions in the matter of salvation. Spinoza does not believe in an everlasting after-life in which we might suffer punishment. Nor does he accept the existence of the sort of God who, like a divine magistrate, would pass judgment and impose sentence upon the guilty. Insofar as Spinoza's affirmative answer suggests an acceptance, on his part, of the beliefs presupposed by the intended meaning of her question, his answer is misleading. Mevrouw Van der Spyck is led to believe that Spinoza holds that she can be *saved* (with all that that involves) whereas in fact Spinoza does not hold that, in her sense, she can be (nor, indeed, that she needs to be) saved.

But if Spinoza does not mean that she will be spared everlasting punishment, and if he is not just plain lying to the woman, just what *does* he mean when he assures mevrouw Van der Spyck that she can be "saved" in her faith? What does "salvation" *mean* for Spinoza? This, as it turns out, is a tricky and complex question. As indicated in Curley's Glossary-Index to the *TTP*, *salus*, *salvare*, and related terms require a variety of translational equivalents, depending upon context. On the whole it is possible to narrow in on those contexts in which the terms are being used in ways that are relevant to Spinoza's exchange with mevrouw Van der Spyck, but even then Spinoza seems to have a lot more to say about the "way to salvation" and what salvation depends on than about what salvation *is*.

Some help can be found in Spinoza's tendency to equate salvation with blessedness, and there is at least one passage in which Spinoza tells us what these are: "...true salvation and blessedness consist in true peace of mind...(vera animi acquiescentia)." (*TTP* 7 p.111) The phrase *animi acquiescentia* appears at one other place in the *TTP*, but these words, coupled with "blessedness" (*beatitudo*) most readily remind us of Part 5 of the *Ethics*, where the phrase appears three times. Not surprisingly, it is here, in the *Ethics*, that Spinoza most fully develops his conception of salvation and blessedness.

Fortunately, our purposes do not require that we pursue the intricacies of that most difficult section of that most difficult work, for Spinoza provides a brief and clear outline of his view early in Chapter 4 of the *TTP*. Using the phrases "our blessedness," "our highest good," and "our highest happiness" interchangeably (or so it seems to me), Spinoza presents an account according to which our blessedness depends entirely upon knowledge -- specifically, knowledge of God:

"...our greatest good and perfection depend only on the knowledge of God;" (*TTP* 4 p.60)

"...our greatest good not only depends on the knowledge of God, but consists entirely in it;" (*TTP* 4 p.60)

"...the knowledge and love of God is the ultimate end toward which all our actions are to be directed." (*TTP* 4 p.61)

This, I take it, is the doctrine (familiar from the *Ethics*) that our blessedness or salvation finds its consummation and culmination in the intellectual love of God.

This is what we should expect Spinoza to say, of course, but it does not bode well for our assessment of his veracity in conversation with his landlady. If salvation requires the sort of knowledge of God presupposed by *amor intellectualis Dei*, then (with all respect) mevrouw Van der Spyck is a lost soul. Such knowledge of God is an intellectual achievement of the highest order, and nothing suggests that she was up to such feats. Moreover, the theological instruction that she would have received in her Lutheran Church would have gone a long way toward undermining any chance that she otherwise might have had of forming a true conception of God. If salvation "depends on and entirely consists in" a true knowledge of God, and if mevrouw Van der Spyck is incapable of achieving a true knowledge of God, then it seems to follow that salvation is beyond her reach.

Yet Spinoza assures her that she can be saved. If we are to avoid the conclusion that Spinoza is just plain lying (our interpretive hypothesis of last resort), then it seems to me that at least one of the following must be the case: either

(1) there is some other (non-cognitive, or at least non-intellectual) path to the salvation that we have been discussing; **or**

(2) there is some other sort of salvation available to those, such as mevrouw Van der Spyck, who lack the requisite intellectual wherewithal to achieve a true knowledge of God.

Both of these are possibilities; both are worth exploring.

The Alternative Path to Salvation

In the *TTP* Spinoza explicitly acknowledges that "the intellectual, or [*sive*] accurate, knowledge of God is not a gift common to all the faithful..." (*TTP* 13 p.168) From the closing sentences of the *Ethics* we know that such a saving knowledge of God is very rare indeed, and not only among the faithful. This fact is unfortunate, of course, but in the *Ethics* Spinoza seems willing to accept the inevitable inference that salvation itself will be rare as well. In the *TTP*, on the other hand, we are told that scripture, rightly interpreted, indicates a way to salvation that does not require an "intellectual or accurate" knowledge of God. Spinoza claims that the prophets and the apostles are of one voice in teaching two very basic and very simple precepts -- that we should love God and that we should obey Him by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Scripture tells us that we can be saved simply through adherence to these precepts.

According to this interpretation of scripture, accurate knowledge of God is not at all necessary for salvation. On the contrary, the truth or falsity of one's beliefs about God is of very little intrinsic importance. The important test for one's beliefs is whether those beliefs are conducive to obedience to God via love of one's neighbor. If so, then one's cognitive states are pious and salutary, even if false. If not, one's cognitive states are impious and pernicious, even if true. (*TTP* 13 p.172) Spinoza adduces seven basic "tenets of the universal faith," (*TTP* 14 p.177) which he holds to be essential -- not because of their truth, but because "...if any of these tenets is taken away, obedience is also destroyed." (*TTP* 14 p.178)

Thinking back to the exchange with mevrouw Van der Spyck, we remember that Spinoza's reassuring words were not unconditional. "...nor need you doubt that you may be saved in [your faith], ***provided, whilst you apply yourself to Piety, you live at the same time a peaceable and quiet life.***" Applying oneself to piety and living a peaceable and quiet life are not exactly the same as loving God and obeying Him through justice and lovingkindness, but we might charitably take the former as a shorthand (or vaguely-remembered) version of the latter. And if we do, we see that in assuring mevrouw Van der Spyck that she could be saved in her faith if she lived in the prescribed manner, Spinoza simply affirmed the doctrine that he finds in both Old and New Testaments -- viz. that "...all and only those who obey God by living in this way are saved." (*TTP* 14 p.177)

By providing an alternative path to salvation, this view resolves the difficulty with which this section began and provides an easy negative answer to the title question of the paper. But perhaps it has occurred to the reader that there is something suspicious in all this. The argument of the last three parts of the *Ethics*, as well as the passages quoted above from the

TTP consistently reaffirm the importance of knowledge (accurate, intellectual knowledge) of God for human blessedness. This new doctrine would have it that one could be saved with quite false beliefs about the nature of God. This does not sound like Spinoza. Moreover, we have seen precious little in the way of argument for the truth of this doctrine. All Spinoza has provided is argument for the claim that the prophets and apostles believed and espoused the doctrine. Since when does Spinoza accept otherwise-unproven views based on the authority of ancient and philosophically unsophisticated writers?

To his credit, Spinoza is up-front about the epistemic status of this doctrine of salvation through obedience alone. Granting that it cannot be known by the light of nature alone, he urges that we can nonetheless accept it "with sound judgment" based on its pragmatic value and on "so many testimonies of the Prophets." (*TTP* 15 p.187) The overall position of the *TTP* on the issue of how one can be saved can thus be summed up as follows: By the light of nature we can know with demonstrative certainty that "...the man ...who participates in the greatest blessedness is the one who loves above all else the intellectual knowledge of God..." (*TTP* 4 p.60) This is the position argued in Chapter 4. In Chapters 12-15, on the other hand, Spinoza interpretively attributes to the prophets and apostles the view that one can be saved through obedience alone, without knowledge, and he urges that this view, though not demonstrable by the light of nature, should nonetheless be accepted.

Leo Strauss holds that a careful, philosophically sensitive reader will see that this position is inconsistent and unstable, and that Spinoza intended thereby to send a signal to the careful reader. (Strauss 1952: 170) According to Strauss, the first (knowledge-oriented) position is Spinoza's real view, and the later obedience-oriented doctrine is a sop to palliate the pious faithful and a smokescreen to confuse the persecutorially powerful. The careful reader, by noting the evident contradictions and by applying the interpretive method provided by Spinoza in Chapter 7, will be able to see through the smokescreen and dismiss the "exoteric" doctrine of salvation by obedience alone as artful deception. Errol Harris, on the other hand, rejects Strauss's position and argues that Spinoza means what he says when he tells us that we can accept the testimony of the prophets "with sound judgment." (Harris, 1978) Mevrouw Van der Spyck's salvation and Spinoza's reputation for scrupulous honesty may both hang on this issue, so let us attend to it with some care.

Whether self-contradictory or not, the position that Spinoza espouses certainly is inherently precarious. This precariousness can be seen as an unavoidable consequence of the nature of the project he has undertaken. In a letter to Oldenburg Spinoza explained that one of his motives for writing the *TTP* was to defend "the freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think." As part of that effort, he seeks to draw a line of strict demarcation between philosophy and theology in order that he may maintain that theology is in no way threatened by philosophy. In the midst of a philosophical book about theology, he claims that what one holds regarding philosophical questions is just irrelevant to faith and theology. In a really remarkable passage, Spinoza juxtaposes a number of his own positions with more traditional religious views and claims that "as far as faith is concerned" it just does not matter what one believes about these things:

Again, it does not matter, as far as faith is concerned, whether someone believes that God ...directs things from freedom or from a necessity of nature, or that he prescribes laws as a prince or teaches them as eternal truths, or that man obeys God from freedom of the will or from the necessity of the divine decree,

or finally, that the reward of the good and the punishment of the evil is natural or supernatural... It's all the same whatever anyone maintains about these matters. (*TTP* 14 p.178)

These issues are all philosophical issues, he says, and philosophical issues have no bearing on the matters of justice, lovingkindness and obedience that are the proper concerns of faith and theology. "...[T]he goal of Philosophy is nothing but the truth, whereas the goal of Faith, as we have shown abundantly, is nothing but obedience and piety." (*TTP* 14 p.179)

This radical separation between philosophy and theology allows Spinoza to conclude that "Faith, therefore, grants everyone the greatest freedom to philosophize, so that without wickedness he can think whatever he wishes about anything..." (*TTP* 14 p.180) A further consequence of this separation, however, is that philosophy (whose goal is truth) cannot be used to demonstrate the truth of "the foundation of theology -- that men are saved only by obedience..." (*TTP* 15 p.185) Theology, on the other hand, is equally incapable of demonstrating this important truth, since truth-demonstrations are not within theology's legitimate purview. So on what grounds are we to accept this important doctrine? Spinoza nicely sums up the epistemic/methodological dilemma in which he finds himself:

...since we cannot rationally demonstrate that the foundation of Theology - that men are saved only by obedience - is true or false, someone may raise against us too the question: why then do we believe it? If we accept it without reason, like blind men, then we too act foolishly and without judgment. On the other hand, if we want to maintain that we can demonstrate this foundation rationally, then Theology will be a part of Philosophy, and would not have to be separated from it. (*TTP* 15 p.185)

As mentioned above, Spinoza addresses this dilemma by offering two kinds of considerations in support of acceptance of the doctrine -- pragmatic considerations and prophetic testimony. The first of these might best be thought of as incentives for acceptance, while the latter is best viewed as a complicated argument from inductively authenticated authority. Neither is without its difficulties.

So even though this foundation of the whole of theology and scripture cannot be shown by a mathematical demonstration, we can still accept it with sound judgment. For it is indeed ignorance to be unwilling to accept what has been confirmed by so many testimonies of the prophets, what is a great source of comfort to those who cannot exert much power by reason, what brings no slight advantage to the state, and what we can believe with absolutely no risk or harm... (*TTP* 15 p.187)

Consider, first, the pragmatic appeal being made here -- an odd appeal by its very nature. The fact that a doctrine has been a great source of comfort to those lacking in reason is offered as grounds for accepting the doctrine -- where "accepting the doctrine" presumably means "believing the doctrine to be true." But there is of course no logical relationship between a claim's being comforting to the weak-minded and that claim's being true. These considerations do not provide epistemic reasons in favor of the claim at all, though they do

provide prudential motives that might induce one to believe -- especially if one counts oneself among the weak-minded and is in need of comfort. The mention of the advantage to the state raises pragmatic considerations of a different kind, but epistemically it is in the same boat. It seems to me most natural to read these passages that deal with the pragmatic considerations as encouraging the reader, with a conspiratorial wink, to play along with the (unsubstantiated) claim in the interests of political stability and the happiness of the feeble-minded multitude. In addition, the note of paternalism in the mention of the comfort that this doctrine provides to the weak-of-mind seems to me further to support Strauss's claim that Spinoza does not want this doctrine to be taken seriously by serious-minded philosophers.

But there is more to Spinoza's position here than the pragmatic considerations discussed thus far. The doctrine of salvation by obedience alone is recommended not only because of the beneficial effects that belief in this doctrine has produced for individuals and for the state, but because it "has been confirmed by so many testimonies of the Prophets..." This is, I think, a stronger contention, but it too has its problems. The reader who has come this far in the *TTP* knows that Spinoza puts no credence in the claims of the prophets when they make pronouncements on speculative matters, but that true prophets are said to be reliable when they address "matters which concern integrity and morals" (*TTP* 2 p.35):

...the Prophets could be ignorant of things that concern only speculation, but not those which concern love and how to conduct our lives. (*TTP* 2 p.42)

Presumably the doctrine of salvation through obedience alone is among those things about which they cannot be ignorant, so that the "many testimonies of the Prophets" regarding this doctrine can be accepted by us all without fear of error.

In fact, Spinoza does not recount a large number of specific cases in which specific prophets have embraced the doctrine in question, but I am prepared to accept his word that there are many such testimonies. More important is the way in which he seeks to establish the prophetic *bona fides* of those who have preached this doctrine. First Spinoza reminds the reader of the conclusion of earlier discussions of prophecy -- viz. that a true and reliable prophet is distinguished by his teachings and by the signs that accompanied the teachings (*TTP* 15 p.186). Since biblical reports on the presence or absence of signs are unreliable (*TTP* 2 p.31), we are forced to base our judgments primarily on the teachings of the putative prophet. Regarding the doctrine of interest to us -- salvation through obedience alone -- Spinoza offers the following rather convoluted argument:

Since we see that the Prophets commend Lovingkindness and Justice above all, and aim at nothing else, we conclude from this that they did not teach in bad faith, but from a true heart, that men become blessed by obedience and trust.

(*TTP* 15 p.186)

It is not entirely clear to me how this argument is supposed to work. Even if we grant Spinoza his premise about what the Prophets commended and aimed at, how would the conclusion follow that they were not teaching in bad faith when they taught that obedience and trust are sufficient for salvation? Is the hidden assumption that the Prophets would not have commended anything that would not suffice to make men blessed? That does not sound

convincing. Is the assumption that those who "commend" (*commendare*) Lovingkindness and Justice always speak and act "with a true heart?" That sounds even less convincing. Perhaps the claim is simply that prophets who teach Lovingkindness and Justice are in the moral mainstream of biblical teaching, so they qualify as *bona fide* prophets. That would in turn lend credence to their words when they spoke on the subject of salvation and obedience. At the very least we could conclude that when the prophets spoke about becoming blessed by obedience and trust, they "...did not say this rashly, and did not rave while they prophesied." This does lend some support to their words, but is hardly decisive.

Actually, Spinoza has another argument with which to follow this one, and I suspect that he might have thought it a better one.

In this we are even more confirmed when we notice that they [the Prophets] taught no moral doctrine which does not agree most fully with reason. For it is not without reason that the word of God in the Prophets agrees completely with the word of God speaking in us. (*TTP* 15 p.186)

Presumably Spinoza is not including the doctrine that obedience suffices for blessedness among those doctrines that "agree most fully with reason," for (by hypothesis) reason cannot pronounce directly on that matter. So how is this argument supposed to work? As I see it, Spinoza wants to stamp the imprimatur of reason on a doctrine that he is forbidden to demonstrate rationally by deducing it from first principles. So he provides what amounts to an inductive argument in favor of the rational reliability of the prophets' pronouncements on the salvific power of obedience. In ninety-nine cases we are able to compare the moral teachings of the prophets with a rationally-deduced ethical system, and in all ninety-nine cases, Spinoza tells us, the positions match up. This then serves as an inductive argument for the claim that the hundredth teaching (that obedience suffices for salvation) will also be in accord with reason, even if we are not able to deduce it rationally (i.e. are not able to find its match in our rationally- deduced ethical system).

Inductive arguments cannot be conclusive, but if they satisfy certain conditions they can lend persuasive support to a position -- and persuasive support is all that Spinoza can expect here. The main conditions that must be satisfied in this case are the following: (1) the one teaching whose rationality we cannot directly assess must be relevantly similar to the ninety-nine teachings whose rationality we can directly assess; (2) there must not be significant independent grounds for believing that the teaching in question is *contrary* to reason. The first of these conditions seems *prima facie* to be met, since the hundredth teaching is a teaching of the prophets and is a teaching about the consequences (if not the dictates) of morality. There is one important *dissimilarity*, of course, and that is the fact that, contrary to the other ninety-nine, the one teaching in question seems not to be directly deducible from first principles by the light of nature. That dissimilarity does not seem to me to be enough to undermine the argument unless it should turn out that the second condition is broken -- i.e. unless it should turn out that the doctrine cannot be deduced directly *because* it is *contrary* to reason. Presumably Spinoza's *Ethics* provides the standard for what can be deductively derived from first principles using only the light of nature. So the test for whether the doctrine of salvation through obedience alone is contrary to reason is whether it is contrary to the truths deduced in the *Ethics*.

A moment's review is in order here. In our initial discussions of the meaning of salvation, we noted a tension between the emphasis upon high-level knowledge of God in the *Ethics* and the claim that mevrouw Van der Spyck could be saved in her faith. It was that tension that led us to search for another path (other than the cognitive/intellectual) by which one might attain salvation. We found Spinoza claiming that the path of obedience via justice and lovingkindness can also lead to salvation and citing the authority of the Prophets in support of that contention. Seeking to assess the epistemic force of Spinoza's appeal to authority, we found that the argument depends upon whether the doctrine of salvation via obedience is consonant with the doctrine of the *Ethics*. In light of our initial perception of a tension in that regard, this is not an encouraging finding.

And it gets worse. Spinoza emphasizes the agreement between the moral teachings of the prophets and rationally deduced ethical principles. In doing so, he calls attention to those parts of the *Ethics* in which the explicitly moral doctrine is developed. Among the most prominent propositions in the relevant section of Part 4 of the *Ethics* are the following:

Proposition 26: What we strive for from reason is nothing but understanding, nor does the mind, insofar as it uses reason, judge anything to be useful to itself except what leads to understanding.

Proposition 27: We know nothing to be certainly good or evil, except what really leads to understanding or what can prevent us from understanding. (Curley translation)

It might seem, at first, as if these propositions are in direct conflict with the doctrine of salvation through obedience alone, since they seem to suggest that the only good, intrinsic or instrumental, is understanding. But in fact they are, at least technically, compatible with the doctrine. Having carefully qualified and circumscribed the claims ("from reason;" "certainly"), Spinoza can maintain (as he does maintain in the *TTP*) that it remains *possible* that obedience is a good even though we cannot know it via reason and hence cannot know it for sure. This resolves the surface tension between these propositions and the doctrine of salvation through obedience, but there is a deeper tension at work here that is not so easily resolved.

The two propositions just cited are absolutely central in the development of Spinoza's own ethical doctrine. Of the forty-five propositions that come after these in Part 4 -- propositions that articulate much of the normative ethical content of Spinoza's system -- *twenty-four* are demonstrated by direct or indirect appeal to proposition 26. For example, Proposition 37 tells us that "The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men..." This sounds like the sort of proposition that Spinoza might have had in mind when he claimed that the moral teachings of the prophets "agree most fully with reason," for it seems like a descriptive version of the oft-quoted biblical prescription that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. But the proof of 37 relies heavily on Proposition 26 -- on the claim that insofar as we use reason we want nothing but understanding. The proposition's plausibility depends entirely on the assumption that the good that the individual wants for himself (understanding) is not a zero-sum good. So the proposition accurately tells us what a rational person would do whose desire is for understanding. But the biblical injunction was addressed to all -- those whose highest good is to be found in rational understanding as well as those for whom that is not the case.

One of Spinoza's main arguments for the acceptability of the doctrine of salvation through obedience alone is the fact that many biblical prophets have taught that doctrine. These prophets are said to be reliable because other of their moral pronouncements agree with rationally deducible moral principles. But many of these rationally deducible moral principles, as it turns out, derive their validity from the claim that the one certain good for a person is understanding -- and that, in turn, is a truth whose deduction requires the condition that the individual's striving is rationally based and that he/she "uses reason." But we have no grounds at all for thinking that what is good for a person insofar as he/she "uses reason" will be good for him/her *simpliciter*. On the contrary, since the plausibility of many of the later propositions of Part 4 of the *Ethics* derives from the fact that the one certain good for a person who uses reason is not a zero-sum good, it seems more likely that what is good for a person who "uses reason" will *not* be what is good for a person *simpliciter*. So it seems to me that our confidence in the moral pronouncements of the prophets (intended for everyone) should not be bolstered by the fact that they match the moral precepts of the *Ethics* (which, after 4, P26, apply to people insofar as they use reason). If the prescriptions of the prophets match the precepts of the *Ethics*, then the prophets are prescribing to people conduct whose goodness depends upon their not being who and what they in fact are. This should not increase our confidence in the moral teachings of the prophets.

In sum, Spinoza can legitimately claim that it is *possible* that salvation or blessedness (of the kind discussed in the final propositions of the *Ethics*) might be had through obedience alone, without knowledge. But try as he might, he has not, I think, provided any persuasive grounds for believing that it can. Pragmatic considerations about the comfort that the doctrine brings the weak-minded are epistemically irrelevant. And arguments based upon the fact that this doctrine was taught by the prophets fail for lack of a convincing case for the authority or reliability of the prophets. Perhaps there is an alternative, non-intellectual path to salvation. Perhaps mevrouw Van der Spyck *can* be saved in her faith, provided she devotes herself to piety and lives a quiet and peaceable life. But thus far we have not discovered good reason for believing it to be so. Since it is hard for me to believe that Spinoza would have accepted the doctrine on the basis of arguments that seem insufficient to convince, I suspect that Spinoza did not believe the doctrine either -- at least not as it is presently being interpreted.

If it is difficult to construct a convincing case for the existence of an alternative path to salvation as initially understood, perhaps there is a different kind of salvation to which mevrouw Van der Spyck might aspire and which she might more likely attain. The *TTP* contains hints in this direction as well.

Salvation of a Lesser Kind

We have been trying to confirm the existence of an alternative (non-intellectual) path that might bring mevrouw Van der Spyck to the salvation enjoyed by those blessed with true knowledge and intellectual love of God. The effort has been laborious and has ended in failure. By contrast, if we are willing to settle for a lesser kind of salvation -- for an *acquiescentia animi* less exalted, less blissful and more temporally circumscribed -- our task will be quite easy. The path that leads mevrouw Van der Spyck from a life of peaceable piety to this kind of salvation is short and follows straightforwardly from the basic principles of Spinoza's psychology.

As developed in the *Ethics*, Spinoza's psychology is based on the primary affects of desire, pleasure and pain, where pleasure and pain are defined in terms of the increase or decrease in

an individual's power to persevere in being. Other affects are then understood as modifications of these primary affects of pleasure and pain and thus inherit their connection to increases and decreases in our power to persevere in being.

Our basic *conatus* to persevere in being leads us to seek to maximize our power so to persevere, and hence to seek to maximize those affects which involve an increase in that power. The more we succeed in maximizing those affects, the greater our chances of perseverance in being and the greater degree of psychological and emotional stability we will enjoy. Chief among the affective states that further our power and stability is love, which is defined as pleasure (i.e. an increase in our power to persevere) accompanied by the idea of an external cause. Maximization of love is *eo ipso* maximization of one's power to persevere.

There are, however, other affective states that run counter to those of pleasure and of love. Chief among those are hatred and fear. Emotions of hatred and of fear are manifestations of pain and are thus by definition reductions in our vital powers. Conflict and contention with others are, of course, major sources of hatred and fear.

If one can maximize the place that love holds in one's affective life, and if one can minimize conflict and contention with other people, one can to that extent increase one's power to persevere in being and decrease the disabling effects of fear and hatred. The resulting peace of mind (*acquiescentia animi* of a lesser, but not inconsiderable kind) could, in a Stoic sense, save one from emotional upheaval -- from being "tossed about on the waves of passion" as Spinoza puts it in the *Ethics*.

Spinoza's reply to mevrouw van der Spyck can plausibly be read as a prescription for attaining this peace of mind. She is discouraged from undertaking a search for a better religion, for such a search would only confuse and unsettle her. To "apply herself to piety" is to focus on the love of God, and although her mistaken imaginative notion of God will infect her love with unfortunate traces of fear, she may nonetheless enjoy some of the benefits of love of the divine. To "live a peaceable and quiet life" is to avoid unsettling public controversies and private conflicts that foster fear and hatred. In these ways, and to this extent, mevrouw van der Spyck might indeed be "saved in her religion."

Fear, hatred and the instability of emotional vacillation are indeed bad things. If mevrouw Van der Spyck can avoid these by devoting herself to piety and by living a peaceable and quiet life, then she will have been saved from sure evils. On this reading, Spinoza's veracity and sincerity need not be questioned, for what he says is simply true. If we were to have doubts about the subtle details of Spinoza's systematic psychology, an inductive appeal could be made to everyday experience. Peaceable and piously faithful people very often impress us with their solid, calm confidence and dignity. Of course Spinoza need not rely on such empirical appeals, since the efficacy of love and quiet piety in bringing affective stability and thus peace of mind follows necessarily from first principles in the *Ethics*.

But this very fact should give us pause. Perhaps this is the sort of salvation that Spinoza had in mind when he spoke with his landlady. But if it is, it must be sharply distinguished from the salvation that is promised to obedient believers in the *TTP*. As our foregoing discussion noted, the *TTP* emphasizes repeatedly that the fact that one can obtain salvation through the practice of justice and lovingkindness *cannot* be demonstrated philosophically. If it *can* be demonstrated that mevrouw van der Spyck can achieve a certain peace of mind through piety

and a peaceable life, then this peace of mind cannot be the salvation that Spinoza is addressing in the *TTP*.

Conclusion

Did Spinoza lie to his landlady? Well, it seems to me that he certainly misled her in answer to her question. He led her to believe that she could be saved (in *her* sense of "saved"), whereas in fact she could not. Not only could she not be saved in *that* sense, but in the sense of "salvation" that is most important to Spinoza, she cannot be saved "in her religion" at all. Her religion will foster in her false ideas about God and thereby preclude her attaining to the accurate knowledge of God required for the intellectual love of God wherein salvation consists. And while Spinoza may be correct in claiming that the prophets proclaim "with one voice" that salvation can be had through obedience alone, if we take "salvation" in Spinoza's own favored sense, he has not given us any reason to believe that what the prophets thereby proclaim is *true*. His suggestion that this doctrine has given great comfort to the weak-minded hardly gives us grounds to believe it, and his attempt to provide inductive support for the reliability of the prophets fails as well. So, if we take the term "save" in mevrouw Van der Spyck's intended sense or in the primary sense in which Spinoza uses it, the correct answer to her question is "no," and the affirmative answer that he gave was deceptive.

Mevrouw Van der Spyck can achieve an impressive peace of mind through Lutheran piety and a quiet life -- and in so doing she will be saved from some of the greatest pains and miseries of human life. This is not to be taken lightly, and would be an attainment worthy of respect and emulation. But this was not what she had in mind when she asked her tenant about her chances of being saved in her religion, and it is not what Spinoza has in mind when he addresses the subject of salvation in either the *Ethics* or the *TTP*. Spinoza led his landlady to believe something which he himself held to be false. I conclude that to that extent he lied to her.

Why might Spinoza have lied to mevrouw Van der Spyck? I think that in this specific case we can reject the Straussian suggestion that Spinoza misrepresented his views "when addressing the vulgar" chiefly in order to avoid persecution. As his landlady she did have some power over him, but it is difficult to imagine that Spinoza would lie to mevrouw Van der Spyck in order to ward off hostility on her part. It is more likely, I think, that his misleading words were an accommodation to her level of understanding and to the level of freedom and fulfillment that she could realistically be expected to achieve in this life. Assuming that she is not going to scale the cognitive heights required for the intellectual love of God, the peace of mind referred to in the last paragraph is the most that she will be able to attain. Since a life of quiet piety is indeed conducive to this peace of mind, it is in mevrouw Van der Spyck's best interest that she lead such a life. Since her notion of salvation is an imaginal idea of a sempiternal afterlife of heavenly reward, she can be encouraged to do that which is in fact in her best interest by being told (misleadingly) that it will lead her to enjoy salvation of the kind that she imagines. Such mendacious accommodation to her imaginal way of thinking and her real capacities and prospects is a lie, but certainly not a malicious one. He is patronizing mevrouw Van der Spyck, but he does not do so with evil intent.

Should we be disturbed by this conclusion? I am not disturbed by it, though it seems that Mssrs. Matheron and Harris would be. I am reassured by the fact that Spinoza attributes to the Apostle Paul and even to Jesus a similar kind of patronizing accommodation to the beliefs and capacities of ordinary people. Jesus, we are told, understood the truth about the divine law --

viz. that it is written in our minds and in the laws of nature, rather than given prescriptively as by a lawgiver.

"...Christ perceived the things truly and adequately. If he ever prescribed them as laws, he did this because of the people's ignorance and stubbornness. So in this respect he acted in the manner of God, because he accommodated himself to the mentality of the people."

The phrase "If he ever prescribed them as laws..." suggests a hesitancy on Spinoza's part to attribute to Jesus the propagation of views which He knew to be false. One should indeed be hesitant in making such attributions. But the rest of the passage makes it clear that in the end Spinoza does make that attribution and is willing to accept the necessity of adapting one's teaching to the level of understanding of one's audience. Indeed, the passage itself exemplifies the very practice in question. The talk of God "...accommodating himself to the mentality of the people" unavoidably suggests an intentional, purposive act on God's part -- a decision by God to be accommodating in this way. But in fact we know that when Spinoza writes in this way he is accommodating his own message to the mentality of those who think of God as a purposive agent.

Spinoza wanted to encourage mevrouw Van der Spyck in her life of quiet piety, and he judged it best mendaciously to reassure her that such a life would lead to her salvation. Spinoza does not condemn Jesus for misleading His followers in His desire to communicate important moral truths to them. Nor, I think, should we condemn Spinoza.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Als seine Wirtin ihn eines Tages fragte, ob sie in ihrer Religion gerettet (erlöst?) werden könne, antwortete Spinoza affirmativ darauf. Dieser Aufsatz versucht, festzustellen, ob er ihr damit Wahrheit mitteilte, oder ob er sie belog. Diese Frage wird mit der ganzen Problematik der These der "Erlösung (Heil?) durch Gehorsam" im *TTP* in Verbindung gebracht. Gibt es nach Spinoza ein zweiter -- nicht-intellektueller -- Weg in den Heil? Gibt es eine andere Art von Heil, die den unwissenden Gläubigen zugänglich ist? Ich antworte negativ auf der ersten Frage und in einem gewissen Sinne positiv auf der zweiten. Immerhin kommt der Aufsatz am Ende wider Willen auf den Schluss, daß Spinoza doch gelogen hat, allerdings mit gutem Absicht.

Colofon

<http://web.rollins.edu/~tcook/personalpage/landlady.htm>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20080330004750/http://web.rollins.edu/~tcook/personalpage/landlady.htm>