

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 1996

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# Interpretation

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Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;  
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks  
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Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,  
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905 U.S.A.  
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,  
Lancaster, PA 17603 U.S.A.

Inquiries: (Mrs.) Guadalupe S. Angeles, Assistant to the Editor,  
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11367-1597, U.S.A. (718)997-5542  
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# Harris, Strauss, and Esotericism in Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*

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Professor Errol Harris's recently published book, *The Substance of Spinoza*, contains fourteen essays, composed over the past twenty years, that address doctrines and themes in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza or consider their influence on the thought of his philosophic successors. "The title of the book is deliberately ambiguous," the author admits, but "it is appropriate because the subject matter throughout is, by and large, Spinoza's doctrine of Substance" and "what is discussed does bear upon the substance of Spinoza's philosophy, even if it does not treat of it exhaustively." The essays collected in the new volume can be seen to supplement the study undertaken in Harris's earlier work, *Salvation from Despair: A Reappraisal of Spinoza's Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup>

*The Substance of Spinoza* is divided into three sets of essays devoted to three different subjects. The first section contains essays treating Spinoza's epistemology and metaphysics. In them, the author examines the connection between method and metaphysics in Spinoza's philosophy; the meaning of "finite" and "infinite" in his system; the question of the infinity of attributes in Spinoza's teaching; the foundation of the mind-body relation in the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*; Spinoza's teaching on the "order and connection of ideas"; and the problem of the essence of man. Within those essays, Professor Harris debates renowned Spinoza scholars such as Harold Joachim, G.H.R. Parkinson, Martial Gueroult, Stewart Hampshire, George Kline, Jonathan Bennett, and Edwin Curley over their interpretations of doctrines central to Spinoza's philosophy. Harris's arguments are detailed as well as thoughtful, and the last section of the book may be seen to incorporate some of the conclusions advanced in the first set of essays. The third part contains four separate articles that assess Spinoza's influence on the teachings of Leibniz, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, in addition to a paper that explores Constantin Brunner's "misreading" of Spinoza.

The second part of the book contains three essays that consider Spinoza's doctrines pertaining to politics and religion. They include studies on Spinoza's treatment of natural law, the foundations of the original contract theory, and a resolution of the question of whether the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* contains an esoteric teaching. In the first of those papers, Professor Harris examines Spinoza's teaching on natural law in relation to the traditions of Thomas

Aquinas, on the one hand, and Thomas Hobbes, on the other, while he also indicates the uniqueness of Spinoza's doctrine as it derives from his metaphysical system. On the matter of original contract, the author notes the marked similarity of the theories of Spinoza with those of Rousseau, and he concludes that Spinoza's position represents a fusion of Hobbes's absolutism with Locke's popular sovereignty. The final essay of the second part of the book deals with a question that has caused and still does occasion much controversy and partisan rancor among Spinoza scholars. Professor Harris disputes Leo Strauss's judgment that there is an esoteric teaching in Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, and Harris's verdict about that vexing matter in Spinoza interpretation deserves close critical attention.

According to Errol Harris, the essays collected in *The Substance of Spinoza* deal with "particularly teasing problems" that arise out of Spinoza's thought, as well as his exposition of it, and they are discussed in light of the way the problems have been addressed by recent or contemporary commentators. According to Harris, "the correct interpretation of Spinoza depends on the reading of certain key passages [and] reference to these crops up again and again in my discussion of how others have interpreted, and misinterpreted, him" (p. vii). One such *misinterpreter* of Spinoza is said to be Leo Strauss, who "strongly and insistently maintained that Spinoza wrote with double intent in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*."<sup>2</sup> But such an interpretation is deemed excessive: "For the view goes beyond, and frequently misrepresents, the evidence, which rightly understood supports more strongly the opposite view" (*The Substance of Spinoza*, p. 125).

If it is true to say that the "correct interpretation of Spinoza depends on the reading of certain key passages," then it is equally true to say that determining whether or not Spinoza composes exoteric/esoteric literature<sup>3</sup> is crucial to the accurate understanding of his philosophic teaching. Professor Harris insists that Spinoza did not engage in such a practice. But if his rebuttal of Strauss's argument proves to be deficient, the question of the correct understanding and estimation of Spinoza's doctrine in the *Tractatus* (and perhaps even elsewhere) remains at very least unsettled. In what follows, I will contend that with regard to the *substance* of the teaching in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Errol Harris's renunciation of an esoteric doctrine in that book is premature.

Professor Harris's repudiation of Leo Strauss's interpretation of Spinoza's treatise employs three separate points of attack. The first point expresses the objection that the practice of esotericism, or "writing between the lines," is morally reprehensible as well as incompatible with Spinoza's personality. The second point involves the demonstration that Spinoza's doctrine is uniform throughout the treatise and therefore it actually contains none of the contradictions or inconsistencies Strauss claimed to have detected. And the third point of attack concerns a dispute about the meaning of the first of Spinoza's "rules of

living” articulated in the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*. To assess the rectitude of Harris’s verdict on Spinoza’s esotericism, I will address each of the three components in his critique of Strauss’s teaching.

### 1. ESOTERICISM AS MORALLY REPREHENSIBLE

Professor Harris argues against the probability of finding an esoteric teaching in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* not only because the practice itself is morally unacceptable but furthermore it is incompatible with what is known of Spinoza’s character.

Of course, Strauss is not the first to have held this opinion, for Spinoza was accused in the nineteenth century, by Jacobi and Carl Thomas, even of using the name of God, let alone attributing to him infinite attributes, as an accommodation to the common sentiments of the pious and as a cover to shield his true heterodoxy from the scrutiny and censure of the Church. Why he should have done this in his written works, when his refusal to simulate Jewish orthodoxy had already cost him his membership of the Synagogue, it is difficult to see; unless one is to argue that the consequences of his youthful frankness had taught him caution which dictated duplicity and deviousness in later life. If this were so, however, we should either have to interpret his ethical teaching as hypocritical, or to believe that he failed to practice what he preached. . . . [W]hat is known of Spinoza’s character, even through tributes paid to him by those, like Colerus, who thought his doctrines pernicious, is inconsistent with the kind of dishonesty and prevarication implicit in any such practice as Strauss alleges. Our estimate of [Spinoza’s] character comes largely, though not wholly, from our understanding of his writings, and our assessment of it would be different if we thought they had a *double entendre*, from what Spinoza intended. Had he believed it morally acceptable to insinuate his true beliefs under a mask of appeasive presentation, that in itself would affect our judgment of his integrity. (*The Substance of Spinoza*, pp. 125–26; and compare pp. 128–29)

The position espoused by Harris amounts to this: If Spinoza practiced esotericism then his moral integrity is questionable; and if his moral integrity is questionable then his teachings do not deserve serious attention. The premise behind such an opinion is the tenet that philosophers should only speak candidly or they never need to speak in disguised or indirect ways. Among early modern philosophers, however, such a conviction was not universally accepted. On the contrary, one finds in early modern philosophic literature explicit acknowledgements of the need to employ circumspect locutions either to protect oneself from harm or for reasons of prudence.<sup>4</sup> For example, in “Clidophorus: Or of the *Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophy*” (1720), John Toland maintained that “considering how dangerous it is made to tell the truth, ’tis difficult to know when

any man declares his real sentiments” and so “the exoteric and esoteric distinction is now as much in use as ever.” Even as late as 1777, Lessing defended the principle that “der Weise kann nicht sagen was er besser verschweigt.”<sup>5</sup> The perspective apparently embraced by Professor Harris implies a sentiment about public philosophic discourse that became prominent only after the Enlightenment. But it was not an attitude typically shared by pre-Enlightenment thinkers. Instead, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries knowledge of the art of reading circumspect texts was not uncommon, and the demise of that art has been argued to be coeval with a “volte face in philosophy” during the nineteenth century whereby “the perennial dispute between philosophy and theology was so artfully covered up that the gulf between them ceased to be understood.”<sup>6</sup>

When disputing the view that the *Tractatus* might incorporate an esoteric teaching, Harris notes that Leo Strauss was not the first to impute such a practice to Spinoza. F.H. Jacobi and Carl Thomas are named as figures who suspected that Spinoza’s teaching in the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* involved some duplicity or insincerity. But the catalogue of those who imputed simulation, insinuation, disingenuity, deliberate ambiguity of expression, and other literary stratagems to Spinoza is rather more extensive. Indeed, it could be maintained that prior to the *Pantheismusstreit* controversy the dominant tradition of Spinoza interpretation had concluded that his doctrines were atheistical. In part, that judgment often was reached based on the detection of significant discrepancies in Spinoza’s statements or from a recognition of his attempts to subvert religious orthodoxy surreptitiously. For example, with respect to the being of God, Leibniz inferred from consequences of the propositions of the *Ethica* that Spinoza actually had denied in fact what he also had attempted to retain in word. In similar fashion, François Lami concluded that Spinoza had affected an air of piety in the *Ethica*. But he warned readers of that work not be deceived by its pretenses; “for under an apparent expression of godliness, [Spinoza] conceals his actual godlessness.” In *De tribus impostoribus magnis liber*, Christian Kortholt uncovered a number of “equivocations and shifts” employed by Spinoza for the purpose of concealing his atheism in the *Ethica*. Moreover, according to Jacob Freudenthal, Kortholt’s study was “one of the most widely read and quoted works of the era.” In an often neglected work, E. E. Powell argued persuasively that Spinoza’s teachings contain a variety of deliberate contradictions that can be resolved only by the application of the interpretive precept Powell enunciated in *Spinoza and Religion*.<sup>7</sup>

Suspicion about Spinoza’s sincerity in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was a pronounced theme in five different refutations of the treatise published in 1674. In one book condemning the “secret teaching” of the *Tractatus*, Musaeus began by announcing that Spinoza “had left no mental faculty, no cunning, no art untried, in order to conceal his [atheistical intention] beneath a brilliant veil.” A similar denunciation of the author of the treatise appeared in a letter

published as a part of the correspondence of Spinoza in the 1677 edition of the *Opera posthuma BDS*. In a letter to Jacob Oostens, written on 24 January 1671, Lambert van Velthuysen complained that the unnamed author of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was guilty of “subverting all worship and religion and secretly introducing atheism with hidden and disguised arguments [*tectis et fucatis argumentis*].” The charge of employing “deliberate ambiguity of expression,” with respect to the discussion of prophecy in the *Tractatus*, was levelled against Spinoza by Mathias Earbury in his book *Deism examin’d and confuted* (1697).<sup>8</sup> Earbury also reproached the author of the treatise for the use of equivocations on the subject of miracles and criticized him for his “affected obscurity” on that matter (p. 119). But by focussing on the implications of the discrepant statements in the *Tractatus* (see, e.g., pp. 99–102, 119, 138, and 176), Earbury came to conclude that Spinoza had attempted to conceal his own atheism by “pretending to be a Deist” (p. 180).

Although such interpretations of Spinoza’s teachings are instructive for the purpose of considering his possible practice of esotericism, it must be conceded that the testimonies cannot be regarded as decisive. An equal or greater number of sources could be invoked to support the view that Spinoza speaks only with utmost candor throughout his written works, although many of those sources flatly denounced Spinoza’s philosophy. Even Thomas Hobbes is reported to have expressed shock at the audacity of Spinoza’s assertions in the *Tractatus*, thus lending credence to the presumption of Spinoza’s frankness. According to John Aubrey, in *Brief Lives*,

[W]hen Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* first came out, Mr. Edmund Waller sent it to my Lord Devonshire and desired him to send word what Mr. Hobbes said of it. Mr. H. told his Lordship: *Ne judicate ne judicemini*. He told me [Spinoza] had cut through him a barre’s length, for he durst not write so boldly.<sup>9</sup>

Whether one agrees with the verdict of Errol Harris or the verdict of Leo Strauss, the issue of Spinoza’s practice of esotericism cannot be resolved merely by an appeal to one or another competing interpretive tradition. However persuasive either of them may be, any decision about the presence of an esoteric doctrine in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* must be reached based on the evidence afforded by Spinoza or the lack of such evidence.

Professor Harris avows that Spinoza would not have believed it “morally acceptable to insinuate his true beliefs under a mask of appeasive presentation.” Yet when observing the consequences of repression of free speech and inquiry by civil or religious authorities, in Chapter 20 of the treatise, Spinoza acknowledges that under precarious conditions men will simulate accepted opinions for the sake of self-protection. That is, where persecution is practiced and independent thinking is made punishable by death, the only lesson one can take from

that circumstance is to imitate the fate of the persecuted or learn how to flatter the oppressors by simulating their views.

What can be more calamitous than that men should be regarded as enemies and put to death, not for any crime or misdeed, but for being of independent mind? That the scaffold the terror of evildoers, should become the glorious stage where is presented a supreme example of virtuous endurance, to the utter disgrace of the ruling power? . . . What sort of lesson, then, is learned from the death of such men, whose cause is beyond the understanding of those of sluggish and feeble spirit, is hated by trouble-makers, but is dear to the hearts of all good men? The only lesson to be grasped from this is to imitate them or flatter their persecutors.<sup>10</sup>

If it is objected that Spinoza does not explicitly advocate the simulation of orthodox opinions by those whose thinking is different from them, it is clear that he only cites two courses of action when encountering circumstances of persecution. One can speak openly against the conventional views he genuinely opposes and thereby suffer the most severe penalties, or one can disguise and even conceal his genuine thinking in order to protect himself from harm. Though Spinoza's observations about the effects of persecution on free expression may not amount to professing that it is "morally acceptable to insinuate [one's] true beliefs under a mask of appeasive presentation," they plainly indicate his acknowledgement of the fact that "necessity is often the mother of invention" in difficult circumstances.

Indeed, in the course of the teaching of the *Tractatus*, Spinoza also articulates what might be regarded as the principles of an educational method. When examining the most effectual manner of communicating a lesson to a single nation, such as the Jews, to say nothing of teaching the whole human race, Spinoza asserts that one must frame the doctrine in such a way that it includes a maximum accommodation of the views embraced by one's audience.

If anyone, in arguing for or against a proposition that is not self-evident, seeks to persuade others to accept his view, he must prove his points from premises that are granted, and he must convince his audience on empirical grounds or by the force of reason; that is, either from what sense-perception tells them occurs in Nature, or through self-evident intellectual axioms. Now unless experience is such as to be clearly and distinctly understood, it cannot have so decisive an effect on a man's understanding and dispel the mists of doubt as when the desired conclusion is deduced solely from intellectual axioms, that is, from the mere force of the intellect and its orderly apprehensions. This is equally so if the point at issue is a spiritual matter and does not come within the scope of the senses.

Now the process of deduction solely from intellectual axioms usually demands the apprehension of a long series of connected propositions, as well as the greatest caution, acuteness of intelligence, and restraint, all of which qualities are rarely to be found among men. So men prefer to be taught by experience rather than engage in the logical process of deduction from a few axioms. Hence it follows that if

anyone sets out to teach some doctrine to a whole nation—not to say the whole of mankind—and wants it to be intelligible to all in every detail, he must rely entirely on an appeal to experience, and he must above all adapt his arguments and the definitions relevant to his doctrine to the understanding of the common people, who form the greatest part of mankind. He must not set before them a logical chain of reasoning nor frame the kind of definitions that are best suited to logical thinking. Otherwise he will be writing only for the learned; that is, to a very small number of men, compared with the rest of mankind, who will be able to understand him. (*TTP*, 3:76–77/119–20)

The educational method recommended by Spinoza comprises three noteworthy features. (1) Teachers or speakers should make concessions to the opinions of those whom they address. (2) They should accommodate their instruction to the abilities of their audience to grasp that teaching. And (3) they should communicate their doctrines by relying principally upon facts or experiences generally assumed by their audiences. The educational procedures recommended by Spinoza are not necessarily unique nor are they especially controversial. Still, Spinoza explicitly advises that one should deduce his points “*ex concessis*”; and he insists that the entire teaching must be adapted “*ad captum plebis*.” In following those procedures, Spinoza says, one does not speak to the learned. Rather one instructs the plebs “who compose the greatest portion of humankind,” and one speaks to them in accordance with their untutored capacities for comprehension. At first glance, to speak “*ad captum plebis*” would appear to mean to teach a sophisticated doctrine in a manner accessible to those of unsophisticated talents.<sup>11</sup> But it will become clearer from the subsequent discussion of what it means to speak “*ad captum*” that Spinoza’s educational method involves an appeasement of his audience’s vulgar prejudices and unphilosophic notions. Thus it can involve the kind of duplicity that Professor Harris claims Spinoza would not have endorsed or practiced.

With respect to the circumstance of persecution, Spinoza acknowledges that men publicly will adopt views which they privately oppose; or at least they will not contest authorized views openly without reserve. And when estimating the prospect of general education, Spinoza advocates teaching in a fashion that appeals to the interests and the sentiments of the vulgar, rather than presuming any erudition on their part, because he acknowledges that the vulgar are “many” whereas the learned are “few.” In neither instance does Spinoza rebuke any individual for speaking less than candidly. On the contrary, he implicitly or explicitly recommends the practice of accommodated speech. If those considerations, taken separately or taken together, are yet insufficient to warrant the conclusion that Spinoza did not adopt the sentiment regarding the moral questionability of appeasive presentation, or less than frank speech, attributed to him by Professor Harris, then one incontrovertible item of evidence remains to be introduced.

When the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was published in 1670 (or the latter months of 1669), the title page of the work did not name the author of the treatise. It only stated that the work had been printed in Hamburg by Henry Künrath. The anonymous publication of the work might have resulted from one of two probable motives. First, it could be presumed that Spinoza's natural modesty induced him to publish the work anonymously so as to contribute to the benefit of humankind without drawing attention to himself as their benefactor. Alternatively, it could be argued that Spinoza preferred anonymity because the treatise expressed many overtly heterodox views, e.g., the teaching on miracles in Chapter 6, and he did not wish to entangle himself in a protracted conflict with the civil or religious authorities.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever plausibility the first motive may hold, the latter motive for the anonymous publication of the *Tractatus* obtains greater credibility based on Spinoza's explanation of the motives which prompted him to write the treatise. In Epistle 30 to Henry Oldenburg, written in October 1665, Spinoza listed three reasons that induced him to write "a treatise about my interpretation of Scripture." The first motive was to expose "the prejudices of the theologians" which Spinoza regarded as "the chief obstacles preventing men from turning their minds to philosophy." The second factor was the common opinion that Spinoza was an atheist and he sought "to avert that accusation as far as it is possible to do so." Finally, the third reason for composing the treatise was to promote the "freedom of philosophizing, and of saying what one thinks; I desire to vindicate that in every way because here it is always suppressed by the impudence of the theologians." Of the motives cited, the first and third confirm that Spinoza intended the teaching of the *Tractatus* to be unconventional, and he must have been cognizant that its publication risked censure and perhaps even personal harm from civil or religious authorities if the author's identity were known.<sup>13</sup> In light of his remarks in the correspondence with Oldenburg, the anonymous publication of the treatise would seem to be more consistent with Spinoza's interest to avoid conflict with authorities than with a desire to be a self-effacing benefactor of humankind. And given Spinoza's observations about public discourse under conditions of persecution and the suppression of free philosophic speech, one legitimately might wonder whether even the teachings of the treatise are entirely candid. But even if that suspicion is not yet adequately warranted, one fact still stands. Contrary to what was inscribed on the title page of the *Tractatus*, the book was not published by Henry Künrath. Nor was it printed in Hamburg. Rather, as it became known, the treatise was published in Amsterdam. There is no evidence that Spinoza ever protested the deception expressed on the title page of his book. Rather his silence about the matter suggests his complicity in the fraud.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, it is rash of Professor Harris to conclude that "what is known of Spinoza's character is inconsistent with the kind of dishonesty and prevarication implicit in any such practice [of esotericism] as Strauss alleges." As a matter of fact, it is neither an exaggera-

tion nor is it misleading to assert that Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* itself commences with a lie on its title page. Whether that lie is momentous or trivial is open to debate. Nevertheless, what it demonstrates plainly is that Spinoza was capable of practicing or approving a sort of prevarication that Harris alleges he would have renounced as morally reprehensible.

## 2. SPINOZA'S DOCTRINE IS CONSISTENT THROUGHOUT THE *TRACTATUS*

The second stage of Professor Harris's argument against there being an esoteric teaching in the *Tractatus* involves an attempt to demonstrate the falsity of a central pillar of Strauss's argument. According to Harris, Strauss's case for esotericism in the treatise depends principally upon the detection of various inconsistencies or contradictions throughout the book which occasions the conclusion that the *Tractatus* is "hieroglyphical" and consequently requires a peculiar form of interpretation.<sup>15</sup> The pivotal contradiction is said to involve Spinoza's conflicting views about the possibility or the impossibility of "supernatural knowledge."

The primary premiss upon which Strauss rests his case is the bewildering (or hieroglyphic) character of Spinoza's treatise consequent upon its numerous contradictions, and almost all of these depend upon the key question whether or not, in Spinoza's view, supernatural knowledge is possible; for if it is not, he cannot consistently allow exceptions in the case of prophecy, the mind of Jesus, or the fundamental dogma of theology; nor should he allege that the Bible is hieroglyphical as surpassing the grasp of human reason. We must, therefore, consider first what Spinoza meant by *captum humanum superare*.

If supernatural knowledge is taken to mean knowledge involving contravention of the laws of nature, Spinoza leaves us in no doubt that he rejects its possibility. The laws of nature are universal, eternal and inviolable, and nothing can exist or occur that is not in accordance with them. But this, he maintains, is because the laws of nature are the laws of God, who does not and cannot contradict himself. It does not, therefore, follow from the denial of supernatural knowledge, in this sense, that no legitimate meaning can be given to divine inspiration. In fact, Spinoza regards all natural (philosophical) knowledge as divine, so far at the very least as it is knowledge of the third kind, *scientia intuitiva*, for that consists of adequate knowledge of individual things derived from adequate ideas of God's attributes—that is, ideas as they are in the divine intellect. So he says in Chapter 1 of TTP:

For those things which we know by the natural light, depend solely on the knowledge of God and his eternal decrees; but ordinary knowledge is common to all men as men, and rests on foundations which all share. . . . Yet nevertheless by equal right with other knowledge, whatever that may be, it can be called divine, for God's nature, in so far as we share in it, and God's laws, dictate it to us . . .

Natural knowledge, then, is not improperly described as *rei alicujus certa cognitio a Deo hominibus revelata* (“the certain knowledge of some things revealed by God to men”). But this is the definition of prophecy with which the TTP opens, and Spinoza does say almost at once that from this definition it follows that natural knowledge could rightly be called prophecy, and it is only the vulgar preference for the unusual that excludes it from the common connotation of that term.

The difference between natural, or philosophical, knowledge (what is known by “the natural light”) and what is commonly called prophecy is not the source of the revelation but the medium. The source of both (as of all truth) is the divine intellect; but whereas rational knowledge is revealed to human beings through the intellect, prophecy is revealed to the prophet through his (or her) imagination.<sup>16</sup>

With respect to his understanding of Spinoza’s teaching on the equivalence of prophecy or revelation with natural or ordinary knowledge, Professor Harris is generally correct. Spinoza does maintain that ordinary knowledge, insofar as it “depends on God and his eternal laws,” rightly may be considered to be “prophetic” or “revealed” because it expresses “sure knowledge of some thing revealed by God to man.”<sup>17</sup> The obvious difference between revelation and natural knowledge is the medium through which each is communicated. Whereas natural knowledge is derived from foundations that are shared by all men as men, prophecy or revelation employs unique means of communication. For example, God spoke with Moses “face to face” (TTP, 3:20–21/64–65). Furthermore, Harris is correct to say that Spinoza denies the possibility of supernatural phenomena. Nevertheless his specific criticism of Strauss is actually misdirected. For Strauss does not say that Spinoza contradicts himself on the question of the possibility or the impossibility of “supernatural knowledge.” Rather he shows that Spinoza contradicts himself on the question of whether *suprarational knowledge* is possible or not.<sup>18</sup>

Before explaining the equivalence of prophecy or revelation with natural or ordinary knowledge, Spinoza asserts that the prophet is “he who interprets the things revealed by God to those who do not have sure knowledge of them but who can comprehend the thing revealed only by faith.”<sup>19</sup> The status of the prophet is privileged. He possesses “certain knowledge” that is unavailable to others who rely solely on their natural faculties. Indeed, when contrasting the subject of miracles with that of prophecy, Spinoza remarks that whereas the question of the possibility of miracles “is plainly philosophical,” i.e., it is a matter that falls within the scope of reason, the issue of prophecy is decidedly different.

Before I bring this chapter to a close, there remains a further point to which I should like to draw attention, namely, that in here discussing miracles I have adopted a method very different from that employed in dealing with prophecy. In the matter of prophecy I made no assertion that I could not infer from grounds revealed in Holy Scripture, whereas in this chapter [“Of Miracles”] I have drawn

my main conclusions solely from basic principles known by the natural light of reason. The procedure I have adopted deliberately because in dealing with prophecy, since it surpasses human understanding and is a purely theological question, revelation provided the only basis for making any assertion about it, or even for understanding its essential nature. (*TTP*, 3:95/137–38)

Because prophecy “surpasses human understanding [*captum humanum superat*]” what is known of it must be derived from the source that relates it, that is, the Bible. But Spinoza also clearly indicates that the information we have about prophecy or revelation must be taken principally from those who impart it, namely, the prophets.<sup>20</sup> In short, only the prophet can authenticate the phenomenon of prophecy because all others are reduced to accepting his testimony on the basis of their simple faith alone. It is even suggested that prophets can have prophets, for example, “Aaron was as a prophet to Pharaoh for Moses” (see *TTP*, 3:15/59); and it is insinuated that the prophets could prophesy to other prophets since “they were more apt for one kind of revelation or another in accordance with their corporeal temperament” (*TTP*, 3: 33/77). Throughout his characterizations of prophecy and the prophets in the *Tractatus*, Spinoza emphasizes that what ensues from prophecy or revelation exceeds what an ordinary man could understand simply by the exercise of his natural intellectual capacities. In particular, it is only through an act of revelation that the cornerstone of theology, the doctrine that human salvation depends upon obedience to the divine law of charity towards others, is made known to human beings (see *TTP*, 3:165/211–12; 3:168/215; 3:174–78/221–25; 3:184–85/232–33). And Spinoza asserts that the truth of that teaching is above or beyond reason. That is, “the power of reason does not extend so far as to be able to determine that man can be blessed by obedience alone without understanding things” (*TTP*, 3:184–232).

According to Strauss, the theological part of the *Tractatus* begins and ends with the suggestion that prophecy or revelation as certain knowledge of truths that surpass human understanding is possible.<sup>21</sup> With respect to prophecy or revelation, as discussed in Chapter 1 of the *Tractatus*, it is said that “divine knowledge extends beyond the limits of natural knowledge”; and it is asserted that God reveals in prophecy “things which exceed the limits of our natural knowledge as well as those things that do not exceed them” (*TTP*, 3:15/59). In Chapter 15 of the treatise it continues to be maintained that the truth of the cardinal instruction of theology (which Spinoza explicitly identifies with the teaching of revelation<sup>22</sup>) cannot be proved to be true through the exercise of reason nor can the fundamental dogma of theology be investigated by the “natural light” (*TTP*, 3:185/233). Nevertheless, throughout Chapter 7 of the treatise and its discussion of Biblical interpretation, Spinoza exhorts the reader to rely exclusively upon his rational faculties.<sup>23</sup> And in Chapter 5, when considering Rabbi Joseph’s criticism of Aristotle’s ethical teaching (namely, that “he did

not embrace the things he teaches as divine doctrines prophetically revealed but solely because they were dictated by reason”), Spinoza declares that those who seek to claim unto themselves some faculty above reason have only a fabrication that is far below reason (*TTP*, 3:80/126). Again in Chapter 6, when refuting the possibility of miracles, Spinoza makes the categorical assertion that “from whatever surpasses our capacity for understanding we can understand nothing [*absolute ex eo, quod nostrum captum superat, nihil intelligere possumus*]” (*TTP*, 3:85/128).

Spinoza is inconsistent about what Strauss rightly calls a “central subject” of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Spinoza cannot coherently maintain that prophecy or revelation relates “certain knowledge” that is characterized as suprarational, in that it “exceeds the limits of the human capacity for understanding,” as well as insist that “whatever claims to be above reason is actually an invention that is inferior to reason” and “from that which exceeds human grasp we can learn nothing.” The inconsistency detected by Strauss is not a conspicuous one. Spinoza does not assert on one page that “X is possible” and then immediately declare after it that “X is impossible.” Yet the inconsistency, or contradiction, discovered by Strauss is real and not merely alleged, even if it takes a subtle form. For instance, revelation or prophecy is defined as imparting *certa cognitio*. But in the treatise Spinoza notes the fact that Moses warned his people against following “false prophets” who prophesied to them and even had the capacity to work “real miracles,” that is, an event regarded as the evidence that their prophesying was valid.<sup>24</sup> The notion of a “false prophet” (even if that is not simply an oxymoron by the terms of Spinoza’s own definition of prophecy or revelation) casts grave suspicion upon the reliability of the phenomenon of prophecy or revelation itself.

The genuine problem exposed by the inconsistency detected by Strauss is as much the matter of the transmission of *certa cognitio* in prophecy or revelation as it is the issue of the possibility or the impossibility of suprarational knowledge. Even if one concurs with Professor Harris that Spinoza does not contradict himself on the matter of “supernatural knowledge,” there remains the fact that Spinoza’s account of many prophetic or revealed teachings ultimately erodes any serious regard for the independent credibility of prophecy or revelation insofar as he demonstrates that prophetic or revealed instructions did not convey “certain knowledge.”

In Chapter 1 of the *Tractatus*, Spinoza defines prophecy or revelation as “certain knowledge of some things revealed by God to man.” But in Chapter 2, and again in Chapter 15, he appears to qualify that definition with the acknowledgement that “the certitude of the prophets was not mathematical but only moral,” and consequently one should not consult prophetic testimonies to resolve “speculative or natural” questions (*TTP*, 3:32/74; 3:35/78–79; 3:42/80; 3:180–88/232–36). Yet even when limited to considerations of revealed teachings concerning moral matters, Spinoza ultimately indicates that the prophets’

transmission of *certa cognitio* on those occasions is not guaranteed. For example, in Chapter 4 of the *Tractatus* it is concluded that the Mosaic moral doctrine incorporated a vulgar and untrue account of the nature of God.

The discussion of the Divine Law in the *Tractatus* seeks to prove that the laws of God are eternal truths rather than mandates, that is, edicts for “a manner of living that is followed by advantage or injury” (*TTP*, 3:63/106). In accordance with the accurate comprehension of the Divine Law, it is realized that God should not be imagined to be “a lawgiver or prince prescribing laws for men” (*TTP*, 3:62/105). Nonetheless the Bible regularly inculcates a perception of the divine being as a legislator, and to illustrate that fact Spinoza cites the case of Adam. Because of a “defect in his understanding,” Adam accepted God’s statements regarding the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a law issued “solely from the desire and absolute injunction of some Prince.”<sup>25</sup> The same defect of understanding also applied to the Hebrew people, according to Spinoza. To them the existence of God was not grasped as an eternal truth; instead it was acknowledged as a law related through the Decalogue (*TTP*, 3:63/106). In fact, according to Spinoza, the error of regarding God as a legislator was attributable not only to Adam and the Hebrews but to “all the Prophets who wrote laws in God’s name.” The chief legislative prophet, of course, was Moses, and Spinoza explains that “from revelation or from a basis of what was revealed him [*ex revelatione vel ex fundamentis ei revelatis*]” he grasped the manner whereby the Israelites could be united into a society. But furthermore, from the same source, Moses portrayed God as “a ruler, a lawgiver, a king, as merciful, just, and so on, whereas these are all merely attributes of human nature, and not at all applicable to the divine nature” (*TTP*, 3:64/107). With respect to the appropriate understanding of God’s nature, Spinoza formulates a doctrine that negates the one propounded by Moses.

We therefore conclude that it is only in concession to the understanding of the multitude and the defectiveness of their thoughts [*non nisi ex captu vulgi & ex solo defectu cogitationis*] that God is described as a lawgiver or ruler, and is called just, merciful, and so on, and that in reality God acts and governs all things solely from the necessity of his own nature and perfection, and his decrees and volitions are eternal truths, always involving necessity. (*TTP*, 3:65/108–9)

Moses teaches that God is a lawgiver who rules over men and reigns with justice and mercy. The moral teaching of the Old Testament, as transmitted through the Decalogue, therefore requires that the faithful embrace the idea of God as a being who must be worshipped and obeyed. That Mosaic teaching, says Spinoza, was derived “*ex revelatione vel ex fundamentis ei revelatis*.” Nevertheless Spinoza himself argues that the apprehension of God in those terms is defective and vulgar. From prophecy or revelation, therefore, Moses is said to teach the erroneous view that God is a king, a lawgiver, a ruler who

dispenses justice and mercy. Spinoza explains that it is only from a vulgar grasp of matters and a defect of understanding that God is perceived in that way. In an extreme respect, one could infer that Spinoza insinuates that there is an equivalence between prophecy or revelation and vulgar comprehension or defective understanding by way of their common doctrine pertaining to the divine nature. But even if that suggestion were deemed to be extreme, one necessary conclusion becomes plain. If, based on revelation, Moses inculcates an inaccurate idea of God's nature, and that view serves as the foundation of Old Testament morality, namely, the believer's adherence to the Decalogue, then it is not the case that prophecy or revelation always transmits "*certa cognitio*" even when it is limited to the sphere of moral concerns. But if the promise of transmitting "certain knowledge" is removed from a source that relates matters that "exceed the limits of human understanding" is it difficult to see why anyone would continue to accede to doctrines whose primary appeal as being "certain" was determined by their prophetic or revealed character. At one place in the *Tractatus*, Spinoza seems to anticipate and resolve that quandary by remarking that inasmuch as prophecy requires a certifying sign, it is inferior natural knowledge which needs no sign because it involves certitude in its own nature.<sup>26</sup>

Spinoza's inconsistency regarding the possibility or the impossibility of suprarational knowledge is reflected in the contradiction concerning the definition and the consequences of prophecy or revelation. Although Spinoza defines prophecy or revelation as the communication of "*certa cognitio*" by God, he also asserts that "from revelation" Moses formed and promulgated misrepresentations about God's nature. From a consideration of those discrepancies in the *Tractatus*, one glimpses the form of Spinoza's esotericism. It frequently involves the oblique subversion of one set of statements by another set of assertions or their implications. In other words, the reader is not simply confronted with one exoteric doctrine as well as with another less perspicuous (but perhaps parallel) esoteric teaching. Rather, the esoteric or true teaching of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* often amounts to the realization that the doctrine asserted most conspicuously is exoterical or untrue,<sup>27</sup> as is the case with the claim that what is attained from prophecy or revelation offers an assured disclosure of some "*certa cognitio*."

### 3: ON THE MEANING OF "*AD CAPTUM VULGI*" SPEECH

The third element in Professor Harris's refutation of Leo Strauss's study of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* concerns the interpretation of the first of Spinoza's *vivendi regulae* articulated in his *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*. The first sentence of that rule is: "To speak in accordance with the vulgar's ability to understand and to do all things that do not pose an impediment

to the attainment of our goal [*Ad captum vulgi loqui, et illa omnia operari, quae nihil impedimenti adferunt, quo minus nostrum scopum attingamus*]” (see *Spinoza Opera*, 2:9). The dispute between Harris and Strauss centers on the question of what it means “to speak to the grasp of the vulgar.”

In his essay, “How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*,” Strauss observed that one precept adopted by Spinoza for interpreting Biblical “contradictions between non-metaphoric statements of one and the same speaker” was to suspend judgment about the speaker’s authentic view on the matter unless one could demonstrate that a difference of occasions or a difference of audiences was the cause for his asserting two conflicting statements.

[Spinoza] applies this rule to the (real or alleged) contradictions 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. 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.” 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 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 be suspected even though it is never contradicted by him.

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 attaining 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,” 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.<sup>28</sup>

The precept for interpreting discrepant assertions by the same speaker or author is applied by Strauss to the study of Spinoza just as Spinoza had applied the rule in his study of the Bible. In accordance with that hermeneutic procedure, certain “rules of reading” are established that must be followed if the authentic significance of conflicting statements is to be determined. For example, Spinoza maintains that the Apostle Paul contradicts himself on the question of God’s revelation of the divine law to mankind. On the one hand, Paul teaches that “God is the God of the Jews and the Gentiles” and hence the divine law is inscribed in the hearts of all men. But on the other hand, Paul affirms that “the utterances of God were entrusted only to the Jews.” Spinoza explains the discrepancy between Paul’s claims about the revelation of the divine law by

observing that the latter declaration was made in concession to the Hebrews' conviction that the law of God was given uniquely to them in written form, namely, the Decalogue.<sup>29</sup> Whether the Biblical authors, such as Paul, actually contradict themselves becomes less significant than the fact that Spinoza attributes contradictions to them and then develops an interpretive method that enables one to determine which of an author's conflicting statements is sincerely believed by him and which one is not. In effect, Strauss adopts the precepts articulated by Spinoza about how to read "hieroglyphical books" (viz., books containing discrepant remarks by the same speaker or works that relate matters which themselves are not easily intelligible, such as contradictions) and how to read books that require no special interpretive method (viz., books that contain matters that are by their nature understandable) in order to understand Spinoza's own writing.<sup>30</sup>

For Strauss, the key to deciphering the authentic interpretation of the teachings of the *Tractatus* involves the recognition of the book's contradictions or discrepancies and the resolution of them through the application of the hermeneutic procedure recommended by Spinoza himself.<sup>31</sup> But according to Harris there are no contradictions in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Hence any recourse to the method of literary interpretation proposed by Spinoza, in order to make sense of his own inconsistent statements, is already a distortion of the philosopher's teaching.

If Spinoza's main theses are patently correct, the representation of them as cosmetic to appease vulgar prejudices and to disguise a hidden and more unorthodox opinion would appear to spring from a somewhat perverse interpretation prompted by some ulterior motive.

Strauss persistently contends that Spinoza adopted his own rule, as enunciated in the TdIE: *ad captum vulgi loqui*. But it is first to be noted that the rule is stated as a temporary practical precept to be observed until the correct method of discovering the truth has been found. Secondly, *ad captum vulgi loqui* in no sense means that one should deceive people, or hide the truth from them. On the contrary, its meaning is (and it is always used by Spinoza in this sense) that one should express the truth in such language and by such means as the vulgar can understand. For instance, if one wants to persuade the masses that they should act justly and be charitable, it would be futile to recite geometric proofs that such conduct is in their best interests. It would be far more effective to teach them that God, an almighty judge and ruler of the world, commands the practice of justice and mercy and will reward men accordingly. (*The Substance of Spinoza*, p. 144)

Harris's understanding of Spinoza's "first rule" is in fact mistaken. And, quite ironically, his illustration of the use of the rule actually confirms the interpretation of the *Tractatus* advanced by Strauss.

Before clarifying the significance of the phrase "*ad captum vulgi loqui*," two brief points are worth remarking. First, Professor Harris claims that the rule is "a temporary practical precept to be observed until the correct method of dis-

covering the truth is found.” But the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* is the articulation of that method and nowhere in the work (though it remained incomplete) did Spinoza suggest under what conditions the rule should be abandoned or amended. Second, Harris says that the meaning of the rule, “and it is always used in this sense,” is that one should “express the truth in such language and by such means as the vulgar can understand.” Yet that second point nullifies the prior observation of Harris since saying that the rule “is always used by Spinoza” in some particular way vitiates its character as merely a “temporary practical precept.” Still, there is a more pointed contradiction of Harris’s opinion about the rule evident in the fact that Spinoza did not “express the truth in such language and by such means as the vulgar could understand.” On the contrary, Spinoza wrote and was published only in Latin, the language of the learned, and consequently “the vulgar” were excluded *a limine* from understanding his “expression of the truth.”<sup>32</sup>

The phrase “*ad captum vulgi loqui*” may be translated in a number of non-provocative ways. One very unbiased translation of it would read: “To speak in accordance with the ability for comprehension of the general public.” On that reading, the sense of the rule would support Harris’s benign explanation of it. But even if some agreement can be achieved about what the word “*vulgus*” implies in the rule, the words “*ad captum*” remain problematic. What does it mean to speak “*in accordance with one’s ability to comprehend something*”? The answer to that question is disclosed by Spinoza himself in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* where he offers illustrations of what is involved when one engages in “*ad captum*” speech.

In Chapter 2 of the *Tractatus*, Spinoza discusses revelations that were made to Biblical figures. Part of his intention there is to demonstrate that when God revealed something to those individuals no unique or constant style of speaking was implemented. Rather, God was “elegant, succinct, severe, uncultivated, prolix, or obscure” in correlation with the learning and capacity of each one with whom God spoke (*TTP*, 3:34/77). Spinoza then broadly concludes that “God accommodated his revelations to the capacity for understanding and to the opinions of the prophets.”<sup>33</sup> At first glance, it would seem that such instances of “*ad captum*” speeches involve benign adaptations of a speaker’s discourse to the limitations of his auditors. But it becomes increasingly clear from the examples of revelations cited by Spinoza that speaking “*ad captum*” does not mean “to express the truth in such language and by such means as the vulgar can understand.” Instead, the instances of revelations that are said to be expressed “*ad captum*” entail confirming the false or vulgar notions of the addressee without attempting any correction of them. And that kind of discourse indeed does imply that one “deceives people or hides the truth from them.” Furthermore, the reader is confronted once more with the inconsistency that was recounted in the previous section of this paper. Namely, the content of what was revealed to Biblical figures, especially when the revelation was framed “*ad captum*,” did not necessarily impart some “*certa cognitio*,” as the

definition of prophecy or revelation given in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* affirms.

In the space of a few paragraphs of Chapter 2, Spinoza offers a number of examples of revelations that were made in accordance with the capacities of their recipients. In each case, the revelation is said to have been made “*ad captum*” and what was imparted confirmed some erroneous view embraced by the one to whom the revelation was made. Among the Biblical figures considered are Noah, Adam, and Cain. With regard to the impending “great flood,” Spinoza asserts that “The revelation to Noah that God was destroying the human race was also made in accordance with his understanding, for he thought that the world beyond Palestine was uninhabited [*Ad captum Noachi etiam revelatum ei fuit Deum humanum genus delere, quia putabat mundum extra Palestinam non inhabitari*]” (*TTP*, 3:37/80). In the case of the “first man” and his offense against God in the Garden, Spinoza states that because Adam was unaware of God’s omnipresence and omniscience “in his case, too, God was revealed in accordance with his understanding, that is, as one who is not everywhere, and as not knowing where Adam was, or Adam’s sin [*Deus etiam ad ipsius captum revelatus fuit, nempe ut qui non ubique est, & ut inscius loci, & peccati Adami*]” (*TTP*, 3:37/80–81). And, after the murder of Abel, Spinoza asserts that God was revealed to Cain as being ignorant of human affairs because no other knowledge of God was required of him for the repentance of his sin: “To Cain, too, God was revealed in accordance with his understanding, that is, as having no knowledge of human affairs; nor did Cain need to have any higher conception of God before he could repent of his sin [*Kaino etiam Deus revelatus fuit ad ipsius captum, nempe ut rerum humanarum inscius, nec ipsi, ut sui peccati poeniteret, opus erat sublimiorem Dei cognitionem habere*]” (*TTP*, 3:37/81).

What it actually means to speak “*ad captum*” may be ascertained by considering the significance that attaches to the phrase as it is used by Spinoza in the *Tractatus*. In each of the instances mentioned, as well as on other occasions,<sup>34</sup> to speak “*ad captum*” means conceding to the opinions of the one who is being addressed. But strikingly, what was thus revealed conflicted with actual or assumed matters of fact. For example, with respect to an actual matter of fact, Noah’s prejudiced opinion that humankind consisted only of the population of Palestine was the reason for the revelation to him that “the entire human race” was to be destroyed in “the flood.” And with regard to an assumed matter of fact, because his idea of God did not include omniscience and omnipresence, God was revealed to Adam as “walking in the Garden, calling him, and asking where he was” (*TTP*, 3:37/80). To speak “*ad captum*,” as examples throughout the treatise evince, means to confirm, or at least not to contest, the erroneous views of the one(s) to whom someone is speaking. But to let false beliefs stand or to promulgate incorrect opinions is tantamount to being willing to “deceive people or hide the truth from them.” On no occasion is it said in the *Tractatus*

that to speak “*ad captum*” involves correcting, even modestly, the innocent or even the negligent misunderstandings of one’s audience. On the contrary, even God does not amend Noah’s ignorance about the actual population of the world; nor does God rectify Adam’s misapprehension of the attributes that are to be identified with the divine nature. Instead, when speaking “*ad captum*,” even God’s revelations yield to the prejudices, misapprehensions, or false opinions of those with whom he is communicating. Spinoza does not question that practice in its moral or pragmatic consequences.

Based upon his use of general phrases like “*ad captum hominum*” and “*ad captum alicujus*” or their more specific counterparts, for example, “*ad captum Noachi*,” Spinoza discloses to his reader the fact that to speak “*ad captum*” is to acquiesce in certain views espoused by one’s audience. That is, it means to speak in accordance with what they are able, willing, or prepared to grasp, even though that practice means leaving their false notions intact, such as Noah’s opinion about the population of the world. To speak “*ad captum vulgi*,” then, is the universal form of the practice that takes into account opinions or prejudices commonly shared by most men rather than the specific ones that have been embraced by a particular individual or group. When Spinoza says, in Chapter 5 of the treatise, that in order to teach “the whole human race” one should adapt his discourse, or teach, “*ad captum plebis*,” that declaration is tantamount to reciting the first of the “rules of living,” namely, “*ad captum vulgi loqui*” which was enunciated in one of Spinoza’s earliest compositions. And from what has been learned about the authentic implications of “*ad captum*” speech from its use in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* it is plain that Spinoza’s manner of teaching does permit him to “deceive people or hide the truth from them.” To demonstrate the accuracy of that conclusion, we only need to consider the example of an “*ad captum vulgi*” speech that was defended by Professor Harris as a faithful illustration of the kind of benign accommodation supposedly intended by Spinoza in his “first rule.”

According to Harris, if one wishes to persuade the vulgar to act justly and charitably it is futile “to recite to them geometrical proofs that such conduct is in their best interests.” Rather, “it would be far more effective to teach them that God, an almighty judge and ruler of the world, commands the practice of justice and mercy and will reward men accordingly.” In fact, that is the doctrine that Spinoza attributes to the “whole of Scripture” in its expression of the one “universal faith” (*TTP*, 3:177/223–24). In Chapter 14 of the *Tractatus*, Spinoza formulates the essential tenets of the universal faith as they pertain to the one indispensable dogma of theology regarding man’s salvation through his obedience to God.

I can now venture to enumerate the dogmas of the universal faith, the basic teachings which Scripture as a whole intends to convey. These all must be directed (as evidently follows from what we have demonstrated in these two chapters) to

this one end: that there is a Supreme Being who loves justice and charity, whom all must obey in order to be saved, and must worship by practising justice and charity to their neighbour. From this, all the tenets of faith can readily be determined, and they are simply as follows:—

1. God, that is, a Supreme Being, exists, supremely just and merciful, the exemplar of the true life. He who knows not, or does not believe, that God exists, cannot obey him or know him as a judge.

2. God is one alone. No one can doubt that this belief is essential for complete devotion, reverence, and love towards God; for devotion, reverence, and love spring only from the pre-eminence of one over all others.

3. God is omnipresent, and all things are open to him. If it were believed that things could be concealed from God, or if it were not realised that he sees everything, one might doubt, or be unaware of, the uniformity of the justice wherewith he directs everything.

4. God has supreme right and dominion over all things. He is under no compulsion, but acts by his absolute decree and singular grace. All are required to obey him absolutely, while he obeys none.

5. Worship of God and obedience to him consists solely in justice and charity, or love towards one's neighbour.

6. All who obey God by following this way of life, and only those, are saved; others, who live at pleasure's behest, are lost. If men did not firmly believe in this, there is no reason why they should obey God rather than their desires.

7. God forgives repentant sinners. There is no one who does not sin, so that without this belief all would despair of salvation, and there would be no reason to believe that God is merciful. He who firmly believes that God forgives from the mercy and grace whereby he directs all things, and whose heart is thereby more inspired by the love of God, that man verily knows Christ according to the spirit, and Christ is in him.

No one can fail to realise that all these beliefs are essential if men, without exception, are to be capable of obeying God as prescribed by the law explained above; for if any one of these beliefs is nullified, obedience is also nullified. (*TTP*, 3:177–78/224–25)

Within the seven articles of the “universal faith” it is explicitly stated or presupposed that God is a king or a sovereign ruler who governs, judges, and shows mercy. In Article 1, God is called “extremely just and merciful” and those who do not know God or who disbelieve in God's existence “cannot obey him and know him as a judge.” The “uniformity of God's justice” in Article 2, which follows from his omnipresence, again characterizes God as a legislator and judge. God's “supreme right and dominion over all things” expressed in Article 4 further represents God as a king or sovereign ruler. And the explicit identification of God's capacity to forgive sins with God's “mercifulness” is confirmed in Article 7.

Spinoza's account of the seven fundamental dogmas of the "universal faith" continues to ratify notions about the nature of God that expressly represent God as judge, legislator, and king, one who shows mercy and dispenses justice. Yet, according to Spinoza, all such characterizations of the divine nature are entirely false. Equally important, however, is the fact that those erroneous notions are said to have been derived "*ex captu vulgi*." For Spinoza to inculcate the images of the divine nature articulated in his account of the seven fundamental dogmas of the "universal faith," without offering any correction of them, is to advocate and promulgate vulgar, untrue opinions about God. For instance, in Article 3 it is asserted that "God directs everything through the equity of his justice"; and in Article 7 it is affirmed that it is "out of grace and mercy that God directs everything." Yet to promote that conclusion about God's activity is also to condone what is said to be an absurd idea about God. For "in reality," Spinoza insists, "God acts and directs everything solely from the necessity of his own nature and perfection, his decrees and volitions are eternal truths, always involving necessity" (*TTP*, 3:65/109).

What Spinoza teaches in Chapter 14 of the *Tractatus* concerning "the fundamental dogmas of the universal faith" is identical with what Professor Harris regards as an example of an "*ad captum vulgi*" speech that purportedly "expresses the truth in such language and by such means as the vulgar can understand." But elsewhere in the treatise Spinoza flatly insists that all teachings that attribute mercifulness or justice to God, or which describe God as legislator or prince, are anthropomorphic fabrications that contain no truth. Still, Spinoza upholds those vulgar teachings as indispensable components of the (presumably true) revealed teaching of theology that man can be saved by mere obedience without understanding: "a doctrine that cannot be investigated by the light of natural reason."

Consideration of the argument and evidence offered by Errol Harris to refute Leo Strauss's teaching on Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* ultimately has the paradoxical consequence of providing support for Strauss's interpretation of that book. Harris's cardinal illustration of an instance in the treatise that evidences the use of the precept "*ad captum vulgi loqui*" really demonstrates that Spinoza was prepared to indulge the ignorance of his audience through his endorsement of generally accepted opinions that he honestly regarded as being indefensible from a philosophical point of view. In other words, Spinoza did not find certain forms of prevarication to be morally reprehensible. Rather, his own declarations attest that he was prepared to inculcate the suprarational doctrine of theology that requires belief in God as a legislator, judge, or king, a being who rules with mercy and justice, while he also maintained that any such ideas about God are untrue and derived only "*ex captu vulgi*." Those two positions represent a conflict that can be resolved only by realizing what it actually means to speak "*ad captum vulgi*." When Spinoza enunciates the teaching of

the “universal faith” he is speaking “to the grasp of the vulgar.” He is formulating for them a doctrine that expresses and affirms the erroneous opinions they already embrace. However, Spinoza himself rejects those very opinions. Through the examples of what it means to speak “*ad captum*,” or to teach “*ad captum plebis*,” Spinoza provides his philosophical readers with a key for discriminating between his exoteric and his esoteric statements. Although the two teachings have not been distinguished here exhaustively, it will be fair to say that it is premature to conclude that there is no esoteric or hidden teaching in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

## NOTES

1. Errol E. Harris, *The Substance of Spinoza* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1995), p. vii. Errol E. Harris, *Salvation from Despair: A Reappraisal of Spinoza's Philosophy*, International Archives for the History of Philosophy (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973). During the interim, Harris has also published an overview of Spinoza's philosophic teachings in *Spinoza's Philosophy: An Outline* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1992).

2. *The Substance of Spinoza*, p. 125. Strauss's thesis concerning esotericism in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was presented in the article “How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*.” It was first published in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 17 (1948): 69–131; the essay was reprinted subsequently in Strauss's book *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952), pp. 142–201. Citations of Strauss's essay will be taken from the book, hereafter referred to in the notes as *Persecution*. Professor Harris's paper, “Is There an Esoteric Teaching in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*?” was originally published in *Mededelingen 38 Vanwege het Spinozahuis* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), but as early as 1973 Professor Harris had publicly taken exception to the view expressed by Strauss: see *Salvation from Despair*, pp. 206–10.

3. I have offered a treatment of exoteric/esoteric literature and its principal characteristics in “On the Practice of Esotericism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 2 (1992): 231–47.

4. See, e.g. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, chap. 11 and *The Prince*, chap. 15; Galileo, *The Epistle to the Grand Duchess Mother, Concerning the Authority of Scripture in Philosophical Controversies*; Francis Bacon, *Valerius terminus*, chap. 18; John Toland, *Pantheisticum* and “Clidophorus: Or of the Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophy”; and Charles Blount, *Great Is Diana of the Ephesians: Or the Original of Idolatry*. On the eighteenth-century practice of esotericism by British Deists, see David Berman, “Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying,” *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment*, ed. J.A.L. Lemay (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987).

5. John Toland, “Clidophorus: Or of the Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophy,” *Tetradyms* (London, 1720), pp. 94–95. G.E. Lessing, *Ernst und Falk, Lessing Werke*, 8 vols., eds. H.G. Göpfert, et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970–79) 8:459. In “Leibniz von den Ewigen Strafen,” Lessing asserted that “all ancient philosophers” had observed a distinction between their exoteric and their esoteric teachings, and they did so for reasons of prudence: see *Werke* 7:180. Also compare “Clidophorus,” p. 99: “For in a letter to his brother, Synesius roundly declares that it may sometimes be expedient to lie, in order to do good; exact philosophical knowledge not being necessary for the vulgar, who may receive hurt from their knowledge.”

6. See A.L. Motzkin, “Spinoza and Luzzatto: Philosophy and Religion,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979): 43–44. Cf. Leo Strauss, *Persecution* pp. 28–29: “Up to the end of the nineteenth century many philosophers and theologians believed that Hobbes was an atheist. At present many historians either tacitly or explicitly reject that view; a contemporary thinker, while feeling that Hobbes was not a particularly religious man, has decried in his writings the outlines of

a neo-Kantian philosophy of religion. Montesquieu himself, as well as his contemporaries, believed that *De l'esprit des lois* had a good and even a wonderful plan; Laboulaye still believed that the apparent obscurity of its plan as well as its other apparent literary deficiencies were due to censorship or persecution. One of the most outstanding present-day historians of political thought, however, asserts that 'there is not in truth much concatenation of subject matter, and the amount of irrelevance is extraordinary,' and that 'it cannot be said that Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* has any arrangement.' This selection of examples, which is not wholly arbitrary, shows that the typical difference between older and more recent views is due not entirely to progress in historical exactness, but also to a change in the intellectual climate."

7. See, e.g., F.H. Jacobi, "Ueber die Lehrer der Spinoza," *Werke*, 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1812–20) 4:54–56, 180–205, 216–20; and Carl Thomas, *Herbart-Spinoza-Kant* (Langensalza, 1875), p. xiii. G.W. Leibniz, Letter to Henry Justel, 14 April 1678, in *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Darmstadt & Leipzig: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1923–69), p. 393. Cf. Robert Blackmore's poem *Creation* (London, 1712), p. 54:

Spinoza next, to hide his black Design,  
And to his side th'unwary to incline,  
For Heav'n his Ensigns treacherous displays;  
Declares for God, while he that God betrays;  
For whom he's pleased such Evidence to bring,  
As saves the Name, while it subverts the Thing.

François Lami, *Extrait du novel athéisme renversé ou refutation du système de Spinoza* (Paris, 1696), p. 350. C. Kortholt, *De tribus impostoribus magnis liber* (Kiloni, 1680), pp. 72–75, 96–99, 145–48. J. Freudenthal, "On the History of Spinozism," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 8 (1895–96):40. E. E. Powell, *Spinoza and Religion* (Chicago & London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Company, Ltd, 1906), pp. 44–65. Powell's rule for interpreting contradictory passages in Spinoza's writings is formulated on page 65.

8. The tracts against the *Tractatus* were published by Jacob Veteler, Regner von Mansvelt (Professor of Theology at Utrecht), Spitzelius, Willem van Blyenburgh, and Musaeus (Professor of Theology at Jena). Musaeus, *Tractatus theologico-politicus ad veritatis lancem examinatus* (Jena, 1674) pp. 1–2. The letters between Oostens and van Velthuysen appear as Epistles 48 and 49 in the *Opera posthuma BDS*, and in Wolf's edition of *The Correspondence of Spinoza* they appear as Epistles 42 and 43: see *Opera posthuma BDS* ([Amstelodami] 1677), pp. 553ff.; and *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, ed. A. Wolf (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), pp. 253–54. Mathias Earbury, *Deism examin'd and confuted, in an answer to a book entitled Tractatus theologico-politicus* (London: Charles Browne, 1697), p. 14.

9. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives* (London: Cresset Press, 1949), p. 225. Hobbes's statement typically is construed to mean that he was surprised by the bald heterodoxy of certain declarations made by Spinoza, whereas Hobbes's own confessed diffidence prevented him from making assertions of a similarly bold nature. Nevertheless it is worth observing that to challenge specific orthodox teachings is not identical with revealing one's genuine thinking on such matters. For example, in the *Tractatus*, Spinoza's negative treatment of numerous Mosaic doctrines prepares his putative endorsement of the teaching of Christ with the result that Old Testament revelation is supplanted by New Testament revelation. But even such a pronounced move does not necessarily disclose Spinoza's genuine regard for the phenomenon of revelation itself.

10. *TTP*, 3:245/297. All passages cited from the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* will be taken from the standard Heidelberg Latin edition and from the English translation of it by Samuel Shirley. See *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols., ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitaetsbuchhandlung, 1925); and *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E. J. Brill Publishers, 1989). In the notes, the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* will be abbreviated *TTP*, and the page number where the passage appears in the Heidelberg edition of the *TTP* will be cited followed by the corresponding page of the Shirley translation. In the text, the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* will also be referred to as the *Tractatus* or the treatise, wherever appropriate. In the main, I have

adopted the Shirley English translations throughout the paper. Occasionally, however, I have offered minor modifications of them for the sake of more literal readings. The slight changes will be evident to those consulting the Shirley translation.

The final sentence of the passage recommends the simulation of accepted opinions rather than submit to the penalty of death for believing and expressing heterodox ones: "*Quid ergo talium nece exempli statuitur, cujus causam inertes, & animo impotentes ignorant, seditiosi oderunt, & honesti amant? Nemo sane ex eadem exemplum capere potest, nisi ad imitandum, vel saltem ad adulandum.*" Still, the sentence poses difficulties for the translator. In the Elwes translation, the sentence reads: "The only lesson we can draw from such scenes is to flatter the persecutor, or else to imitate the victim": see *TTP*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 263. On the other hand, Shirley's translation is more benign. He renders the Latin verb *adulari* as "to revere" rather than the more customary, though negative, sense of "to flatter" or "to fawn," which is the typical significance of the word in other passages of the *TTP*. Still, three considerations support the interpretation of the passage I have proposed. (1) Chapter 20 of the *TTP* is devoted to demonstrating that in a free republic "one is allowed to think as he wishes and to say what he thinks." In the passage cited, Spinoza denounces situations where there is punishment of those who think differently than the authorities but who do not know how to simulate the authorized views. Spinoza does not condemn simulation. Instead he condemns the political or religious circumstances that force men to simulate. (2) The sentence immediately following the passage cited explains that the alternative to compelling the kind of simulation practiced by those seeking to avoid persecution is to allow full freedom of judgment and expression in all matters. That liberty, says Spinoza, will foster authentic speech and action by the citizens. But where such liberty is not conceded then simulation and deceit remain as necessary or reasonable alternatives, even though they are socially and politically undesirable. (3) The disjunctive character of the grammatical construction *vel* supports the Elwes rendition rather than the Shirley translation, for Spinoza intends to confront the reader with these alternatives. Either there must be free speech and inquiry without persecution; or where persecution exists individuals will learn to practice simulation of accepted opinions rather than suffer the penalties prescribed for embracing unorthodox views.

11. The teaching of an identical doctrine in nonidentical ways (i.e., adapting the discourse to the intellectual abilities of one's audiences) is the meaning of the distinction between one's exoteric and one's esoteric writings as it was observed by Aristotle. See, e.g., *Nichomachean Ethics* 1217b20–25 and 1101a26; *Politics* 1278b30; *Eudemian Ethics* 1218b34. Also compare the characterizations of the differences between Aristotle's written works in these commentaries on his texts: Cicero, *De finibus* 5:5.12; Simplicius, *In de Caelo* 288.31–289 and *In Physica* 695.34; Elias, *In Categoriae* 114.5; Philoponus, *In Physica* 705.22; and Strabo, *Geographikon*, 13:154. For the coining of the term esoteric in contradistinction to exoteric, in respect of Aristotle's "school notebooks" and his "exoteric discourses," see Lucian, *Vitarum auctio*, section 26.

12. Spinoza concludes the Preface to the *Tractatus* and Chapter 20 of the book with the same deferential statement: "I have written nothing that I would not willingly submit to the scrutiny and judgment of my country's government. If anything of what I say is deemed by them to be repugnant to the laws of the country or the good of the community, I retract it. I know that I am human, and may have erred. Yet I have taken great pains not to err, and I have made it my prime object that whatever I have written should be in complete accord with my country's laws, with piety, and with good morals [*me nihil in eo scripsisse, quod non libentissime examini, & iudicio summarum Postestatum Patriae meae subjiciam: Nam si quid horum, quae dixi, patriis legibus repugnare, vel communi saluti obesse judicabunt, id ego indictum volo: scio me hominem esse, & errare potuisse; ne autem errarem, sedulo curavi, & apprime, ut quicquid scriberem, legibus patriae, pietati, bonisque moribus omnino responderet*]" (*TTP*, 3:247/299 and compare 3:12/57). Though the content of the statement is identical in both passages, there are some few differences between them in respect to punctuation and tense.

Spinoza's deferential remark is not unique in the literature of his age. Nor does it simply constitute obsequiousness on his part. On the contrary, much seventeenth-century literature includes a declaration of the author's willingness to submit his book to the approbation of civil authorities, for the "welfare of the community." Still, I believe Spinoza's declaration is interesting

in two respects. First, his statement not only expresses a hope that he had violated no “laws, piety, or good morals,” but it contains the promise to retract whatever proposition in the book has caused offense. That promise exceeds the terms of other deferential statements typical of the age. And while Spinoza’s “wish to unsay” anything offensive may indicate his awareness of the radical character of his doctrine, it also suggests his appreciation of the difficulty of teaching what one believes openly and without reservation. Consequently, the promise of recanting seems more obviously connected with a concern for safety rather than a regard for politeness. Second, I think that Spinoza’s promise, while instructive for the reason mentioned, is also quite hollow or disingenuous. Since the author of the *Tractatus* was not named, how could the authorities demand or even expect a retraction from an unknown source?

13. At the opening of Chapter 8 of the *TTP*, Spinoza boldly states that his intention is “to remove common theological prejudices,” and he notes that “the history of the Bible is untrustworthy rather than imperfect”: see *TTP*, 3:118/161. Public outrage at the content of the *TTP* is confirmed in the fact that by 1675 publication and sale of the *TTP* had been forbidden by virtually every synod in the United Provinces of The Netherlands.

14. By contrast, for example, we know that Spinoza fiercely objected to a proposal to translate the *TTP* out of the Latin into Dutch: see Epistle 40 to Jarig Jelles in 1671. But there is no indication of any concern on Spinoza’s part that the title page of the *TTP* deliberately communicated false information.

15. The treatment of the difficulties involved with interpreting the Bible and the manner of surmounting them is the focus of Chapter 7 of the *TTP*. There Spinoza devises a method of Biblical interpretation because the Bible is “hieroglyphical”: i.e., it possesses textual perplexities or inconsistencies and it contains matters that are not easily intelligible by our natural faculties (see, *TTP*, 3:97–99/140–42). In discussing the hermeneutic procedure developed by Spinoza to decipher the meaning of the Bible, Strauss suggests that the method employed by Spinoza to resolve Biblical contradictions also may be applied to resolve contradictory statements in Spinoza’s own book: see *Persecution*, pp. 176ff.; and that application of Spinoza’s Biblical hermeneutic is denounced by Harris: see *The Substance of Spinoza*, pp. 129–32. But ultimately the issue of the “hieroglyphical” character of the *TTP* is subordinated by Harris to the question of the real or alleged contradiction concerning the possibility or impossibility of “supernatural knowledge”: see *The Substance of Spinoza*, pp. 132–35. For that reason, I have not offered a distinct account of Harris’s criticism of Strauss regarding the “hieroglyphical” character of the Bible.

16. *The Substance of Spinoza*, pp. 135–36. Strauss’s position is related on pages 169ff. of *Persecution*, esp. p. 169: “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. Yet there are also passages in which the possibility of any suprarational knowledge is simply denied. Spinoza contradicts himself then regarding what one may call the central subject of the 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.” To negate the interpretation of Strauss, Harris appeals to the equivalence between “prophecy or revelation” and “natural or ordinary knowledge” established by Spinoza at the beginning of Chapter 1 of the *TTP*. But, in effect, Harris goes beyond the equivalence indicated by Spinoza and identifies “natural or ordinary knowledge” with *scientia intuitiva* as it is defined in the *Ethica*. That “natural knowledge” (even in the highest sense) is the same as “knowledge of the third kind” may be a conclusion inferred by Professor Harris. But it certainly would not be a matter known to the reader of the *TTP* in 1670. At least in that one case, Harris’s interpretation of Spinoza’s doctrine involves the interpolation of philosophic views that are formulated in the *Ethica* but which are not evident in the *TTP*. For example, there is no discussion in the *TTP* of obtaining “adequate knowledge of individual things derived from adequate ideas of God’s attributes.” And invoking that proposition from the *Ethica* to explain the connection between “prophecy or revelation” and “natural or ordinary knowledge” in the *TTP* amounts to violating the integrity of the book by allowing explanations based on external evidence to supersede interpretations derived from the internal evidence.

17. *TTP*, 3:15–16/59–60. It would not be an exaggeration to remark that the equivalence asserted by Spinoza between prophecy or revelation and ordinary or natural knowledge, “which is common to all men and rests on foundations that are common to all men,” allows reason or the “natural light” into a domain from which it otherwise might be barred. In effect, Spinoza makes reason as reliable a source for learning how to secure man’s well-being as revelation. Or, indeed, because of the exclusory character of prophecy or revelation, i.e., the fact that though ordinary knowledge may be called prophetic its possessors are not entitled to be called prophets (*TTP*, 3:16/60), natural or ordinary knowledge may be regarded as the more accessible and universal source to employ as a guide.

18. Strauss, *Persecution*, p. 169. In the *TTP*, Spinoza denounces the belief that supernatural events, i.e., “events that contravene the laws of nature or at least cannot be occasioned by nature,” are possible. When denying that miracles can occur, Spinoza goes so far as to assert that “what is contrary to nature is contrary to reason and what is contrary to reason is absurd and therefore to be rejected” (*TTP*, 3:91/134). The connection between nature and reason expressed in the equation cited may be what prompted the confusion of the word “supernatural” for “suprarational” in Harris’s rebuttal of Strauss. Even in the Bible, the supernatural and the suprarational are regularly connected because the certification for a teaching as being prophetic or revealed is its confirmation by some *sign* (see *TTP*, 3:31/75) by which Spinoza means a “miracle” as it is understood by the vulgar, i.e., “an event that contravenes the laws of nature.” For the identification of “signs” with “miracles,” compare *TTP*, 3:35–36/78–79 and 3:92/135; the same event of “the sun standing still” is referred to as a “sign” in Chapter 2, and then it is cited as an example of a “miracle” in Chapter 6. Still, with respect to the difference between “supernatural” and “suprarational,” it should be clear that there can be claims to suprarational knowledge that do not depend upon supernatural events. For example, the prediction of future events by “seers” does not require the aid of some supernatural occurrence. Yet the “knowledge” imparted by the “seer” is not accessible to others by the exercise of their faculty of reason alone. Rather, the “knowledge” attained derives from the use of some putatively suprarational faculty.

19. *TTP*, 3:15/59. It should be noted that Spinoza effectively identifies the phenomenon of prophecy or revelation with the religious experience of the Hebrews by citing the word *navi* (“interpreter” or “spokesman”) and its Old Testament meaning, viz., “interpreter of God,” as the operative definition of a prophet for the *TTP*. Moreover, the Hebrew significance of the word prophet implicitly extends to the New Testament since “all of the authors of the Old Testament and the New were Hebrews,” and although the New Testament has been translated into other languages its “idiom is Hebraic” (*TTP*, 3:100/143). Nevertheless, in the Preface to the treatise, Spinoza acknowledges the phenomenon of prophecy in groups other than the Hebrews, and he cites the example of Alexander who sought advice from seers/prophets: “If anyone seeks particular examples to confirm what I have said, let him consider Alexander. It was only when he first learnt to fear fortune at Pylae Susidis (Curtius, Book V, sec. 4) that superstition drove him to employ seers. After his victory over Darius he ceased to consult prophets and seers until he was once more dismayed with his plight” (*TTP*, 3:6/50). Non-Hebraic prophecy did not imply that the prophet was an “interpreter of God.” In polytheistic cultures, prophets or augurs foretold future events or explained the meanings of enigmatic signs. But they did not have the singular function of serving as interpreter for the god(s). Spinoza’s emphasis upon Biblical prophecy is determined by his audience. Had Spinoza written in or for Moorish Spain he might have concerned himself with the kind of prophecy relevant to the Koran.

20. See *TTP*, 3:16/60: “Our discussion must be confined to what is drawn only from Scripture. For what can we say of things transcending the bounds of our intellect [*limites nostri intellectus excedentibus*] except what is transmitted to us by the prophets in word or writing? And since there are no prophets among us today, as far as I know, our only recourse is to peruse the sacred books left to us by the prophets of old, taking care, however, not to make metaphorical interpretations or to attribute anything to the prophets which they themselves did not clearly declare.”

21. See the text of note 15. In notes 34 and 35 on page 169 of *Persecution*, Strauss lists a number of passages from the *Tractatus* expressing the view either that suprarational knowledge is possible or that suprarational knowledge is impossible.

22. *TTP*, 3:184–85/232: “By theology, I here mean, in precise terms, revelation in so far as it manifests Scripture’s objective as we have stated it, that is, the way of achieving obedience, or the dogmas of true piety and faith. In other words, by theology I mean the word of God properly so called, which does not consist in a set number of books (see Chapter 12).”

23. See, e.g., *TTP*, 3:112–17/154–60, where Spinoza extols the exercise of an unaided *lumen naturale* and dismisses any claims that endorse the validity of some *supra naturam lumen*.

24. See *TTP*, 3:186/233–34. Also compare *TTP*, 3:30/74: “The prophets were not assured of God’s revelation through the revelation itself, but through a sign. This is clear in the case of Abraham (Gen. ch. 15 v. 8) who, when he heard God’s promise, asked for a sign. He did indeed believe in God, and he did not seek a sign so as to have faith in God, but to know that this was God’s promise to him.” It is curious, of course, that the genuinely faithful demand from the object of their faith assurances about the merit of that faith. But it is equally peculiar that Spinoza would mention miracles, i.e., “signs,” in Chapter 15 with any seriousness after his refutation of the possibility of miracles in Chapter 6. But I suggest that his introduction of the notion of miracles in Chapter 15 is an illustration of the subtlety of Spinoza’s deliberate inconsistencies.

The point of the argument in Chapter 15 addresses the motive for one’s accepting the teaching of theology even if it is “above reason” and therefore cannot be proved true or false by the exercise of the “natural light.” Spinoza reminds the reader that “the certitude of the prophets,” as described in Chapter 2 (*TTP*, 3:31/75), consisted of three criteria: (1) a distinct and vivid imagination; (2) a sign; and (3) a heart inclined toward the right and good. In Chapter 15 of the *TTP* it is maintained that the first criterion could have applied only to the prophets and hence “our certitude about revelation rests on the other two.” But the second criterion, the sign (or the miracle, by virtue of the identification established by Spinoza [see *TTP*, 3:20–21/64–65]) also must be ignored since even “false prophets could work true miracles.” Consequently, the only criterion that remains to assure one of the certitude of the prophetic testimony is the goodness of the doctrine that is professed. In order to come to that conclusion, however, Spinoza undermines the certitude of prophecy or revelation based upon any sign/miracle. And he achieves that goal by appealing to the Biblical, viz., Mosaic, admonition against following the false prophet “even if he confirmed his authority with signs and portents.” Nevertheless, once the prophetic commendation of “justice and charity” is declared to be *the* teaching of Scripture, Spinoza reverts to the view that the prophets confirmed that benevolent doctrine with signs: “For since we see that the prophets commend above all else justice and charity and have no other objective, we may hence conclude that it was no evil intent but sincere conviction that prompted them to teach that men may achieve blessedness by obedience and faith. And because they furthermore confirmed this teaching with signs we are convinced that they were not speaking at random nor were they out of their sense while prophesying” (*TTP*, 3:186/234). To say that a doctrine is “certified by a sign” is to make the doctrine compelling by recourse to the vulgar’s interest or belief in miracles. But by connecting the implications of previous arguments and statements, it should be realized that in the passage quoted Spinoza says that the prophets were able to do what Spinoza elsewhere says it simply is impossible to do, i.e., work a miracle.

25. *TTP*, 3:63/106. The “defect of knowledge” is elaborated in Chapter 2 where Spinoza describes Adam in the Garden of Eden as being ignorant of God as an omnipresent and omniscient being: see *TTP*, 3:37/80.

26. *TTP*, 3:30/74: “In this respect, then, prophecy is inferior to natural knowledge, which needs no sign, but of its own nature carries certainty.”

27. I have in mind here the description of “the exoteric and the esoteric distinction” articulated by John Toland in the complete title of his essay, “Clidophorus.” The title of that work effectively serves as a definition for one sort of esotericism: viz., “Clidophorus or of the *Exoteric and Esoteric Philosophy*, that is, of the *External and Internal Doctrines* of the Ancients: the one open and public, accommodated to the popular Prejudices and the established Religions; the other private and secret, wherein, to the few capable and discrete, was taught the TRUTH stripped of all disguises.”

28. *Persecution*, p. 177. On the principle of “suspending judgment” when confronted with contradictory statements see *TTP*, 3:103/146. Similar formulations of the rule for the interpretation of conflicting assertions by the same speaker or author are pronounced by John Toland and E.E.

Powell. See Toland, "Clidophorus," p. 96: "there is one observation left us, whereby to make a probable judgement of the sincerity of others in declaring their opinions. Tis this. When a man maintains what's commonly believ'd, or professes what's publicly injoin'd, it is not always a sure rule that he speaks what he thinks: but when he seriously maintains the contrary of what's by law establish'd, and openly declares for what most others oppose, then there's a strong presumption that he utters his mind." And compare, Powell, *Spinoza and Religion*, p. 65: "In view of the circumstances, the interpretation of Spinoza should evidently proceed according to the following principle: Whenever two passages contradict each other, one of them expressed in religious terminology and the other not, we are bound to regard the latter as conveying Spinoza's real meaning; and in general, whenever religious phraseology implies views clearly in contradiction with the first principles of his philosophy, we must accept as his real opinions, not those implied in the religious phraseology, but those in harmony with the first principles of his philosophy." For Powell, Spinoza's philosophy represented a form of atheistic monism.

29. See *TTP*, 3:54/97–98: "So when he says, 'To the Jews alone were entrusted the oracles of God,' we should either take it as meaning that only to the Jews were the laws entrusted in writing while to other nations they were communicated by revelation and conception alone, or we must say (since Paul's aim is to refute the objections that could be raised only by the Jews) that Paul is answering in accordance with the understanding and beliefs of the Jews of that time [*Cum ergo ait, Judaeis tantum Dei eloquia credita fuisse, vel intelligendum est, quod iis tantum Leges scripto, reliquis autem gentibus sola tantum revelatione, & conceptu conceditae fuerunt, vel dicendum (quandoquidem id, quod soli Judaei objicere poterant, propulsare studet), Paulum ex captu & secundum opiniones Judaeorum, tum temporis receptas, respondere*]."

30. For Spinoza's instruction regarding the method of interpretation, see *TTP*, 3:110–11/153–55.

31. A precedent for the practice of an author explaining how to resolve contradictions in a book with a view to having the reader apply the rule(s) disclosed by the author to the interpretation of his own book is to be found in a work well known to Spinoza and Strauss. In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides describes "the causes [that] should account for the contradictory or contrary statements to be found in any book or compilation": see *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 2 vols., trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1962) 1:17–20. With the description of the cause for the contradiction, Maimonides supplies the interpretive procedure by which the contradiction can be understood and resolved. He then states that "[d]ivergences found in [*The Guide*] are due to the fifth cause and the seventh." And to that acknowledgement he adds: "Know this, grasp its true meaning, and remember it very well so as not to become perplexed by some of its chapters" (see *The Guide*, 1:20). Also see Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of *The Guide for the Perplexed*" in *Persecution*, pp. 38–94.

32. What or who Spinoza intends by "the vulgar" is an interesting question. Since he wrote in Latin, he did not seek to address "the vulgar," i.e., the commoners or the multitude, in the conventional sense of the term. Yet in the Preface to the *TTP* Spinoza does not invite "the vulgar" to read his book: "*Vulgus ergo & omnes, qui cum vulgo iisdem affectibus conflictantur, ad haec legenda non invito*" (*TTP*, 3:12/56). If it is plain that the book excludes the conventional vulgar who cannot read Latin, then it would seem that Spinoza allows for the possibility that some portion of his Latin-literate audience shares opinions in common with the vulgar. Thus, for Spinoza, there appears to be a class of readers who could be characterized as the "learned vulgar." And perhaps for that reason, in the Preface to the *TTP*, Spinoza addresses the book to the "*Philosophe lector*" (see *TTP*, 3:12/56). How Spinoza's regard for a class of readers characterized as the "learned vulgar" affected his teachings in the *TTP* I have discussed in "Spinoza, Biblical Criticism, and the Enlightenment," *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, ed. John McCarthy (forthcoming from The Catholic University of America Press).

33. *TTP*, 3:42/86: "*Ex his itaque satis, superque constat, id, quod ostendere proponebamus, nempe Deum revelationes captui, & opinionibus Prophetarum accommodavisse.*"

34. To propose that the genuine meaning of “*ad captum vulgi*” can be attained by examining the significance of the occasions when the words “*ad captum*” are used is to follow a principle defended by Spinoza himself in the *TTP*. For according to him, “words have a definite meaning solely from their use” (see *TTP*, 3:160/206–7; and compare passages from the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, 2:131–32; 195–96; 205–6).

E.g., see *TTP*, 3:84/127: “since miracles were wrought according to the understanding of the common people who were quite ignorant of the principles of science [*verum, quoniam miracula ad captum vulgi facta fuerunt, quod quidem principia rerum naturalium plane ignorabat*], men of old doubtless regarded as a miracle whatever they could not explain in the way in which common people are accustomed to explain natural phenomena.” In a statement that illustrates something being undertaken “*ad captum vulgi*” we find Spinoza discussing a phenomenon that is made credible only because of the vulgar’s lack of knowledge of nature and its eternal laws. In other words, as the description of miracles attests, what is said or done “*ad captum vulgi*” is identified with something that Spinoza regards as philosophically absurd. Spinoza also concludes Chapter 2 with the observation that there are many passages in the Bible, adapted “*ad captum*,” that cannot be defended as divine doctrine without great prejudice to Philosophy: “if I had to enumerate all the passages of Scripture composed ‘ad hominem’—i.e., according to the individual’s understanding—and which could not be upheld as divine doctrine without great prejudice to philosophy, I should depart from the brevity which is my aim [*nam si mihi enumeranda essent omnia Scripturae Loca, quae tantum ad hominem, sive ad captum alicujus scripta sunt, & quae non sine magno Philosophiae praejudicio, tanquam divina doctrina defenduntur, a brevitate, cui studeo, longe discederem: sufficiat igitur, quaedam pauca, & universalia attigisse reliqua curiosus lector apud se perpendat*]” (*TTP*, 3:43–44/87).