

## Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics<sup>1</sup>

In "Spinoza: Scientist and Theorist of Scientific Method,"<sup>2</sup> David Savan has raised two very important questions: 1) what is the place and importance of Spinoza's work as a practising scientist? and 2) what did Spinoza think were the right rules to follow in carrying out specific scientific investigations? By connecting these questions, and asking first what Spinoza's actual contributions to the sciences were, Professor Savan suggests that in assessing Spinoza's epistemology we ought to look not only at his theoretical writings *about* science, nor only at those theoretical writings plus his practise in the *Ethics*, but also at his practise as a scientist in areas which we, who tend to distinguish philosophy from the sciences, would count as sciences. If we do this, he contends, we will find Spinoza to be much less the paradigm of aprioristic rationalism he is generally taken to be, and much more an empiricist. This reading of Spinoza's theory of knowledge is one I find highly congenial, since it agrees with conclusions I once reached by a different route.<sup>3</sup>

Savan begins with a review of Spinoza's work in physics, chemistry, optics, and mathematics, concluding that

As far as the natural sciences and mathematics are concerned... although Spinoza was thoroughly competent and acquainted with some of the best work of his time, he contributed little of importance to research or theory. (p. 97)

He does not consider whether Spinoza's *Hebrew Grammar* may have made a significant contribution to the development of Hebrew linguistics, but if he had, I think he would have reached a similar assessment: it is a competent work, showing a good knowledge of the best available work in the field, but not itself a landmark in the history of the subject.<sup>4</sup> So far as I can see, that is the right judgment to make about Spinoza's work in all those areas, though I acknowledge that you need to be (or to be able to rely on) a considerable historian of those disciplines to judge the significance of Spinoza's work in them.

Savan, however, is not content to rest with that somewhat discouraging conclusion. He goes on to point out one area, at least, in which Spinoza did make a seminal contribution to science. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* (hereafter, TTP) he showed that the methods of the natural sciences could be fruitfully extended to the scientific study not only of the Bible, but of historical texts generally. Spinoza is the founder

---

<sup>1</sup> From *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions*, ed. by Graeme Hunter, Toronto: U of Toronto P.

<sup>2</sup> In *Spinoza and the Sciences*, ed. by Marjorie Grene and Debra Nails, Vol. 91 of the *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1986, pp. 95-123.

<sup>3</sup> See my "Experience in Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge," in *Spinoza, a collection of critical essays*, ed. by Marjorie Grene, Doubleday/Anchor, 1973, pp. 25-59, and Grene's introduction to *Spinoza and the Sciences*, pp. xvi-xvii. I've discussed the more general problem of whether there really was an epistemological movement properly called rationalism in my contribution on rationalism, in the *Companion to Epistemology*, forthcoming from Blackwell, edited by Ernest Sosa and Jonathan Dancy.

<sup>4</sup> This seems a fair conclusion to draw from two articles by A. J. Klijnsmit, "Spinoza and Grammatical Tradition," *Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis* xlix, Leiden: Brill, 1986, and "Some 17th Century Grammatical Descriptions of Hebrew," a paper presented to the 5th Annual Colloquium of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas, St. Peter's College, Oxford, September 1988.

of scientific hermeneutics. (p. 97)

Savan supports this claim by citing the 20th Century Biblical scholar, R. H. Pfeiffer, as crediting Spinoza and Richard Simon with being "the two founders of modern Biblical criticism." Savan points out that Simon, who published his first work in this area eight years after the TTP,<sup>5</sup> acknowledged the priority and importance of Spinoza's work.

After a brief summary of Spinoza's principles of scriptural interpretation, Savan goes on to draw a striking conclusion:

Most of those who have written on Spinoza as a scientist have arrived at an unbalanced and even incorrect interpretation because they have tended to focus on his chemical and physical experiments. But Spinoza's experimentation in these fields was occasional and *ad hoc*... It was in the extension of the scientific outlook and scientific methods to the study of historical texts that Spinoza was innovative and influential. He emphasized the importance of the careful collection of empirical data. Variations and changes in the data must be noted, compared, and cross checked. In several cases Spinoza states that our data are quite inadequate and no particular explanation is warranted. In other cases he acknowledges that his explanatory hypothesis is tentative and doubtful. In his most successful and important scientific work, then, Spinoza is an empiricist. (p. 99)

In making this suggestion, Savan has opened up what seems to me a very interesting subject for investigation. To appreciate the freshness of this you need only compare it with Nancy Maull's essay in the same collection, "Spinoza in the Century of Science."

Maull argues that, unlike such contemporaries as Descartes, Boyle, Leibniz and Newton, Spinoza made no major contribution to the sciences, and suggests that this was because of the inadequacy of his epistemology. She grants that Spinoza performed quite a few experiments, but the ones of which we have the most detailed account were undertaken not

to understand the internal composition of nitre, but in order to confront Boyle with a philosophical lesson, namely, that (as we would put it) hypotheses are underdetermined by experiment. (p. 5)

In the end her account of Spinoza's theory of knowledge makes any appeal to experience unnecessary. Spinoza is not interested in formulating an understanding of the world which will need to be tested against the facts because his primary concern is with constructing a picture of the whole of the universe which will lead the individual knower to blessedness. The details of that picture are unimportant.

I question whether Maull's account of Spinoza's experimentation in chemistry is accurate. If "hypotheses are underdetermined by experiment" means merely that no experimental data, no matter how extensive, will ever make a hypothesis metaphysically certain, will ever exclude all possibility that an alternative hypothesis is correct, very likely Spinoza would agree.<sup>6</sup> If, however, her gloss on the letter to Boyle means something more interesting, say that, for any given set

---

<sup>5</sup> *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, Paris, 1678, followed in 1689 by his *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament*, Rotterdam.

<sup>6</sup> That seems to be a conclusion implicit in the discussion of hypotheses in the Preface to Part III of his presentation of Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, 1/226/6-227/23 (references are to volume, page and line numbers of the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza's *Opera*, given in the margins of my *Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, Princeton, 1985). Spinoza acknowledges that a hypothesis might satisfy all the stated criteria for being a good one and still be false.

of experimental data, and for any hypothesis which "explains" those data, there is always some other hypothesis which will explain them equally well (where simplicity is one of the criteria of a good hypothesis, along with experimental fit and consistency), then I'm not so sure. In any case, on neither of these interpretations of her gloss does that seem to be the point of the letter of Boyle.

Rather what Spinoza says is: a) that if the purpose of Boyle's experiments is to show something specific about the constitution of nitre, viz. that it is a heterogeneous substance (i.e., composed of particles of two quite different kinds), then they are inadequate for that purpose, since the data can be accounted for at least as well by supposing the component particles of nitre to be homogeneous, given the right auxiliary hypotheses; to establish the specific conclusion Boyle draws about the constitution of nitre (so far as we can ever establish this kind of conclusion) he needs to do more experiments which would disconfirm Spinoza's alternative hypothesis (cf. IV/16/10-17/5); and b) that if the purpose of Boyle's experiments is to demonstrate the falsity of the scholastic theory of substantial forms by showing that the secondary qualities of things depend on their primary qualities, then they are unnecessary, since the less recondite experiments of Bacon and Descartes have already demonstrated that quite adequately (IV/25/1-9, cf. IV/64/28-65/2). Neither of these claims involves any depreciation of the importance of consulting experience.<sup>7</sup> Each, in fact, assumes that the way you learn about the world is by experience.

However we ultimately interpret Spinoza's views about chemistry, our concern now is with his views about scriptural interpretation. Maull knows that Spinoza wrote a work on the interpretation of scripture and that this may have some relevance to what she says, but her only reference to the TTP does not show much appreciation of its importance:

Spinoza suggests that the scientific understanding of nature is by no means an ampliative process, but rather a precarious attempt to apply principles already known by the light of reason. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* he likens the interpretation of nature to the interpretation of scripture, with all the attendant pitfalls. (p. 13)

That's all in a footnote, and the part I've quoted is all she says about the TTP. I find it a rather mysterious footnote. What are the "attendant pitfalls"? And what does Maull think is the point of Spinoza's comparison between interpreting nature and interpreting scripture? Those are topics I propose to return to later.

David Savan has done us a service in calling our attention to a neglected masterpiece. I say this with a particular sense of gratitude, since I am now engaged in a translation of the TTP, which has already cost me a lot of time and effort, and will cost a lot more before it's over. I would like that translation to have as large a readership as possible. So I, like Savan, am in the business of encouraging people to pay more attention to this work. On a less personal note, I think the general epistemological moral he draws from his study of the TTP is correct and salutary. One of the works which helped me to understand the extent of Spinoza's empiricism was the

---

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that Spinoza does not think that *some* things Boyle tries to prove by experiment can be proven by demonstration and computation. E.g., he does appear to hold that we can prove in that way that very small bodies can very easily be put into motion. This is a consequence of the infinite divisibility of bodies, which he takes to be demonstrable *a priori*. Cf. IV/29/12-17. But he does not thereby deny that experiments are sometimes necessary in chemistry.

TTP.

But I have reservations about some of the things Savan says about this work, and questions about the TTP which his article raises, but does not answer: 1) is Spinoza really "the founder of scientific hermeneutics"? did he really, as that phrase might imply, have no predecessors who made any significant or comparable contribution to the development of the discipline? 2) if (as I'm inclined to think) the answer to the first question is "no," then we face a battery of further, related questions: what exactly is his relationship to other people in that discipline? to what extent did his predecessors anticipate his conclusions? what was there about his work which led his successors to look upon it as a landmark in the field? and finally, 3) is there such a thing as scientific hermeneutics anyway? what is the status of this discipline which Spinoza (either) founded (or contributed to in a significant way)?

These are complex and difficult questions, which I can hardly hope to answer definitively here. But they are questions of the first importance for our understanding of Spinoza, not only for their own sakes, but also because answering them will require us to address the ever-entrancing question: how did Spinoza come to be Spinoza? i.e., how did this young man, raised in the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam, come to rebel against the religious tradition in which he was raised, and become a symbol in Western thought of the rational reconstruction of religion?

-1-

About the first question I shall be brief and dogmatic. A priori it seems highly unlikely that anyone, no matter how brilliant, would deserve the title "the founder of discipline X," for any X, if that implies that the person in question created the discipline essentially *ex nihilo*, as if no predecessor had made any significant contribution. Neither philosophy nor science seems to work that way. The idea that any one person can properly be described as *the* founder of any intellectual discipline is a form of the myth of the hero which we should treat with great skepticism. Scientists or philosophers who make seminal contributions to their disciplines typically build on the work of predecessors, who struggled to formulate its central questions and propose plausible answers to them. When they are candid, the great figures acknowledge this, as Newton did when he observed (with no great originality) that if he saw further than others, it was because he stood on the shoulders of giants.<sup>8</sup> To show that there were in fact giants on whose shoulders Spinoza stood will be the task of our second section.

Meanwhile, we should note that Savan really doesn't need to insist that Spinoza was without significant precursors in his work on the interpretation of scripture. Surely it will be enough for his purposes if Spinoza's work was extremely important in the development of the subject. Surely it's sufficient to show some appreciation of scientific methodology if you make important, permanent contributions to knowledge in some one of the sciences. You needn't also

---

<sup>8</sup> Newton makes the remark so often attributed to him in a letter to Robert Hooke regarding the question who deserves credit for inventing the reflecting telescope; it can be traced back through Richard Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1634) as far as Bernard of Chartres in the 12th Century. See Robert K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants: a Shandean Postscript*, New York, 1965.

be the founder of the discipline. Indeed, we might question whether it is necessary for a good theorist of knowledge or a philosopher of science to even be an important contributor to science. Why isn't it enough just to be competent in the science of your day? Maull's view seems to be that if a thinker of Spinoza's calibre was not an important contributor to science, we would need to explain why not by pointing to defects in his epistemology. Spinoza must not have been an empiricist, look how little he accomplished in science. This seems an odd view. Certainly we owe great respect to the views of important contributors to science about their own methodologies. But most working philosophers of science are not also significant contributors to science. It seems too much to expect that they should be. Why is it not enough just to be competent in contemporary science?

Savan's view, I think, is not that you must be an important contributor to science to be a sound theorist of science, but rather that *if* you are an important contributor to science, then you cannot be entirely unsound in your theory of science. That seems right. If we then agree that Spinoza did make important contributions to one of the emerging sciences of his day, we should want to take another look at his theory of science and ask whether it is really as aprioristic as is usually assumed. So it's a fruitful question just what Spinoza's position is in the history of this discipline.

-2a-

Our first question has led quickly to a battery of further questions: What are some of the conclusions of the TTP which have given it its reputation as a landmark work in the history of scientific hermeneutics? Who were Spinoza's predecessors in this area? To what extent did they anticipate Spinoza's views? Who were the giants on whose shoulders Spinoza stood?

One of Spinoza's most famous conclusions was that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, i.e., the first five books of the Bible. In his day, Spinoza tells us, "nearly everyone" believed Moses had written all five books. (TTP viii, 4, III/118/18-20) Spinoza's conclusion, of course, is much broader than the mere denial of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. He also thinks Joshua did not write the book of Joshua, the judges did not write the book of Judges, and so on. But the denial of Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch seems to have captured people's imaginations in a way the other denials didn't, partly because those first five books of the Bible are so important to the Judaeo-Christian story of man's relationship to God, partly because denying that Moses was the author of these books is denying that they were written by the prophet to whom, according to the Bible itself, God revealed himself more clearly than to any other prophet, "not in dark speech," but "mouth to mouth," or "face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10, Numbers 12:6-8). By comparison, denying that Samuel wrote the books of Samuel is a small matter.<sup>9</sup>

Not only does Spinoza deny that many of the books of the Bible were written by the people his contemporaries usually ascribed them to, he also argues affirmatively that the cen-

---

<sup>9</sup> For Maimonides the superiority of Moses to the other prophets was one of the 13 principles constituting the essence of Jewish belief. See *Maimonides: a guide for today's perplexed*, by Kenneth Seeskin, Behrman, 1991, p. 108.

tral historical books of the Old Testament, in the form in which we have them, are essentially the work of one man, Ezra, working long after the events these books describe, in the postexilic period. What Ezra did, according to Spinoza, was to organize and edit materials which had been handed down to him from a variety of sources. Ezra wrote for a definite political purpose: to show that the tragedy which had befallen the Hebrew people had occurred because they neglected to follow the law of Moses (viii, 42-58, III/125/25-128/31). Ezra's Bible is an exercise in theodicy, designed to explain how such a thing could have happened to God's chosen people. Although he intended to do so, Ezra did not, according to Spinoza, succeed in making a very smooth and coherent narrative out of his history of the Hebrew people. Often he merely copied from his sources alternative and inconsistent versions of the same events. Spinoza speculates that perhaps an untimely death prevented Ezra from fully realizing his plan (ix, 2-3, III/129/11-21).

Now much of the analysis I've summed up in the last two paragraphs would be accepted today by all but the most orthodox Jews and the most fundamentalist Christians. Some scholars even follow Spinoza in identifying Ezra as the redactor who gave the Biblical narratives the essential form they have today.<sup>10</sup> But nearly everything I ascribed to Spinoza in those two paragraphs you can also find in Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Certainly Hobbes not only denies the Mosaic authorship, but also argues that most of the books of the Bible were written not by the people whose names they bear and whose deeds they describe, but by someone else living long after the event. Hobbes even anticipates Spinoza in identifying Ezra as the person who probably put the central historical books of the Bible into the form in which we have received them.<sup>11</sup> Where he differs from the picture sketched here is in not criticizing Ezra for his inability to make a coherent narrative of the whole. So naturally people have often described Spinoza as following Hobbes. This has happened as recently as Harold Bloom's *The Book of J*,<sup>12</sup> and as long ago as Leibniz's first letters regarding the TTP, where he contended that Hobbes had "sown the seeds of that very smart critique which this bold man carries out against sacred scripture."

Leibniz was most upset by Spinoza's critique, which he saw as undermining the authority of scripture.<sup>13</sup> He does not present Spinoza as merely rehashing material already found in Hobbes. His metaphor of seed-sowing implies, what any fair comparison of *Leviathan* with the TTP will confirm, that Spinoza's case for his conclusions is much more thorough and scholarly than Hobbes' case.<sup>14</sup> For example, whereas Hobbes cites only three texts as counting against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, Spinoza calls attention to nearly two dozen problematic passages. The numbers matter in a case like this, since the more passages there are, the more difficult it is to devise a hypothesis to explain them. The fact that the last chapter of the Pentateuch describes the death of Moses is pretty obviously a problem for the theory that Moses was the author of the whole work. Jewish scholars had acknowledged this problem as early as the *Talmud* and had dealt with it by ascribing the last eight verses of Deuteronomy to Joshua.<sup>15</sup> In the Re-

---

<sup>10</sup> On this see Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Harper and Row, 1989..

<sup>11</sup> *Leviathan*, ch. xxxiii, ¶19, p. 422 in the Macpherson edition.

<sup>12</sup> Grove Weidenfeld, 1990, p. 20

<sup>13</sup> For Leibniz's reaction to the TTP see "*Homo audax*: Leibniz, Oldenburg and the TTP."

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between *Leviathan* and the TTP see "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly' or, How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise."

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. by I. Epstein, Soncino, 1935, vol. II, p. 71, Baba Bathra 15a.

formation Luther had adopted a variant of that view, ascribing the entire final chapter of Deuteronomy to either Joshua or Eleazar.<sup>16</sup> But if there are many *prima facie* later passages scattered throughout the Pentateuch, such simple solutions will not work.

Another difference between Hobbes and Spinoza is that Hobbes makes no pretensions to Hebrew scholarship,<sup>17</sup> whereas Spinoza's case often depends on a knowledge of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and of the Hebrew language.<sup>18</sup> Leibniz certainly thought Spinoza's scholarship made him a formidable opponent:

I grieve that a man of his evident learning should have fallen so far into error... these things tend to overturn the Christian Religion... if only someone could be stirred to activity who was equal to Spinoza in erudition, but dedicated to the Christian cause, who might refute his frequent paralogisms and abuse of oriental letters. (Akademie ed., I, i, 148)

But though Leibniz recognizes Spinoza's superiority to Hobbes as a biblical scholar, the suggestion is still strong, if you look at the totality of Leibniz's correspondence about the TTP, that Hobbes had a decisive influence on Spinoza.

Hobbes is certainly an important figure in the history of this subject, and clearly an important influence on Spinoza in political philosophy; but I doubt that he had any significant influence on Spinoza's Biblical criticism. The catalogue of Spinoza's library mentions a copy of *De cive*, and he could have been reading that work early in the 1650s, since he had the linguistic equipment to do so. Probably he was.<sup>19</sup> The catalogue does not mention *Leviathan*, the work to which we have to go for Hobbes' biblical criticism, and Wernham cannot find any internal evidence in the TTP suggesting a reading of Hobbes' most mature statement of his theory.<sup>20</sup> Though Hobbes published *Leviathan* in 1651, for 16 years it was available only in English, a language Spinoza could not read. I think that makes it very unlikely that Hobbes' critique of scripture influenced Spinoza at the time he was excommunicated from the synagogue in 1656. By the time Spinoza wrote the TTP he could have read *Leviathan* either in a Dutch translation (1667) or in a Latin one (1668). I'm inclined to think he did.<sup>21</sup> But he had embarked on writing out his "opinion

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Luther's *Works*, Vol. IX, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan, St. Louis: Concordia, 1960, p. 310. Luther does allow as a possibility that Moses himself described his death in this way "as if foreseen." Hobbes appears to be aware of the Lutheran response, arguing that it would be strange for a man prophesying that his sepulcher would not be found to say "no one knows his burial place to this day," and pointing out that problematic passages are not confined to the last chapter of Deuteronomy, but occur also in Genesis (12:6) and Numbers (21:14). Cf. *Leviathan* ch. xxxiii, ¶4, p. 417 in the Macpherson edition.

<sup>17</sup> Arrigo Pacchi concluded from a study of the evidence that though Hobbes made some attempts to learn Hebrew, he never became proficient in that language. See "Hobbes and Biblical Philology in the Service of the State," *Topoi* 7(1988):231-239.

<sup>18</sup> As in TTP ix, 37-61 (111/136/13-140/34), where Spinoza argues that the marginal notes in the Hebrew texts represent doubtful readings.

<sup>19</sup> The Jewish community in which Spinoza grew up was a rather cosmopolitan one. Lewis Feuer reports that "Menasseh ben Israel [Spinoza's teacher]... prided himself on his close personal and intellectual relations with the Gentile world. He had corresponded in warm terms with the renowned jurist Grotius... The library of Spinoza's judge, Rabbi Isaac de Fonseca Aboab, housed the works of Montaigne, Hobbes and Machiavelli..." (*Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, Boston: Beacon, 1958, pp. 2-3)

<sup>20</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *The Political Works*, ed. & tr. by A. G. Wernham, Oxford, 1958, p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> Wernham's inability to find internal evidence of this may come from his having concentrated primarily on the political portions of Hobbes' work. Though Hobbes' political theory does show some development from *The Elements of Law* (1640), through *De cive* (1642, with a second edition containing interesting revisions in 1647), to

regarding scripture" (i.e., the nascent TTP) at least as early as 1665 (see Letter 30). Moreover, Bayle's *Dictionary* informs us that at the time of the excommunication Spinoza wrote a work in Spanish, addressed to the leaders of the synagogue, defending his wicked opinions.<sup>22</sup> This defense is now lost, but according to Bayle much of what Spinoza later said in the TTP was in this early work.

So it seems that the main outlines of Spinoza's position on scripture were fixed well before he read *Leviathan*, if, indeed, he ever did read it. We cannot exclude the possibility that Spinoza knew Hobbes' *De cive* in the early 1650s, had his curiosity roused, and took the trouble to find out about the later work, say from a friend who could read English, during the critical period when he was forming his own theories. But I think there is a better explanation available to us.

In doubting the influence of Hobbes on Spinoza's biblical criticism, I agree with Richard Popkin,<sup>23</sup> though my reasons are not his reasons. He tends to depreciate the work of Hobbes, representing him as holding a very cautious view, which only revised traditional theories of biblical authorship moderately, quoting the passage in which Hobbes says

though Moses did not compile those books entirely, and in the form we have them, yet he wrote all that which he is there said to have written. (L xxxiii, 5, p. 418, cited in Popkin 1979, p. 217, and 1987a, p. 72)

Since writers as scripturally conservative as Luther were prepared to acknowledge that some parts of the Pentateuch, such as the description of Moses' death, were probably by a hand other than that of Moses, Hobbes does not appear very radical in Popkin's account. But whereas Luther thought the rest of the Pentateuch up to that last chapter was by Moses, the only part of the Pentateuch Hobbes explicitly ascribes to Moses is Deuteronomy 11-27, rather a small part of the whole. Hobbes seems to be aware that there are many other problems with the ascription of Mosaic authorship besides the obvious one. And his claim that, not just the Pentateuch, but all the central historical books only received their final form centuries after the events they described is quite radical compared to Luther.<sup>24</sup>

---

*Leviathan* (1651), the changes are not nearly so dramatic as those resulting from the increased attention he gave to religious issues in his later works. I've commented on some of the changes in political theory in "Reflections on Hobbes: Recent Work on his Moral and Political Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 15(1990):169-250.

<sup>22</sup> Bayle's dictionary article on Spinoza is reprinted, with annotation and a collection of Bayle's other discussions of Spinoza, in Pierre Bayle, *Ecrits sur Spinoza*, ed. by F. Charles Daubert and Pierre-Francois Moreau, Paris: Berg, 1983.

<sup>23</sup> In a remarkable series of articles and books over the last 15 years or so, Richard Popkin has done a great deal to illuminate the context of Spinoza's nascent religious skepticism: a representative selection would include "Spinoza and La Peyrere," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 8(1977):177-195; the revised edition of his *History of Scepticism, i.e., The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, U Cal P, 1979; "Spinoza and Samuel Fisher," *Philosophia* 15(1985):219-36; *Isaac La Peyrere (1596-1676)*, Leiden: Brill, 1987; and *Spinoza's Earliest Publication? The Hebrew Translation of Margaret Fell's A Loving Salutation to the Seed of Abraham among the Jews...* ed. by R. Popkin and M. Signer, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1987. I'll refer to these by their date, distinguishing the last two as 1987a and 1987b, respectively. Though I disagree with many of Popkin's conclusions, I've profited greatly from his research. Also interesting is Popkin's contribution to the Spinoza article in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, New York, Macmillan, 1971.

<sup>24</sup> Hobbes does say (at the end of L xxxiii, 4, p. 418) that it is "not so manifest" how long after the time of Moses the five books of Moses were written, and this may seem to confirm Popkin's picture of him as not a very radical thinker. But the beginning of L xxxiii, 6, implies that it was long afterward, and L xxxiii, 19, says that "if the Books of Apocrypha... may in this point be credited, the Scripture was set forth in the form we have it in by



Popkin depreciates the work of Hobbes, not to make the work of Spinoza seem more important, but to buttress his case that the *real* founder of modern critical Bible scholarship was Isaac La Peyrère, a French Millenarian who published a work denying the Mosaic authorship of the Bible in Amsterdam in 1655,<sup>25</sup> just in time to turn Spinoza from the straight path of traditional Judaism before he was excommunicated. Indeed, Popkin sometimes attributes such importance to La Peyrère that the reader may wonder whether Spinoza showed any originality at all in his critique of Scripture.<sup>26</sup> La Peyrere is the giant on whose shoulders Spinoza stood, sometimes seeming a lilliputian figure by comparison.

Others may believe this.<sup>27</sup> I can't. Of course Spinoza must have read La Peyrère's work at some time. We know he owned a copy of it. He was not so wealthy that he could afford to buy books and not read them. La Peyrère's work caused a sensation when it was published and Spinoza's earliest critics saw an affinity between the two authors, if not an influence.<sup>28</sup> Modern scholars before Popkin have also seen La Peyrère as an important precursor of Spinoza, even if they haven't presented Spinoza as his disciple.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, Spinoza never cites La Peyrère, though he frequently cites other Biblical commentators. The commentator he cites most frequently (more often even than Maimonides) is Ibn Ezra, a 12th Century Jewish commentator, for whom he clearly has great respect, as

---

Esdras," (i.e. Ezra). This is only conditional, of course, but I've argued in "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly'..." that Hobbes had good reason to advance his heresies in a somewhat oblique way.

<sup>25</sup> Popkin 1979, p. 215. La Peyrère's *Praeadamitae* was published in an English translation, *Men Before Adam*, in London in 1656.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., in the TTP Spinoza "used material from La Peyrère to make out his challenge to the Bible" (Popkin 1979, p. 228); "Spinoza's scepticism about revealed religion... grows out of his contact with La Peyrère's ideas and out of his application of Cartesian method to revealed knowledge" (ibid., p. 229); "Spinoza's analysis of the Bible, using the sceptical points of La Peyrère about the Mosaic authorship, etc., and applying the critical method of Cartesian science to the content of the document, played a vital role in launching modern Bible criticism" (ibid., p. 236). The reference to Cartesian methodology sounds an important theme, but Popkin doesn't do much with it. Later Popkin is better: "Juan de Prado [a friend of Spinoza's in Amsterdam around the time of the excommunication]... adopted some of the heretical views of La Peyrère. Using them he had developed a minor level of biblical criticism. But Spinoza went on from the critiques of La Peyrère and Prado to develop a really full-fledged biblical criticism, based on a thorough-going analysis of the kinds of knowledge-claims made for the Bible and in the Bible... Spinoza was thus, if anything, only a very partial disciple of La Peyrère, for he was a much more original thinker, who created a basic metaphysical framework for a non-Biblical world." (1987a, pp. 85-6) But even there Popkin is more concerned to demonstrate the influence of La Peyrère than to explain in any detail how Spinoza differed from him.

<sup>27</sup> Yosef Kaplan writes: "Spinoza's opinions at the date of his excommunication are unknown to us, but in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* he was to make use of La Peyrère's critique when developing his own principles of biblical criticism; one may assume that he had already adopted these views in the mid-1650s..." (*From Christianity to Judaism*, Oxford, 1989, p. 132) Brad Gregory (in his introduction to Samuel Shirley's translation of the TTP, Brill, 1989, p. 4) also tends to follow Popkin, though allowing also for the possible influence of Van den Enden (Spinoza's Latin teacher), Juan de Prado, and Daniel Ribera (these last two were members of the Jewish community who were excommunicated shortly after Spinoza, apparently for similar reasons).

<sup>28</sup> See the review of the TTP by Jacob Thomasius, Leibniz's teacher, published originally in May 1670, and re-published in a collection of his father's writings by Christian Thomasius in 1693 (*Dissertationes LXIII. Varii argumenti...*) Thomasius also sees an affinity between Spinoza's work and those of Hobbes and Herbert of Cherbury. Richard Simon seems to have attributed a decisive influence to La Peyrère. See Popkin 1979, p. 296, n67.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Schocken, 1965 (but the translation of a work first published in German in 1930).

appears from the passage in which Spinoza first raises the issue of the Mosaic authorship:  
Almost everyone has believed [the writer of the Pentateuch] to be Moses. Indeed, the Pharisees maintained this so stubbornly that they considered anyone who seemed to think otherwise a heretic. That is why Ibn Ezra, a man who possessed an independent mind and no slight learning, and who was the first of all those whom I have read to take note of this prejudice, did not dare to explain his thought openly, but dared only to indicate the problem in rather obscure terms. (viii, 4, III/118)

Not everyone, of course, reads Ibn Ezra as Spinoza did. Formally, Ibn Ezra affirms the Mosaic authorship, censuring an opponent for suggesting that Genesis 36:31 was probably written in the time of Jehoshaphat.<sup>30</sup> Some take Ibn Ezra at his word, others don't.<sup>31</sup> What counts is how Spinoza read him. He builds his case largely on hints he finds in Ibn Ezra.

Perhaps the reason Spinoza does not cite La Peyrère is that he does not take him seriously as a Biblical scholar. Certainly he considers it extremely important for the interpreter of the Hebrew Bible to be able to read it in the language in which it was written. His first requirement for the history of scripture which is a necessary prelude to our interpretation of scripture is that it should give an account of the nature and properties of the language of the text (vii, 15). La Peyrère gives no evidence of knowing Hebrew; Popkin grants that he did not, and that this was one reason Richard Simon had no great respect for La Peyrère as a scholar (Popkin 1987a, p. 87). Does it not seem likely that Spinoza would have shared his view, particularly since La Peyrère shows various evidences of having an uncritical mind?

One of La Peyrère's central arguments for his hypothesis that there must have been men in existence before Adam (apart from the familiar query about where Cain's wife came from) was that other civilizations claim to have much older histories than is implied in the Biblical account of creation.<sup>32</sup> This is an old argument which (as Popkin acknowledges)<sup>33</sup> Jewish thinkers had had to deal with since their first contact with the Greek world. Spinoza needn't have learned it from La Peyrère. But I think it will be instructive to see how the argument went in these earlier thinkers. We may then be in a better position to appreciate Spinoza's contribution.

---

<sup>30</sup> See Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Genesis (Bereshit), tr. and ann. by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, Menorah Pub. Co., New York, 1988, p. 341.

<sup>31</sup>E.g., Popkin says that Ibn Ezra did not intend to raise doubts about the Mosaic authorship, but "to find reassurance." (Popkin 1987a, p. 50) Similarly Edward Gray, *Old Testament Criticism, Its Rise and Progress from the Second Century to the End of the Eighteenth*, Harper, 1923, ch. 8.

On the other hand, Tovia Preschel writes: "Very characteristic of Ibn Ezra's thought are his mostly veiled suggestions which tend to cast doubt on the belief that the Pentateuch as we have it was written by Moses and which have given him the title of the father of modern biblical criticism." (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, article on Ibn Ezra) Preschel also points out that Ibn Ezra's commentaries on the Bible "enjoyed great popularity and, next to Rashi's, were the most widely studied."

Many philosophers hold that only as a last resort should we interpret an author as having an esoteric doctrine. Cf. Alan Donagan, *Spinoza*, Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1988, ch. 2. But Maimonides plainly invites such a reading of his *Guide of the Perplexed* when he writes at the end of the introduction to Part I about the causes of contradictory passages in books, identifies the need to conceal certain doctrines as one of the causes, and acknowledges that this is one of the causes of inconsistencies in his own work. In the Pines edition (U Chicago P, 1964) see pp. 18 and 20.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Men Before Adam*, Bk. III, ch. vi-vii. One reason Peyrère gives for crediting the claims of pagan historians is that we must assume that the history of mankind has lasted longer than the Bible implies, otherwise we will not be able to explain the development of astrology as a science. That is one reason I accuse him of having an uncritical mind.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Popkin 1987a, ch. 3.

In *The City of God*<sup>34</sup> Augustine, in the course of arguing against those pagans who believe in the eternity of the world and of the human race, undertakes to refute their argument based on the antiquity the Egyptians claimed for their civilization (more than 100,000 years, according to Augustine, CD XVIII, xl, p. 648). Augustine points out that the pagan historians do not agree among themselves about the antiquity of the human race, that the Greeks do not assign a greater age to the race than the Bible does (slightly less than 6000 years in Augustine's day), and he contends that we ought to give more credence to the Greek histories than to those of the Egyptians "because they do not exceed the true account of the duration [of the human race] as it is given by our documents, which are truly sacred."

Now to the extent that this argument depends on the sacred character of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, we might well regard it as question-begging. We might think we should first determine the truth of what these works say before we decided that they were sacred texts.<sup>35</sup> But Augustine does have two other arguments: first, that a text filled with accurate predictions of the future is more credible than one filled with "fabulous antiquities," and second, that the pagan historians are less credible than the sacred scriptures because they cannot agree among themselves (see particularly CD XVIII, xl, p. 648).

How much weight we attach to the matter of prophecy will clearly depend a good deal on when we think the books were actually written. If we think that in their present form they were composed many centuries after the events they describe, and hence, after the events they "predicted," we may not attach much weight to the predictions.<sup>36</sup> That is one reason why it matters not only who wrote them, but when they were written. But what interests me most at the moment is the second argument, appealing to the inconsistencies among the pagan historians.

Clearly this consideration will have force only to the extent that the scriptural narratives themselves are internally consistent; some versions of the argument make this point explicitly. For example, in Judah Halevi's *The Kuzari*, a medieval dialogue in which a Rabbi defends Judaism to the King of the Khazars, the King says to the Rabbi:

It is strange that you should possess an authentic chronology of the creation of the

---

<sup>34</sup> Bk. XII, ch. x, in the enumeration of chapters given in Migne, and followed in the translation by Marcus Dods (Modern Library, pp. 390-391). Other editions (e.g., in that of the Bibliothéque augustinienne, tr. by G. Combes, Desclée de Brouwer, 1959) count the second paragraph of Migne's ch. x as ch. xi. Subsequent references to *The City of God* (abbr. CD) will be to book and chapter number, followed by the page number in the Modern Library edition. But I will sometimes modify the Dods translation.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Spinoza, TTP Pref, sec. 19: "Most of [the ministers of the Church] suppose, as a foundation for understanding Scripture and unearthing its true meaning that it is, in every passage, true and divine. So what one ought to establish by understanding Scripture, and subjecting it to a strict examination, and what we would be far better taught by Scripture itself... they maintain at the outset as a rule for the interpretation of Scripture."

<sup>36</sup> According to Gray, *op. cit.*, ch. 2, Porphyry wrote fifteen books against the Christians and their doctrines, drawing extensive replies from Eusebius, Apollinarius and Methodius. All of this is now lost, but Jerome's preface to his commentary on Daniel gives us an idea of the general character of the attack. Porphyry argued that the book of Daniel was composed in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, about 400 years after Daniel's time, apparently on the ground that its history (presented as predictions) is accurate up to that time and inaccurate afterward. This dating seems now to be generally accepted. See *The Interpreter's Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1956, vol. VI, pp. 349-50.

world.

To which the Rabbi replies:

Surely we reckon according to it, and there is no difference between the Jews of Khazar and Ethiopia in this respect...

Later the King objects:

Does it not weaken thy belief if thou art told that the Indians have antiquities and buildings which they consider to be millions of years old?

To which the Rabbi replies:

It would, indeed, weaken my belief had they a fixed form of religion, or a book concerning which a multitude of people held the same opinion, and in which no historical discrepancy could be found. Such a book, however, does not exist [sc. among the Gentiles].<sup>37</sup>

Clearly if defenders of Judaism and Christianity are going to claim greater credibility for their sacred texts on the ground of their greater internal consistency, it becomes very important to know whether or not those texts actually are internally consistent.

And that, of course, is precisely what Spinoza denies, most notably in TTP ix, 16-26, where he takes up the claim in 1 Kings 6:1 that 480 years passed between the exodus and Solomon's building the temple. He argues in considerable detail that this total cannot be reconciled with other texts giving the length of time various rulers ruled, or periods during which the people of Israel were under foreign domination:

... we cannot establish a correct calculation of the years [between the exodus and the building of the temple] from the accounts themselves, which do not agree in one and the same calculation, but presuppose quite different ones. So we must confess that these accounts were gathered from different writers... (TTP ix, 26)

This is not the only chronological inconsistency Spinoza is concerned about, but it is the one he devotes the most attention to, and it is interesting for a variety of reasons.

First, there is no analogous argument in La Peyrère. When he raises the chronological issue, he does not go beyond what the King of the Khazars objected to the Rabbi, pointing out that other civilizations claim longer histories. Spinoza, on the other hand, has a reply to the Rabbi's reply. Moreover, La Peyrère doesn't claim any great originality here, acknowledging his dependence on the work of Joseph Scaliger at the end of the 16th Century.<sup>38</sup> It's hard to believe that Spinoza was not aware of Scaliger's work on chronology independently of La Peyrère, since he seems to have been much concerned about the problem of chronology.<sup>39</sup>

Second, there are indications that Spinoza was worried about these chronological issues long before he ever encountered La Peyrère. In TTP ix, 30-31, Spinoza writes:

If anyone should think that I am speaking too generally here, and without adequate foundation, I ask him to show us some definite order in these historical narratives, which his-

---

<sup>37</sup> *The Kuzari*, I, 44-61, tr. by Henry Slonimsky, Schocken Books, 1964, pp. 49, 52.

<sup>38</sup> *Men Before Adam*, III, vii, citing *De emendatione temporum* (1594). Scaliger was a professor at the University of Leiden, best known as an editor of classical texts, who did much to establish textual criticism as a science. It seems very likely that, as a student of classical literature, Spinoza knew at least his work as an editor. On his work as a chronologist, see Anthony Grafton, "Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology: The Rise and Fall of a Discipline," *History and Theory*, 14(1975) : 156-185.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, II, x, I/272/30ff.

torians could imitate without fault in their chronologies; and while he is interpreting these accounts and striving to reconcile them, let him respect the expressions and ways of speaking, and of organizing and connecting statements so strictly... that we too could imitate them in our writing. If he supplies this, I shall immediately surrender to him, and he will be a great oracle for me. For I confess that although I have long sought such an explanation, I have still never been able to find anything like it. I add, indeed, that *I write nothing here which I have not thought about intensely for a very long time*. Although from childhood I have been instructed in the common opinions about Scripture, nevertheless, in the end I could not but admit these things... (III/135/1-13, my emphasis)

In context it seems most natural to take "these things" to refer to the claim that there is no plausible way of reconciling the chronological inconsistencies he has been discussing.<sup>40</sup>

Third, we can identify sources other than La Peyrère from whom Spinoza is likely to have learned about these chronological problems, sources native to the Jewish tradition in which Spinoza was brought up. For one thing, the problem about reconciling I Kings 6:1 with other passages in scripture was recognized as early as Josephus' *Antiquities* (VIII, iii, 1). Josephus is an author whom Spinoza frequently cites (eight times in the TTP, by my count). And he is an author whom Spinoza's teacher, Menasseh ben Israel, thought it worth the trouble to translate into Hebrew.<sup>41</sup> The work in question, *Against Apion*, is also concerned with a chronological issue: why is it that the Greek historians make no mention of the Hebrew people if the Hebrews have a history as old as their Bible implies?<sup>42</sup>

Probably more important, however, is the work of Menasseh ben Israel himself, particularly his *Conciliator*, first published in Spanish in 1632, then translated into Latin. This work seems to have had a considerable reputation in the 17th Century, not only among Jews, but also among Christians.<sup>43</sup> It is a systematic attempt to identify and reconcile all *prima facie* contradictions in Scripture, motivated by the belief that because the Bible is "in the highest degree true, it cannot contain any text really contradictory of the other." (Preface, p. ix) Many of the difficulties in scripture which Spinoza raises Menasseh had already discussed at length in this work, among

---

<sup>40</sup> However, in his article for the *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, "Spinoza and Bible Scholarship," Popkin gives a different gloss for "common opinions about Scripture" : "namely, that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, and that the Bible is the Word of God." (p. 5) No doubt these were among the doctrines his teachers in the synagogue imparted to him, but the immediate context of this passage is the problem of reconciling apparent inconsistencies in the Biblical narrative. It seems most natural to take Spinoza's reference to be to the problem discussed in the immediate context, particularly since we know that this was a matter of concern to his teachers.

<sup>41</sup> See *The Works of Josephus*, tr. by William Whiston, C.T. Brainard, 1900, 4 vols., IV, 355n.

<sup>42</sup> This must have been particularly puzzling for Menasseh given his acceptance of the legend that the greatest of the Greek philosophers had learned Mosaic theology from the elders of the Jews. Cf. *The Conciliator* I, p. 8, tr. by E. H. Lindo, London: Duncan and Malcolm, 1842, 2 vols.

<sup>43</sup> The Lindo translation cites the following testimony: "This work shews that its author had a profound and intimate acquaintance with the Old Testament writings, and it procured for him the esteem and admiration of all the learned, as well Christians as Jews. It was recommended to the notice of Biblical scholars by the learned Grotius." This is from *Rees's Cyclopaedia*. Lindo also quotes a similar testimony from Moreri's *Dictionary*.

I should note that I first became aware of the existence of this work from reading Popkin 1979, p. 218. Unfortunately Popkin does not seem to have exploited this resource for understanding the history of Spinoza's development, perhaps because he tends to look for influences from people who had essentially the same idea, rather than from people who posed a problem and then dealt with it unsatisfactorily. Cf. the criticism by Yirmiah Yovel, in *The Marrano of Reason*, vol. I of *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, Princeton UP, pp. 76-83.

them the problem of the length of time between the exodus and the building of the temple. Considerations of space forbid my analyzing Menasseh's treatment in detail, but I do need to convey some idea of his methodology.

Menasseh begins, as he typically does, by laying out very clearly the reasons why there is a problem, taking as his starting point a verse in Judges 11:26, "While Israel dwelt in Heshbon... 300 years." (Lindo, 1, 29) He then explains carefully why it does not seem that that account could be correct, giving an analysis of Biblical chronology closely parallel to that in the TTP (ix, 17). Commenting that "authors have been very solicitous to conciliate these texts and solve the doubt," he then explains the theories advanced by various predecessors - J. R. Jose ben Chelpheta, R. Abraham a Levi, R. Levi ben Gershon, and Don Isaac Abarbanel - and the reasons why Don Isaac rejected previous hypotheses, particularly that of R. Levi ben Gershon. Finally he gives his own reasons for preferring Gershon's theory, rebutting the criticisms of Abarbanel.

The *Conciliator* is a compendium of Jewish Biblical scholarship and it contains dozens upon dozens of examples of the kind of dialectic just described. It seems reasonable to suppose that Menasseh's work is representative of the teaching Spinoza was exposed to as he was growing up in Amsterdam. Even if he did not complete the course in the synagogue school,<sup>44</sup> we cannot suppose that he was ignorant of one of the most important works of one of his most eminent teachers. To account for the learning he displayed in the TTP, we must assume that he pursued his studies of the Jewish tradition as an independent scholar, if not in formal classes. The editor of Spinoza's *Opera posthuma* reports that

from his childhood on the author was trained in letters, and in his youth for many years he was occupied principally with theology; but when he reached the age at which the intellect is mature and capable of investigating the nature of things, he gave himself up entirely to philosophy. He was driven by a burning desire for knowledge; but because he did not get full satisfaction either from his teachers or from those writing about these sciences, he decided to see what he himself could do in these areas. For that purpose he found the writings of the famous René Descartes, which he came upon at that time, very useful.<sup>45</sup>

This is interesting for a variety of reasons, but for our present purposes the important point is that Spinoza turned to philosophy because he did not get full satisfaction from the teachers who had trained him in letters and theology.

Anyone who reads Menasseh's work and then compares it with the TTP will be able to see why Spinoza would have been dissatisfied with it. Repeatedly Menasseh raises problems, canvasses solutions to them, and proposes his own solution. Repeatedly Spinoza raises those same problems again in the TTP, only to treat them quite differently. Menasseh's work is designed to put doubt to rest; but all too often it merely encourages doubt by its scrupulous account of the reasons which can be given on each side and by the unsatisfactory nature of its grounds for preferring one solution over another. Sometimes it appears that Menasseh will accept any solu-

---

<sup>44</sup> As argued in *Spinoza, Merchant and Autodidact*, by A. M. Vaz Dias and W. G. Van der Tak, *Studia Rosenthaliana*, vol. xvi, 1982, pp. 105-195.

<sup>45</sup> The texts both of Jarig Jelles' original Dutch preface and of Lodewijk Meyer's Latin translation of it are given in F. Akkerman, *Studies in the Posthumous Works of Spinoza*, Krips Repro Meppel, 1980. Akkerman judges that this neglected preface contains information on Spinoza's life which is "among the most reliable of what the older sources have to offer."

tion, so long as it clears Scripture of the charge of self-contradiction (cf., for example, I, 15). I think we should see Menasseh and the philosophers and commentators of the Jewish tradition (e.g., Ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi) as a much more powerful influence on Spinoza than Isaac La Peyrère or any of the other figures Popkin has suggested.<sup>46</sup>

-2b-

One thing which distinguishes Spinoza from both Hobbes and La Peyrère is that he has, what they do not, a well-worked out theory of what is required for the interpretation of a text. Professor Savan quotes a very significant passage from the Preface to the TTP:

When I weighed these matters in my mind - when I considered that the natural light is not only scorned, but condemned by many as a source of impiety, that human inventions are treated as divine teachings, that credulity is considered faith, that the controversies of the Philosophers are debated with the utmost passion in the Church and in the State, and that in consequence the most savage hatreds and disagreements arise, by which men are easily turned to rebellions - when I considered these and a great many other things, which it would take too long to tell here, I resolved earnestly to examine Scripture afresh, with an unimpaired and free spirit, to affirm nothing concerning it, and to admit nothing as its teaching, which it did not very clearly teach me. With this precaution I constructed a Method of interpreting the Sacred books... (III/9)

Spinoza does not, in this passage, explicitly invoke the name of Descartes, but it is clear (and Popkin has recognized) that what Spinoza is engaged in here is extending the Cartesian method to the realm of Biblical interpretation.

He was not unique in trying to do that. That was a project he shared with his good friend Louis Meyer, who published in 1666 a work entitled, *Philosophy, the Interpreter of Holy Scripture*.<sup>47</sup> Meyer's preface gives the following account (pp. 24-25) of the situation of theology in his day. Whenever a controversy arises among the theologians, they try to settle it by an appeal to the word of God, as recorded in Scripture. The fact that this is their ultimate court of appeal is what makes them theologians. But their interpretations of scripture are so insecurely based that

---

<sup>46</sup> In "Spinoza and Biblical Scholarship" and some of his other more recent works, Popkin has modified his position somewhat, attributing considerable influence on Spinoza to Samuel Fisher, the Quaker author of *The Rustic's Alarm to the Rabbis* (1660), a work which led Christopher Hill to describe Fisher as "the most radical Bible critic of the time." Since Fisher's work is in a language Spinoza could not read, Popkin must postulate that Spinoza was influenced by conversations they had in one of their common languages when Fisher visited Amsterdam in 1657-58. There may have been such conversations, though Popkin's evidence for them is very circumstantial. But if you assume, as I would, that Spinoza's basic views about scripture were formed by the time of his excommunication, the dates are wrong for Fisher to have been an important influence. One reason Popkin is attracted by Fisher as a possible influence is that he raised an issue Spinoza does and La Peyrere does not raise: the problem of the canon. But Fisher was certainly not the first person to do that. Throughout the medieval period the Catholic Church counted as canonical books from the Septuagint which were not regarded as canonical by the Jews. And in the Reformation this issue became quite critical, as various Protestant movements rejected the doctrinal authority of books accepted by the Catholic Church. For a good brief account see the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Preface and Introduction to the Apocrypha.

<sup>47</sup> Meyer's work is most easily accessible now in the recent French translation, *La philosophie, interprète de l'écriture sainte*, by Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau, Paris: Intertextes, 1988.

they are easily refuted. So theology, which is (or at least ought to be) the queen of the sciences, is plunged in doubt and uncertainty. Meyer reports that, as he was reflecting on this miserable situation, there fell into his hands the work on method of the incomparable Descartes, who had finally brought the truth to light, after it had been hidden in darkness for so many centuries, who rebuilt philosophy from its foundations and purged it of its defects. Descartes had always been careful not to try to apply his method to theology, but Meyer proposes to do just that: to call in doubt whatever can be doubted, indeed, to reject it as false, until he can find something firm and stable to serve as a foundation.

But though Meyer and Spinoza share an interest in applying Cartesian method to the interpretation of scripture, the ways in which they do this are radically opposed. Meyer quickly reaches the conclusion that the foundation of all theology is the proposition that the books of the Old and New Testaments are the infallible word of a supremely good and powerful God (p. 27). He presents this principle as precisely that, a first principle, subject to the maxim *de principiis non disputandum est*. If someone were to reject this principle, he would quit the field of theology. And this gives him the interpretive principle which is implied by the title of his book. Philosophy is to be the interpreter of scripture because scripture is the word of God. He guided the hand of the scribes who produced our text. But God is not a deceiver. Therefore, if a proposed interpretation of scripture conflicts with what we know in philosophy to be the truth, we can reject that interpretation as false. It does not give the true meaning of the text. (p. 93)

So, for example, since we know philosophically that nothing comes from nothing, we can reject any interpretation of the creation story in Genesis which would imply the falsity of that maxim. (p. 142) Meyer does also argue that in other scriptural contexts the Hebrew translated by *create* applies to the production of something from some pre-existing material, so his actual procedure is not entirely a priori. But theoretically this appeal to other contexts is superfluous.

Those familiar with Spinoza's discussion of this topic will recognize that his way of introducing Cartesian method into theology is very different. He explicitly rejects Meyer's position in TTP vii, though he does not name Meyer in doing so. His target instead is Maimonides, who had argued in *The Guide of the Perplexed* (II, 25) that if we found a passage in scripture whose literal meaning conflicted with something established by reason, we would have to interpret the passage figuratively. So, for example, if we had a philosophical demonstration of the eternity of the world, we would have to assume that those scriptural passages which appear to deny the eternity of the world do not mean what they seem to. When Spinoza is expounding this position, he adds, somewhat maliciously, "no matter how clear the meaning of the passage seemed to be."

Spinoza finds this quite unreasonable. It assumes that the prophets agreed among themselves, and that they were very good philosophers, whereas Spinoza claims to have shown, from an examination of their opinions, that they often disagreed and had very imperfect ideas on speculative issues. Moreover, it gives the interpreter of scripture a license to twist its meaning to suit his own preconceived ideas. It also has the consequence that, wherever we are not certain of the truth, we cannot be certain of the meaning of scripture. And since the bulk of scripture consists of things we are not capable of knowing by the natural light - e.g., historical narratives - we would have to concede that we simply do not understand what the bulk of scripture means. So long as we are not certain by reason whether or not what it says, construed literally, is true,



we cannot be certain whether or not to take it literally or figuratively.

These objections are as applicable to Meyer's position as they are to that of Maimonides. They illustrate that Spinoza would not accept one, *prima facie* plausible, way of introducing Cartesian method into theology. The correct principle for the interpretation of scripture, according to Spinoza, is that we must use scripture itself to interpret scripture. This is not a new doctrine. It is, rather, the battle-cry of the Protestant Revolution: *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (Scripture is its own interpreter).<sup>48</sup> But in Spinoza's hands this slogan takes on a new meaning. If, as good Cartesians, we are to free ourselves from prejudice, we must apply to the interpretation of scripture the same method we apply to the interpretation of nature. Just as in interpreting nature we begin by putting together a history of nature, from which we infer the definitions, or essential natures, of the things with which our science deals, so in the interpretation of scripture we must begin by constructing a history of scripture, from which we can infer the intentions of the authors of scripture. (TTP vii, §7)

Note that Spinoza speaks here of the *authors* of scripture, not the *author*. We are not to assume from the outset, as Meyer had, that God is the author of scripture. To do so would be to fail to comply with the Cartesian maxim that we must free ourselves from prejudice at the beginning of our investigation. We must first determine from scripture what its teachings are, and if we find that they are true, then we may infer from that that scripture is of divine origin.

Spinoza does not explain what he means by a history of nature, but I take him to mean "history" in a Baconian sense, that is, a descriptive catalogue of the principal phenomena a scientific theory would seek to explain.<sup>49</sup> He is much more explicit about what he means by a history of scripture. It must contain an account of the nature of the language in which scripture was written (a dictionary and a grammar of the language); it must include an index of the various things said in scripture on various subjects, noting any *prima facie* obscurities or inconsistencies;<sup>50</sup> since this index is to be done as a preliminary to interpretation, it must itself be free from interpretation; in this initial catalogue of the opinions of scripture, we are not to use our own judgments of truth to determine the meanings of the various passages; rather we are to be guided by the ordinary use of language; the history must contain (to the extent that these can be known) a full description of the life, character, and concerns of the author of each book, when he wrote the book and for what reason and in what language, how his text was subsequently transmitted to us, how many variant readings of it there are, how it came to be accepted as a sacred book and included in the canon; and whether or not the text has become corrupted, either through inadvertent error or deliberate falsification.

Once all these data have been compiled, then we may begin the task of determining what the teachings of scripture are (§26). In doing this, we follow the same procedure as we do in our

---

<sup>48</sup> "Scripture is its own interpreter." See Luther's *Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per Bullam Leonis X novissimam damnatorum*, in the Weimar edition of his *Werke*, VII, 97, and Roland Bainton's "The Bible in the Reformation," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. by S. L. Greenslade, Cambridge UP, vol. III, pp. 1-37.

<sup>49</sup> For examples of this usage see 1/226, IV/12, 34, 158. Cf. Bacon, *The Great Instauration, Works*, ed. by J. Spedding, R. Ellis, and D. D. Heath, London, 1883, vol. IV, pp. 27-31 (=I, 140-143).

<sup>50</sup> So Menasseh's *Conciliator*, to the extent that it did what it set out to do, viz. identify all *prima facie* contradictions in Scripture, supplied one key element in what Spinoza requires.

investigation of nature; in natural science we look for what is most universal and common and try to determine what its laws are; these are the laws of motion and rest; from these we try to deduce less universal generalizations; similarly, in scientific hermeneutics we try to determine what the universal teachings of the prophets are - that there is one God almighty, who cares for all, but particularly for those who love him and love their neighbor as themselves; to these universal teachings we subordinate those which are peculiar to some of the prophets only, such as their particular teachings about the nature of God and the way in which he cares for man; these less universal teachings we will not present as scriptural doctrine, even though we may be able to determine their truth by the natural light (§28).

Spinoza offers an example which I think is helpful in seeing how this is supposed to work. He considers two scriptural statements, each of which might be thought to be contrary to reason: God is a fire and God is jealous.<sup>51</sup> The first of these, he says, is not the universal teaching of scripture, in the sense that there are other passages in scripture which *prima facie* conflict with it, passages in which Moses teaches that God has no likeness to any visible thing.<sup>52</sup> This inconsistency creates a presumption that one or more of the conflicting statements is to be understood metaphorically rather than literally. But before we can claim that the statement God is a fire is to be understood metaphorically, we would have to confirm that there is precedent for a metaphorical use of the term "fire." Since there are passages where it is clear that "fire" is used as a metaphor for anger, we are entitled to treat the statement God is a fire as metaphorical.

On the other hand, there are no passages in scripture inconsistent with the frequent claim that God is jealous.<sup>53</sup> Nowhere do Moses or the other prophets teach that God is not susceptible to passions. So that statement must be reckoned among the universal teachings of scripture and taken literally, even though it is contrary to reason. Spinoza operates with a strong presumption in favor of literal interpretation (§20), which can only be rebutted by a showing that literal interpretation leads to inconsistency within scripture itself, and cannot be rebutted by a finding of inconsistency with reason.

Earlier I suggested that Professor Maull did not seem to have read the TTP with sufficient care to appreciate its importance and I promised to explain why later. I think we have enough exposition at hand now to offer the promised explanation. She seems to be under the impression that the point of the comparison between the interpretation of scripture and the interpretation of nature is to establish what the interpretation of nature must be like, given what the interpretation of scripture is like. In interpreting scripture we apply to it principles antecedently known by the light of reason. So we should do the same thing in the interpretation of nature.

But this is doubly wrong. The point of the comparison is rather to move from the method of interpreting nature, which we are presumed to understand, to the method of interpreting scripture, which we do not yet understand, which it is rather Spinoza's business to explain to us. Moreover, Spinoza explicitly repudiates the idea that in interpreting scripture we should apply to

---

<sup>51</sup> Both claims are made in Deuteronomy 4:24.

<sup>52</sup> TTP vii, § 19. Cf. Exodus 8:10, 9:14, 15:11, Deuteronomy 33:26, 29.

<sup>53</sup> It's not clear to me that Spinoza is right to make this claim, since the passages cited in the preceding note - whose general theme is that there is no one like God - seem as inconsistent with God's possession of passions as they do with his corporeality.

it principles antecedently known by the light of reason. That's the Meyer-Maimonides line which he rejects. So if the analogy between scriptural interpretation and interpretation of nature holds, he would also have to reject the notion that in interpreting nature we are merely applying principles antecedently known by the light of reason.

-3-

I turn now to my final question: is hermeneutics, understood as an enterprise which seeks an interpretation of texts, a science? So I hope, and so I believe. That is what I do. I interpret texts, either as a translator or as a commentator. I suppose that I might find this enterprise just as fascinating if I did not think of it as fundamentally comparable to what scientists do, but I am not sure about that.

Some people turn from philosophy to the history of philosophy because they despair of discovering the truth in philosophy; discovering the truth in the history of philosophy seems a more manageable task. I have not despaired of discovering philosophical truth; I pursue historical truth partly because I think understanding how we got to the point we have reached in the development of this discipline may be a means to discovering philosophical truth. But I also think that coming to understand what our predecessors thought about the problems of philosophy offers intrinsic pleasures analogous to those a crossword puzzle addict might feel in solving a difficult puzzle, and I cannot imagine what it would be like to feel such pleasure if you did not also believe that there is such a thing as a correct solution to the puzzle and that you might be able to work out what that solution was. By "work out the solution" here I mean "come to have a high degree of confidence, reasonably founded, that a particular solution is the correct solution."

I take it that many thoughtful people would say that my conception of what I am doing involves a delusion, that the interpretation of texts is not like the sciences, in the sense that it involves methodological difficulties which make it inappropriate to speak of *the* correct solution to a problem arising within them. I find the following argument in the literature: the basic principle advocated by Luther and Spinoza for the interpretation of Scripture is valid for the interpretation of any text; the text is its own interpreter, in the sense that if we have a question about the meaning of one part of a text, we must seek the answer to our question in the text as a whole; but this interpretive principle leads to what is called the hermeneutic circle; the meaning of the whole can only be grasped on the basis of the parts, which in turn cannot be understood except by grasping the meaning of the whole; this circularity is not vicious (i.e., it does not entail the impossibility of ever arriving at any understanding of any text or the impossibility of ever providing rational grounds for preferring one interpretation to another); but it does have the consequence that any interpretation must always be provisional, subject to revision on further reflection; the validity of one interpretation does not exclude the possibility of there being other interpretations, equally valid, but inconsistent with the first interpretation; this difficulty afflicts any discipline, such as history, to which the interpretation of texts is fundamental; so the history of philosophy in particular, and humanistic studies in general, cannot be sciences. Not only am I mistaken in my conception of what I do, but Spinoza was wrong to see the interpretation of Scripture as being essentially analogous to the interpretation of nature.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Specifically, I find this argument suggested, in all essentials, in the introduction to *Hermeneutics Versus Science?* ed. by John Connolly and Thomas Keutner, Notre Dame Press, 1988. They attribute this line of argument

Let me call this the argument from the hermeneutic circle. I hope and believe that it fairly represents a kind of argument which has had a good deal of popularity in recent years. On that assumption, I make the following observations:

As stated, the argument does seem to presuppose something I find very dubious (and rather surprising, given what I believe to be the paternity of the argument). It seems rather a positivistic argument, in that it apparently involves the following move:

Premise: You can never be certain of the validity of any particular interpretation of a text.

Conclusion: It is inappropriate to speak of any particular interpretation as *the* correct interpretation of a text.

I can see why someone who held a particular form of the verifiability theory of meaning might accept this argument. If you think that a sentence must be conclusively verifiable in order to be meaningful, and if you think that no sentence of the form "The correct interpretation of T is I" is conclusively verifiable, then it can never be meaningful to claim that a particular interpretation of a text is the correct one, and so it will always be inappropriate to make such a claim.

But the strong form of the verifiability principle presupposed by *that* argument was long ago abandoned by the positivists as indefensible.<sup>55</sup> I think they were right to abandon it, and I don't at the moment see what assumption short of that form of the verifiability principle would work.

I imagine that someone who wished to press the argument from the hermeneutic circle might reply to this along the following lines: of course, that strong form of the verifiability principle is indefensible as a criterion of meaning; I can know perfectly well what it means to say that Peter denied Jesus without being able to verify conclusively that that sentence is true; so we should give up that part of the hermeneutic-circle argument which says that the "openness of the text" (i.e., the fact that any interpretation of a text is always provisional and subject to revision

---

to Gadamer, though it is unclear to me whether or not he would accept all of it. E.g., in the essay "On the Circle of Understanding," included in their anthology, he seems happy enough to talk about "the correct understanding" of a text (p. 73) or its "true meaning." (p. 77) On the other hand in *Truth and Method*, he denies that there can be "any single interpretation that is correct in itself." (2nd edition, tr. of W. Glen-Doepel, rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York: Crossroad, 1989, p. 397) I'm not clear what the qualification "in itself" means, but the context suggests the following possibility: because any given verbal formula offered as an interpretation is apt itself to be interpreted differently by different readers, no one verbal formula can serve all readers equally well. So, for example, a translation of a work of 17th Century philosophy (say, the Duc de Luynes' translation of Descartes' *Meditations*) might serve one generation (or many) very well; but it might need eventually to be replaced if only because of changes in the language. This seems true, but innocuous.

Of considerable interest here are Michelle Beyssade's comments in the introduction to her new translation of the *Meditations* (Librairie Generale Francaise, 1990), which prints a fresh French translation of the *Meditations* opposite both the original Latin and the later translation of the Duc, which has a claim to being an authentically Cartesian text because Descartes took the opportunity of reviewing it to explain his meaning more clearly (and in some cases, perhaps, to change his mind).

<sup>55</sup> The classic article is Carl Hempel's "Problems and Changes in the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning," published originally in the *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 11(1950):41-63, and subsequently reprinted (after combination with another article) under the title "Empiricist Criteria of Cognitive Significance: Problems and Changes," in his *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*, Free Press, 1965.

in the light of further reflection) implies that we cannot properly speak of *the* correct interpretation of the text; still, the argument is correct in pointing to a fundamental methodological difficulty which makes research in the humanistic disciplines different in kind from research in the natural sciences; the hermeneutic circle does imply the openness of the text, and that in turn implies that disciplines essentially involving the interpretation of texts aren't sciences in the way that the natural sciences are.

If I understand this reply properly, it involves a view of what happens in the natural sciences which is as difficult to defend as the strong version of the verifiability principle which I just rejected. The argument seems to be:

Premise: Because of the hermeneutic circle, interpretations are always subject to revision.

Intermediate conclusion: We can never say with certainty that any interpretation is correct.

Final conclusion: The interpretation of texts is an enterprise different in kind from inquiry in the natural sciences.

The problem here is that the argument must assume that we have in the natural sciences a kind of certainty unavailable to us in the interpretive disciplines. And unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be true. At any rate, I think Quine's doctrine that no statement in the sciences is immune to revision<sup>56</sup> has a broad measure of acceptance nowadays, at least if it is restricted to statements in the natural sciences and excludes the truths of pure mathematics and logic.

At this point someone who wished to press the argument from the hermeneutic circle might say: all right, that is how enlightened people now think about the natural sciences; the history of science has taught them not to dogmatically claim certainty for whatever scientific theory happens to hold the field at the moment; but this is a very different view of science from Spinoza's; Spinoza is a Cartesian about the natural sciences; he thinks of them as proceeding by finding some presuppositionless starting point, and arguing deductively from there, so that the conclusions of the sciences are absolutely certain; when *he* compares the interpretation of texts to inquiry in the sciences, he is committed to regarding the interpretation of texts as capable of achieving certainty.

I think it is unclear, however, just how far Descartes and Spinoza really thought it possible to achieve absolute certainty in the sciences. At the end of the *Principles of Philosophy* (IV, 204-206) Descartes addresses this issue as it arises for the scientific theories advocated in that work. He claims, first, that his theories are at least morally certain, i.e., certain enough that it would be reasonable to act on them if the situation called for action. In this regard he compares them to the solution of a coded message. Suppose we had a message, written in Latin, but encoded in such a way that the letters did not have their normal value. Each letter, say, has been replaced by the one immediately following it in the alphabet. If you substitute A for B, B for C, etc., you get a Latin message in which all the words combine to say something intelligible, whereas previously they didn't. You may recognize the possibility that there is an alternative key to the code, where different substitutions produce a different message, though one which is equally intelligible, just as this Sunday's crossword puzzle in the *Times* might in principle have two solutions, globally distinct from one another, yet each equally plausible in terms of fit. But if

---

<sup>56</sup> "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper, 1963, p. 43.

the message is a long one, you will think this possibility so improbable as not to be worth considering. If called on to act, you will not hesitate to act on the assumption that your interpretation of the message is correct. In the absence of the divine guarantee, that is the status Descartes claims for his scientific theories. His account of magnetism, for example, offers a simple explanation from which we can deduce everything we observe about magnetic bodies. It is possible that the explanation is incorrect, but the likelihood of that is so small as to be negligible.

The divine guarantee is supposed to alter the situation. Once we know that God is supremely good and in no way a deceiver, we think that at least some of our beliefs, "even about matters in nature," are absolutely certain, i.e., it is simply not possible that things should be other than we judge them to be. But what is the scope of this certainty? Mathematical demonstrations fall within it. So does the belief that material things exist and any evident reasoning we can produce about material things. But what of the other things Descartes has written in this treatise? Descartes expresses the hope that they will all be accepted, but he seems disposed to insist only on "the more general things I have written about the world and the earth." Just what that includes is unclear, but the expression does seem to allow that a wide range of Descartes' explanations are only morally certain.

How much of this Cartesian philosophy of science would Spinoza have accepted? I think it's very difficult to say. We know that he rejected much of Cartesian science, even with respect to the more general things, such as the laws of impact.<sup>57</sup> And the preface to his geometric exposition of Descartes' *Principles* suggests that he did not find the Cartesian argument for a divine guarantee very satisfactory. Since Spinoza conceives of God very differently than Descartes does, rejecting the whole idea of God as a personal being, this is only to be expected. Descartes would say that if you reject the argument from a divine guarantee, the most you can hope for is moral certainty. I suspect that Spinoza would disagree with that assessment, but I don't find that he ever explains clearly how we can get more than moral certainty, or how far into the domain of science that certainty would extend.

In a certain sense, though, it doesn't matter how we understand Descartes and Spinoza on these issues. If what we want to know is whether or not the interpretation of texts is analogous to inquiry in the natural sciences, and not whether it is analogous to inquiry in the natural sciences *as the latter inquiry was perhaps overoptimistically conceived by Descartes and Spinoza*, the tentative nature of interpretation is not an obstacle. We have yet to find a good reason for regarding the two enterprises as fundamentally different.

I close by considering one further suggestion as to the difference. Connolly and Keutner suggest that in a natural science such as geology a question such as that about the age of certain fossils

counts as decidable in principle, and establishing facts of this kind constitutes an important part of such disciplines. But in literary criticism decidable questions, such as those concerning the author's intention, are by no means reckoned as of central importance, since in the ongoing debate about the meaning *of the text* critics regularly overrule even the expressed intention of the author. While decidable and undecidable interpretations mark *both* the natural sciences and the humanities, they are weighted

---

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Letters 32 and 81.

within those disciplines in contrary ways: decidability is central in the sciences, undecidability in the humanities... (op. cit., p. 58, their emphases)

Now I'm sure that the establishing of facts does constitute an important part of what natural scientists do (though it may be a greater part in a science like geology than in, say, quantum mechanics, where the major problem seems to be more one of interpretation of experimental data). But one thing I find dubious in this contrast is the implication that the practice of literary critics is representative of what happens in the humanities in general.

Let me confess, first of all, that I do find it to be of central importance *to my work* to determine what the author's intention may have been in writing the words he did. What makes a set of inscriptions on the page words in a language, and not mere random scratchings, is the fact that the person who wrote them intended them to be taken in a certain way by those familiar with the conventions of the language he was writing in. If the author's intention in writing what he did is decidable, then for me that has great weight in determining the meaning *of the text*. I can imagine considerations which might lead me to discount the author's claims about his meaning (e.g., pride makes him reluctant to admit a mistake, or fear of persecution makes him reluctant to admit an unorthodox view to a correspondent who cannot be trusted to keep such matters confidential). But without some such reason I cannot imagine overruling the author's clearly expressed intentions. If literary critics regularly behave differently, then they approach texts with a very different purpose than I do.<sup>58</sup>

What I would like to suggest is that we think of the interpretation of texts in terms of what we might call (with apologies to Quine) three grades of interpretive involvement. At the lowest level, there is the kind of interpretation involved in determining, say, whether a particular translation of a text is an accurate or faithful translation. This kind of question arises quite commonly in my area. The three philosophers whom I have been most interested in, Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza, all wrote at a time when Latin was on the way out as the primary medium for philosophical discourse. So for each of these philosophers we frequently have an original text written in Latin and a translation into a vernacular language which has at least some claim to the author's approval and may even have been written by the author himself.<sup>59</sup> Serious scholars may devote a great deal of their time to carefully comparing the two versions, on the theory that variations in the translation might reflect a decision by the author to present his ideas in a different way.<sup>60</sup>

This certainly constitutes an important part of the history of philosophy, as it is currently practised, and I think it has as good a claim to be the establishment of facts as, say, a geolo-

---

<sup>58</sup> I'm sure that *some* literary critics *are* quite indifferent to authors' intentions, though I am much less confident that this is a good thing. I've discussed this, with reference to Cavell, Capra, and *It Happened One Night*, in "Cavell and the Comedy of Remarriage," *Philosophy Research Archives*, 14(1988-89):581-603.

<sup>59</sup> Examples in the former category are the contemporary French translations of Descartes' *Meditations* and *Principles of Philosophy*. A possible example of the latter kind is the English translation of Hobbes' *De cive* (but some of us doubt that Hobbes did the translation).

Sometimes it goes the other way. A work may be written in a vernacular language and then translated into Latin. A clear example is Descartes' *Discourse*. A less clear example is Hobbes' *Leviathan* (the Latin version is pretty clearly by Hobbes; what is unclear is how much of it may have been written before the English version). For discussion see Francois Tricaud's preface to his French translation of Hobbes' *Leviathan* (Sirey, 1971).

<sup>60</sup> For examples, see Genevieve Rodis-Lewis' edition of Descartes' *Meditations* (Vrin, 1978) or Tricaud's edition of *Leviathan*.

gist's conclusions about the age of certain fossils. These are the data we construct theories to explain. E.g., in the English version of *Leviathan* (1651, ch. xiv, ¶15) Hobbes claims that from the fundamental law of nature there follows a second law,

That a man be willing, when others are too, *as far forth as for peace and defense of himself he shall think it necessary*, to lay down his right to all things...

In the Latin version (published only in 1668, but possibly written, in part at least, before the English) the corresponding sentence reads:

oportere unumquemque, *quoties paci et defensionis propriae provisum erit*, a jure suo in omnia, caeteris idem facere paratis, decedere...

In his French translation of *Leviathan* Tricaud quotes both the English and the Latin for the italicised portion of this law, gives French versions of both texts, and comments, with masterful understatement, *la nuance n'est pas sans importance*. The point is that for the italicised phrase we cannot simply regard the Latin as a faithful reproduction (within the limits of what can be done in transferring to another language) of the English. That would be a reasonable enough judgment for the rest of the sentence, but the italicised phrase might best be translated into English as "whenever provision has been made for peace and his own defense." And this says something different enough that a conscientious editor will want to call it to the attention of the reader. The English version leaves it to the individual to determine whether or not he thinks adequate provision has been made for his safety; if not, he is not obliged to lay aside his natural right to all things. In the Latin, it is sufficient for his being obliged if he is in fact secure, whether he thinks so or not.

Recognizing that the Latin text says something different than the English requires competence both in Latin and in English. Recognizing that the difference may have some importance for larger issues of interpretation requires an analogous competence in philosophy. So we're not dealing here with a pure datum. But it seems to me that this is a comparatively objective matter, about which I would expect those with the relevant competences to agree. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that agreement about this is a test of a person's possession of the relevant competences. So I would count determining that Hobbes stated the second law of nature differently in the Latin *Leviathan* than he did in the English as a matter of establishing a fact, in just as good a sense as the dating of a fossil might be a matter of establishing a fact for a geologist.

Other textual issues, I think, present a different order of difficulty. In the Dedicatory Letter of the English *Leviathan* Hobbes writes

That which perhaps may most offend [sc. in my book] are certain texts of Holy Scripture, alleged by me to other purpose than ordinarily they use to be by others.

Now there's a sense in which we understand well enough the meaning of that sentence. We can recognize that the following Latin sentence is a pretty faithful translation of it:

*Displicebit etiam fortasse non paucis, quod loca quaedam Scripturae Sacrae aliter interpretari ausus sim, quam ab aliis explicari soleant.*

Let us stipulate that there are nuances here which make the Latin not an exact equivalent of the English.<sup>61</sup> My point is that they don't amount to anything by comparison with the larger uncer-

---

<sup>61</sup> If we were to translate the Latin back into English, aiming at a pretty literal translation of the Latin, but staying as close to the English original as possible, we might produce the following: "It will, perhaps, also offend not a few people that I have dared to interpret certain texts of Holy Scripture otherwise than ordinarily they use to



tainty about Hobbes' meaning. We don't know what passages of Scripture he is referring to, when he warns us that some of his interpretations of Scripture may be offensive. Determining that requires something more than philological competence. It requires a knowledge of how Scripture was read in his day. To answer this question, we might look at contemporary reactions to *Leviathan*, to see what his contemporaries did in fact find offensive in his scriptural interpretation. And if we think, unlikely as it may seem, that those contemporaries did not exhaust the possibilities for being offended, that they may have let certain unorthodox interpretations slip by without objection, we might check his interpretations of those other scriptural passages against the interpretations which dominated scriptural exegesis in his time. But though there is an uncertainty about Hobbes' meaning which it requires something more than philological competence to resolve, this question too seems to me decidable, in a perfectly good sense of that term. We know how to find out, with an acceptable level of certainty, which passages in Scripture Hobbes was referring to (or at least what some of them very probably were).

On the third level of difficulty I would place such utterances as the remark Aubrey reports Hobbes as making to him, after having read Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*:

He has outthrown me a bar's length, for I durst not write so boldly.

This is truly a problematic text. While a competent translator might be able to render it into another language, with greater or lesser loss of nuance, its meaning is uncertain to a degree and in a way that the meanings of the previous statements are not. I have written at length about this remark, using such philological, historical and philosophical skills as I possess, to try to determine what it was in Spinoza's work which Hobbes so admired, and what he might have wished to say in his own work had he felt freer to speak his mind.<sup>62</sup>

This kind of exercise, though it may have great interest, deals with a kind of question which may well be undecidable. Perhaps this remark is not different in principle from the one I cited from the Dedicatory Letter. I can imagine someone saying "If only Aubrey had pressed Hobbes to explain his meaning, and then left us a record of Hobbes' reply, we might be able to answer this question with some degree of assurance." And that's true. Unfortunately, it seems that Aubrey didn't do that. And he and Hobbes are both dead now, so the opportunity has been irrevocably lost. It's not that we have no idea how to proceed in this case. We can make a careful comparison between *Leviathan* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, looking for signs in the latter work of a boldness greater than Hobbes displayed in the former. But if we are candid about the results of such an inquiry, we have to admit that it is a highly speculative undertaking.

The questions Connolly and Keutner force us to consider are these: to what extent is

---

be by others." The principal difference I find is that in the Latin Hobbes confesses to an act of daring. But reflection on the matter of nuances also suggests an ambiguity in the English which the Latin resolves: does the phrase "that which may most offend" mean "what will offend more people than anything else I say" or "what will offend the people who are offended more deeply than anything else I say"? The Latin suggests the former reading of the English, though we needn't assume that in writing the English Hobbes was aware of the ambiguity and intended his words to be taken in the former way rather than the latter. Perhaps he only became conscious of the ambiguity when he had to express his thought in another language. Perhaps he was never conscious of it. In any case, what seems to me most important is, not that the Latin is not an exact equivalent of the English, but that we can recognize and agree about the ways in which it fails to be an exact equivalent.

<sup>62</sup> See "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly'..."

this last kind of interpretive issue representative of work in the humanities? and are such difficult issues really more prominent in the humanities than they are in the natural sciences? Mightn't the impression which some humanists have that their disciplines involve deeper levels of uncertainty simply result from the fact that their first hand experience of science typically is with those parts of science which are no longer of serious interest to scientists working on the frontiers of their discipline? I pose these questions. I will not presume to answer them, though I suppose that what I have written suggests an answer.

I propose that we replace the image of a hermeneutical circle with that of a hermeneutical spiral. A geometrical circle is a figure all of whose points are equidistant from its center. This is apt to suggest, wrongly, that all the elements in any given text are equally uncertain, and hence that the meaning of the text as a whole is radically uncertain. Instead, I would offer the image of a spiral, rising screw-like from a broad base to a sharp point. At the base I would place such relatively secure interpretive judgments as the following:

In *Leviathan* (ch. xiii, 16) Hobbes writes that the "three principal causes of quarrel" are "competition... diffidence... and glory." By "diffidence" he means, not modesty (OED sense 2), but mistrust (OED sense 1).

Here philological competence is central and the element of uncertainty is minimal. A good translation here will not leave the ambiguity unresolved.

Somewhat further up my hermeneutical spiral I would place such riskier judgments as this:

In *Leviathan* (ch. xii, ¶32) Hobbes writes that he attributes all changes in religion to one cause, "unpleasing priests, and those not only amongst Catholics, but even in that Church that hath presumed most of Reformation." This last is probably a passing shot at the Presbyterians.

Here we require more than philological competence to understand the text, and a faithful translation of the passage would raise precisely the same problems of interpretation as the original does.<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, the level of uncertainty is higher. But it seems clear that there is a right answer here, which is (roughly) the answer Hobbes would have given had he been asked to explain his meaning under circumstances conducive to candid communication. The right answer may not be "the best interpretation," if the latter phrase means something like "the one which represents the current consensus of competent interpreters, working out of a tradition of ongoing debate about the meaning of the text." But if we have learned anything from the Reformation, we should have learned not to trust too much to the authority of interpretive traditions.

---

<sup>63</sup> Clarendon professes to see in this sentence a reference to the Church of England. (*A Brief View and Survey of the dangerous and pernicious Errors to Church and State, In Mr. Hobbes's Book Entitled Leviathan*, Oxford, 1676, p. 25) This has some plausibility, insofar as the unpopular policies of Archbishop Laud led to schism in the Church. But the great criticism of Laud was that he was a papist at heart, and I think it would be more natural to take "that Church that presumed most of [= made the greatest claim to] Reformation" to be the Church which criticised the Church of England for being insufficiently reformed. In *Behemoth*, Hobbes will say of the Presbyterians that they "introduced many strange and many pernicious doctrines, out-doing the Reformation, as they pretended, both of Luther and Calvin, receding from the former divinity (or church philosophy, for religion is another thing) as much as Luther and Calvin had receded from the pope." (*Behemoth*, ed. by F. Tönnies, intr. By Stephen Holmes, U of Chicago P, 1990, p. 136) Hobbes considered the Presbyterian ministers ambitious hypocrites, whose insistence on imposing "odd opinions" on the people led to the fragmentation of the Reformation into many sects. Cf. *Behemoth*, pp. 21-30, 57, 155, 169, 172, and in *Leviathan*, *xlvi*, ¶20 (pp. 710-712 in Macpherson).

At the peak of my hermeneutical spiral I would place such highly venturesome judgments as this:

In his prose autobiography Hobbes writes words which we might most naturally take to mean that he was a sincere Christian.<sup>64</sup> Probably we should take that remark with a grain of salt.

Here we are dealing with a puzzle we shall probably never resolve with any great and justified confidence, and one, unfortunately, which has an enormous impact on our interpretation of *Leviathan* as a whole.<sup>65</sup> Here, I think, we must learn to live with substantial uncertainty. But we should not suppose that all texts, and hence all the data we can bring to bear on this question, are as uncertain as that one. Our situation is not that desperate.

I conclude, with Spinoza, that it is proper for interpreters of texts to think of themselves as engaged in an enterprise not fundamentally different from the one natural scientists are engaged in.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> *Opera latina* I, xvii, commenting on the fact that on his return to England he had attended church regularly, although at that time no one was legally obliged to do so: *Alterum hoc signum erat non modo hominis partium episcopalium, sed etiam Christiani sinceri.*

<sup>65</sup> E.g., on the question whether Hobbes really does want us to think of his laws of nature as divine commands, as he perhaps suggests in the English (but not the Latin) version of the final ¶ of ch. xv.

<sup>66</sup> I'm indebted to a number of people for comments on earlier versions of this paper, more than I can now remember. But those most prominent in my memory at the moment are: Richard Popkin, John Connolly, Donald Marshall, Rod Bertolet, and in a general way, the members of the Purdue philosophy department.