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Prophecy as Expertise



Abstract: At the beginning of his “Tractatus,” Baruch Spinoza encounters a dilemma of prophecy, that one must have prophetic knowledge in order to know with certainty who it is that has prophetic knowledge. He escapes, or believes he escapes, this dilemma by asserting a democracy of knowledge, that all men have adequate knowledge of the divine, at least of the two attributes of the divine about which men have, in principle, equal knowledge and which form what we know as natural knowledge. Later in the “Tractatus,” however, Spinoza implicitly acknowledges that natural knowledge is democratic in principle only, not in fact, and that the dilemma of prophecy recurs as a dilemma of expertise. It is Maimonides, not Spinoza, who is able to establish a true democracy of knowledge untroubled by any of these dilemmas and in so doing transforms prophecy into philosophy and science.

Toward the beginning of the first chapter of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,¹ Spinoza makes an important and, I believe, inevitable concession in his argument. He is in the midst of warning us that in talking about prophecy we must confine our discussion to what is drawn from Scripture and from Scripture alone. “For,” he tells us,

what can be said of things that exceed the bounds of our intellect, except that which is bequeathed to us from the mouths or writings of the prophets themselves? And because, so far as I know, we

¹ Translations of Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* throughout this paper are my own. In addition to citing Gebhardt’s standard Latin edition of the *Tractatus*, Carl Gebhardt, *Spinoza Opera*, vol. 3 (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitaetsbuchhandlung, 1972), I cite page numbers for the two most widely used English translations: Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991); and Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. Robert Harvey Monro Elwes, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1951). In the Gebhardt edition, I cite first the page number for the text of the *Tractatus*, then in brackets the page number for the volume as a whole.

have no prophets nowadays, nothing is left for us but to pursue the sacred books left to us by the prophets.²

Spinoza wants to say that in trying to understand the phenomenon of prophecy we must look only to the “mouths or writings of the prophets” and to nothing else, such as any gloss provided by rabbinic tradition. Of course, if there were a prophet alive today with whom we could converse, then we should not want to confine our investigation of prophecy to the evidence offered in Scripture; we should want to talk to the prophet himself. If, then, we confine our investigation to Scripture, as Spinoza wants us to, then it must be because we have no prophets, and that is exactly what he claims. But that is not all Spinoza has to say on this matter, and there’s the rub, as Hamlet says, in the sense of an obstacle or impediment to his argument.

For Spinoza adorns his claim that we have no prophets nowadays with a qualification. He writes that we have no prophets “so far as I know.” He cannot assure us that we have no prophets with the same conviction with which he tells us in the *Ethics*, for example, that God exists, or with the confidence with which a physicist declares energy not subject to being either created or destroyed. He does not claim to know that we have no prophets, and he also does not claim to know that we do have prophets; he simply cannot be sure.

This inability to say with certainty that we do or do not have prophets is a necessary incapacity, not contingent or peculiar to Spinoza, as no person who is not a prophet can know for certain whether someone else is. In order to be able to say who is and who is not a prophet, one would have to be able to tell whether someone who claims or appears to be a prophet does, in fact, have access to divine knowledge, and that this person can be trusted to accurately and reliably report the fruits of that access to those to whom it must be reported. But in order to tell whether or not the would-be prophet has access to divine knowledge or can be trusted to report divine knowledge accurately and reliably, one must have access to divine knowledge on one’s own, without the aid of the prophet and without the aid of a competing prophet spoiling for primacy and power and fame. Without access of one’s own to divine knowledge, it is simply impossible to tell whether someone who claims or appears to have access does in fact have it.

Of course, if only true prophets laid claim to the gift of prophecy, then it would not be necessary to tell the difference between false and true prophets. But false prophets, we know, do lay claim to the gift of prophecy

² Ch. 1; Gebhardt, p. 2 [16]; Shirley, p. 60; Elwes, p. 14.

along with true prophets, not all of them or even most of them in bad faith. Spinoza's age was itself not untouched by false claims of prophecy—Sabbatai Tzvi is one well-known example whose life encompassed Spinoza's own.³ But even if there were no false prophets, even if no one wrongly laid claim to the gift of prophecy, how would we ever know? How would we even know that only true prophets claim to be prophets? We would still need independent access to divine knowledge, which, of course, we do not have. Indeed, it is because we do not have independent access to divine knowledge that we seek prophets in the first place.

It is this dilemma that forms the subject of this essay. It is a dilemma that preoccupied Spinoza in the *Tractatus* and to which he provides a resolution. I regard Spinoza's resolution to be unsatisfactory, but because it constitutes a defining characteristic of modernity, it is worth laying out before laying bare. The laying out part of the essay belongs to Spinoza; the laying bare part, perhaps unsurprisingly, belongs to Maimonides. Let us first outline Spinoza's resolution.

One way to resolve the dilemma of determining who is and who is not a true prophet is to deny that anyone has access to divine knowledge. This is consistent with Spinoza's claim that we have, so far as he knows, no prophets, no one with access to divine knowledge that the rest of us do not have. But while this would resolve the dilemma, it is not Spinoza's approach. He does not deny that anyone has access to divine knowledge, but, to the contrary, Spinoza asserts that *everyone* has access to divine knowledge. Indeed, if everyone has access, no one can be a prophet. In such a world, any claim to a monopoly or aristocracy of divine knowledge, or to a privileged position of retailing or relating that knowledge to those who are without it, is nonsensical. In fact, for Spinoza, those who claim a privileged position based on a claim to having received divine knowledge prove by their very claims that they don't have access to divine knowledge, because part of divine knowledge is the knowledge that everyone has access to it. Prophecy is hence shoved aside, in Spinoza's thought, by a democracy of knowledge.

There is, however, as economists are fond of telling us, no free lunch. The condition under which Spinoza is able to assert the universality and equality of access to divine knowledge is that human knowledge be restricted to just two of the infinite number of attributes that in Spinoza's view God possesses. These are thought and extension, the attributes first placed on the philosophic table by René Descartes. The only divine

³ On Sabbatai Tzvi's impact on the Amsterdam Jewish community, see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Tsevi: The Mystical Messiah 1626–1676*, trans. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 518–545.

knowledge to which all of us have equal access is the knowledge belonging to these two attributes, or natural knowledge. Spinoza has proven to his satisfaction in the *Ethics* that these two are not the only divine attributes, that natural knowledge is not the only sort of divine knowledge. This leaves prophecy, in principle, possible. It may be that someone amongst us has access to one or more of these other attributes. If so, then we shall someday have a claim to another Scripture, and then the dilemma of prophecy will reassert itself. But so long as no one comes along who convincingly presents himself as a true prophet, Spinoza believes we can avoid the dilemma of prophecy by constructing a political system and a philosophic culture that adhere rigorously to the two attributes of thought and extension and all the consequences of the attributes of thought and extension—all the natural consequences spelled out in the *Ethics*.

But can we really do this? Does Spinoza believe that we can really do this? Can we banish the prophetic dilemma from our politics and from our science? Spinoza understands the empirical basis for a negative answer to this question quite vividly. The fact of the matter is that just as we found differential access to divine knowledge before Spinoza's solution, people have differential access to natural knowledge. Some people claim, and some in fact have, a greater knowledge of science or of some specialty within science than other people; some people claim, and some in fact have, a greater knowledge of what political prudence requires than others. All the old dilemmas of prophecy reassert themselves even within the democracy of knowledge. We must be able to tell the difference between someone who has and someone who does not have a greater knowledge, whether in science or in politics, whether in scientific method considered as a whole or in some particular specialty within science. We must be able to tell the difference between someone whose report of knowledge we can trust and someone whose report we cannot trust. Thus assembled, the dilemmas of prophecy as applied to natural knowledge are quite familiar to us, except in this regard we call the prophet an expert, and we call the knowledge to which he has special access his expertise. The dilemmas of prophecy may now be viewed as dilemmas of expertise.

So how does Spinoza, our philosophic Houdini, escape from the toils of prophecy as they manifest themselves in the form of expertise? How does he reassert the democracy of knowledge in the face of an aristocracy of expertise? Mere assertion, that is how. Speaking of those he terms "propagators" of natural knowledge, he says that the "rest of humanity"—the recipients of natural knowledge indirectly through propagators rather than directly from God—"are able to perceive and consider what

[the propagators] teach with a certainty and dignity equal to theirs, and this not only through faith.”⁴ That is to say, they are able to tell whether the knowledge they receive secondhand is or is not genuine natural knowledge. Moreover, the rest of humanity have this ability as against propagators, even though they do not have it as against God. In other words, they are able to tell what is and what is not genuine natural knowledge when propagators present it to them in the form of a report, but they are unable to form an intuition of the knowledge apart from the report. They have the intuition against which to judge the verity and accuracy of a propagator’s report, but not otherwise. They are handicapped in their access to natural knowledge but not in their certainty about its truth.

Thus, the propagators of natural knowledge cannot, in the end, be considered prophets. For Spinoza, direct access to divine intuition does not mark one off from the rest of humanity as a prophet. The rest of humanity can “perceive and consider what they teach with a certainty and dignity equal to theirs, and this not only through faith.” Only if the rest of humanity could not perceive and consider the teachings of propagators—making the relationship between the rest of humanity and the propagators a relationship of faith—would it be proper to call the propagators prophets. Prophecy requires faith; natural knowledge does not.

The rest of humanity, those to whom the propagators of natural knowledge propagate, has complete access to natural knowledge in *principle*, but not in *fact*. With respect to at least some part of natural knowledge, they are forced to rely on the report of propagators who have complete, or at least better, access. The propagators of natural knowledge have an expertise. The beneficiaries of that expertise, like all beneficiaries of all expertise, are forced to submit, in Spinoza’s words, to the propagators’ “authority and testimony.”⁵

So Spinoza’s evasion of the dilemma of prophecy simply doesn’t work. That is why I turn to a different expositor of the dilemma of prophecy, who comes to a very different and, I suggest, more compelling solution. Maimonides replaces the presence or absence of prophetic communication—a state known with certainty only through divine knowledge—with ordinary judgments made by ordinary people about the moral, intellectual, and physical condition of the would-be prophet. Prophets must have great wisdom. They must have a strong character, together with a broad and correct perspective. They must be completely physically sound. They must be happy. Those who claim to be prophets and satisfy these moral

⁴ Ch. 1; Gebhardt, p. 2 [16]; Shirley, p. 60; Elwes, p. 14.

⁵ Ch. 7; Gebhardt, p. 100 [114]; Shirley, p. 157; Elwes, p. 116.

and intellectual and physical requirements Maimonides calls “disciples of the prophets.”⁶ They are fit to be prophets. They are candidate prophets. But they are not yet prophets. A disciple of the prophets becomes a prophet only when he accompanies his prophetic statement by a sign or wonder. Once again, just as in the case of admission to the class of candidate prophets, admission to the class of genuine prophets is governed by ordinary judgments made by ordinary people, about signs and wonders, which can be perceived just as readily as moral and intellectual and physical conditions.

Contrast Maimonides’ criteria for prophets with Spinoza’s criteria for the propagation of genuine natural knowledge. Maimonides’ criteria are about the prophet, not the prophecy. Maimonides does not require ordinary people to be able to assess the veracity of the contents of prophetic statements, nor does he demand that they do so. The one exception to this is when a disciple of the prophets claims to predict the future. Then, the “sign” that the disciple is a true and not a false prophet is that what the prophet predicts actually happens. The “sign” concerns the contents of the prophecy, but an ability to notice whether what the prophet predicted actually came about is a far cry from the ability to assess, say, whether string theory provides an adequate reconciliation of quantum mechanics with general relativity. An ordinary person can easily do the former but would not dare attempt the latter, even were the world to lavish upon him or her adequate training for the task. This one exception to Maimonides’ rule that the truth of a prophet is determined by the discernible qualities of the prophet and not by a test of veracity of the prophet’s claims, then, is extremely specific. Moreover, prophets who qualify as prophets by virtue of the “sign” of predicting the future are limited to that one sort of prophecy, whereas prophets who qualify by other kinds of signs or by wonders are not so limited.

Spinoza’s criteria, as we have seen, focus on the ability of the recipients of propagated knowledge to judge whether the knowledge itself is valid. They are not criteria about the propagators. The propagator could have a terrible character, low morals, a mediocre intellect; he could be physically decrepit and utterly morose. None of that matters. What matters is the truth or falsity of the knowledge being propagated. The knowledge that ordinary people must have is knowledge of the truth or falsity of knowledge, not knowledge of character and intellect and morals and physical perfection and happiness. Spinoza’s are criteria of substance; Maimonides’

⁶ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah: The Laws, Which Are the Foundations of the Torah*, trans. Eliyahu Touger (New York: Moznaim, 1989), 7:5, pp. 252, 253.

are criteria about qualification. Maimonides' criteria do not embroil him in Spinoza's dilemma, that only prophets have the ability to recognize other prophets. Maimonides' criteria provide a firmer grounding for the democracy of knowledge than Spinoza's. They do not propose what is a democracy in principle only, an aristocracy in fact. Instead, they propose what is in fact a democracy, that everyone is fit to make judgments about morals and intellect and character. They flank that democracy with what is in fact an aristocracy: the platoon of prophets, those who meet recognizable standards of character, intellect, and morals and can muster signs or wonders for the job.

But it is not enough, in Maimonides' view, to become a disciple of the prophets and to produce signs or wonders. For signs or wonders, he says, may be the product of sorcery and magic rather than true prophetic gifts.⁷ Prophecy then would be ordinary prudential or philosophic judgment and not communication from God. We can all agree that we see the manifestations of a sign or wonder, but we have no way of knowing the source of the manifestations, whether what appear to us to be signs or wonders are God's work or the work of a sorcerer or magician and not true signs or wonders at all. Maimonides holds that it doesn't matter, and that we are legally bound to accord the status of prophet to the disciple of the prophets who appears to us to be performing signs or wonders. Any such person whom we know to be a disciple of the prophets and who appears to us to be performing signs or wonders is legally *presumed* to be a prophet. That is to say, we must treat that person as a prophet and his communication as divine communication, even if he is not a prophet and his communication therefore not divine communication. Hence, the ultimate conclusion that a disciple of the prophets is a prophet is the consequence of a legal presumption. Prophecy in Maimonides' view becomes a status that is at once natural and legal. It is natural because the judgments ordinary people make concerning who is and who is not a prophet concern naturally occurring phenomena, such as intelligence, character, and signs, or the disruption of naturally occurring phenomena in the form of wonders. It is legal because we do not and cannot make a direct judgment about the divinity of the candidate prophet's communication. We make a judgment only about natural phenomena or the disruption of natural phenomena, which judgment triggers a legal presumption.

The only prophecy needing certain knowledge of divine origin, therefore, is the prophecy establishing that presumption—the prophecy of the legal system legislated by Moses—for it is the presumption that makes all other prophecy, understood now strictly as a legal status, possible.

⁷ Ibid. 7:7, pp. 260–261; 10:3, pp. 286–287.

Moses' prophecy was indeed accompanied by a sign that the Israelites observing it knew as a matter of fact to be the work of God. They heard God appointing Moses his prophet on Mount Sinai, telling Moses to go and tell the people such and such, and they also heard the first two of the Ten Commandments. They heard exactly what Moses heard, and could tell, just as Moses could tell, that the voice they heard was that of God. In these moments, they were Moses' prophetic equals, even though very few of them, if any, would have had the requisite moral, intellectual, and physical gifts to qualify as disciples of the prophets. But then again, neither would Moses have qualified. His stutter rendered him physically imperfect; his temper rendered his character imperfect. He was, nonetheless, the greatest of prophets. Disciples of the prophets receive communications from God only indirectly, while asleep, in visions. Moses spoke with God directly, as a friend. Disciples of the prophets have to wait until the mood for prophecy comes upon them. Moses prophesied at will. Of the validity of his prophecy neither Moses nor anyone else had any doubt; he was not a prophet by presumption. And for those brief moments, at the foot of Mount Sinai, the people of Israel were his equal—equal in access to divine knowledge if not in prophetic ability. The legal system establishing the required prophetic presumption was the product of a temporary, though genuine and thoroughgoing, democracy of knowledge.

A disciple of the prophets who successfully predicts the future may well consider his prediction to be prophecy. He may or may not be right about that. But if his predictions are to be predictably successful over a sustained period, what the disciple must in effect be engaging in is some sort, however intuitive or primitive, of political or moral or natural science, and the judgment by which the people accept or reject the disciple as a prophet is not prophetic, but ordinary democratic judgment. What Maimonides describes, then, is no less the transformation of law into science.

Maimonides would disagree with Spinoza's dictum in the *Tractatus* that we have, so far as he knows, no prophets. Certainly there are no miracles and no prophets qualified by wonders or signs of the sort the people of Israel saw and heard on Mount Sinai. But there is predicting the future, there is broadening one's own perspective and increasing one's own knowledge. Both of these are prophecy in the hands of the right person. Both are limited to the few. Neither requires miracles. So there are prophets. We just don't call them that anymore. We call them scientists and philosophers instead.