

Spinoza and Leibniz on Faith and Reason

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A note about citation of the *Ethics*

My in-text citations of Spinoza's *Ethics* start with a capital *E*, followed by a number denoting the Part. After this number may be any of the following abbreviations, with their respective numbers (if applicable):

a = Axiom

c = Corollary

d = Definition (if not following a Proposition)

d = Demonstration (if following a Proposition)

p = Proposition

s = Scholium

INTRODUCTION

Does Spinoza or Leibniz give the better account of the relationship between faith and reason?

The relationship between faith and reason raises many questions. Does faith imply a belief that is contrary to reason, or outside of reason? Do our beliefs based on faith bring us closer to truth, as reason does? Are truths about the divine accessible through reason, and if not, does it do us any good to try to comprehend them?

Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz were concerned with the relationship between faith and reason, and come up with very different answers to these questions. While Spinoza argues in his *Theological-Political Treatise* that the common man's faith is absolutely divorced from reason, as only reason leads us to truth, Leibniz argues in his *Theodicy* that faith and reason go hand in hand, as both are paths toward truth. Both philosophers acknowledge the existence of truths (such as truths about the divine) beyond the average person's level of comprehension; however, Spinoza thinks the philosopher can reach these truths through extensive study, while Leibniz thinks no human is capable of understanding them. For Spinoza, then, faith becomes nothing more than the consideration of incomplete ideas in lieu of better understanding, a sort of lack or error in reasoning. For Leibniz, faith is a necessary step towards explaining the divine and involves more understanding rather than less. In my thesis, I intend to show that Leibniz's account proves more useful and charitable in describing faith. While Spinoza's complete separation of faith and reason is initially tempting, his views as expressed in his *Ethics* ultimately lead to the conclusion that the average person's ideas regarding the divine are not just incomplete, but false – despite numerous attempts to avoid this conclusion. Leibniz, on the other hand, allows for varying degrees of depth in understanding, giving us a more charitable picture

of what faith is to the faithful. By comparing each philosopher's treatment of the relationship between faith and reason, we can also gain insight into the advantages and disadvantages of their respective theories of knowledge more generally.

In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza approaches the relationship between faith and reason from a practical standpoint. Concerned with the violent consequences of religious intolerance, he wrote the text in an attempt to show that any religion that preaches good behavior and love of one's neighbor should be accepted, since such religions are beneficial to society. In doing so, he reveals his opinion that while religion is a positive practice, the average person's faith amounts to little more than superstition, a kind of belief that has nothing to do with reason. Spinoza defines faith as a set of beliefs which, if accepted, dictate belief in and reverence of God (*TTP* 222). These beliefs, in short, are that God is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent; that worshipping him takes the form of loving one's neighbor, and that terrible consequences will follow from doing otherwise (224-225). They are supported by reading scripture, and especially by accounts of miracles, events that Spinoza takes to be metaphysically and logically impossible.

We discover in the *Ethics* that the beliefs supporting faith hardly agree at all with Spinoza's own conception of God. He bases his ideas about God on complex and rigorous proofs. Spinoza's God is equivalent to nature, or everything that exists. According to Spinoza, only one who is convinced of God's existence through reason has a sound conception of God and a true understanding of his nature. Spinoza explains the exact role reason plays in the acquisition of knowledge with his description of adequate and inadequate ideas, in which he describes the difference between ideas based on knowledge of "the highest certainty", as opposed to "mutilated and confused" perceptions. In order to explain how we acquire both of these types of

ideas, Spinoza specifically distinguishes between three levels of knowledge. The first, opinion or incidental knowledge, is knowledge based on information acquired from another person or from casual observation without further proof. For example, I might believe that a friend is in Paris because he told me he was traveling there, despite not having seen him off to his flight or confirmed his arrival. The second level is knowledge via deduction, or what we might normally think of as reason. An example of this would be knowing the next term in a mathematical sequence as a result of having derived its formula. The third and highest form of knowledge is what Spinoza calls “intuition”. This is knowledge that is not without proof as in the first level, but does not require the sort of conscious deduction which occurs in the second level. In the case of the mathematical sequence, I might know that the next term in the sequence “2, 4, 6, 8 ...” is 10 without having to consciously deduce this.

The distinction between levels of knowledge relates to adequate ideas in that according to Spinoza, only the second and third kinds of knowledge can lead us to adequate ideas. Furthermore, he equates conclusions drawn from adequate ideas to truth and those drawn from inadequate ideas to falsity (*Ethics* 2p34-35). Since the common man’s understanding of God is clearly inadequate by these standards, this leaves us with the dissatisfying conclusion that any idea he has about God must be false. At the same time, true knowledge of God is possible, but only through rigorous study of Spinoza’s own proofs as laid out in the *Ethics*. While Spinoza makes several attempts to avoid the conclusion that only a scholar could have true ideas about God, we will see that each fails to be satisfactory, given the rigid and demanding standards he has set for truth.

Leibniz gives us a more charitable and usefully descriptive picture of the relationship between faith and reason. First, his theory of knowledge gives a far more inclusive definition of

truth than Spinoza's. While complete certainty was a necessary condition for true knowledge in Spinoza, this sort of certainty about real-world substances is hardly possible for Leibniz. All "individual substances", such as objects and individuals, have infinitely many predicates; therefore, we are never able to claim complete knowledge of them (*Discourse* 228). Since absolute certainty is only possible in cases of abstract reasoning (such as reasoning in mathematics), there is no need to withhold the label of 'true' from a conclusion drawn from less-than-certain observations. In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz also discusses a distinction between things that are beyond our human understanding (*above* reason) versus those that are contrary to reason altogether (*against* reason). He holds that so-called "Mysteries" about the divine, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, fall into the first category: though humans may not be able to understand them fully, we can examine them to the limited extent of our abilities and decide whether they are, so far, consistent or self-contradictory. In doing so, he thinks we will discover that certain doctrines are in fact inconsistent and necessarily false. Faith, for Leibniz, seems to involve accepting the truth of mysteries about the divine that reason can neither prove nor disprove. This has some similarities to Spinoza's position – neither philosopher thinks that having faith must entail total understanding of divine truths – but Leibniz sees this state of uncertainty as the best anyone can do, as divine truths are ultimately beyond human understanding. Spinoza, in contrast, believes that understanding of the divine can theoretically be achieved through careful study. For Leibniz, faith seems to imply *more* understanding rather than less, as faith helps us to explain, or at least accept, that which we cannot decisively prove or disprove with reason. Accepting a belief on faith is no blind act: it requires us to carefully examine the belief through reason to the best of our abilities, and then chose to accept the belief despite the fact that it is beyond our complete comprehension.

Spinoza's comparison of faith with superstition is intuitive and tempting – after all, many people who claim to understand or communicate with God seem to have at best a very confused idea of what that God might be like. We do not wish to adopt a theory that gives too much respect to such beliefs by characterizing them all as true or easily defensible. However, I believe Spinoza goes too far in applying his concepts of adequate and inadequate ideas to matters of faith. The problem arises in his assertion that conclusions based on inadequate ideas lead to falsity, while those based on adequate ideas lead to truth. We must consider that almost no one, under Spinoza's view, has an adequate idea of God. Does it therefore make sense to say that almost everyone's ideas of God are not simply incomplete, or slightly confused, but *false*? One might argue that since so many ideas are false according to Spinoza, falsity might not really be such a bad thing. However, the theory of knowledge set out in the *Ethics* gives us little room to argue that beliefs can be characterized by relative certainty or uncertainty, nor does it give us any reason to think that by 'false', Spinoza might just mean 'uncertain'. When it comes to ideas about God, Spinoza is unable to satisfyingly argue that the common man has any ability to have beliefs that are anything other than false. Though it is normal for us to climb up the successive levels of knowledge to find truth, Spinoza seems to think that most people base their faith on the wrong kinds of beliefs – ones that will never prove to be true, even if we examine them more thoroughly. Furthermore, his sweeping dismissal of faith in the *Theological-Political Treatise* seems to support the idea that he really did consider almost all religious views that did not exactly match his own to be unworthy of attention. "Faith", as Spinoza understands it, bears no relation whatsoever to what he believes to be the truth about the divine. He seems to think a correct understanding of God is of little to no importance to having faith, an assumption we will want to question.

Leibniz avoids this extreme conclusion by establishing the category of understanding that which is above reason. He asserts that there are truths about the divine, and even about individual objects in the world, that no human is capable of understanding. Faith, then, is always necessary to explain the divine. This allows for various degrees of understanding and certainty, rather than a strict division between the “adequate” and “inadequate”. In labeling beliefs as true, we are not restricted to only absolutely certain claims. Ultimately, Leibniz’s picture allows for much more nuanced and varying descriptions of faith. Some conceptions of the divine may be more sophisticated than others, but ultimately, the very idea of “the divine” implies something beyond human understanding, something that we can only grasp by allowing faith to work in concert with reason. Leibniz gives more credit to this idea while also giving us more flexibility to describe faith as adding more or less to knowledge in different people. His framework also provides such flexibility for discussing the truth, falsity, or relative certainty of all claims, and allows us to give far more useful descriptions of these concepts than we can under Spinoza.

SPINOZA ON FAITH AND REASON

Spinoza lays out his views on the relationship between faith and reason most clearly in the *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)*. In this document he also gives us his ideas of what exactly faith is, and why most religious beliefs are completely divorced from reason – in other words, they are the kinds of beliefs which can be proved neither true nor false through rational argument, and they can never contribute to our rational knowledge. To gain a better understanding of Spinoza's theory of knowledge, as well as his own ideas about the divine, we must look to his greatest work, the *Ethics*. By examining both the *TTP* and the *Ethics*, I hope to give a complete and accurate picture of what Spinoza thinks faith and reason are, why he believes them to be so separate from one another, and what conclusions this necessarily leads us to make about the nature of faith.

As we will see, Spinoza takes faith to be a set of beliefs about God that motivate piety. These beliefs may or may not conform to Spinoza's actual theory of God's nature – in other words, one might choose to be pious based on completely mistaken beliefs about God. In fact, according to Spinoza, most people have these mistaken beliefs, as he takes understanding God to require significant intellectual work. Based on Spinoza's theory of knowledge, it becomes difficult to say anything about the common man's beliefs other than that they are false, and it seems impossible that they could contribute to one's knowledge or understanding in any way.

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*

I will be discussing two sections of the *TTP*: Chapter 6 (“Of miracles”) and Chapter 14 (“An analysis of faith, the faithful, and fundamental principles of faith. Faith is finally set apart from philosophy”).

Why the *Theological-Political Treatise* was written: Some historical context

Spinoza released the *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670 in hopes of setting the stage for his upcoming major work, the *Ethics*. Though Amsterdam, the city in which he resided, was known for its religious tolerance, the late 1660s had seen that tolerance weaken as poorer economic and political conditions aggravated religious disputes (Klever 38). Spinoza’s friend Adriaan Koerbagh, a like-minded thinker, published a work in 1668 that included many of Spinoza’s own ideas, as well as more direct attacks the church. Koerbagh was arrested and imprisoned, and died the next year (39).

Given the extreme reaction to Koerbagh’s work, and knowing his own ideas would be seen as just as radical, Spinoza wrote the *TTP* in an attempt to explain his views towards faith in a way that would make it clear that he was not an atheist. He hoped to defend both himself as an intellectual and the practice of natural science in general, which was being attacked by the church as heretical. In this work, Spinoza tries to identify the many ways in which church officials and theologians were misinterpreting scripture for political purposes. He argues that scripture itself almost never claims that events occur outside of what can be explained by natural sciences – even when describing miracles (*TTP* 132). Therefore, it cannot be considered

sacrilegious to study science. Spinoza also explains in the *TTP* that since scripture was written for the common people, it often uses language that aims not at historical accuracy, but at motivating the reader towards obedience to God. He further states that because scripture was written by many different people over a great length of time, there are of course many contradictory accounts and interpretations of its content. But since it is written for persuasive purposes rather than for historical accuracy, we should see this as unproblematic. “The aim of Scripture”, Spinoza says, “is simply to teach obedience” (221). Spinoza hoped that this viewpoint would allow different religious sects to set aside arguments about the specific contents of scripture and focus on their shared goal of promoting piety. He sees no problem with various sects coming up with their own interpretations of scripture, if this makes them more likely to pious. The problem, he says, is “that they refuse to grant this same freedom to others” (220). This is likely to cause religious fighting, and is “fraught with danger to the state” (221).

Unfortunately, the *TTP* had the opposite effect that Spinoza intended. When published anonymously in 1670, it only aggravated religious disputes. Spinoza was labeled as an atheist by other intellectuals and his text was decried as sacrilegious by the church. Many refutations and defamations were published. Spinoza ultimately fought to delay translation into Dutch from the original Latin as long as possible, fearing further repercussions (Klever 39).

Spinoza on faith and its relationship to philosophy

In Chapter 14 of the *TTP*, Spinoza explains what he takes ‘faith’ to mean, who should be considered faithful, and why faith is so separate from reason. He starts by pointing out that scripture is the work of many authors and contains many contradictions. Religious sects tend to

subscribe to a certain text and a certain interpretation of that text, which may be contradictory to the interpretations of other sects. Since, as stated in his chapter on miracles, Spinoza considers most of scripture to be persuasive rather than factual, he does not see this disagreement as problematic – unless it leads to religious fighting and persecution. Spinoza states, “I will not level the charge of impiety against those sectaries simply because they adapt the words of Scripture to their own beliefs...My accusation against them is this, that they refuse to grant this same freedom to others” (220). This sort of conflict, which is so often caused by opposing sects of the same religion, actually works directly against the main goal of these religions.

The whole point of religion and of scripture, Spinoza says, is to promote obedience to God, and to instruct people what form this obedience must take. He equates obedience to God and belief in God, saying, “The message of the Gospels is one of simple faith; that is, belief in God and reverence for God, or – which is the same thing – obedience to God” (221). Spinoza also states that “faith must be defined as the holding of certain beliefs about God such that, without those beliefs, there cannot be obedience to God, and if this obedience is posited, these beliefs are necessarily posited” (222). The concept of faith Spinoza is working with involves a set of beliefs that, given one believes in God, demand obedience to God. This could be due to the importance or significance given to God under those beliefs, or to the severity of punishment implied for disobedience. According to scripture, there is only one way to be obedient to God: to love one’s neighbor. Therefore, the goal of religion is just to promote love of one’s neighbor (though Spinoza later adds to this “justice and charity”). The form that one’s belief in God takes, or one’s opinion on the existence of things such as miracles, is entirely incidental and important only as a means to an end. As Spinoza puts it, “Scripture does not require us to believe anything beyond what is necessary for the fulfilling of the said commandment [piety]” (221) – in other

words, scripture is interested only in teaching obedience, not in supplying information about God. I take Spinoza's claim here to be referring to the perspective of a religious or political leader, and not as much the individual who holds faith-based beliefs. The holder of the belief may *think* they are discovering some truth about God when they assert he is all-powerful (though this approach certainly seems less intellectually curious than the approach of, say, a Spinozan scholar). In fact, many potentially curious believers may fall back on these sorts of claims about God for lack of any better explanation of their faith. But the most important point being made is that leaders understand religious education to be for purposes of obedience only. Scripture, under Spinoza's view, was written to promote obedience, and it serves the same purpose today. Of course, this is what Spinoza took to be scripture's important role *politically*. He saw religious fighting as "fraught with danger to the state" (221), and therefore wanted to provide a way in which religions with different specific beliefs might agree on a common goal. He does take understanding of God's nature to be important *intellectually* – this is what he spends much of the first part of the *Ethics* on. Given a proper understanding of God, that understanding can even constitute happiness and shape the good human life. But it is notable that he thinks these two sets of ideas – those that promote piety, and those that further understanding of God's nature – *can* be completely separate from one another. He seems to think that piety in no way demands an accurate picture of God, and in fact, it takes a significant amount of knowledge and reasoning to understand why the accurate picture should promote piety.

The relationship between belief and action in Spinoza's conception of faith is not entirely clear. As stated above, Spinoza claims at one point that faith is essentially defined by one's beliefs. However, he goes on to say that "faith in itself without works is dead", and "Only by works can we judge anyone to be a believer or an unbeliever. If his works are good, he is a

believer, however much he may differ in religious dogma from other believers; whereas if his works are evil, he is an unbeliever, however much he may agree with them verbally” (222).

Which of these is most essential to faith – beliefs or actions? It is possible that Spinoza finds it implausible that holding beliefs that promote obedience might *not* lead to obedient actions.

Overall, Spinoza seems to be merely pressing the point that it is the goal of religion (promoting love of one’s neighbor), and not the precise method used to reach that goal, that is most important.

Spinoza lays out his “tenets of faith” at the end of Chapter 14. Briefly, they state that God exists as a “supremely just and merciful” being, that he is supremely powerful and all knowing, that the way to worship him is through love of one’s neighbor, and that the consequences for doing otherwise would be dire (224-25). He claims these to be the only beliefs necessary to motivate obedience to God, and considers them the core teachings of scripture. Though none of these beliefs specifically contradicts any of Spinoza’s own ideas about God, they also bear little to no resemblance to the Spinozan conception of God as nature. This God seems more like that which the common people believe in – an anthropomorphized ruler who enacts his will over nature. Presumably, the inaccuracy of this view does not bother Spinoza because of his belief that this sort of faith is completely divorced from reason and from any sort of attempt to understand what God is. From a practical or political standpoint, all that matters is that the common people act as they believe God wants them to; it makes no difference what they take that God to be.

Spinoza has made a number of strong claims in this section of the *TTP*. He has declared that faith is nothing but obedience to God, which he also equates to belief in God. Though one must believe in God to be faithful, it is not important that one understands who or what God

actually is, so long as we take him to promote love of one's neighbor. Certain beliefs – those stated above as “tenets of faith” – will give support to kind of faith in God that promotes piety, but according to Spinoza himself, these beliefs are completely incorrect. If we take these claims to be true, it is obvious that faith and reason have nothing to do with one another – faith, as Spinoza imagines it, is merely the blind acceptance of a number of rules that indirectly guide one towards good behavior. The entire significance of God to the common person is merely as the enforcer of these rules. However, I believe there is reason to question Spinoza's claims. Are faith and belief in God really equivalent to obedience – especially when it seems that obedience can be motivated by either a very weak or a very strong understanding of God? Can we really set aside, as Spinoza does, all considerations about the nature of God when describing faith? And is obedience really so separable from the wish or attempt to understand God? We can imagine that while some people might be willing to accept faith blindly without any explanation of the nature of God (other than an assurance that he has certain authoritative powers), many others will want to know more about the God to whom they pledge obedience. For instance, Spinoza's “tenets of faith” make no mention of why we should believe God exists. An argument for God's existence, it seems, would be influential to many in their decision to act piously. Moreover, it seems entirely possible that knowledge gained about the nature of God would influence one's faith in God or obedience to him. These are claims that Spinoza must deny. Lastly, we might ask what to make of the beliefs about the nature of God that common people hold (the idea of God as a ruler, for instance). Even if these beliefs do not bear on the person's behavior, we would hope to be able to say something about them – for example, the ways in which they contribute to that person's understanding of the world. We will see upon examination of the *Ethics* that it is

difficult, under Spinoza's system, to say anything about these beliefs other than that they are false.

Spinoza's claims about miracles

Spinoza's approach to understanding miracles is closely related to his conception of God, which is laid out fully in the *Ethics* and which I will describe later in more detail when discussing that work. Briefly, Spinoza believes God and nature to be one and the same. God (or nature) consists of everything that exists, including both material things such as objects and immaterial things such as thoughts. Spinoza extends his naturalistic conception of God to miracles. He argues that most, if not all, scriptural accounts of miracles can be understood from within the laws of nature. While miracles are commonly thought of as cases where faith and reason must be incompatible (because breaking the laws of nature seems contrary to reason), Spinoza presents them in such a way as to avoid any straightforward contradiction. However, this contradiction between faith and reason can only be avoided given a proper Spinozan understanding of God and miracles, something that he takes very few people to have. I present this discussion of miracles in order to further illustrate Spinoza's belief that a completely erroneous conception of God can be a sufficient basis for faith.

According to Spinoza, the common person thinks of God and nature as two opposing forces. Miracles, then, are commonly understood as cases in which God, usually inactive, decides to intervene with the force of nature and change its rules or course. Spinoza thinks this is nonsensical, and he comments, "To what lengths will the folly of the multitude not carry them? They have no sound conception either of God or of Nature, they confuse God's decisions with

human decisions, and they imagine Nature to be so limited that they believe man to be its chief part” (*TTP* 125). In reality, what we refer to as ‘miracles’ are just “unusual works of nature” (124). Spinoza points out that we tend assume works of nature that we cannot explain given our current understanding of natural laws will never be explainable, and therefore consider them to be acts of God. But this is simply faulty reasoning. Even at the time of Spinoza’s writing, scientific explanations for many scriptural miracles were obvious.

In fact, according to Spinoza, many descriptions of miracles from scripture do not refer to the inexplicable nature of the events. For example, he mentions a passage where God tells Noah he will send him a rainbow as a sign (132). Though the idea of God creating a rainbow might be contrary to laws of nature, a rainbow itself is not. There are also cases in which an event is presented as a miracle, yet other “accompanying actions” are also mentioned. The plague of locusts is brought on not just by God’s decree, but also by an unusually strong wind (133). These details, when present, hint at possible natural explanations for these supposed acts of God. When no such explanation is obvious, it is likely that such details were omitted. Miracles as described in scripture often seem miraculous not because of the events themselves, but because they are supposedly enacted by God. Spinoza argues that the writers of scripture chose to present the events in this way because the point of scripture is to inspire obedience to God, not to provide natural, causal explanations for extraordinary events. These two goals may not be mutually exclusive, but given the relatively little attention scripture pays to natural explanations, it would be difficult to argue that it is in any way a scientific text. The events it chooses to present as acts of God are generally ones that “strike the imagination” and “excite wonder” (133). Scripture is not so much trying to make readers ignore natural explanations as it is highlighting the role of God in performing supposed miracles. If there is an account of a miracle in scripture that cannot

be understood within the laws of nature, Spinoza says that “we have to believe that this was inserted into Holy Scripture by sacrilegious men. For whatever is contrary to Nature is contrary to reason, and whatever is contrary to reason is absurd, and should therefore be rejected” (134).

In this way, Spinoza makes the point that even scripture may not point out a single instance where God clearly steps in to change the laws of nature. Instead, it chooses unusual – yet almost certainly natural – events and portrays them as acts of God in order to impress readers with God’s power. This backs up Spinoza’s claim that the point of scripture is to promote obedience and not to further understanding. Of course, to be impressed by such accounts requires the notion that God and nature are essentially separate, a view that Spinoza considers to be completely incorrect. Beyond its inaccuracy, Spinoza seems to think this view is harmful, since it encourages people to only admire God when they think of him as subduing nature. Faith based entirely on one’s belief in miracles might not be a very robust form of faith, because it requires one to be convinced by particular accounts of past events. This, he says, points to the whole reason accounts of miracles arose in the first place: Jews wished to express the power of their intangible God over “visible Gods” that others worshipped, such as the sun, moon, and earth. They took to describing ways in which their God could overpower these natural entities (125).

Spinoza even claims that if miracles (as commonly understood) did occur, they could teach us nothing about God. If an event cannot be explained through natural causes, and God comprises all of nature, then we cannot understand the event as having a cause at all (128). It is difficult to see how we could make sense of an event that has no intelligible cause. But if we cannot understand miracles, neither can we understand anything *from* miracles, such as the existence or power of God (128). Even if it were possible to understand anything from miracles, Spinoza still thinks that we would not be able to take them as proof of God’s existence. He

writes, “Since a miracle is an event of a limited nature, expressing a power that is never other than fixed and limited, from such an effect we could not possibly conclude the existence of a cause whose power is infinite” (129).

How, then, would one gain a better understanding of God? For Spinoza, knowledge of God is supposedly very accessible. Since God and nature are one and the same, acquiring knowledge of God requires nothing more than learning about the natural world. In reality, truths about God under Spinoza’s system are extremely complex, and require much more than simple observation. Regardless, Spinoza uses this argument to defend natural science as actually being a method for coming to understand God rather than as an alternative to religion. He explains, “those events which we understand clearly and distinctly have far better right to be termed works of God, and to be referred to God’s will, than those of which we are quite ignorant, even though the latter appeal strongly to the imagination and evoke men’s wonder” (128-9). However, it is worth pointing out that this sort of understanding of God, and the sort of belief in God that it might support, is radically different from traditional religious views. It is also unclear whether an idea of God as nature would have the same ability to promote obedience and piety as the idea of God as a ruler over natural forces, at least for someone who lacked a deep understanding of this idea. Spinoza does ultimately argue in Part V of the *Ethics* that the more knowledge we have, the more we will love God (*E* 5p32c). This “intellectual love” is important, but it is not clear that it would play the same role as the ruler-god plays in creating an ordered society.

By presenting miracles as misunderstood natural events and denying the ability of a supernatural event to teach us anything about God, Spinoza limits the ways in which the contemplation of miracles could support obedience and piety. If miracles are taken to be what they really are, this supports the correct Spinozan picture of God but does nothing to support the

“tenets of faith”. Miracles must be understood incorrectly, as supernatural events, in order to promote piety. Spinoza is therefore not only denying the importance of a correct understanding of God to faith, he is also presenting a way in which an incorrect understanding might do a better job promoting faith than a correct one. However, Spinoza has also given us reasons to doubt this very claim. A belief in God based strongly on interpretations of miracles does not seem particularly robust. If one were to look closely at scriptural accounts of miracles and come to the same conclusion as Spinoza – that none of them actually describe supernatural events – then one would have no more reason to believe in God’s power. And as discussed earlier, even the beliefs Spinoza takes to be essential to faith seem likely to be an unsatisfying basis for belief in God. We are left to think that anyone sincerely claiming to believe in God has either thought very little about the evidence for such a claim, or has gone through the arduous process of attaining understanding of the Spinozan picture of God.

Spinoza's *Ethics*

The *Ethics* is Spinoza's major work, published posthumously in 1677 (Klever 13). I will be dealing mainly with its second section, which concerns Spinoza's theory of knowledge, but first I will briefly discuss the first section, which describes Spinoza's theory of God and his proof of God's existence.

Part 1 of the *Ethics*: Spinoza's conception of God

Spinoza spends significant time and effort in the first part of the *Ethics* defining God and giving arguments for his existence. I do not wish to go into detail on these arguments here, but I will note some of the most important and relevant points in Spinoza's theory of God.

Spinoza begins by talking about "substance", which he defines as "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that which does not need the concept of another thing, from which concept it must be formed" (*E* 1d3). A substance, in other words, is something that contains in itself its own reason and cause for existing. We can conceive of substances through various "attributes", and these attributes can be further broken down into various "modes".

Attributes are supposed to be distinguished by essential qualities of the substance involved, while modes under a given attribute differ in less essential ways. We will see concrete examples of these below.

God, as Spinoza defines him, is a substance that is infinite and therefore contains infinite attributes (*E* 1d6). As it turns out, there cannot be any two substances that share attributes (*E* 1p5). Since God has every attribute, this must mean he is the only substance (*E* 1p14d). Though

God has infinite attributes, we have access only to two of these: thought and extension. God is only one substance, so we must in a way consider thought and extension to be two different ways of expressing the same thing. Modes, then, must allow us to distinguish different types of extended matter and thought. “Particular things” are all examples of modes: physical bodies, specific thoughts, and so on (*E* 1p25c).

Since Spinoza’s God is simply an infinite substance, we cannot understand him to have many of the qualities that are typically associated with God. He is not an anthropomorphic ruler or even a creator, and he cannot break laws of nature – since this would be a contradiction of himself.

Part 2 of the Ethics: Truth and adequacy

A central concept to Spinoza’s theory of knowledge is that of *adequacy*. An idea is adequate if it is complete and true, and it fails to be adequate if it is incomplete, or “mutilated and confused” (*E* 2p34-35). This notion of completeness seems to refer to the idea properly relating to its object. The object of the idea need not be a material object – it can be, for instance, a thought or another idea. Spinoza posits that insofar as all ideas are related to God, they are true (*E* 2p32). In Spinoza’s metaphysics, there is a one-to-one correlation between ideas and physical objects, which both constitute nature, or God. In fact, thought and extension are simply two different attributes of substance, through which we can understand the same things (*E* 2p7s). However, these “ideas” are not necessarily in our minds, or in anyone’s mind but God’s. When we succeed in having a true idea, the connection between our idea and its intended object must be in some way comparable to the connection between an idea in God’s mind and the corresponding object

of that idea. As established in Axiom 6, true ideas must “agree” with their objects (*E* 1a6). This is restated again in Book 2: “A true idea is distinguished from a false idea solely in so far as it is said to agree with that of which it is the idea” (*E* 2p43s).

Spinoza describes three ‘levels’ of knowledge, each of which implies increased certainty, or better-justified belief. These can be seen as steps in a progression – often, we start out at one of the lower levels and take steps to reach the higher ones. An idea might start out as a single observation or a report from an outside source, but through investigation, one could gather enough evidence to raise the idea to the second kind of knowledge. A thorough understanding of the phenomena involved could then lead to knowledge of the third kind. It is also possible, however, that we might never recognize the need to improve our ideas, and therefore remain at the lower levels indefinitely. The levels of knowledge are described as follows:

1. The first level is referred to as “knowledge from inconsistent experience”, “opinion”, or “imagination”. This sort of knowledge is usually acquired in one of two ways. It can be acquired through sensory perception, but in a confused or inattentive manner that admits of possible error. It can also be acquired through others, by reading or hearing that something is the case without being provided any further proof. An example of this might be: I know that my friend is in Paris this week because he told me he was going there.
2. The second level is referred to as “reason”. This is the sort of knowledge that is acquired through deductive inference. An example of this: I know the next term in a mathematical sequence because I have determined the formula for the sequence.
3. The third and highest level is referred to as “intuitive knowledge”. Spinoza notes “this kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of some of

the attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things". In the case of intuitive knowledge, we are grasping the objects of our ideas in the most complete and accurate way. We no longer have to remind ourselves of the truth of our conclusions by following the deductive pathways we used to reach them. Instead, we have a sort of instantaneous understanding of the idea in question because we have reasoned our way to it so many times. While there is no conscious deduction going on here, I cannot arrive at this state by accident; I must first understand through reason before understanding through intuition (*E* 5p28). Spinoza's example of the third level of knowledge is again of knowing the next term in a mathematical sequence. This time, however, I know the term not because I have consciously calculated the sequence's formula, but because my knowledge of mathematical patterns allows me to immediately 'see' what the next term should be (*E* 2p40s2).

Interestingly, Spinoza finds knowledge of the third kind, which involves no conscious calculation or determination of how one reaches a conclusion, to be more certain than knowledge of the second kind, presumably because it involves the aforementioned complete grasping of the objects involved. Instead of drawing from past calculations, we are drawing from a direct understanding of the essences of the objects involved – in other words, we understand the objects in relation to God (and therefore in relation to the rest of the world) instead of only in relation to each other. This level of understanding hopefully provides us with the power to give better explanations, as we can draw directly upon God's nature as a means of explaining the properties of objects.

Though intuitive knowledge is supposed to be more certain than reasoned knowledge, both are sufficient for forming adequate ideas (*E* 2p40s2). Knowledge of the first kind, however,

is not. It may seem sensible that knowledge gained from mere hearsay or inattentive perception should be deemed unworthy of the status given to the two higher kinds of knowledge. Under Spinoza's view, sense perception cannot give us adequate knowledge of objects, as "the human mind perceives no external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its body" (*E* 2p26). But, we should consider the exact claims Spinoza makes about adequate and inadequate ideas. While adequate ideas are necessarily true, inadequate ideas are necessarily false. Spinoza writes, "Knowledge of the first kind is the sole cause of falsity, but knowledge of the second and third kind is necessarily true" (*E* 2p41). This may seem to make a distinction between knowledge of the second and third kind *being* true, while knowledge of the first kind *leads to* falsity – but we can understand these two phrases to be equivalent for our purposes. Spinoza uses "leads to" in the case of falsity in order to distinguish false beliefs based on knowledge of the first kind from absolute ignorance, which he does not categorize as false belief (*E* 2p35). Falsity, under Spinoza's view, is not so much the existence of a wrong idea (or a lack of an idea at all), but a lack of more complete knowledge. Since all ideas that exist, exist in God, and all ideas that exist in God are true, Spinoza cannot make room in his metaphysical picture for the existence of a false idea. This is why he must conceive of falsity as a privation (Wilson 109). We can understand how things we would normally consider to be false ideas, like the idea of a square circle, can be conceived of as privations: One who imagines such a figure lacks adequate knowledge of the definition of a circle. This sort of lack is always present in knowledge of the first kind: one might have suggestive but not definitive observational data, or one might have some reason but no proof for believing the claims of others. The "privation of knowledge" (*E* 2p35) implied in the case of falsity is importantly not a complete lack; this Spinoza would call "absolute ignorance" (*E* 2p35d). In order to avoid the idea that false ideas exist in God, we can

also take Spinoza to mean that false ideas are only false in their *relationship* to other ideas; false ideas do not posit objects that do not exist, but misinterpret our relationship to a real object.

If knowledge of the first kind can never provide us with adequate ideas, and only adequate ideas can lead to true beliefs, then any conclusion drawn from knowledge of the first kind *must* be false. This is surprising, because while it seems natural not to trust this kind of knowledge as much as other kinds, it seems that it should at least be *possible* for that knowledge to be true. Perhaps Spinoza means something different here by ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ than we normally mean? His notion of ‘truth’ is captured in an idea’s correspondence to its object, so it may not be so radical to claim that ideas must properly relate to these objects. But even if we reduce truth and falsity to this relationship, it remains unclear what the implications are of assigning these labels. Normally, we think of true ideas as ones that can be reliably acted upon, while false ideas are ones that should not be acted upon. If all knowledge based on hearsay is considered false, we might therefore conclude that we should never act upon such knowledge, but this would be completely unrealistic. These sorts of conclusions that we usually draw from the labeling of ideas as true or false are not just incidental, but essential to the meaning of such labels. While not all ideas pertain to physical actions, all ideas are capable of serving as the basis for further ideas. We might make a three-way distinction when it comes to the relationship between the truth or falsity of an idea and its ability to serve as a basis for other ideas. As an example, consider the belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. There are numerous justifications one might have for such a belief. First, one might have adequate knowledge of the movements of the sun and the earth, and therefore be able to prove the claim deductively. This sort of belief is considered true both by everyday standards and by Spinoza’s more stringent standards. It does not seem plausible that holding this belief would lead one to hold false beliefs. Second, one

might believe that the sun will rise tomorrow for purely inductive reasons – it has happened consistently in the past, others have confirmed this, and so on. By everyday standards, there is nothing wrong with this belief: it is upheld by a significant amount of evidence. But this is just the sort of claim that Spinoza is committed to labeling as false. Though we generally consider ourselves to have good reason to believe things with such overwhelming supporting evidence, Spinoza denies the truth of any belief that is not backed up by adequate knowledge of the ideas involved – and it is likely that we do not have adequate ideas of the sun and the earth. However, even if Spinoza chooses to label this belief as false, he could *not* say with any accuracy that it is likely to lead us to other false beliefs. An example of the last category of justifications for the belief is that the sun will rise tomorrow because a magical being has made it so (Zeus on his chariot, perhaps). By both everyday and Spinozan standards, this belief is false. It may well produce further false beliefs, possibly about other natural occurrences or the possibility of the sun not rising regularly.

Ordinarily, we would make a larger distinction between beliefs of the third kind and the other two than we would between beliefs of the first kind and the second and third. I argue that this is on the basis of the likelihood of the beliefs to create further false beliefs, but even if we question this assumption, we can still see that our everyday notions of truth and falsity do not match up with Spinoza's, and this should cause us to question what he means when he assigns these labels to ideas.

We can stop at recognizing the lack of certainty involved, but “uncertain” seems to be an entirely different characterization of an idea than “falsity”, and we would like to continue to distinguish between the two. There should be a difference between saying that I am uncertain (or that I have insufficient knowledge as to) whether my friend is in Paris, and that it is false that my

friend is in Paris. Falsity implies certainty that it is not the case, whereas uncertainty leaves both possibilities open. Spinoza leaves very little room for anything to fall between truth and falsity, and the only alternative to those two extremes seems to be complete ignorance. He speaks only of ideas of “the highest certainty” and those that are “mutilated and confused”, and says nothing of ideas which might be uncertain yet reliable. Even if we grant Spinoza the ability to characterize ideas as more or less confused, it remains that any idea that admits of the slightest uncertainty must be called false.

By equating adequacy to a sort of success (that is, the successful attachment of an idea to an object) and inadequacy to a failure, Spinoza has essentially presented a completely binary system of truth and falsity. More troubling still, he has set the bar for success extremely high, requiring any true idea to be completely certain and provable through deduction. Given this system, it seems that we will necessarily have very many false ideas and few true ones. If this is meant to be only a semantic distinction, not a guide for how we should act on our ideas (as notions of truth and falsity usually are), the usefulness of the distinction is not obvious.

Knowledge concerning God

While acquiring true beliefs in general seems like a difficult task under Spinoza’s system, the acquisition of true beliefs concerning God appears almost impossible. Spinoza says in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that knowledge of God is readily available in the form of knowledge of the world (*TTP* 128). But this seems a great oversimplification of Spinoza’s idea of God. His God consists of the entirety of existence, both thought and extension, and the average person’s knowledge covers only a tiny fraction of this. Spinoza might not think it

necessary to understand every part of the world in order to understand God, but it seems equally unlikely that an incidental understanding of one's immediate surroundings will suffice. After all, he has just spent the entire first section of the *Ethics* proving God's existence and describing his nature. This would hardly be necessary if God were simply evident in our everyday lives. And in fact, Spinoza states in the *TTP*, "since God's existence is not self-evident, it must necessarily be inferred from axiomatic truths" (127).

A relevant passage to this discussion is Proposition 47 of the second part of the *Ethics*. This proposition states: "The human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God" (*E* 2p47). Spinoza gives as proof of this claim the fact that the human mind has knowledge of the external world, bodies, and objects as actually existing. Since God consists of all these things (among others), the mind must have adequate knowledge of God. Perhaps all Spinoza means here is that the mind cannot deny the existence of God if at least some aspects of God are present and absolutely certain. But this hardly seems to justify the claim that we have adequate knowledge of God's "eternal and infinite essence". It is not clear that Spinoza is able to make such a strong claim here, given his stringent requirements for adequacy. While he does claim that bodies and minds express the eternal and infinite essence of God under the attributes of thought and extension, Spinoza also makes it clear that this understanding of objects is separate from an understanding of their finite nature. He distinguishes between "active nature" (*natura naturans*) and "passive nature" (*natura naturata*) (*E* 1p29s). It is not obvious that the average person ever considers the minds and bodies with which they interact to belong to anything other than this passive nature. It also seems that in order for bodies and objects to give us knowledge of God, we would have to know to equate the entire, infinite external world with God, which most people certainly do not. Spinoza brings up this problem in Proposition 47's

Scholium. He reduces it to merely an error in naming, stating that “many errors consist solely in the fact that we do not apply names correctly to things” (*E* 2p47s). He then goes on to compare the problem of identifying God to such a trivial problem as erring in speech, using the example of someone shouting that “his yard had flown into his neighbour’s hen”. We do not really believe the speaker to be in error, Spinoza says, because we can easily see what he meant to say. But is the problem with regards to God really comparable? It seems that when people fail to identify God correctly (correctly as according to Spinoza), this is not a mere slip of the tongue or a trivial error. While the speaker in Spinoza’s yard/hen example would immediately consent to correction, the person who fails to understand the nature of God would surely need an extensive explanation to convince him of his error. He may, in some way, be aware of the thing which Spinoza calls “God”, but he in no way intends to be talking about this when he refers to God in his own speech. The “God” to which he does refer bears no resemblance to anything Spinoza believes to exist. The explanation needed to convince the average person to refer instead to Spinoza’s God may take the form of the first part of the *Ethics*. If such lengthy explanation really is necessary, it is hard to imagine that any human has adequate knowledge of God by virtue of having a mind.

The *TTP* and the *Ethics*: problems regarding knowledge of God

It might trouble us if, from Spinoza's writings, we should be forced to conclude that only the most educated philosophers are able to hold true beliefs about God. Despite what look like numerous attempts to avoid this conclusion, Spinoza does leave us in this unfortunate state. The two texts discussed, the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Ethics*, both present significant obstacles to the common person – or indeed, anyone but a philosopher who studies Spinoza – acquiring any knowledge about God. In the *TTP*, Spinoza makes the claim that the common people have “no sound conception either of God or of Nature” (125). He goes on to posit ‘faith’ as a construct which has no relation to an understanding of God, but this seems implausible for reasons previously stated. Spinoza's theory of knowledge as presented in the *Ethics* makes the problem more troubling. Even if we are ready to accept the claim that common people have no true beliefs about God, Spinoza's theory makes no distinction between the common person, who has thought very little about the divine, and the philosopher or theologian, who has devoted much of her life to contemplation of God but has reached conclusions different from Spinoza's. Graeme Hunter even suggests that in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza intended to include scholastic philosophers in his references to the “multitude”, as these thinkers supported the traditional understanding of miracles (43). Attempts by Spinoza to claim, for instance, that all humans have adequate knowledge of God's essence, do not seem to stand up to his strict requirements for adequacy. Adequacy requires having a clear, distinct idea of the object of one's thoughts, the correct identification of that idea as the object of the thought, and the ability to use this idea for explanatory purposes. It seems that only a practiced scholar, fluent in the *Ethics*, would be able to have a clear and distinct idea of God *and* be able to identify it as such, never

mind the ability to properly use this idea of God to explain the way things are. We might be tempted to say that the labels of ‘true’ and ‘false’ hold something other than their normal meanings in Spinoza’s philosophy, and that we therefore might give credit to the slightly misguided philosopher over the unthinking common man. But Spinoza has left us very little room to make any such distinction. Moreover, any attempt to prove that Spinoza wishes to be charitable with regards to the possibility of knowledge of God seem much less plausible given the language of the *TTP*. If Spinoza is comfortable referring to “the folly of the multitude” (125) and “the unstable and fickle Jewish multitude” (220), and if he takes faith to be completely separable from any understanding of the divine, it is hard to say why we should take seriously any effort he makes to allow the common man true beliefs regarding God.

LEIBNIZ ON FAITH AND REASON

Introduction

Leibniz's views on the relationship between faith and reason are expressed in the *Theodicy*. In this text, he asserts that faith and reason work together in various ways. First, laws of reason should not be suspended regarding matters of faith (for example, when contemplating divine "mysteries"). It is important, in fact, to subject scripture to rational scrutiny in order to identify false doctrines. Second, faith is supposed to increase our understanding when reason can take us no further. We will see that Leibniz considers many things to be beyond the scope of human reason, even in the natural world. Faith allows us to in some way grasp that which we cannot understand through reason. Leibniz also makes the important distinction between that which is "above" and that which is "against" reason. This illustrates his defense of religious doctrine that, while not provably true, is also not provably false.

In order to get a full picture of the work Leibniz wishes to do here, we will first need to examine his *Discourse on Metaphysics*. This text provides us with his conception of God, as well as details on his theory of knowledge. Leibniz's understanding of predication will prove especially important in understanding the context of claims made in the *Theodicy*. Because Leibniz takes ordinary physical objects to contain infinite predicates, we are presented with very few opportunities for complete knowledge, even with regards to things that seem not at all mysterious.

After analyzing the content of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and the *Theodicy*, I will consider the philosophical implications of Leibniz's picture of faith and reason and raise possible

objections to the view. Leibniz's main weakness is his assurance in the authority of scripture, which may seem arbitrary from a contemporary standpoint. He seems certain that, while some doctrine might be discovered to be false, the foundations of belief will not be seriously shaken by the work of reason. We may not share this certainty, but we can imagine possible replies Leibniz could make to this worry. For instance, given Leibniz's requirements (stated in the *Theodicy*) for proving something false, there is little reason to believe most religious claims would be vulnerable to this. I also wish to draw attention to the highlights of Leibniz's view. His theory of knowledge allows us to know things without needing complete certainty. This proves useful both regarding knowledge of the divine and in general. With regards to religious beliefs, we will be able to consider a wide variety of beliefs as being more or less founded in reason, without having to label all but the most certain as false.

Leibniz's conception of God

In order to understand Leibniz's claims about the relationship between faith and reason, we should first look at his conception of God. The claims he makes about God, specifically about God's creation of the best possible world, will also serve as examples of the limits Leibniz places on human knowledge. Leibniz states at the beginning of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, "God is an absolutely perfect being" (224). More specifically, he says that "there are several entirely different perfections in nature, that God possesses all of them together, and that each of them belongs to him in the highest degree" (224). Leibniz's notion of a "perfection" seems to be something like the highest possible degree of anything that is subject to limitation. In this way, we can imagine God as a being who is perfectly moral, perfectly rational, and perfectly free.

However, we should not take Leibniz' God to be, like Spinoza's, simply equivalent to nature. Leibniz notes that while God has all of the perfections, not all things in the world can be understood through perfection. Numbers, he mentions, have no limit; therefore, God could not embody the greatest of all numbers. Leibniz also speaks of God as the "author" or "creator" of natural things, a characterization Spinoza would certainly not have agreed with (225).

Leibniz maintains, famously, that God could not have made our world any better – that we live in the best of all possible worlds. He points out that if we admit the world could have been better, this would imply that God's act of creation was imperfect (225). Leibniz importantly does *not* say that our world has no evil, or is only good – he only says that God could not have made it better. He argues that our inability to understand the reasons for the bad things we observe comes from incomplete knowledge of the universe and God's reasoning (225). Events may seem bad or evil to us, but given the perspective of an omniscient being, we would see how these events contribute to the best possible state of affairs. Still, this is not a 'perfectly good' state – it is merely the best one available. The idea of knowledge existing beyond human comprehension is one that will prove important in Leibniz's description of how faith and reason might work together: faith will allow us to grasp just this sort of idea.

Predication and certainty

The concept of predication is important in understanding Leibniz's theory of knowledge and determining what sorts of knowledge he considers to be available to humans. The possibility of infinite predication will limit our opportunities for complete knowledge of any individual substances, but this will not stop us from having "clear" and "distinct" ideas. Leibniz's notion of

predication comes from his definition of individual substances, whose actions he wishes to distinguish from God's. According to Leibniz, we can identify an individual substance "when several predicates are attributed to a single subject and this subject is attributed to no other" (228). In the case of abstract concepts, such as geometric shapes or categories of objects, the number of predicates attributed to a subject is limited. A rectangle is defined in a certain way by a finite number of properties it holds – four right angles, two sets of parallel sides, two-dimensionality and so on. One could give a complete definition of a rectangle by carefully listing all of these properties. Leibniz gives as another example of an "accident", or an abstract concept, a king (228). We consider a king, in the general case, to have a set of distinct properties just as the rectangle has these.

When we move from abstract concepts to real objects and people, the number of predicates attached to each subject becomes infinite. While concepts have specific definitions, individual substances do not – and attempting to list all of an individual substance's qualities would be futile. In addition to physical properties like size and shape, predicates include a substance's relations to and interactions with other substances. According to Leibniz, the predication of an individual consists not just of current properties, but of all past and future qualities as well. Not only must we have incredibly detailed knowledge of our subject – we must actually know everything about its past and future in order to define it properly (228). It is important for Leibniz that all predicates be included in a substance's definition, rather than in some more accidental relation, because of his account of truth. He states in the *Primary Truths*, "The predicate or consequent is always in the subject or antecedent, and the nature of truth in general or the connection between the terms of a statement, consists in this very thing" (265). In other words, all true statements can be found to be reducible to statements or negations of

identity. When defining a substance, then, we are making a claim about the identity of that substance, and in order to be sure of the truth of our statement, we must include in that definition all predicates attached to the substance. If I identify a tree as one I saw earlier, I am not just affirming its similarity in appearance. I am making the claim that the current tree is the same individual substance as I saw before – and this claim requires that the history and future of the two trees be identical.

It is easy to deduce from the above that complete knowledge of individual substances is simply not available to human beings. God might have this kind of knowledge, but there is no conceivable way a mortal could hope to attain it. Luckily, Leibniz does not consider complete knowledge to be necessary for at least some forms of understanding. He describes “distinct” knowledge as having an awareness of the components making up an idea, and he states, “distinct knowledge has degrees” (239). Leibniz also distinguishes between “clear” and “confused” ideas. Clear ideas are indubitable, while confused ideas are subject to doubt. In neither case – with regards to distinct or clear ideas – is complete knowledge of the subject stated as necessary. These claims are made about rational knowledge, with regards to which Leibniz thinks absolute certainty is at least a possibility. While distinct knowledge does imply a need for some understanding of a subject’s predicates, it is not necessary that one should grasp *all* of those predicates. Leibniz allows for this with his statement that distinct knowledge can come in differing degrees.

Given this framework, we have multiple ways of evaluating claims of rational knowledge. We can describe the relative clarity or distinctness of an idea without needing to categorize it as either definitely true or definitely false. Contrast this to Spinoza’s framework, which demands that an idea be absolutely certain and provable through deduction before it can

be considered true. Leibniz's picture allows for many more claims that we would commonly consider true to be labeled as such, and also gives us the ability to describe the relative certainty of claims in a much richer and more detailed fashion.

Leibniz's *Theodicy*

Leibniz wrote the *Theodicy* with the issue of faith and reason in mind. Much of its content is a response to another writer, Pierre Bayle, who held opposing views on this subject (Brown 57). The opinion that faith and reason were, in one way or another, incompatible was not an uncommon idea. Some claimed that faith was strictly contrary to reason, while others argued that theology had a concept of "reason" that was separate from the reason of natural sciences. In this text, Leibniz attempts to deny these views, supporting instead a picture of faith and reason working in concert with one another towards truth. He believes that reason has an important place in theology, and that faith has an important place in natural sciences.

A crucial point in Leibniz's argument for the conformity of faith with reason is his distinction between "above reason" and "against reason", "explaining" and "comprehending" (76). He presses the point that something cannot be considered contrary to reason unless reason can prove it to be incorrect. In doing so, he shifts the burden of proof for the truth of religious doctrine from the believer to the skeptic. I will examine his arguments towards this end, and evaluate the benefits and costs to this move.

Defining faith and reason

At the beginning of his discussion of the conformity of faith with reason, Leibniz states, “the object of faith is the truth God has revealed in an extraordinary way; and...reason is the linking together of truths, but especially...of those whereto the human mind can attain naturally without being aided by the light of faith” (73). He makes a distinction between faith and reason only in their appropriate objects, not in their goals. Both faith and reason seem to be related to acquiring knowledge, only in different ways. Leibniz continues in this vein, writing, “One may compare faith with experience, since faith (in respect of the motives that give it justification) depends on the experience of those who have seen the miracles whereon revelation is founded” (73-4). Here, faith is actually being compared to the empirical gathering of evidence. Faith, however, applies only to the sort of experience one would get from witnessing a miracle – an utterly incomprehensible experience.

It should be mentioned here what it is Leibniz means when he refers to miracles. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, he claims “that miracles conform to the general order, even though they may be contrary to the subordinate maxims” (227). These “subordinate maxims” refer to the laws of nature as we ordinarily think of them. While miracles seem to break these customary laws, Leibniz insists that they do not happen outside of “the order”; presumably, they are not caused by anything other than God’s power (which is the cause of everything else). Some similarity is evident between this view and Spinoza’s, in that Spinoza, too, claims that miracles could not possibly violate universal laws. However, Spinoza denies any distinction at all between laws governing miracles and laws of nature. While Leibniz posits “subordinate maxims”, Spinoza takes laws of nature to be of the highest order.

Faith, then, is the sort of thing that could be inspired by witnessing an event that defies well-known laws of nature. Obviously, very few people will even claim to have seen a miracle, but many people claim to have faith. We learn about supposed miracles by reading accounts of them in scripture. Leibniz has no issue with this method of acquiring faith. He compares it to the way in which we might count on the testimony of a person who has seen China to tell us what it is like, even though we have never visited it (74). Testimony clearly has many issues as a source of knowledge, but it seems plausible that we can determine, in many cases, when we should or should not trust it.

It is not immediately obvious from the above what the *content* of a faith-based belief might be. We can infer that, if faith is the sort of thing acquired by witnessing miracles, it must be something like an understanding or appreciation of God or God's power. This will become clearer when we consider Leibniz's use and definition of reason. Reason is, as previously stated, "the linking together of truths, but especially...of those whereto the human mind can attain naturally without being aided by the light of faith". If reason involves linking together truths, it must rely on fairly certain, understandable evidence. This could take the form of empirical evidence, testimony, or logical conclusions drawn from argument. Faith, on the other hand, seems to be a similar reaching of a conclusion, only without this obvious evidential foundation. Our faith might rely on testimony, but only on specific types of testimony, such as scripture. We might also apply different standards of reliability to this sort of testimony, as under normal circumstances, it is very hard to justify believing claims of supernatural events. One might want to simply characterize faith as a willful ignorance of the fantastical nature of claims made in scripture. However, I think Leibniz feels, and wants us to feel, a certain persuasive force in

regards to matters of faith. Scripture is supposed to have a special kind of authority, not merely that of any written document.

Above vs. against reason

Leibniz goes on to make an important distinction between that which is “above reason” and that which is “against reason” (76). If something is against reason, this means it violates logical principles. Under Leibniz’s view, nothing that violates such principles can be true, regardless of its status as accepted doctrine or scripture. However, we need not be able to provide deductive arguments that prove all claims in scripture are true. We must only show them to be above reason – that is, beyond the limits of human comprehension. Leibniz does not think this means they are beyond comprehension completely, as God may be able to comprehend things that humans cannot. He even states that God’s “wisdom differ[s] from ours only because [it is] infinitely more perfect” (75). God does not have access to any special type of reasoning, of which we are deprived. As a perfectly knowledgeable being, he has the required knowledge to understand things which humans could never hope to understand, given their limited knowledge and perspectives. In addition to the “mysteries”, things incomprehensible to us might include the previously mentioned claim that God has created the best of all possible worlds. This is a particularly interesting example in that, if true, this claim would not require any sort of supernatural power in order to be understood. The fact that it is out of our reach is just a matter of our limited knowledge of the world.

Closely related to the above/against reason distinction is Leibniz’s distinction between “explaining” and “comprehending”. He writes: “Mysteries may be *explained* sufficiently to

justify belief in them; but one cannot *comprehend* them, nor give understanding of how they come to pass” (76). “Explaining” can be thought of as the process by which we come to understand the aspects of an idea that lie within reason, though complete understanding may be impossible. “Comprehending” refers to the kind of complete understanding we can only acquire for abstract concepts, and that God might have in regards to individual substances. When it comes to mysterious claims about the divine, it is enough for us to show that they are explainable within our powers of reasoning – that they do not result in any contradictions. Because logic allows us to scrutinize arguments even when we cannot claim full understanding of their content, it is not necessary that we comprehend them, or come to a full understanding of them. Leibniz goes on to point out that even in the field of natural science, we often reach limits in our ability to explain phenomena. Natural occurrences, such as the spread of disease, might have been incomprehensible to us at one point, and even today many problems test our powers of understanding. Rather than discarding such theories as false, we merely acknowledge this limitation and move forward, hoping to find a complete explanation at a later point. This is acceptable as long as there is no evidence to the contrary of our claim. In the case of mysteries about the divine, however, we cannot expect to find an explanation in the future. Leibniz states, “Nor is it possible for us, either, to prove Mysteries by reason, for all that which can be proved *a priori*, or by pure reason, can be comprehended (76)”. The term “pure reason” here can be thought to refer to reasoning regarding concepts, as concepts have limited predicates and can therefore all possibly be comprehended given the opportunity. Divine mysteries, on the other hand, hold no such promise of comprehensibility. To comprehend such a thing would be at least as difficult as grasping the predication of an individual substance, if not more so.

Leibniz's assertion that scriptural claims must hold up to the scrutiny of reason is not a casual statement. He believes that one should actively examine religious doctrine for evidence of any logical contradictions. If one were to arise, some part of the doctrine would have to be discarded as false. Leibniz cautions, "In general, one must take care never to abandon the necessary and eternal truths for the sake of upholding Mysteries" (88). In fact, Leibniz himself engages in this sort of work in this text and in others – though it often turns out that doctrine does stand up to reason after all. One of the most notorious "Mysteries", the doctrine of the Trinity, states that while God is one individual, the father, the son, and the holy spirit are all, individually, God (while still remaining distinct from one another). This appears to be an obvious contradiction – how can three individuals all be equal to the same thing, and yet different from one another? Leibniz insists that the mystery of the Trinity does not violate any rational principles. He resolves the problem by distinguishing between God taken "absolutely" (as a divine essence), and God taken "relatively" (as a person or individual). When we say that all three members of the Trinity are equal to God, we refer to God as the divine essence, and when we say that God is one being, we refer to him as a person or individual (Antognazza 71).

The role of faith in natural science

Not only did Leibniz claim that reason should play a role in theology, he also wanted theology to play a role in natural science. In his *Catholic Demonstrations*, he argues for the need for an incorporeal substance to explain the nature of corporeal substances. Leibniz claims that the primary qualities of corporeal substances cannot be derived from the definition of a body, and therefore cannot exist in those bodies (Loemker 170). He explains the view in the following way:

We know that the definition of “space” refers to size and shape occupied by a body. However, just by looking at a body itself, we cannot say anything as to why it fills this particular space, and why it is this size and shape. We might make reference to previous interactions with other physical bodies, but this, Leibniz says, will simply lead to an infinite regress (171). Leibniz’s own metaphysics sometimes suggests that all substance is incorporeal, but this does not help to stop the regress either. These incorporeal substances (monads) give rise to all physical and relational properties – which leaves us in the same regress as before, only regarding monads instead of corporeal substances.

The only way to break this infinite causal chain, then, is to invoke God as a cause. This might not seem like a particularly original suggestion – ancient philosophers such as Aristotle posited God as a final cause to all motion (*Metaphysics* XII.7). The context in which Leibniz makes the claim, however, is more novel. In addition to describing a particular role of God, this argument may also inspire us to ask what sort of questions empirical enquiry is able to answer. While we might think that all empirical questions fit neatly into the realm of science, perhaps this is not the case. As Leibniz’s concern here is merely with the causes of observable qualities in objects, it is hard to see this line of thought as obviously unscientific. Even if we do not think he has a scientific answer to the problem he poses, the very fact that this problem, which at first does not seem theological, might lead to a theological conclusion should make us wary of neat distinctions between science, theology and philosophy.

Possible issues with Leibniz

Perhaps the most obviously sympathetic part of Leibniz's view is his assertion that scripture should be subject to the same scrutiny as any other sort of evidence for a claim. This should act as a safeguard against any far-fetched religious dogma being taken too seriously. However, there seems to be no guarantee that the most important claims of religion will survive our attempts to scrutinize. What if we were to find that some of the most accepted accounts in the Bible were contradictory to reason?

While this is a possibility given Leibniz's claims, it also seems extremely unlikely. By forcing the burden of proof onto the nonbeliever, Leibniz has made it nearly impossible to prove any given account to be false. After all, most Biblical stories are so old that it looks completely useless to even attempt to conclusively prove them false in any of the conventional ways one would go about disproving testimony. If a specific claim in a story were identified as contradictory (to itself or to another claim), this could presumably be thrown out without accusing the entire story of falsity. This itself may be seen as another weakness, however. If it is nearly impossible to prove a claim to be false, will we be forced to accept all kinds of claims as true simply because they are so hard to disprove? Some claims, such as the "mysteries", might be realistically proven false by logical deduction. But other claims, like accounts of miracles, can often only be disproven by providing numerous facts about the circumstances of the event, which have been lost to time. Furthermore, it seems that "not proven false" does not carry the same persuasive power as "proven true". Why should we take religious doctrine seriously simply because it has not been proven false?

This question gets at a deeper issue with Leibniz's theory: his almost unwavering respect for doctrine. It is difficult to justify the reliability he assigns to scripture, especially given his sophisticated formulation of the acquisition of knowledge. I can respond to this at least by saying that if he were to seriously challenge all of scripture, this project would not have a hope of getting off the ground – there is simply too much to question in any organized way. Leibniz's contemplation of doctrines known to be problematic at least shows him to have some amount of skepticism.

Highlights of view

Leibniz succeeds most in the way in which his theory of faith and reason fits nicely into his larger theory of knowledge. In all areas, he says, completely certain knowledge is hard to come by. It is only to be expected that our reasoning, which is limited even with regards to everyday matters, should be limited in its understanding of God. It seems right that complete certainty should be such a difficult thing to achieve. When we do lack complete certainty, this does not mean we have no knowledge at all, nor does it mean that all our beliefs are false. Under Leibniz's view, certainty and knowledge admit of degree – so it is not necessary, either in natural science or in theology, to have unshakeable proof of a belief in order for it to be true. With regards to religion in particular, this means that we have the ability to describe the relative validity and invalidity of various beliefs, rather than being forced to categorize all into either “true” or “false”.

CONCLUSION

Spinoza presents us with extremely strict requirements for adequacy, and therefore truth, which have important consequences with regards to knowledge of God as well as knowledge in general. His distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas, which map onto truth and falsity, leaves little room for anything between these two extremes. Given that adequacy requires absolute certainty and the ability to deductively prove a claim, true belief is difficult to attain under any circumstances, but especially regarding the divine. While Spinoza attempts to use his conception of God as nature to prove that knowledge of God is in fact accessible to anyone, his arguments do not sufficiently acknowledge the distinction between God's finite nature (which is easily accessible) and his infinite nature (which is not). In practice, it seems, only a dedicated scholar could hope to comprehend God's infinite nature. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza gives us further reason to doubt the sincerity of these attempts. He describes faith as completely separate from reason, based on beliefs that are categorically false, like the existence of miracles. He also equates faith with obedience to God, further minimizing the importance of knowledge to faith-based belief.

While Spinoza's theory separates faith and reason completely, Leibniz wants the two to work together as different methods of grasping truth. We are able to understand some ideas through reason alone, such as abstract concepts. Many ideas, however, are beyond human comprehension, requiring far more knowledge than any human could ever attain in order to be understood. This includes both the comprehension of individual substances and certain truths about the divine. Leibniz denies that anyone can have absolute certainty about these divine truths, but at the same time he asserts that we can use reason and faith in order to grasp them to

the best of our ability. Reason allows us to check doctrine for logical inconsistencies and discover the limits of our comprehension, and faith allows us to accept a belief once we have reached this limit.

If we accept Leibniz's picture, we are able to give accounts of different individuals' faith as more or less based on reason, depending on the amount of scrutiny they have applied to their beliefs. We can choose to regard some beliefs as blind acceptance of scriptural dogma, while appreciating the intellectual work others have done in an attempt to justify their beliefs, whether or not we think those beliefs are ultimately correct. This sort of description is lost in Spinoza's binary framework of truth and falsity. The descriptive power Leibniz offers is applicable not only to faith-based beliefs, but to all kinds of beliefs. Especially in cases such as belief based on testimony, Leibniz's picture gives us more helpful ways of thinking about the truth or falsity of such claims, and his conclusions match up with our intuitions much better than Spinoza's. Ultimately, we can choose to give faith-based beliefs as much or as little credence as we like, depending on how we view scripture and its supposed authority. But no matter what conclusions we come to in this regard, Leibniz gives us much more useful ways of describing the truth, falsity, and certainty of beliefs, whether they be about God or about the physical world.

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