

CAN PHILOSOPHY DESTROY FAITH?  
SPINOZA ON THE SEPARATION OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

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In

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by

Jacob Andrew Zellmer

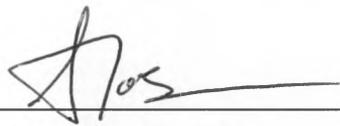
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Can Philosophy Destroy Faith? Spinoza on the Separation of Philosophy and Theology* by Jacob A. Zellmer, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.



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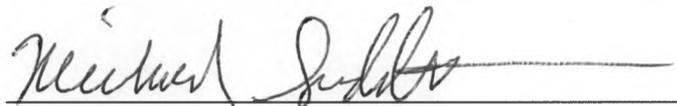
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CAN PHILOSOPHY DESTROY FAITH?  
SPINOZA ON THE SEPARATION OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

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San Francisco, California  
2016

*Abstract:* Spinoza's view in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP) is that theology and philosophy have separate domains and are completely harmonious; theology aims at obedience and philosophy aims at truth (Spinoza's "Separation Theory"). Commentators point out tensions in this theory: Michael Della Rocca argues that philosophy and theology are continuous in that they both aim at social harmony and Daniel Garber argues that Spinoza gives philosophy the ability to defeat theological beliefs. I first argue that Della Rocca's problem can be solved via the distinction between obeying God and loving God. I then argue that James's Ciceronian reading of Spinoza's Separation Theory does not resolve Garber's problem because it does not provide an account of how philosophy can defeat theological beliefs.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Alice Sowaal, Chair, Thesis Committee

12/13/2016  
Date

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## I. Introduction

We generally hold that everyone should be free to hold whatever religious beliefs he or she wants. When, then, if ever, should reason determine what religious beliefs we hold? If we allow reason to continually inform and update our religious beliefs or understanding of a sacred text, at what point is the authority of the religious belief or text replaced by the authority of reason? This is a major question with which Spinoza grapples in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (henceforth TTP). Spinoza argues that theology (scriptural revelation) has very little to do with truth. That is, theology teaches its doctrines only insofar as they are sufficient for obedience with little concern for the truth of those doctrines (III/184; xv.22-3).<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the domain of philosophy is truth. With such different domains, philosophy and theology are separate because they each pursue different goals; I will call this Spinoza's "Separation Theory." Although separating theology from truth may have upset the religious orthodox, it allows theology to retain some of its authority, despite its inferiority to natural knowledge – something we might not expect from the arch-rationalist (III/30; ii.6).

In addition to separating philosophy and theology by distinguishing the domains of each discipline (the domain of philosophy is truth whereas the domain of theology is

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* will be to Edwin Curley's translation (2016) and will consist of the Gebhardt page numbers, given in Curley 2016, e.g., "III/184", followed by the Curley chapter and paragraph numbers, e.g., "xv.22-23". Bracket inserts are Curley's unless noted otherwise.

obedience to God and the state) he makes additional claims about their differences.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophy and theology can each “maintain control of its own domain with the utmost harmony” (III/182; xv.12). There is “no dealings, or no relationship, between faith, or theology, and philosophy (III/179; xiv.37). Finally, philosophy and theology have different foundations:

...the foundations of philosophy are common notions, and [its truth] must be sought only from nature. But the foundations of faith are histories and language, and [those foundations] must be sought only from scripture and revelation... (III/179; xiv.38)

Establishing the Separation Theory is one of the main goals of Spinoza’s TTP and so the question of whether Spinoza succeeds not only informs our conception of this age-old question, but it also instructs our interpretation of the TTP as a whole (III/174; xiv.5).

However, though this separation is explicitly stated in several places in the TTP, tensions quickly become apparent within Spinoza’s account. For example, though Spinoza aims to vindicate the view that philosophy and theology are separate domains of knowledge, such that neither is ancillary to the other, it appears that he gives to philosophy the ability to defeat theological beliefs and therefore make theology ancillary to philosophy, as I will explain below. A second problem is that philosophy and theology both aim at communal cooperation. So how is it that they are completely separate despite this instance of continuity?

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<sup>2</sup> Before Spinoza, various Dutch Cartesian philosophers advocated a modified version of Spinoza’s theory of separation between philosophy and theology. See Douglas (2015) and Meyer (2005/1666).

Susan James (2012) attempts to resolve these problems by providing a reading of Spinoza on philosophy and theology that is consistent. She argues that because philosophy and theology do not differ according to content, but in their methods and goals, each has their own domain such that neither takes precedence over the other. As such, theology encompasses morality and imagination and philosophy encompasses reason and truth. The Bible counts as theology because it is filled with moral narratives that help an individual grasp what is required for obedience. These theological narratives are not infinite in quantity and therefore not comprehensive, so theology necessarily falls short. James argues this deficiency of theology does not detract from the claim that theology and philosophy are distinct. In dealing with this apparent precedence given to philosophy, James argues by analogy with Cicero's account of virtue that theology is an anticipation of the higher form of virtue engendered by philosophy. For James, the Separation Theory is consistent with philosophy's precedence over theology.

I will argue that James does not adequately resolve one of the problems in Spinoza's account. After reconstructing James's argument I will argue that James's attempt to resolve the tension in Spinoza's account fails to answer Garber's problem of philosophy's ability to undermine theological beliefs.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, James's account misses its mark. In what follows, I first recount Spinoza's project in chapter fifteen of TTP and then present possible problems with this account as pointed out by Michael

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<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, no one has given a critique of James's account. My contribution will be to show that James's account (written after Della Rocca and Garber) fails to account for Garber's objection. Further, I will show the way in which Della Rocca's problem can be solved.

Della Rocca and Daniel Garber. I then reconstruct James's argument and finish by showing that James does not solve the interpretive problem of philosophy's ability to undermine theology. This problem poses a threat to Spinoza's claim that theology and philosophy have no dealings with each other, and leaves open the possibility that Spinoza was not able to protect theology from the subjugation of reason amidst his argument for freedom to philosophize.

## II. Spinoza's Separation of Philosophy and Theology

The central aim of Spinoza's TTP is to defend the freedom to philosophize. In particular, the main thesis in the TTP is that the freedom of judgment (such as in holding heretical philosophical views) and the freedom to worship God according to one's own mentality "can be granted without harm to piety and the peace of the Republic..." In fact, this freedom of judgment "cannot be abolished unless piety and the Peace of the Republic are abolished with it" (III/7; Preface.12). Although the Dutch republic in Spinoza's time was tolerant compared to other European countries, there was not a complete freedom to believe whatever one wished about religious matters. Part of Spinoza's strategy to argue for the freedom to philosophize was, as he says, to expose the prejudice of the theologians in hope of mitigating their influence.<sup>4</sup>

Cartesian philosophy in the Netherlands was seen as dangerous by some of the theological authorities, in part because philosophical scrutiny could call into question the

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<sup>4</sup> Spinoza, Letter 30 in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* Vol. II, transl. and ed. by Edwin Curley. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 14-15. (IV/166/20-29).

veracity of theological doctrines (Israel 26-7). To the theologians, philosophy threatened theological orthodoxy and the moral principles grounded in theology. So Spinoza's goal of defending the freedom to philosophize must address the boundary between theology and philosophy as well as the relationship between the two. When should theological beliefs restrict one's philosophizing? Likewise, does philosophy pose a threat to religious beliefs?

In order to defend the freedom of philosophizing from the rule of theology, Spinoza addresses the boundary and relationship between theology/scripture<sup>5</sup> and philosophy. Spinoza argues that philosophy and theology are separate, that is, there are "no dealings, or no relationship, between faith, or theology, and philosophy"; further, "each has charge of its own domain without any conflict with the other" (III/179; xiv.37, III/188; xv.43). There are two claims here: (1) philosophy and theology are separate and (2) neither undermines the other's authority within its domain. Before arguing for his own position, Spinoza first argues that if we hold philosophy and theology to *not* be separate, we are led to one of two absurd views: dogmatism and skepticism.

The dogmatist thinks scripture should be interpreted in the light of reason, i.e., they hold that reason determines the meaning of scripture. Spinoza focuses on the dogmatism of Maimonides, who argued that the truth of Scripture aligns with the truth of

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<sup>5</sup> "Theology" and "scripture" are used interchangeably by Spinoza. There is a distinction between "practical theology" and "philosophical theology" where the former is what Spinoza means by "theology" and the latter is a part of metaphysics, such as Spinoza's metaphysics of God (c.f. *Ethics* Part 1). Alan Donagan makes this clarification in "Spinoza's theology", 1996. in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* ed. by Don Garrett. New York: Cambridge University Press. 343-382.

reason. Propositions that are determined true by reason cannot contradict the Bible, rather the Bible must be read allegorically on points of apparent contradiction with reason.

Spinoza's argument against dogmatism begins with his argument that God accommodated himself to the imaginations and preconceived notions of the prophets (III/42; ii.52).<sup>6</sup> The prophets and authors of scripture were only required to have moral knowledge and could be ignorant of philosophical matters. In fact, the prophets had contrary opinions on philosophical matters. "So we really should not seek knowledge of natural and spiritual things from them" (III/42; ii.52).<sup>7</sup> All the contents of scripture were adapted to the common beliefs of the people at the time of origination and the common beliefs were not philosophically oriented. It follows that if we ascribe philosophical doctrines to the prophets, as the dogmatists do, we are distorting the meaning of the prophets, for they never had philosophical doctrines in mind when composing scripture. Therefore, scripture does not teach philosophy.

The second view on the relation between philosophy and theology, Spinoza calls "skepticism." It holds that reason should be made to conform to scripture, i.e., scripture has authority over reason and skepticism is directed at reason itself. For Jehuda Alpakhar, Spinoza's quintessential skeptic, reason should be ancillary to scripture and should be

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<sup>6</sup> Spinoza argues for this in chapter ii. His conclusion: "The passages we have discussed establish more than adequately what we proposed to show: that God accommodated his revelations to the power of understanding and to the opinions of the Prophets, and that the Prophets could be ignorant of things which concern only speculation, but not those which concern loving-kindness and how to conduct our lives, and that they really were ignorant and had contrary opinions [regarding speculative matters]. So we really should not seek knowledge of natural and spiritual things from them."

<sup>7</sup> Earlier in chapter ii, Spinoza has this rephrased as, "we are not at all bound to believe them [the prophets] concerning purely speculative matters" (III/35; ii.24). Bracket insertion is mine.

completely subservient to it.<sup>8</sup> An example of scripture superseding reason is believing that, based on the authority of scripture, not reason, God is one alone (Deut. 6:4). Scripture should not be read as metaphorical if it is contrary to reason; Scripture should only be read as metaphorical if it is contrary to scripture. Going back to the example, scripture tells us that God is one. Yet there are many passages where God speaks of himself in the plural; these later passages are to be read metaphorically because Scripture directly asserts that God is one. According to Spinoza, if the skeptic holds that philosophy is ancillary to theology<sup>9</sup> they must accept the utterances and prejudices of an ancient and simple people to be divinely inspired. Believing the prejudices of an ancient people to be divinely inspired is absurd in Spinoza's view. He says those who hold this belief "blind themselves" (III/180; xv.3). They want to make reason, which is "[God's] greatest gift," subordinate to "dead letters," and they speak against the mind, which is "the true original text of God's word" (III/182; xv.10).

Spinoza thinks that both the dogmatic and skeptical positions go wrong. In order to sort the problem out, and also fulfill his main motivations in writing the TTP, Spinoza argues theology and philosophy are separate and "Theology is not bound to be the handmaid of reason, nor reason the handmaid of Theology" (III/184; xv.21). This is possible in Spinoza's view because each has its own domain; philosophy has the domain

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<sup>8</sup> Alpakhar's rule (according to Spinoza): "we're bound to accept as true whatever Scripture affirms, and reject as false whatever it denies..." and "Scripture never explicitly affirms or denies anything contrary to what it's affirmed or denied in another passage." (III/182; xv.13).

<sup>9</sup> Here Spinoza substitutes "Scripture" for "theology". He sometimes uses these words interchangeably although they have their own technical definitions as well.

of truth and wisdom, and theology has the domain of piety and obedience. Theology “determines the doctrines of faith only so far as is sufficient for obedience. But precisely how those doctrines are to be understood, with respect to their truth, it leaves to be determined by reason, which is really the light of the mind, without which it sees nothing but dreams and inventions” (III/184; xv.22-3). Theology or scripture appeals to the imagination, not to reason, and has the goal of cultivating obedience. If the criterion of *truth* (beyond the criterion of sufficiency for obedience stated above) is used to analyze a theological doctrine, then the analysis has become philosophical rather than theological.

Importantly, reason has a limitation:

For as we’ve shown, the power of reason does not go so far as to enable it to determine that men can be blessed by obedience alone, without understanding things. But theology teaches nothing but this, and does not command anything but obedience. It neither wills nor can do anything against reason. (III/184; xv.22)

Spinoza seems to be ceding to theology a doctrine that cannot be demonstrated as true or false by philosophical reasoning. Although theology aims only at obedience, its doctrines can all be investigated for their truth-values, except for the *foundation of theology* (also called the “fundamental tenet of theology”), namely, that men can achieve blessedness simply through obedience without understanding (III/185; xv.26).

But why should we trust the fundamental doctrine of theology? After all, theology is separate from philosophical truth, that is, the foundation of theology cannot be demonstrated as true or false. According to Spinoza, we should not accept blindly the foundation of theology, and nor should we think that the foundation of theology can be

demonstrated on rational grounds – this would make theology a part of philosophy and thus give philosophy the upper hand. In fact, Spinoza thinks that the foundation of theology cannot be demonstrated with reason, or at least that such a demonstration has not been discovered yet. So, we can trust in the fundamental doctrine of theology only with “moral certainty.”

At play here is a distinction that Spinoza and others in the period draw between moral and mathematical certainty. Mathematical certainty is that “which follows from the necessity of the perception of the thing perceived or seen” (III/32; ii.12). Moral certainty is something that cannot be shown with mathematical certainty, but can still be embraced with sound judgment (III/187; xv.36).<sup>10</sup> Spinoza is getting these terms from Descartes who defined moral certainty as

...certainty which is sufficient to regulate our behavior, or which measures up to the certainty we have on matters relating to the conduct of life which we never normally doubt, though we know that it is possible, absolutely speaking, that they may be false. (AT VIIIA 327: CSM 289 n. 2)

In contrast, metaphysical certainty is when we believe it to be wholly impossible that

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<sup>10</sup> Spinoza writes, “Unlike a clear and distinct idea, a simple imagination does not, by its nature, involve certainty. So to be able to be certain of things we imagine, we must add something to the imagination – viz., reasoning. It follows that, by itself, prophecy cannot involve certainty. As we have shown, it depended only on the imagination. So the prophets were not certain about God’s revelation by the revelation itself, but by some sign... In this respect, then, Prophecy is inferior to natural knowledge, which needs no sign, but of its own nature involves certainty... Indeed, this prophetic certainty was not mathematical, but only moral” (III/30; C ii.4-6 cf. ii.12). Spinoza later states “...I maintain that we can use our judgment, so that we accept what has already been revealed [in scripture] with at least moral certainty. I say with moral certainty, for we should not expect to be able to be more certain of it than the prophets were” (III/185; C xv.27-8).

something should be otherwise than we judge it to be. Because God is good and not a deceiver, and our ability to distinguish between truth and falsity comes from God, if we use our judgment correctly, we can trust our clear and distinct perceptions (AT VIIIA 328: CSM 290).

The prophets and authors of the bible received revelation only by moral certainty and “the authority of the Bible depends on the authority of the Prophets” (III/185; xv.29). Ultimately, the prophets can be trusted because their teachings commend “loving-kindness” and “justice” above all else. The content of the prophets’ teaching along with the miracles they perform gives credibility to the prophets. Although the foundation of theology cannot be mathematically demonstrated, we can trust it with moral certainty because the prophets “did not teach with an evil intent, but from a true heart” (III/186; xv.34).

### **III. Garber’s Problem**

With the sketch of Spinoza’s account just given, I now aim to reconstruct the concerns Garber and Della Rocca present about it. First, there appears to be evidence in Spinoza’s TTP that philosophy can undermine theology. Second, insofar as theology and philosophy both lead to love of neighbor (theology through obedience to God and philosophy through love and knowledge of God), they are continuous endeavors and not separate.

The first problem is textual. Spinoza gives philosophical reasoning the capability to convince a person that one or more of their theological beliefs is false. This may cause

an individual to lose faith in that doctrine and so threaten their obedience. To unpack this, recall that faith “requires not so much true doctrines, as pious doctrines” and for this faith to hold, the pious doctrines must be *believed* to be true and the believer must not encounter any rationally compelling arguments against that doctrine. So, on Spinoza’s account faith does not require true doctrines. It only requires doctrines that move the heart to obedience, “even if many of them do not have even a shadow of truth” (III/176; xiv.20). Our problem becomes explicit when Spinoza goes on to qualify this definition:

This is true provided the person who accepts them [doctrines] does not know they are false. If he did, he would necessarily be a rebel. For how could someone who is eager to love justice and to obey God worship as divine something he knows to be foreign to the divine nature? (III/176; xiv.20 Insert is mine)

Theological beliefs do not need to be demonstrated as true by reason in order to inspire obedience, but if it is known that a theological claim is philosophically false, then it ceases to be efficacious in producing obedience for the person with the newly found philosophical knowledge. Insofar as faith is required for obedience, as Spinoza affirms, the individual who loses faith in this way will not be able to obey God (III/175; xiv.14-15).<sup>11</sup> Thus, theological beliefs can be defeated by philosophical truths. For example, if a person believes that God exists and is a moral exemplar, then if a philosopher shows by mathematical demonstration that the conception of God as a moral exemplar is false, as Spinoza does in *Ethics* Part 1, then this belief will no longer lead to obedience.<sup>12</sup> Insofar

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<sup>11</sup> There are two types of obedience: Obedience to God, and obedience to the state. It is an interesting question whether faith is also required for an individual to be obedient to the state. If so, obedience would still be possible, but it would be directed at the state as a lawgiver, rather than God.

<sup>12</sup> *Ethics* I, Appendix.

as faith is “thinking such things about God that if you had no knowledge of them, obedience to God would be destroyed,” it follows that philosophical truths can destroy the faith that leads to obedience.<sup>13</sup> Garber points this out:

...such a person may well lose his faith without replacing it with an acceptable substitute. Such a person will be without a guide in life. Insofar as he rejects the tenets of universal faith, he will be incapable of obedience, but insofar as he is not (yet?) fully rational, he will not behave well from reason either.... For the atheist, and for the imperfectly rational Spinozist, it would seem that anything goes (183).

Garber argues that people who have lost faith and are still not fully rational pose a problem for Spinoza’s separation theory; these individuals destabilize social harmony. This is especially interesting in light of Spinoza’s argument that rational people will by the guidance of reason, necessarily endeavor to bring it about that men should live by the guidance of reason (E IV P37 Pr1).

A theological belief can be undermined by philosophical reflection and this is problematic for the Separation Theory, but Spinoza may have been aware of this in this conception of law. On my reading, Spinoza thought very few people (perhaps no one) were fully rational. He writes, “it’s not in anyone’s power to always use reason and be at the highest peak of human freedom...” (PT III/279; ii.8). Further, most people are not fully obedient to God, as Spinoza decries throughout the TTP, that is, they are not perfectly faithful. As such, it is likely Spinoza, known for his philosophical rigor, can account for Garber’s intermediary stage in which individuals are not fully obedient and

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<sup>13</sup> Curley notes that this is a broad sense of “know”.

not fully rational. The way to keep individuals who are not fully obedient and not fully rational, i.e., the majority of people, in social harmony is through law:

In this way Society has the power to prescribe a common rule of life, to make laws, and to maintain them – *not by reason*, which cannot restrain the affects (by [IV] P17S), but by threats (IV P37 Schol2 italics mine).

A state has laws to create harmony among individuals who are not fully rational.

A non-philosopher who stumbles upon a line of reasoning that shows his theological doctrines are false can do four things: (1) they can accommodate their doctrines of faith to their new understanding i.e. they retain their obedient status, yet as a philosophically minded theologian, they are interested in finding truth (III/178; xiv.32). This is what Spinoza calls dogmatism. (2) Or they could deny the veracity of the reasoning that shows their theological doctrine to be false; this is Spinoza's "skepticism". (3) A third option is that they would abandon their faith and not be fully rational, leaving them with no moral guide. In this case they would use this new line of reasoning as a greater license to sin (this is Garber's worry), or (4) they will begin to transition from being obedience-oriented to truth-oriented. As we will see in the next section, this fourth option is James's view. This person would continue to accommodate their doctrines of faith to their understanding as they begin a life of rational virtue; they would continue obeying until the eternal truths replace their theological truths.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Although this view appears similar to the dogmatist, the different would be that the dogmatist continues to hold scripture as philosophically true (at least allegorically) whereas this on this last route, a person will gradually become a Spinozist philosopher who holds that scripture is not aiming at philosophical truth.

The person who loses their faith would be similar to the person who is in bondage to their passions. Most individuals who lose faith do not immediately (or ever) become fully rational and so Spinoza's account preserves social harmony via state laws. Thus, even without taking into account the intermediary stage between non-philosopher and philosopher, Spinoza explains how a society can function even though its people are in various stages of bondage to the passions. The question remains of how Spinoza can allow philosophy to undermine theological tenets while also claiming that philosophy and theology have different domains.

#### **IV. Della Rocca's Problem**

In the first problem, we saw that philosophy can encroach upon the domain of theology. A second problem, pointed out by Michael Della Rocca, is that the aims of theology and philosophy are conflated. Philosophy aims at truth and theology aims at obedience to God, which consists only in loving your neighbor (III/168; xiii.8). Yet a philosopher "guided by reason reaches precisely the conclusion that one should love one's neighbor as oneself. So, for the philosopher to seek the truth is, in the end, an endeavor aimed at obedience" (Della Rocca 236). That is, the rational person in Spinoza's *Ethics* recognizes that living by the guidance of reason produces harmony in a community because "every man who is guided by reason aims at procuring for others, too, the good that he seeks for himself" (E IV P73 Schol). The rational person is led by reason to love their neighbor – thus the theological aim of obeying God by loving your neighbor isn't completely separate from the aim of philosophy. Similarly, "the non-

philosopher who seeks obedience does not aspire to the grasp of truth that the philosopher seeks, nonetheless, the non-philosopher who becomes more obedient thereby becomes more rational and thus reaches – as much as he can – the truth.” The non-philosopher, by theological obedience endeavors to repay hatred with love (E IV P46) and therefore freedom from their passions, which is also what the philosopher seeks. The problem is that the philosophers and non-philosophers both end up reaching the conclusion that they should love one’s neighbor, that is, they both aim at obedience. The conclusion of loving one’s neighbor can be arrived at by reason and so the non-philosophers who become more obedient are also moving towards the philosophical truth. Della Rocca concludes that the endeavors of philosophy and theology are “continuous” and so it isn’t right to characterize them as having nothing in common (Della Rocca 236).

Della Rocca’s criticism seems intuitively correct; philosophers and non-philosophers both end up loving their neighbors. But strictly speaking, the methods of both of these groups are fundamentally different. Garber points out that the perfectly rational person will love God, but not out of obedience: “knowing that God is not the kind of being that gives commands, to the extent that we are rational, we simply can’t obey God” (Garber, 175-6). Spinoza writes,

For the love of God is not obedience, but a virtue which is necessarily in the man who rightly knows God. Obedience is concerned with the will of the one commanding, not with the necessity and truth of the matter...Moreover, we’ve shown that the divine laws seem to us to be laws, *or* things instituted, just as long as we do not know their cause. But when this is known, they thereby cease to be laws, and we embrace them not as laws, but as eternal truths. That is, obedience passes into love, which proceeds from true knowledge as necessarily as light does

from the sun. So under the guidance of reason we can love God, but not obey him. For we cannot embrace the divine laws as divine so long as we are ignorant of their cause; and we cannot, by reason, conceive God as establishing those laws like a prince. (III/264; xvi.53 n.)

Spinoza is making a distinction between coming to love God by means of *obeying* God

and coming to love God by means of *knowing* God. Thus, philosophers do not obey God because only an anthropomorphic God gives commands, and non-philosophers are not infringing on the domain of philosophy because they do not arrive at loving God via “true knowledge”. Although strictly speaking, the endeavors of theology and philosophy are separate due to the method by which they arrive at loving God, there is still a sense in which Della Rocca is right to question whether philosophy and theology are continuous.

Garber and Della Rocca criticize Spinoza account from two directions. If Della Rocca is correct, then philosophy and theology are continuous, rather than separate, in that they both move an individual towards obedience and reason. On the other hand, Garber argues that philosophy can undermine religious tenets such that an individual will lose their faith, and not be fully rational. Thus, theology has become a “handmaid” i.e. subservient to philosophy.

## V. Camps of Interpretation

So far I have outlined Spinoza’s account of the separation of philosophy and theology and pointed out the problems Garber and Della Rocca see in his account. Many others have also written on this topic; so my aim in this section is to situate ourselves

within this scholarship.<sup>15</sup> Generally, scholars who grapple with this problem in the TTP can be put into three categories:

- (1) Some have tried to show that Spinoza's account is *consistent*, by situating it in its historical context. For example, if we take into account the Stoic influence on Spinoza, or the contemporary Dutch Cartesian influence, we can better understand Spinoza's account of philosophy and theology and therefore rightly understand its consistency.<sup>16</sup>
- (2) Some argue that Spinoza simply could not or did not reconcile the various strains of thought within the TTP. This camp might affirm that Spinoza was not completely candid in his writing and yet hold that this fact does not fully account for the tension that arises between philosophy and theology.<sup>17</sup>
- (3) Others argue that Spinoza's account is *purposefully inconsistent*, that is, Spinoza's inconsistencies point to esoteric meaning designed to be understood only by erudite philosophers.<sup>18</sup> Proponents of this view might argue that Spinoza used specific rhetorical strategies in order to appease the theological

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<sup>15</sup> Relatively recent articles include Gildin (1980), Lucash (2001), Frankel (2002; 2005), Fraenkel (2008; 2011; 2013; 2016), James (2012), Douglas (2013), Nadler (2013), Harvey (2013), Anderson (2014), and LeBuffe (2015).

<sup>16</sup> Examples of this approach are Herman De Dijn, Frank Lucash, Susan James, and Alexander Douglas.

<sup>17</sup> Carlos Frankel (2008) is an example of this position.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Strauss is the most influential interpreter of this type. Hilail Gildin can also be included here.

orthodox (just enough to not persecute him) while also allowing the TTP to communicate to those able to understand Spinoza's real intentions.<sup>19</sup>

A recent example of resolving the tension by means of (1) is that of Susan James (2012). As she understands it, Garber and Della Rocca and other similar commentators object on the grounds that Spinoza "does not succeed in showing that philosophy and theology are mutually independent, but gives epistemological precedence to philosophy" (James 91). In the next section I will reconstruct James's argument, which aims to vindicate Spinoza's account. I will then show that James's argument does not account for the problem of philosophy's ability to undermine a theological belief and so there remains a problem for Spinoza's Separation Theory.

## VI. Susan James on Resolving the Problems

Susan James sets out to show that Spinoza succeeds in showing that theology and philosophy are separate. She concedes to critics of Spinoza's account that theology and philosophy are not on equal footing, i.e., philosophy has the upper ground, but she nevertheless argues that Spinoza's account of the separation between theology and

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<sup>19</sup> As Curley points out (*Collected Works* II, 53), a central interpretive difficulty within Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* (TTP) is whether Spinoza wrote candidly, free expressing his views, or esoterically, cloaking his true views in apparent contradictions such that only erudite philosophers could derive his true views. The reasoning behind this interpretive problematic goes as follows. Spinoza was a first rate philosopher capable of producing a work as rigorous as his *Ethics*, thus Spinoza must have had some reason for allowing the numerous ostensible ambiguities into the TTP. Spinoza "ran the risk of persecution if he ventured too far from orthodoxy". In regards to the separation of philosophy and theology, he actually believed that philosophy is stronger than theology, but needs to keep this ambiguous to stave off the theologians. Thus, one route of interpretation holds that Spinoza wrote esoterically. This interpretive difficulty will not be the focus of this paper, but it is important to note that one of the apparent contradictions that Leo Strauss uses in support of the esoteric interpretation is Spinoza's separation theory.

philosophy can be shown to be consistent. James does not address any critic in particular, although she lists Strauss (1952) and Della Rocca (2008) in her references.

James's main argument is that although critics are correct that Spinoza does not put theology and philosophy on equal footing, "this does not undermine his claim to have established that the two forms of enquiry are in a relevant sense distinct" (94).<sup>20</sup> To argue for this position James relies on an argument by analogy. First she gives an illuminating and compendious summary of Spinoza's account of theology and philosophy. She then makes a case for structural isomorphism between the Spinoza's Separation Theory and Cicero's two-tier conception of *honestum*. The argument here is that Spinoza was significantly influenced by Cicero's two-tiered ethical system such that Spinoza's Separation Theory is modeled after Cicero's theory of virtue. Therefore, if understood as Ciceronian, we will see how philosophy and theology are separate even though philosophy is given the upper hand. James is seeking to answer two related questions: (1) if philosophy can undermine theology then there must be a connection between these two endeavors. How, then, can they be separate? (2) What is the *relationship* between philosophy and theology? I.e. how is it that philosophy and theology are both a "path to salvation" and how would an individual move from one path to the other (III/188; xv.44; *Ethics* P36, P36Schol)? To answer these question James clarifies the connection between

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<sup>20</sup> The very next sentence reads: "They are to be seen as both separate and overlapping, and as simultaneously independent and dependent" (94). We might take this to mean that theology and philosophy have different domains, yet their content can overlap. Or we might understand it as meaning that philosophy and theology are different paths to a similar goal of "blessedness".

Spinoza and Cicero so that Spinoza is understood as Ciceronian and Spinoza's separation of theology and philosophy can be shown to be coherent.

James first clarifies Spinoza's argument on its own terms. The difference between philosophy and theology is not one of content, but a difference of methods and goals/ends. James writes, "There is no specific subject matter that is essentially the preserve of one form of enquiry rather than the other, although each may in practice focus on certain distinctive topics" (James 94). For example, propositions about God are not necessarily a matter of theology – if the propositions concern truth claims and are based on the demonstrative method, then it is a matter of philosophy. The distinguishing factor between the two is the method: theology uses the method of imagination, which starts from particulars that derive from words and images, and reasons inductively from these to a type of knowledge characterized as "moral certainty". Theology uses "inductive" or historical reasoning based in Scripture to identify the divine commands revealed to the prophets. In contrast, "philosophical certainty" is based on clear and distinct ideas that are derived from first principles. Theology is not capable of defending its claims as philosophically certain, and this is not its task. The task of theology is to bring individuals in line with the divine law, namely, to 'love your neighbor'; moral certainty is sufficient for this task (James 95-96).

Spinoza most likely would have been familiar with Cicero's *De Officiis* (*On Duties*), and so James explicates Cicero's account of *honesta* within *De Officiis*.<sup>21</sup> On James's reading, Cicero distinguishes between two levels of virtue: the first level is a perfectly virtuous person that has the quality of *honestum* (sometimes translated as moral goodness or honorable) and has "a comprehensive capacity to respond virtuously to all situations, however complex and multi-faceted they may be" (James 100). In contrast, there is second-level of virtue which is a "likeness or *similitudo*" of perfect virtue to which all humans can aspire. For those with second-level *honestum* "their conception of what it would be virtuous to do will sometimes conflict with their conception of what it would be most advantageous" (James 101). For such people, the virtues of justice and communal cooperation are to be cultivated precisely because they have a tendency to seek personal advantage rather than the good of a community. It is even possible to progress from second-level *honestum* to perfect *honestum* by "extending one's philosophical understanding of what virtue consists in" (James 101). For James, the philosopher does not need to depend on theological instruction in order to arrive at moral knowledge (97).

James then goes on to make the comparison between Spinoza's account and Cicero's account of first-level and second-level virtue (James 101-106). First, Spinoza's

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Miller (the translation James refers to) translates *honesta* as "moral goodness" whereas Griffin and Atkins translate it as "honorable", noting that Cicero's ethics were a public matter. Public reputation and social standing were not divorced from virtue by Cicero and they (Griffin and Atkins) think "honorable" better conveys this. (Griffin and Atkins, xliv-xlv).

account can be broken into a two-tier system. Theology corresponds to second-level virtue and philosophy corresponds to first-level virtue. Theology's end is obedience and piety. It fulfills this by teaching scriptural narratives to help people live together in the harmonious manner that it dictates.<sup>22</sup> Philosophy's end is truth. It fulfills this by relying on a demonstrative method to uncover the relations between types of things, i.e., the most universal features of nature. Spinoza's first-level virtue is associated with "the kind of rational understanding that philosophy yields" and this is cultivated by philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Spinoza's second-level virtue is grounded on the workings of imagination and allows for the pursuit of virtue to be accessible to non-philosophers. Second-level virtue has a likeness of first-level virtue, but at a level that ordinary people can aspire to. In this way, second level *honestum* and perfect first-level *honestum* are analogous to theology and philosophy respectively.

Theology is meant to inspire obedience to the divine law, which 'consists in the exercise of loving kindness and justice.' As such, theology and second-level *honestum* are both concerned about living equitably with others (James 102). Humans have a duty to God to obey the divine law and so pursue the justice of the state. Because the theological virtue of obedience coincides with "justice" and justice is the virtue that is,

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<sup>22</sup> James quotes Spinoza as saying, that theology 'determines the tenets of faith only insofar as is sufficient for obedience; but precisely how they are to be understood, with respect to truth, it leaves to be determined by reason, which is really the light of the mind' (III/185). *When Does Truth Matter?* Pp. 96.

<sup>23</sup> First-level virtue is the "comprehensive capacity to respond virtuously to all situations, however complex". One who possesses first-level virtue is able to "blend and reconcile duties arising from individual duties."

for Spinoza, the key to a successful political order, theology helps to sustain the goals of the state. Humans have a duty to the state and so it follows that our duty to God coincides with our duty to the state (James 102).

When people possess second-level virtue, they lack philosophical understanding of virtue, but their grasp of individual virtues can be shaped by a repertoire of theological exemplars and narratives that show them how to behave in certain types of situations. E.g., for person x to resolve scenario y there must be an exemplar or narrative that guides person x to correct behavior for resolving y to avoid as much conflict as possible. Yet, exemplars and narratives applied to particular circumstances are less than comprehensive (they do not cover all possible situations), i.e., there cannot be a narrative or exemplar as a moral guide for every situation in life. It follows that theology cannot be expected to produce a form of social cooperation immune from conflict. James uses this line of reasoning to show that theology necessarily falls short of producing its goal of communal harmony (102). Note that James is here showing how philosophy has the upper hand over theology because theology falls short *on its own*.

Increasing philosophical understanding affords members of a community knowledge beyond second-level virtue and so would lead to increased cooperation and justice. That is, as philosophical understanding grows in a community, the people in the community will become increasingly capable of creating and sustaining a community whose members are comprehensively committed to co-operating. As community members increase their philosophical understanding, they can begin to appreciate what

their earlier view (second-level virtue) lacked and can correct its practical implications through cooperation (James 103). A question that James does not address is *how* it is that an individual or community begins to philosophize as I will explain in the next section.

Although philosophy and theology are mutually independent in their domains and goals, philosophy shares theology's capacity to bind a community in cooperation: "The injunction to live co-operatively therefore falls within the purview of philosophy as well as theology, and the central doctrine that theology teaches 'agrees with reason'" (James 97). So philosophy can replace theology as a higher form of piety, and in this way the "goal of theology has become absorbed into that of philosophy, and the pursuit of cooperation has become integral to the pursuit of wisdom" (James 105).

James concludes:

There is no inconsistency in Spinoza's claim that the ends of theology and philosophy are distinct. Instead, each practice represents a different state in a process of moral empowerment and as communities or members progress from one stage to the next, their outlooks change.... Recognizing Spinoza's debt to a Ciceronian conception of *honestum*, and thus to the legacy of classical humanism, attunes us to a model of moral knowledge that allows him to reconcile the separateness with the convergence of obedience and understanding. (James 106)

The religious or theological way of life is an "anticipation or likeness of the higher form of virtue and piety that philosophy engenders" (James 106). James tries to defend the consistency within Spinoza's account by arguing that philosophy and theology are indeed mutually independent in Spinoza's Separation Theory and this can be accounted for by explaining how the Separation Theory is modeled after Cicero's first-level and second-level virtue.

With our sketch of James's argument complete, I now aim to assess whether it helps us to resolve the problems laid out by Della Rocca and Garber. First, I will show that James's account, in agreement with my own assessment, allows us to make headway in resolving Della Rocca's problem. Second, I will argue that philosophy's ability to defeat theological beliefs, as Garber argues, inherently vitiates the distinction between theology and philosophy. That is, there cannot be a complete distinction between two methods or types of knowledge if one can undermine the other. Lastly, I will argue that James's explication of Spinoza does not satisfactorily erase this tension between philosophy and theology.

#### **VII. Are the problems solved?**

My purpose in this section is to see if James's account poses a solution to Della Rocca's and Garber's problems. I argued earlier (pp. 12-14) that Della Rocca's problem can be resolved and will here argue in support of Garber's problem. Della Rocca's problem is that we have reason to believe philosophy and theology are continuous, rather than separate, in that they both move an individual towards obedience and reason. On the other hand, Garber argues that philosophy can undermine religious tenets such that an individual will lose faith in a tenet and possibly pose a threat to society. The implication of this view is that theology has become a "handmaid," i.e., subservient to philosophy, something Spinoza rejects.

James concedes to the critics that although Spinoza attests to equality between philosophy and theology, he ends up giving more power to philosophy. What James

wants to defend is that theology and philosophy are *distinct* (separate) in a consistent way within Spinoza's account. In other words, although philosophy is more powerful than theology, neither is ancillary to the other. James gives a reading of Spinoza in which the putative tension between philosophy and theology never arises.

I argue, in agreement with Garber, that the ability of philosophy to defeat theological beliefs and so destroy their ability to produce obedience is evidence against a complete distinction between theology and philosophy. James shows how philosophy can fulfill the goals of theology in the ways that theology falls short, but she does not address how philosophy can be the perpetrator of theology's failure to produce obedience and cooperation. Because philosophy can produce beliefs that defeat theological beliefs, there cannot be a complete distinction between philosophy and theology. To be more precise, there must be an intermediate stage between the non-philosophical person (who has had a faith tenet undermined by philosophy) and full rationality. Within this intermediate stage it is possible to lose faith in a tenet that produced obedience, to some degree, and yet not be fully rational; this person will not obey insofar as faith is required for obedience, as Spinoza holds, nor will they love God. In this condition, they will be a danger to society (Garber 182-3). This is a problem because it shows that philosophy can defeat theological beliefs, and so contra Spinoza and James, philosophy does have dealings with theology. I will show that James's account does not adequately account for this problem.

#### **A. Are Philosophy and Theology Separate or Continuous?**

James gives an account of how the following two propositions can both be true in Spinoza's account: (1) philosophy and theology are completely separate such that each has its own domain (i.e., the Separation Theory) and (2) philosophy can be more powerful than theology. The separation theory is threatened if there is any way in which philosophy and theology enter the other's domain. I argued earlier, that obedience, strictly speaking, is something that the philosopher will not be able to do because they would not hold an anthropomorphic view of God as a lawgiver.

James argues that philosophy and theology both share a capacity to bind together a community in cooperation – does this not annul the separation theory? Philosophy and theology both aim at this one thing: love of neighbor/cooperation. Yet there is still a way in which theology and philosophy are separate. Spinoza writes that the most perfect person is the one who “loves above all else the intellectual knowledge of God, the most perfect being, and takes the greatest pleasure in that knowledge” (III/60; iv.12). The perfect person will have supreme blessedness from their knowledge and love of God. The knowledge and love of God cannot be gained from theology:

...faith in historical narratives, no matter how certain that faith may be, cannot give us any knowledge of God. So it also cannot give us the love of God. For love of God arises from knowledge of him, and knowledge of God must be drawn from common notions certain and known through themselves. So it is far from true that faith in historical narratives is necessary for us to attain our supreme good. (III/61; iv.19)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> This quote makes clear that theology is not necessary for us to attain our supreme good. It leaves *unclear* whether historical narratives can lead someone to attain their supreme good. For instance, Spinoza writes: “Therefore, if a man is rich in these fruits, loving-kindness, gladness, peace, patience, beneficence, goodness, good faith, gentleness, and self-restraint... whether he has been taught only by reason or only by Scripture, he has truly been taught by God and is completely blessed” (III/80; v.50). Elsewhere Spinoza shuts this possibility down: “...our supreme good, not only depends on the knowledge of God, but consists

What is striking is that neither reading Scripture, nor holding true theological beliefs, nor obeying God by loving your neighbor lead to love of God. Rather, because “all things in nature involve and express the concept of God,” we can love God by perfecting our intellect with knowledge of natural things (III/60; iv.11). On Spinoza’s account, theology produces obedience to God and philosophy gives rise to love of God. There is a way in which theology and philosophy remain distinct and so avert Della Rocca’s problem. There is a way to love God via obedience based on scripture and there is a love of God that comes from knowledge of natural things. Strictly speaking, loving God by obedience is only a semblance of the love of God that comes from knowledge of natural things produced by philosophy. So although both ways of loving God lead to communal cooperation, they take different paths to get there. I take this to be what James means when she says philosophy and theology are “in a relevant sense distinct” (94).

### **B. Can Philosophy destroy Faith?**

Garber argues that philosophical reasoning has the ability to undermine theological beliefs. As noted earlier, James accounts for how theology, which is based on historical narratives, falls short on its own. She does not address the problem of philosophy causing theology to fall short of its goal of obedience. I take this to be a problem of the transition from the path of theology to the path of philosophy; such a

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entirely in it” (III/60; iv.12). And earlier in chapter five Spinoza says that he who is led by the natural light is more blessed than the common people who need faith in historical narratives “because in addition to true opinions, he has a clear and distinct conception” (III/78; v.40).

person who is moving from obedience to reason and still lacks philosophical maturity will possibly be confused and so vulnerable to the passions. They will probably fall into bondage to the passions on their way to philosophical maturity (rationally understanding virtue). I will argue that this undermining of obedience is consistent with Spinoza's separation theory.

James argues that the change from theological thinking to philosophical thinking is "gradual" (105). Each endeavor represents a "different stage in a process of moral empowerment" (106). She explains that the tenets of faith can cease to serve the purpose of obedience on the way to philosophizing, but she does not explain how a community begins to philosophize. How can a community begin to philosophize without a theological tenet being undermined by philosophy? James does not give an explanation for this. The closest she comes is to say, "The goal of theology has become absorbed into that of philosophy, and the pursuit of cooperation has become integral to the pursuit of wisdom" (105). To restate this, James does not address the possibility of philosophical truth undermining a person's obedience in a case where the person cannot immediately rely on philosophical maturity to pursue communal cooperation. As such, there is a problem in Spinoza's claim that philosophy and theology can each "maintain control of its own domain with the utmost harmony" (III/182; xv.12). Insofar as rationality pursues a similar end goal to theological beliefs, namely, the goal of communal cooperation and philosophy can undermine a person's theological belief, then philosophy can end up damaging communal cooperation by undermining a theological belief.

### VIII. Conclusion

The 17<sup>th</sup> century debate on the relation between theology and philosophy can be understood as a response to what Paul writes in his epistle to the Colossians: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit... and not according to Christ” (NRSV).<sup>25</sup> If we take a literal and superficial reading of Paul here, “philosophy” is a direct adversary to the type of faith that Paul advocates elsewhere, and so, following Paul, any theologian would be on guard against “philosophy”. Contra this interpretation of Paul, Spinoza defends the freedom to philosophize by separating philosophy and theology and making it possible to be faithful and also to think philosophically about anything, no matter how unorthodox (III/179-80; xiv.39). Spinoza endeavors to boost philosophy’s authority while also preserving theology’s authority within its domain. Yet, I have argued there is tension in his account that remains to be solved.

We can account for Della Rocca’s problem of apparent contiguity between philosophy and theology by understanding Spinoza’s distinction between obeying God and loving God. Garber’s problem is that Spinoza gives philosophy knowledge the ability to defeat theological beliefs. James’s account of how to read Spinoza as consistent is attractive, yet it does not adequately address how philosophy can create disharmony within the domain of theology by showing the falsity of a theological belief. James

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<sup>25</sup> Jolley (1998; 363-4) points this out. Lodewijk Meyer spends a chapter addressing Paul’s remarks concerning philosophy.

argues that philosophy can have the upper hand while still remaining distinct from theology. She shows that Spinoza's account mirrors Cicero's account of *honestum* such that the theological way of life is a semblance of the higher form of the virtuous life engendered by philosophy. I have argued that James does not succeed in rendering theology and philosophy completely distinct in Spinoza's TTP as it only accounts for how theology internally falls short of its goals. As of yet, there remains the problem of philosophy's ability to defeat theological beliefs and therefore destabilize an individual's obedience.

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