

Transcript

Emanuele Costa - "Spinoza on Prophecy and Belief Justification"

Emanuele Costa:

What I'm going to discuss today is a dominant contemporary conception of truth that defines truth as justified true belief. This is called the JTB, post-Gettier theory. So, this concept implies a triple requirement for a certain state of affairs to qualify as truth. First it must be a belief, so it must involve an intentional relation between a knower and a known state of affairs. Secondly it must be true, that means that the state of affairs described by the belief must correspond to a state of affairs existing independently of the subject knower. And third, in order to qualify as truth this belief cannot happen by chance to be true, but it might must be supported by some sort of evidence or verification process. And this process needs to justify the knower in selecting this belief as her belief. So, in this context in this essay sorry I illustrate how Spinoza in the TTP offers an alternative view of truth which applies exclusively I will argue to prophecy in his nosological system. To be clear this prophetic truth does not share the same epistemological value enjoyed by a priori deductive reasoning which is obtained by means of intellect or intuition however the other image of truth that I think emerges from the TTP provides a utilitarian sort of portrait of prophecy which nonetheless employs strict epistemological criteria to be identified as true prophecy. So, I shall argue that Spinoza's definition of true prophecy implies a suitable process of verification which establishes the justification procedure for a given state of affairs endorsed by a prophet. Moreover, I will argue that Spinoza avoids the establishment of prophecy as true in the proper sense but that nonetheless he inserts the notion of goodness which we know is very perspectival but could be justified in terms of maybe usefulness as an important criterion for determining which prophecies can be believable.

So in the Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect Spinoza formulates a definition of truth that does not require a perception of knowledge and he says certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself so the mode by which we are aware of the formal essence is certainty itself, and from this again it's clear that for the certainty of the truth no other sign (and this word is very significant) sign is needed than having a true idea, for as we have shown in order for me to know it's not necessary to know that I know. So, the intentional relationship between a state of affairs defined as truth and the knower that interacts with that state of affairs needs not to be conscious for Spinoza. The objective relationship between a state of affairs and the knower is described as a mode of knowledge that connects a formal essence with the awareness of the knower. To offer an example one could consider the formal essence of God. In the Ethics Spinoza affirms that such formal essence is constituted as Antonio reminded us by the infinite attributes, since human knowledge is finite even when adequate it's impossible that human beings can access this formal essence in total. Human knowledge of God's formal essence is bound to be partial and limited to the attribute that expressed God's essence within the human reach, that's thought and extension. Nonetheless Spinoza affirms that god's infinite essence and his eternity are known to all in the scholium of proposition 47 of part two [Ethics]. Thus, we must conclude that for Spinoza partial knowledge does not imply failure to know. Furthermore, Spinoza explicitly rejects any form of truth confirming sign as a necessary requirement for truth. And this is the second quote on the presentation, on the slide: 'since truth therefore requires no sign but it suffices in order to remove all doubt to have the objective essences of things ideas it follows it follows that the true method is not to seek a sign of truth after the acquisition of ideas but the true method is

the way the truth itself or the objective essences of things or the ideas all those signified the same should be sought in the proper order', so truth becomes kind of a methodological issue for us

Now let me switch subjects and let's move to the prophets. In the TTP Spinoza dedicates meaningful lines to the assessment of prophecy as a vehicle for the transmission of truth. In particular he's interested in securing the distinction between reason and imagination as kinds of cognition.

So, in chapter 2 he says unlike a clear and distinct idea a simple imagination does not by its nature involve certainty and this is the very same word that he uses in the TIE [Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect]. So, to be able to be certain of things we imagine we must add something to the imagination and that's reasoning. There is a clear continuity between this insistence on self-evidence of truth and the necessity for a sign in the case of prophecy. Intuitively this should suggest that prophecy does not possess an automatic or analytic connection to truth. Again, by itself prophecy cannot involve certainty. As we've 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. So, the verification process demanded by Spinoza in the case of prophecy more closely resembles the modern scientific method I think because it formulates an a posteriori hypothesis and then it attempts to validate that hypothesis through experience, through a sign.

So, after discussing the possibility of false prophecy which I'm not going to touch today but I'm happy to discuss in the Q&A. But what I want to say is that for Spinoza false prophecy is that which has the effect of leading believers towards both error, in an epistemological sense, and impiety on a moral sense. So, Spinoza comes back and he's careful to mark the boundaries of what he considers to be true prophecy and this I hope is a nice echo to Susan James' talk yesterday although this is on a much lower level. So, for Spinoza prophecy is strictly related to piety since it serves to guide human behaviour and he says: 'Although all of this seems to show that prophecy and revelation are very doubtful', because they don't have this hold on certainty, 'still they do as we said have a great deal of certainty. For God never deceives the pious and the elect'. So, in describing the revelation vacated by prophecy, Spinoza explicitly connects it to objective knowledge, the formal essence of a state of affairs, and he says a few lines after: 'To the pious he revealed the thing as it was, and he did not prohibit him from predicting the truth'. However, the relationship between the prophet as a knower and the objective reality of truth is decidedly non-apperceptive. Nevertheless, I've said the prophet's certainty was only moral, because no one can justify himself before god. So, let me now switch to how do we know if prophecy leads us to truth or just to belief. Well Spinoza provides us with what he considers the verification criteria for true prophecy and he says the whole of prophetic certainty is 'founded on three things. One, that the prophets imagined the things revealed to them very vividly, in the way we are usually affected by objects when we are awake. Two, that there was a sign. And finally - and this is the chief thing - that they had a heart inclined only to the right and the good'. So, I think we should note here that the fact that he wants to provide verification criteria establishes prophecy as a maybe only sometimes valid vehicle for truth. But it also must be noted that Spinoza first two criteria here do not bear a huge difference from the ones usually applied to cognition through imagination. And that is, apart from the Ethics, or apart from scientific or philosophical reasoning how we usually engage with the world. So, we have kind of a parallelism between how a prophet knows just better, and how we engage with the world on a day-to-day basis. One could say that a prophet is some sort of hyper-knower moving only within imagination. So, let us go and compare what the truth of prophecy and the truth of the TIE [Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect] have in common and what kind of differences they have. So, for Spinoza truth does not require a perception. Well neither does prophecy right? A prophet does not know unless... they only know that they're good they don't

know that they're truthful. Well prophecy does require a sign; truth explicitly does not. And finally, truth is mainly concerned with the essences of objects although as we've seen although prophecy is primarily concerned with behaviour and piety, it also reveals things as they are. So, I want to try to make this move and I'm very aware that there's a lot of work still to done on this this is kind of an opener of a future paper, but we can affirm I think that prophecy does not fall under the definition of truth provided by Spinoza that we've discussed before. But we can ask ourselves does Spinoza prophet fall under the definition of truth of contemporary philosophy, so the JTB model? Well let's see it is a belief in so far as it concerns the relationship between a knower and the known object. It does undergo some process of justification, because it has set criteria for verification that it is distinguished from false prophecies, so it has verification and falsification. And then the final crucial question: is it true, does it establish a correspondence between a knower and the world? Well clearly this is the most difficult question to answer. Sometimes Spinoza seems to be going in this direction insofar as he suggests that the essence of things are revealed to the prophet as they are. And then given Spinoza's skepticism towards the notions of good and bright as universal categories, it seems unlikely that he would claim that prophecy is subject to being defined as a justified true belief. However, what I'm going to suggest in the future developments of this paper that I've sketched for you today, I think he would be amenable to a variation of the standard JTB model. And I think we should call that a justified good belief, so the goodness of the belief that is its suitability for the rationality of the subject-knower and its interests substitutes the truth of the belief. And that's all I had for today. Thank you very much.