

SPINOZA CONTRA CARLYLE: AN INQUIRY
CONCERNING THE SOURCES OF DISAGREEMENT IN
THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TREATISE AND *ON HEROES,*
HERO-WORSHIP, AND THE HEROIC IN HISTORY

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A conflict exists among men that is as ancient as the origins of human thought, science, religion, literature and philosophy. Once called the "ancient quarrel" between philosopher and poet by Plato, it embroils all people who have questioned, marveled at or attempted to quantify the world humans inhabit every day; natural or constructed, rational or supernatural. The reasons for this conflict's inexorable link to the pages of history and human interaction could very well be due to the fact it is so fundamental to who we are as people, the ways in which we interact and the things in which we put our "faith" or hold to be true. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that all people recognize this conflict and so achieve a better understanding of its nature and, perhaps, the nature of their fellow man as well.

Two very useful mediums through which this conflict can be analyzed are Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and Scottish historian and critic Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Both mediums present a well-representative argument for one of the opposing sides, and when juxtaposed, lay clear the conflict which these arguments birth.

In analyzing this conflict, it would first be best to give a name to the opposing sides, to define who these people are, what they do and what they believe; however, it is even on these most fundamental points which Spinoza and Carlyle disagree.

In the final paragraph of the preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza puts forth his claim concerning the dichotomy into which the arguments break.

I would say more, but I do not want my preface to extend to a volume, especially as I know that its leading propositions are to Philosophers but commonplaces. To the rest of mankind I care not to commend my treatise, for I cannot expect that it contains anything to please them: I know how deeply rooted are the prejudices embraced under the name of religion. . . . They would gain no good themselves, and might prove a stumbling-block to others, whose philosophy is hampered by the belief that Reason is mere handmaid to Theology, and whom I seek in this work especially to benefit. (11)

Spinoza divides those who would read his work into three categories; “Philosophers” – for whom the work will be of no benefit because they understand all of these ideas already, the “masses” – who Spinoza initially refers to as *everyone* and hopes they will *never* read his work because they will only misread it, and finally those with the “belief that Reason is a mere handmaid to Theology” – who Spinoza regards as those who will benefit from his work.

For Spinoza, the Philosopher is someone who is guided by what he calls the “light of reason” (8). Reason, a type of orderliness to thinking, is knowledge all people possess even if they choose not to use it. There is nothing superstitious about reason, nor the knowledge we deduce from it; it is something objective which is governed by laws and which every human mind has access to. There is evidence, there are proofs, and the world and natural laws all work in a coherent, explainable way.

On the other hand, those who Spinoza refer to as believing “Reason is a mere handmaid to Theology” – or, as he calls them, the Prophets – are people for whom a kind of “prophetic” knowledge – “sure knowledge revealed by God to men” – supersedes reason in importance (13). These types of people, supposedly, possess a type of knowledge that not everyone can have or even understand, given as “revelation” to them by God(s) (13). Spinoza remarks that these people have an especially strong “imagination” and it is through this that they obtain the prophetic knowledge (27). It is then, through analogy, that they convey this knowledge as prophecy, often relying on a type of sign to accompany the prophecy as a proof they are a true prophet. The

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connection between a particularly vivid imagination and the acceptance of the prophet is important; it is the prophet who is able to create the best analogy i.e. the analogy which is both easily understandable and most accurately conveys the message it is carrying, that will lead him to be accepted over another prophet with an imagination less vivid.

Finally, there are the “masses” who, as their name suggests, make up the majority of human society. Spinoza describes these people as being acutely superstitious, waffling between fear and hope, always searching for a way to gain favor in the universe. They are a middle ground in the quarrel, following either the Philosopher or the Prophet, depending on who makes them feel most at ease.

Clearly, Spinoza would fall into the category of the Philosopher. This is observable through the way in which he presents his argument; he categorizes, defines for us what the words he uses mean in this context, and lays forward a clear and logically constructed argument. Feelings, emotions or imagination have nothing to do with it, and will even hamper clear, reasonable thinking if we allow them to control the mind. The Philosopher is not concerned with superfluous outer trappings, but instead the real meat and bones of the thing, the truth which the appearance conceals.

Spinoza considers the people standing in opposition to the Philosophers, the Prophets, as people who depend upon an abstract, unverifiable type of knowledge that they claim to be divinely inspired. Unlike reason, this is a type of knowledge that by definition only a very few can have, and so must disseminate it to “the masses” through scripture or “allegory” (25). This prophecy and allegory is not dependent upon any types of objective proof or evidence, but is a purely emotional and spiritual exercise that is inherently subjective.

This type of thinking and the definitions Spinoza presents for the Philosopher and Prophet stand in sharp contrast to Carlyle’s perspective on the quarrel. In his work *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle sets himself the task of analyzing and understanding “Great Men, their manner of appearance in our world’s business, how they have shaped themselves in the world’s history, what ideas men formed of them . . .” (5). Early in his work, Carlyle begins to talk about religion and his idea of what “true” religion is. When Carlyle says “religion,” he is not talking about a theocratic, dogmatic “church-creed” but “the thing a man dose practically believe, (and this is often enough without asserting it even to himself, much less to others) . . . and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe. . . .

This is his religion; or, it may be, his mere skepticism and no-religion . . .” (7).

Here, Carlyle sets up what could loosely be defined as an “argument” (though the concept of such is wholly inadequate in understanding Carlyle’s thought). The Hero, or Spinoza’s “Prophet,” is a person who is able to mold men—the masses—into his own image. The “masses” take on the characteristics—Carlyle would prefer to call it feelings—of this Great Man not because he empirically proves to them he is the best, or explained himself to them in a logical proof, but because this Hero is a kind of “light-fountain” to which people are naturally drawn, he has a certain way about him that men instinctively recognize as true and good and so put their faith in him (6).

When speaking about religion, Carlyle is uninterested in what people profess to believe, but asks what they “practically” believe, what their actions show they believe. Emphasis must be put on the feeling that controls the thought that precipitates the action. Religion is not a set of creeds, morals and dogmas, but a feeling about the Universe as a whole. It is this feeling, which finds its source in the Hero, and which men take from him and use to pattern themselves after him.

For Carlyle, Spinoza’s concept of the Philosopher is nothing more than a man whose religion is skepticism, and who has devalued the world by attaching to it formulas and mechanisms (reason) that say nothing about what man “practically” does. There is no proof—at least “proof” in Spinoza’s sense—for Carlyle, and to talk in such a way is to completely misunderstand this feeling and the faith men put in it. Reason, philosophy or the material sciences cannot lead you to this feeling because there is no way of measuring or quantifying, in any scientific or philosophical way, this feeling.

The crux of disagreement between these two radically different ideas lay in the underlying assumptions each side is making about the world. The Philosopher views the universe through the lens of reason; intrinsic truths exist within the universe, we deduce these through logical means and accept them with evidence and solid reasoning. Feeling has nothing to do with it; it doesn’t matter how you *feel* about the Law of Non-Contradiction, it simply is. The Hero, on the other hand, sees the world as a mysterious place, a place in which it is possible to mold truth through will and in which appearance, and feeling about that appearance, are the only important things. The feeling from which the Hero takes his truth is not something that can be accessed through formulas or reason because it is not the type of thing that those formulas are set up to measure.

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Spinoza and Carlyle's thought, in a way, almost exist in entirely different intellectual dimensions. Spinoza is uninterested in the fleeting physical world; he wants to get to the objective truths that the world conceals because anything else will eventually wither and die. Two and two will forever equal four; it is a truth regardless of our feelings about it. Carlyle is only interested in the physical world, because, for him, there is nothing else; there is no objective truth at the center of things, what matters is our feelings and sensations within the world we live; anything else, like scientific truths, are impractical and say nothing about our existence here and now.

One institution of man that both authors spend a large amount of time examining and worrying over is religion. Each offers a different account of what exactly religion is, why people believe it and what its purpose is. For both Spinoza and Carlyle, religion is a key factor in determining what the masses will believe and follow, and the masses, being the majority of society, are a fairly big deal.

Spinoza defines religion in terms of superstition, as an institution that plays upon the fears of the masses through fiery rhetoric, "sacred" ritual and claims to be the only holder of actual truth. Near the end of his preface, Spinoza comments "I draw the conclusion that Revelation [religion or faith] has obedience for its sole object, therefore, in purpose no less than in foundation and method, stands entirely aloof from ordinary knowledge . . ." (9). This passage can mean two separate things: either that religion teaches its followers how to be obedient, or that its sole purpose is obedience.

Therefore, people follow religion and believe the prophet because they are superstitious and driven by fear; religion is an institution that nurtures this fear and claims to be the truth through pomp of ritual and rhetoric, and this institution's only purpose is obtaining the obedience of the masses, over which they then hold a kind of power. The truth and obedience which religion teaches claims to supersede ordinary knowledge or reason, because that type of knowledge has no practical purpose and moves men away from the truth of God and the Prophet.

Carlyle would, of course, disagree. Farther into his work, Carlyle asks why people have believed religions throughout human history, and not just why people have believed them, but believed *in* them, so much so that they will die for them. Carlyle presents an opposing argument, similar to Spinoza's, that claims it was the allegory (strangely similar to Spinoza's "analogy") that the prophets and religious leaders employed that drew people to religion. For Carlyle, this is not only demeaning, but

wholly ridiculous. Carlyle calls this type of thinking “quackery” and claims that no man would ever believe something simply because of the story they are told, but because there is something which precedes the story that the story awakens within them (9). The faith that men have in religion, the feeling that they have about God and the Universe, is something within them all along. The essence of the story precedes its existence, and so men follow the Hero because of this faith he is able to touch within them through the story. Again, the feeling—the faith all men are given by the Hero—supersedes the thought—the story/analogy—and precipitates the action.

Spinoza views religion as an elaborate organization of superstitions, rituals and false truths in which men put their faith because they are prone to superstition. There is no true faith or feeling that these men have, they are simply being duped by people who can play with their fears. Carlyle cannot believe this; for him, men are not stupid enough to put their faith so strongly in a story that they are willing to die for it just because they crave something for which to be obedient. There is a feeling that they possess before they even hear the story, and the story is just able to touch that feeling, and so they follow it because they recognize that feeling in it, and recognize the feeling as truth.

From what has been laid out so far, it is clear that both Spinoza and Carlyle both speak in terms of a truth that they possess or a true knowledge they have. Therefore, it is not surprising that each has a differing view of what knowledge is and how and who can possess knowledge.

Despite the view Spinoza expounds in his work of the masses as being a superstitious, fear based lot who are easily duped, there is ample reason to believe that he is just putting on a front, and does not believe this at all! As has been shown, Spinoza hopes for his book to appeal to the Prophet/Hero, a person who, in both his view and, in a way, Carlyle’s view, possess a certain something—be it feeling or knowledge—that is inaccessible to the majority of men. Would it not then be most profitable to speak to these people in a way that feeds their ego, talking about the masses as a bunch of know-nothings who need to be brought into obedience either by the light of reason or by religion? Spinoza believes that reason is something which every single person who has or will ever live possess and can employ. He holds a very democratic view of knowledge, there is no “type” of knowledge which one person can possess and another not, and through this all men are equal and equally competent.

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Carlyle, when he talks about his feeling-that-is-truth, does not believe it is something which we can *all* possess, but which a few men possess and so reflect it upon the mass of men. If all men possessed this truth, than why, when we look at history, are we really looking at the doings and ambitions of the few; Alexander, Christ, Napoleon, Hitler! This truth that the Hero possesses allows him to galvanize the masses who would without him be lost and flounder. This democratic truth which the Philosopher talks about is useless, scientific formulas and logical proofs have no bearing upon the practical aspects of a man's life and will not protect his family, feed him, or promise him happiness; if anything, atheistic sciences and philosophies are depressing and bring about inaction.

When one takes a hard look at what is truly being argued, it is easy to see the political and ethical consequences. And these consequences, be they good or bad, have and still do affect every single person in all periods of time (on this point both Spinoza and Carlyle would *agree* . . . finally!).

There is a deeply political undercurrent to both authors' writings. One of Spinoza's stated aims in his treaties is to show that freedom of thought is essential to the overall freedom and piety of a Republic. And there is ample reason to believe that Spinoza supported some form of democracy as his view of knowledge shows; all people equally possess the "natural light" of reason and so every man is competent and capable of adding to his government.

Carlyle's politics, naturally, differs greatly from Spinoza's as the stated aim of his book is to examine "great men": the leaders and "modelers" that mold the mass of men (5). Carlyle is interested in kingly men to whom all others are subservient- that is the Hero! From looking at Carlyle's view of knowledge (or feeling) it is easy to see the move to something decidedly un-democratic.

Carlyle's work puts forth the claim that it is a few special men who lead the course of history and which the mass of men follow. This, however, is a view of history and politics that has generally fallen out of favor, especially with the birth of Marxism and the view that it is not a few men who lead into an uncertain future, but great forces of men who move history forward to some kind of pattern. Few monarchies exist any longer, and the idea of a proletariat revolution (be it American or Russian) is common to recent history.

From an ethical standing, the conflict between Philosopher and Hero debates how it is we go about examining ethical truths. The field of ethics in philosophy studies what the definitions of good and evil are,

how we can judge an action as either moral or immoral, and what justice is and how best to go about achieving it. Different philosophers expound views that can be ascribed as either being ethically absolute (there is some kind of right and wrong and a way of defining it) or relativistic (there is no right or wrong, or just no way of properly gauging it), but it is safe to say that all philosophers contend that it is reason and logical thinking which leads us to these views. The Philosopher as defined in this paper would most usually describe the view of a human feeling as a guide to truth as being dangerous.

The Hero expounds a version of truth which is based on feeling; what we feel is true through our connection with the “mysterious Universe,” and this feeling is ultimately given to the mass of men through the Hero (12). Carlyle himself would not think of this view of truth as relative or absolute but as the only kind of truth there is: think of it as its own absolutism—it is both absolutely true because it comes from the Hero, but is wholly subjective, because that is how the Hero obtains that truth. In fact, he would most likely not even want to speak in terms of absolutism or relativism.

So, as a way of summing up the essence of what is argued here, and, hopefully, providing a much more tangible example of both the views of the Philosopher and the Hero, what should be looked at is a very famous *philosophical* device which Carlyle discusses in his work: Plato’s Allegory of the Cave.

To begin, the Allegory, plainly stated, is this: Imagine there is a cave, and in the cave, there are some men chained to the cave floor, completely immobilized, who can only look straight ahead to a wall onto which are projected shadows from people passing in front of a flame above and behind the men. For the sake of the Allegory assume that these men have never been outside the cave, and never even been in any position other than their current one; chained to the floor, watching the shadows of people passing by. Now, suppose that one of these prisoners escapes his bonds, sees the light at the entrance of the cave, and runs out into the world.

Once outside he is completely blinded by the sun. He can see nothing, and so wanders about aimlessly until finally his eyesight begins to return and he can first see shadows, than people, than the world around him. Eventually he notices that the light by which he can see is coming from somewhere and so he would recognize the sun as the thing giving off light. Finally, suppose that this man is immensely intrigued by this outside world and wants to share it with his fellows in the cave (who are still trapped and looking at just the shadows on the wall). The man

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goes back to the cave and sits in the same place he did before, but with one difference; he, having been exposed to the sun for so long, is once again blinded, this time by the darkness, and so cannot see the shadows for a long time. His fellow prisoners, meanwhile, not only do not believe him, but also believe the “outside” he speaks of has ruined his eyesight and is not worth exploring. In fact, they would most likely react violently to him and want to kill the man.

Obviously, Carlyle and Spinoza each have a different way they interpret the allegory. Spinoza’s interpretation (and, it is safe to say, the interpretation of philosophers all across history) looks at the allegory in terms of Plato’s Theory of Forms, which attempts to put things on a hierarchical scale of how “real” they are. Plato would place things like sensations, emotions, and physical bodies low on his scale because they are fleeting material things that can exist at one moment and are gone the next. Towards the top of his scale, Plato places things commonly called “truths” – things like mathematical equations, scientific and logical proofs and the things which philosophy studies. For Plato, these truths at the top are the only real things that exist, because they are eternal and exist whether humans are here to perceive and understand them or not. Physical things like you, a chair or even the Earth, exist for only a few fleeting seconds when compared to the enormity of time, and things like feelings or sensations are even further down because they change from moment to moment.

While most philosophers (Spinoza included) no longer agree with the metaphysical theory of Plato’s hierarchy, they do agree with the metaphor. The truths at the top are the most important things to pursue; it is about the truth that the appearance conceals. Philosophers and scientists constantly strive to get out of the cave in their search for wisdom and the truths that control our world.

Carlyle, on the other hand, uses the allegory as a call for men to remember their ancestors and their impulse to marvel at nature and the miracle that is the natural world. In Carlyle’s interpretation the man is awestruck by the beauty of the outside world and even falls down to worship the sun because of the feeling it creates within him. Carlyle’s version is deeply rooted in praise of the *physical* world and the feeling that world gives us, devoid of scientific objectivity or formulas. The physics at work which create the sun is unimportant when compared to the beauty of the sun and the feeling we obtain when we allow ourselves to become one with the natural world and the mystery around us.

Carlyle has completely inverted Plato’s hierarchy and elevated the feeling as the most real thing in the universe. The Hero is like the sun

that gives the man such an overwhelming feeling that he can do nothing but fall down in praise of it. It is this same feeling that the masses recognize in the Hero, and so they pattern themselves after him and follow him.

It is the difference that exists in Carlyle and Spinoza's interpretations of the allegory that sums up perfectly the differences in their philosophy. Carlyle is concerned with the practical, physical world and the feeling that the Hero has, and that the masses recognize as truth. The Philosopher is concerned with the theoretical truths that the physical conceals and he discovers these truths through reason.

Much has been said here concerning the philosophy of two very different kinds of people, and who is right or if any person is right is entirely in the eye of the beholder, but one last thing must be said concerning the idea of God. A belief in God and recognition of oneself as someone of a philosophical disposition is not mutually exclusive, just as someone in tune with Carlyle is not necessarily religious. Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, (who usually commands his own shelf in most Barnes and Nobles' philosophy sections) would fall decidedly to the side of the Hero, despite being a vehement atheist and even declaring himself to be the anti-Christ. While St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the thirty-three Doctors of the Catholic Church, with his Five Proofs, would most likely align himself with the Philosopher.

The conflict between Philosopher and Hero concerns how humans view the world and the things we hold to be most important. While some people may not fall decisively into either category, this dichotomy is important to understand because it can assist each of us in communicating with our peers more effectively and understanding the things which motivate people to act as they do. What is certain, though, is that each person has a responsibility to act and to discover the things which they believe and which motivate them, so as not to be one of the masses, controlled by others and used as a means to an end.

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