

# THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY AT THE CROSSROADS OF SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

## INTRODUCTION

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In some ways, the problem of certainty affords us a privileged glimpse into the early modern period. It opens up the discussion of what constitutes adequate knowledge in general, of how and to what extent one can overcome skepticism and of how an epistemological model built to surmount skeptical worries can satisfactorily account for the possibility of epistemic error. But it also raises the question of whether the same standard of knowledge, the same standard of certainty applies across all fields of inquiry (with only minimal adjustments to account for the particularities of each field). The alternative is, of course, to toe the old Aristotelian line and allow for different fields of inquiry to have their corresponding degree of certainty. For example, the standards of mathematical certainty are not to be attained in natural philosophy or in the practical sciences (using an Aristotelian designator). Different standards and perhaps different epistemic strategies should be worked out for these fields.

This issue of *Society and Politics* revolves around the latter point of discussion: standards of certainty across various fields of inquiry. It brings together papers discussing metaphysics, ethics and religion in the works of early modern authors (by chance, natural philosophy ends up absent from the list). Several of the issues mentioned above (the fight against skepticism, the difficulties in conceptualizing epistemic errors, moral vs. mathematical certainty) are running threads through almost all of the contributions.

The first two papers of the volume have their starting point in the complex legacy of the Cartesian project in the century following Descartes' death. Elena Muceni's paper is an account of the way in which Malebranche uses various elements of the Cartesian framework to establish a science of ethics. For Descartes, ethical knowledge can, in principle, attain the status of scientific (i.e. certain and universal) knowledge, but it "presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences" - which is perhaps one reason why Descartes himself never offered a systematic moral theory. According to Muceni, Malebranche avoids this difficulty by securing both speculative and practical truths as immutable truths or archetypes of our ideas in the mind of God. Our access to them is guaranteed by the same Vision in God that governs the rest of our cognitive activity. Through rational contemplation, finite minds can "see" the immutable order of God's will and choose to submit to it. (For Malebranche, as

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for Descartes, the will is subordinated to the intellect, so adequate knowledge of moral principles is all that is needed to ground a science of ethics.) But, as Muceni notes, certainty secured this way comes at a double cost, at least from a contemporary perspective. Malebranche's ethics is not only intrinsically tied to his theology, but also unable to satisfactorily bridge the gap between the most general principles of morality and lower level moral norms.

The problem of the relationship between the will and the intellect comes up again in Mariangela Priarolo's paper, this time in the context of the Cartesian account of error as a product of free will, and the unfortunate applications of this account in theological debates. Seeing Cartesian epistemology as a recipe for religious intolerance, figures such as Bayle and Voltaire reject all philosophical grounds for religious tolerance and instead entrust the task of preserving said tolerance to the state. Priarolo argues that there was at least one viable philosophical project that could have provided grounds for tolerance in the period, that of Leibniz. Her reconstruction of Leibniz' position shows a negative ground for tolerance, in his rejection of the Cartesian theory of error, and a positive one, in the distinction between a core of fundamental truths (true religion) and various truths of fact pertaining to historically-determined creeds, which can only rise to moral certainty. Leibniz' notes on a project to unite the Protestant churches provide further useful indications as to how common ground can be achieved despite sectarian differences.

Both Muceni and Priarolo make a point of mentioning – if only briefly – the ways in which the problems early modern philosophers were trying to address are still relevant today. The third paper in this volume goes much further in this direction. Anya Topolski traces the way the concept “true religion” became a floating signifier in the wake of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Turning to the historical context in which Spinoza wrote the *TTP*, Topolski shows that the function of true religion was to bring peace (at a collective level) and salvation (at an individual level) in a political community deeply divided by religious and philosophical differences. An accurate reading of the Scriptures would reveal a universal messages, rising above sectarian squabbles. However, careful textual analysis reveals a series of ambiguities in the way Spinoza constructs his actual concept of true religion. Topolski's goal is not to eliminate these ambiguities, but rather to argue that the tension they bring to the concept of true religion and the wealth of possible interpretations contribute to the emptying out of this concept, to its becoming a floating signifier. With a detour through some of the key moments in the evolution of true religion in the following centuries, Topolski ends her analysis with some remarks on how some of the most socially, politically and culturally charged debates of today (should the elites or the masses yield political power, is religion a matter of the private or the public sphere etc.) can be traced back to the ambiguities at work in Spinoza's concept of true religion.

True religion is also in some ways the focus of the next paper, E.M. Lorkowski's study of attenuated deism as a Humean natural belief. For Hume, natural beliefs (like the belief in the external world or in the cause-effect relation) are beliefs of common sense, established independently of reason and that surmount global skepticism. According to some Hume scholars, belief in God cannot be a natural

belief for Hume, as it is not necessary to our functioning in the world (the way the two aforementioned beliefs are) and thus not universally shared. Lorkowski argues for a weaker reading of natural belief, according to which in some cases it is just the propensity to hold a belief, and not the instantiation of the belief itself that is universal. Such is the case with religious belief: a tendency to believe in an intelligent creator is universal, but the actualization of this tendency is not. This stripped down deism is Hume's true religion, while any additions to this "genuine theism" only push matters into the territory of false and pernicious religion.

We return to the sources of epistemic error in Lawrence Pasternack's paper discussing the public use of reason in Kant. This subject is usually analyzed in its socio-political dimensions (a perspective that would have fit the issues raised in the previous papers quite well by itself), but Pasternack is interested in exploring its importance in Kant's epistemology, adding a further interesting twist to the discussion comparing standards of certainty in practical and theoretical sciences. He contrasts epistemic and moral error, showing how the confusion between subjective and objective elements of judgment (which is the source of all error for Kant) can be overcome using only the agent's internal resources in the case of moral error, but not in that of epistemic error. In the latter case, the agent lacks the standards to evaluate the truth of their opinion beyond all doubt, and can be fully blinded by prejudice. Because of this, communication, though an imperfect instrument, is essential in identifying the subjective grounds of our judgments (since these grounds will not be reliably shared by others or command the same assent from them).

Finally, Jason Dockstader closes the volume with a discussion of metaphysics and levels of knowledge in Spinoza. Dockstader aims to defend Spinoza from Hegel's charge of acosmism and from contemporary readings that still grant an attenuated version of this charge. He argues that, for Spinoza, finite things *qua* finite are only fictions and (properly conceived) they are nothing but the infinite variety of ways in which the one substance is discernibly identical to itself. So, while according to Dockstader, nothing true may be said of finite things *qua* finite that does not mean that Spinoza denies their existence. It also does not mean he denies their difference and plurality, as the author tries to prove in the second part of his paper by appealing to a latent use of the principle of discernibility of identicals (as theorized by Donald Baxter) in Spinoza.