

Exempla desiderarem Spinoza and the *Facies Totius Universi*

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Abstract This article analyzes the expression *Facies totius Universi* (FTU), contained in *Letter* 64 to Schuller, in order to offer some considerations concerning Spinoza's philosophy of imaginative language, particularly concerning his use of examples. The most recent readings of Spinoza's use of language make imagination a positive expression, which can help to understand clear and distinct concepts. Following this path, the aim of this article will be to examine a specific example used by Spinoza (the FTU) to develop historical, exegetical, and more strictly philosophical considerations regarding both the example itself and Spinoza's use of language.

Keywords Spinoza. *Facies Totius Universi*. Seneca. Imagination. Mediate Infinite Modes.

Index 1 Interpretation of the *Facies Totius Universi*. – 2 *Exempla quæ petis*. The *Facies Totius Universi* as an Image. – 3 The Texture of the Text. The *Facies Totius Universi* as a Quotation. – 4 Conclusions.



Peer review

Submitted 2026-05-06
Accepted 2026-08-04
Published 2026-09-17

Open access

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DOI 10.30687/Jolma/2723-9640/2026/01/001

Las palabras / no hacen el amor / hacen la ausencia
/ si digo agua ¿beberé? / si digo pan ¿comeré?
(Alejandra Pizarnik, *En esta noche, en este mundo*, 1971)

1 Interpretation of the *Facies Totius Universi*

On July 25th, 1675, Spinoza received a letter from Schuller in which his friend presented him with four questions on behalf of their mutual acquaintance Tschirnhaus. In the last one, Schuller asks:

I would like Examples [*Exempla desiderarem*] of the things produced immediately by God, and those produced by the mediation of some infinite modification. Thought and extension seem to me to be of the first kind; of the second kind, in thought, Intellect, and in extension, Motion, etc. (Ep 63)

We can immediately see that Schuller does not ask *what* the mediate infinite modes *are*, but his desire – which echoes that of Tschirnhaus – is rather to obtain *examples* of these modes from Spinoza: “I would like some examples” [*Exempla desiderarem*], says the Dutch physicist. The same term is then taken up by the author of the *Ethics* in his reply as well:

Finally, the examples which you ask for [*exempla, quæ petis*]: examples of the first kind are, in Thought, absolutely infinite intellect, and in Extension, motion and rest; an example of the second kind is the face of the whole Universe [*facies totius Universi*], which, however much it may vary in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same. On this, see L7S before II P14. (Ep 64)

As it is used, the expression FTU is an example that we might describe as *amphibious*, *ambiguous*, or *equivocal*. It is immediately evident that the FTU differs significantly from the other two *exempla* provided shortly before by Spinoza in the same letter, namely motion and rest and the absolutely infinite intellect, which, appearing in numerous Spinozian texts, are defined, are involved in axioms, do not evoke images, and seem to be direct references to concepts of thought.

Indeed, the history of interpretations of the FTU is complex and layered. As early as 1880, Pollock noted that the question of mediate infinite modes and the FTU had been extensively addressed by Bohmer in 1863, who “takes Spinoza’s ‘*facies totius universi*’ to cover Thought as well as Extension”, a “possible but not very probable interpretation” (Pollock 1880).

Here emerges what would become the fundamental question around which Spinozian studies have revolved, sparking lengthy debates, right up to the present day. While it is true that in Ep 63

Schuller proposed two kinds of things produced *immediately* by God (erroneously suggesting the attributes, namely extension and thought) and two kinds of things produced through the mediation of an infinite modification (indicating the intellect for thought and movement for extension), it has never been clear why, in his reply, Spinoza provided two examples of the first kind but only one of the second (namely, the FTU). Starting from this *asymmetry*, there have been countless attempts to resolve what has all too often been interpreted as a deficiency, a *slip*, or a “void place” – as Badiou (1988) defines it¹ – in the Dutch philosopher’s otherwise consistently precise and meticulous work. What do the *mediate* infinite modes correspond to?² Is the FTU an example of the infinite mediate mode valid only for the attribute of extension or also for the thought?

There are not only different interpretations, but also different conceptual frameworks, such as that proposed by Schmaltz (1997) or, more recently, by Pinheiro (2015), who identifies three main interpretations – those of Gueroult, Beyssade, and Schmaltz himself – as representative of three attempts to find a candidate, in thought, capable of occupying the corresponding place of the FTU in extension. In Pinheiro’s (2015) summary, while Gueroult found it in the set of all existing minds, that is, in the infinite will as the sum of all finite wills, and thus in E I, p32 (Gueroult 1968), Beyssade, on the other hand, proposed as a solution the *amor Dei intellectualis*, the infinite love with which God loves himself, as expounded by Spinoza in E V, p36 (Beyssade 1994), while Schmaltz, finally, maintained that the counterpart of the FTU in thought was the idea of the idea of God, referring to E II, p21 (Schmaltz 1997).

Pinheiro then proposes his own interpretation, according to which the mediate infinite mode of thought, referring to E V, p40s, would be the formal essence of ideas (Pinheiro 2015, 376). Although suggestive and supported by solid arguments, Pinheiro’s interpretation seems, in any case, to seek the mediate infinite mode of thought as if the text, once again, were incomplete or lacking something. In this sense, the real question to ask is precisely the one formulated in his conclusion: why, then, should Spinoza say less than he knows? That is, once again, why provide an example, namely that of the FTU?

In addition to those of Beyssade, Guérout, and Schmaltz, mentioned by Pinheiro, there have in fact been numerous interpretations that have argued that the FTU was, for Spinoza, solely the mediate infinite mode of extension. Pollock (1880), Hallett (1957), and Joachim (1901), according to Schmaltz (1997), for example, supported the idea that

1 In his *Meditation 10*, Badiou calls the mediate infinite mode the “place of the void”, “torsion” or “forclusion”. See Badiou 1988.

2 On this see also Melamed 2013 and Primus 2019.

the mediate infinite mode of thought was the idea of God. According to Wolfson (1934) or, more recently, Giancotti (1991), Spinoza would have no need to mention two infinite modes, since that of extension, explained in E II, p13L7s, would be sufficient on its own to provide a clear and distinct idea.

However, as Brykman (2012) aptly notes in commenting on Gueroult's attempt, the idea that the FTU is an incomplete formulation, corresponding solely to extension, leads to the search for a sort of "prosthesis" to Spinoza's text, by virtue of what Wolfson himself called a sort of obsession with seeking perfect symmetry in Spinozist philosophy (Wolfson 1934). These interpretations likely find their justification in the reference made by Spinoza himself in Letter to E II, p13L7s, where he refers to Nature as an individual composed of infinite bodies and, therefore, to the attribute of extension.

However, in light of what we have seen so far, nothing is less certain. The FTU appears to be an expression, just as Bohmer (1863) argues and as Wolfson (1934) underlines, that constitutes a metaphor for *all* mediate infinite modes, both of extension and of thought, as if each of them were *analogically* a complex individual that varies in infinite ways while always remaining the same.³

In this second sense, there have been just as many interpretations that, in the name of the absolute unity – and not parallelism (Jaquet 2021) – of mind and body, have argued that the FTU is a valid example for all attributes. According to Zourabichvili (2002), for example, there is a universe of bodies just as there is a universe of ideas, and the FTU holds for each of them. Similarly, Macherey (1998) asserts that just as there is a physical universe, there is also "a sort of mental universe", which in turn would have a *facies*.

More recently, Bouchilloux (2012) argued, drawing on E II, p11c, for the existence of a complete analogy between thought and extension. Like the body, the mind is also a complex aggregate of individuals and, therefore, "we hold the key to the mystery: whether in the realm of thought or in the realm of extension, the infinite mediated mode is an aspect of the entire universe or an aspect of the whole of nature". The entire universe, or the entire nature, thus has "multiple faces or multiple facets" [*plusieurs faces ou plusieurs facettes*] that we can view both from the perspective of thought "as composed of an infinity of minds" and from that of extension "as composed of an infinity of bodies" (Bouchilloux 2012, 171, Author's transl.).

3 On this kind of interpretation see also Mignini and Proietti's notes to the Italian edition of Spinoza's works, where the commentators says, regarding the FTU: "This is the only place where the universe is mentioned as the mediated infinite mode of extension. It is not specified what the mediated infinite mode of thought consists of; *by analogy*, it must be conceived as the totality of ideas" (Spinoza 2007, 1745; Author's transl., emphasis added).

Finally, one cannot avoid to mention Chaui's interpretation (2016), who, emphasizing that there is only one mediate infinite mode – namely, the FTU – valid for all attributes, argues that it is by no means a *mediation* between the infinite and the finite, but rather the *very nature* of the universe: that is, the way in which, for Spinoza, the unity of reality and its laws is preserved despite the infinite differentiation of its parts.

The *immediate* infinite modes are the necessary sequence and connection of causes – that is, of the proportions of motion and rest, which constitute bodies, and of thoughts, which constitute ideas; the *mediate* infinite mode (Spinoza refers to this mode as singular) is the *facies totius universi*, the physiognomy of the entire universe, i.e., the conservation and constancy of causes and their laws amidst the infinite mutation and variation of singular things. (Chaui 2016, 82; Author's transl.)

Chaui's interpretation, in line with those of Bouchilloux and Zourabichvili, seems to be the one best able to account for the richness and complexity of Spinoza's formula, while continuing to probe deeply into its philosophical-conceptual meaning.

2 **Exempla quæ petis. The *Facies Totius Universi* as an Image**

Beyond interpretations aimed at identifying both mediate infinite modes, it is worth considering the role played by the FTU; that is, as noted at the outset, it is an example provided by Spinoza in response to a request for clarification of certain concepts set forth in the *Ethics*.

The FTU is not the only instance in which Spinoza uses examples to explain his philosophical theory and the concepts he employs in a more rigorous manner, such as those of the sun (E II, p35s and E IV, p1s), of Peter and Adam (TdIE 52–55), the candle (TdIE 57), the infinite fly (TdIE 58), the bees (KV II, 24), the fish (KV II, 26), the flute (CGLH 1), the hen (E II, p47s) or the spanish poet (E IV, p39s). Many studies have also investigated the use of examples in the field of geometry, particularly starting from the genetic definitions of the circle or the sphere (Rabouin 2010; 2021).

In all these cases, Latin phrases such as *ex. gr.*, or terms like *exemplo*, *exempla*, *exemplar*, and the like, serve different functions: 1) they evoke everyday images by referring to objects, animals, or situations; 2) they introduce quotations, authors, stories, and so on; 3) they “illustrate clearly”, “clarify”, or “demonstrate” the subject matter

better than the discussion itself.⁴ In this multiplicity of uses, Spinoza seems to emphasize that there is nothing inherently wrong with imagination, fiction, or the use of examples *alongside* philosophical discourse, provided these images are accompanied by a clear and distinct perception of the thing: “we ought not to fear in any way that we are [merely] feigning something, if only we perceive the thing clearly and distinctly” (TdIE 62). As we can see also in *Ethics*, when Spinoza speaks about our imagination of the sun, the problem with images and inadequate ideas is a lack of knowledge, not images in themselves (E II, p35s). As Deleuze (1990; 1997) has repeatedly emphasized, this imaginative and, we might say, *everyday* (Vinciguerra 2026) use of language emerges particularly in the scholia of the *Ethics* and in passages that seem to lie beneath the surface of the *geometric* and *rational* exposition. Again drawing on Deleuze (1997), we could say that in Spinoza’s work there are traces of a *minor literature*, which passes through examples, images, scraps, hens, and infinite flies.

In the case of FTU, this is a use of language that seems to embody all three of the functions mentioned in the examples above at the same time, and these functions seem to echo Spinoza’s distinction between images, words, and ideas (E II, p49s). The distinctive feature of FTU as an *exemplum* is that it is simultaneously an evocative image (the term *facies* immediately brings to mind a visual image, a face or a mask), a word-quotation (a literary text, and in particular, a very specific quotation as we will see later), and finally, an idea, or a concept of thought (which the formula FTU is intended to clarify).

Furthermore, as in the case of the *exemplar humanae naturae*, the FTU represents a hapax in Spinoza’s writings, a concise expression yet characterized by with such a strong clarifying power that it seems to require no further explanation and is used, strangely, to elucidate a passage from the *Ethics* that, by July 1675, had already been extensively meditated upon and refined from a lexicographical and conceptual standpoint. Why, then, resort to this term, never again used nor defined? In what sense can the *Facies* clarify, rather than confuse, Schuller regarding mediate infinite modes? Does the Universe have a real *face*? Certainly not in a literal sense. Should we, then, understand this example in an analogical sense, namely that the Universe changes while remaining the same, *as if* it had a face that changes through infinite ‘*facial expressions*’ while always remaining the same and, therefore, always *recognizable*?

The FTU thus evokes, first and foremost, an image that appeals to our common, everyday experience. To help us understand, Spinoza

⁴ See, for example, the case of the fourth proportion, first presented in the TdIE and later taken up in the *Ethics*, regarding which Spinoza states that “From this example it is clear to see what I have just noted” (TdIE 23).

uses the word *facies* where we would not expect to find it, producing a shift in meaning and evoking the unexpected memory of the infinite faces of others that we see changing over time, while still being the same faces. The *Facies* is metaphorically an image of change, of the succession of figures, of becoming, which remains within the same form. The *Facies* expresses itself in infinite ways (it has infinite *faces* or *aspects*), but it always remains the same.

In this sense, it seems difficult to argue that in Spinoza's opinion the mediate infinite mode *is* the FTU, just as we would hardly believe that truth *is* light and that darkness *is* falsehood. Spinoza's use of the expression FTU might be much better understood if interpreted first and foremost as an *analogical* or *metaphorical* example, which aids comprehension by drawing on an image that shares *similar relationships* to those between the concepts to which Spinoza wishes to lead the reader. On this primary level, the FTU is an *auxilium imaginationis*, a useful tool for understanding – provided, of course, that the fiction is accompanied by an appropriate concept.

It is no coincidence, then, that Spinoza, immediately after providing the example Schuller-Tschirnhaus sought, refers back to the text of the *Ethics*, as if inviting his friends *not to stop* at the proposed image. In the passage he is referring to, in fact, Spinoza spoke of the composition of bodies, starting from the simplest to arrive at the most complex, defending the idea that a composite body, though varying in countless ways, remains the same as long as its parts communicate their movement to the others in the same way, so that, proceeding thus to infinity:

We shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual. (E II, p13L7s)

Thus, the image of the *facies* in the letter acquires meaning when placed within this demonstration concerning the nature of bodies or, rather, concerning the relationship between difference (*sive* variation) and identity.

3 The Texture of the Text. The *Facies Totius Universi* as a Quotation

But this first interpretive level certainly is certainly not the only one. The common framework in which Spinoza and Schuller are situated is twofold. On the one hand, there is clearly, in the background, their shared reading of the *Ethics*. On the other, the reading of other texts from the tradition. The intellectual environment in which both were situated – likely Schuller as well, as a physician – in fact included

the reading of the classics as part of the educational curriculum, at least as is customary according to “the ‘Jesuit’ and ‘Protestant’ *ratio studiorum*”, according to which famous phrases and passages to be memorized were to be copied from texts. Furthermore, beginning in the Renaissance, books of commonplaces began to spread more and more, and “this didactic and pedagogical model [...] was accepted and commonly adopted in the Protestant countries of seventeenth-century Northern Europe” (De Bastiani 2023, 74-87; hereafter Author’s transl.).⁵

Although Spinoza criticizes this practice in principle, his use of explicit, implicit, or cryptic quotations has been amply demonstrated in the literature (Proietti 1985; De Bastiani 2023). In examining this apparent contradiction, De Bastiani proposes a reconciliation of the two aspects, based on the fact that it is not a matter of denying any cognitive value to experience *ex auditu* and *ex signis* nor of banning references to an authority, but rather of not hanging on its every word, since any text is “always partial and fluid, and therefore its interpretation and use are *partisan*” (De Bastiani 2023). Since engagement with experience *ex auditu* and *ex signis* is ultimately inevitable, Spinoza seeks rather to make critical use of it, interpreting it through the second or third kind of knowledge, and makes it part of a precise communicative and educational strategy. Just as, for example, in the letter to Boxel (Ep 52) Spinoza adapts to the “*ingenium*” of his interlocutor, so in the TTP he “makes copious use of quotations from the ancients to appeal to a complex of shared references, of experiences known to his ideal audience” (De Bastiani 2023, 58).

The example of the FTU thus opens up to a second level of analysis, namely as a quotation, a reference, a body which is in relation with other bodies. The exegetical question, in this sense, is far from being an end in itself, but can reveal the meaning that this formula might have had in Schuller’s own eyes. It will be useful to summarize the writings that have followed in the wake of such research.

First, according to Wolfson, the FTU formula in Spinoza can be traced back to texts of the Jewish tradition and, in particular, to the commentaries of the theologian and Kabbalist Abraham Cohen de Herrera (1570-1635), author of *La Puerta del Cielo*, which contains the expression “parzupim del mundo del ynfinito”.⁶ Wolfson writes:

The phraseology of this expression is reminiscent of the Biblical manner of describing the totality or wholeness of a certain extent of territory. Thus when the Bible wants to say “over the entire

⁵ Among the most frequently cited authors were: Virgil, Ovid, Plautus, Terence, Cicero, and Seneca (De Bastiani 2023).

⁶ On Abraham Cohen de Herrera and Spinoza, see Beltran 2012.

earth" it says "upon the face of all the earth", which in the Vulgate is translated by *super faciem totius terrae* (Dan. 8, 5), or by *super faciem universae terrae* (Gen. 7, 3, I Sam. 30, 16), or by *super faciem omnis terrae* (II Sam. 18, 8, Zech. 5, 3). The term *facies* may also reflect the Greek *πρόσωπον* in the sense of "person", for the Latin *facies* as well as the Hebrew word for "face" has acquired the meaning of "person" under the influence of the Greek term. [...] In coining or adopting this expression for the mediate modes, Spinoza may have also been influenced by the Cabalistic term "faces" (*parzufim*, from *πρόσωπον*), which stands for the mediate emanations from the Infinite (*En Sof*) following from Him through the mediacy of the Sefirot. Abraham Herrera in his *Puerta del Cielo* refers to these mediate emanations as the "faces of the universe of the infinite". In the Spanish original, the phrase reads: "parzupim del mundo del ynfinito". (Wolfson 1934, 244-6)

Among the scholars who have written on the problem of the mediate infinite modes in general, and on the FTU, in particular, Wolfson's interpretation has also been recently taken up by Schmaltz (1997), who nevertheless notes, following Yovel (1991), that "Spinoza could hardly have accepted the anthropomorphic implication in these writings that the universe as a whole is a 'person' with human-like features" (Schmaltz 1997, 204n).

These interpretations may be useful in identifying some sources within the Jewish tradition that may have given rise to the idea of the FTU. Nevertheless, considering the example as a crypto-citation appears problematic, given that it was addressed to Schuller and Tschirnhaus, both outsiders to the Jewish context, should one rely solely on these sources. Instead, a much more useful approach consists in identifying the sources of the FTU within classical Latin texts.

In his study on Latin classics in Spinoza's work, Proietti (1985, 256), discussing the presence of Ovid, refers to certain passages and, in this context, also cites the FTU as one of the *loci* from *the Metamorphoses* that reappear in Spinozian thought. The passage from *the Metamorphoses* – also recently cited by Natassja Pugliese (2019) – is as follows:

Nec species sua cuique manet rerumque novatrix / ex aliis alias
reddit natura figuras. / nec perit in toto quicquam, mihi credite,
mundo, / sed variat faciemque novat; nascique vocatur / incipere esse
aliud quam quod fuit ante, morique / desinere illuc idem. cum sint
huc forsitan illa, /haec translata illud, summa tamen omnia constant

Nothing retains its own form; but Nature, the great renewer, ever makes up forms from other forms. Be sure there's nothing perishes in the whole universe; it does but vary and renew its form. What we

call birth is but a beginning to be other than what one was before; and death is but cessation of a former state. Though, perchance, things may shift from there to here and here to there, still do all things in their sum total remain unchanged. (Ovid, *Met.* XV, 252-5, transl. by F.J. Miller 2017; Cf. Proietti 1985)

The passage is highly evocative and cannot fail to resonate with the Spinozist reader. However, although the conceptual similarity between Ovid's discourse and Spinoza's passages is striking, the absence of the entire syntagma of the FTU formula in the text of *the Metamorphoses* cannot but leave us disappointed. As Pugliese points out, commenting on Ovid's text and Proietti's article:

Spinoza, in this case, borrowed no particular part of the verse, but made reference to this Ovidian image. There is a philosophical/thematic resemblance between the idea in those lines of the *Metamorphoses* and Spinoza's usage of the syntagma '*facies totius universi*' in letter 64 to Schuller and in E2L7sch. (Pugliese 2019, 16)

We are faced with two symmetrical situations. On the one hand, in the texts suggested by Wolfson, the terminological similarity is striking, yet the conceptual distance appears more pronounced, and a reference familiar to Schuller is missing. On the other hand, in the case of Ovid, the content is similar and the text is almost certainly known to the interlocutor, even though the full FTU expression or other precise references to the work by Spinoza are absent.

There is, however, a third possibility to consider, one that contains all three of these elements and which, surprisingly, to our knowledge, has never been explored in relation to the FTU. It is letter LXXXIX of Seneca's *Epistolae ad Lucilium*.⁷ This text, moreover, was part of Spinoza's library at the time of his death. In the opening lines of the letter, Seneca writes to his disciple about the proper approach to the study of philosophy, namely by dividing it into parts – not because it is actually divided, but because only the wise are capable of embracing it in its entirety:

Rem utilem desideras et ad sapientiam properanti necessariam, dividi philosophiam et ingens corpus eius in membra disponi; facilius enim per partes in cognitionem totius adducimur. Utinam quidem quemadmodum universa mundi facies in conspectum venit,

⁷ Proietti wrote several important articles and essays about Seneca's influence on Spinoza's works, confirming Spinoza's extensive knowledge of the *Epistolae*, and their importance not only in relation to the TdIE but also to specific passages of the *Ethics* (Proietti 1985; 1990). But, as far as we know, the case of the FTU is analysed only in reference with Ovid *Metamorphoses* and never in relation to Seneca's *Epistolae*.

ita philosophia tota nobis posset occurrere, simillimum mundo spectaculum!

It is a useful fact that you wish to know, one which is essential to him who hastens after wisdom – namely, the parts of philosophy and the division of its vast body into separate parts. For by study, by studying the parts, we can more easily come to understand the whole. I only wish that philosophy might appear before our eyes in all her unity, just as the entire expanse of the firmament [*universa mundi facies*] is spread out for us to gaze upon! It would be a sight closely resembling that of the firmament. (Gummere 1917, 379)

Not only do we find, in this passage, the expression *universa mundi facies*, but its origin in Seneca's *Epistolae* – undoubtedly known to Schuller and Tschirnhaus as well – and the context in which it is used seem to bear witness in favor of this source. In the letter's content, in fact, the Latin writer addresses precisely the question of the relationship between the part and the whole in the process of philosophical knowledge. For Seneca, dividing philosophy into parts means advancing step by step toward knowledge of the whole, since the whole never presents itself in its entirety, as does the face (or vault) of the entire universe.

Thanks to this passage, it is possible to understand Spinoza's FTU as a cryptic reference to Seneca's text, which readers can read between the lines to form a clearer idea of what the Dutch philosopher means by those things "produced by the mediation of some infinite modification".

It may also be interesting to note that Seneca's *Letter* itself contains another passage that can be traced in Spinoza's work as a cryptic quotation. Speaking about the difference between the study of philosophy as a means and the study of philosophy as an end in itself, Seneca writes "Philosophia studium virtutis est, sed per ipsam virtutem" (Seneca 2015, 320), in a manner very similar to when, in the conclusion of the *Ethics*, Spinoza wrote "Beatitudo non est virtutis præmium, sed ipsa virtus" (E V, p42). The relationship between Seneca and Spinoza certainly merits further exploration, particularly starting from this *Letter*, though this goes beyond the aim of the present article.

Furthermore, the reference to Seneca is in no way intended to detract from the significance of the quotations noted by other scholars – which are certainly useful for understanding Spinoza's example – but rather to humbly contribute by adding a useful piece to the study of Spinoza's use of language and the meaning of the FTU.

In this sense, since language always possesses its own history, it is capable of evoking memory in various ways, a fact even more evident in the case of these crypto-quotations. The example of the FTU,

therefore, functions not only as an image-example but also as a quotation, that is, as a text-as-a-body connection capable of producing other *mediated* effects, by referring to a common background of knowledge; in this case, *ex auditu ex signis*. The FTU, thus, is not necessarily *the* mediate infinite mode, but a metaphor for it.

4 Conclusions

The FTU presents itself as an example open to three distinct levels of interpretation. The first, so to speak, *immediate*, emphasizes the simultaneous clarity that this image can offer both correspondents through its evocative power (§ 2). The second, *mediated* by a particular background shared by Schuller and Spinoza, suggests considering their experience as readers of works encountered within the same cultural context (§ 3). The third and final level refers to the *deeper* level of interpretation of the concept to which this image refers, once Spinoza's explanation in *the Epistle* and *the Ethics* has been integrated with a more in-depth reading of the passages to which the FTU refers (§ 1).

In Chapter LXII of Part II of his *Don Quixote*, Cervantes has his *ingenioso hidalgo* deliver a brief discourse on literary translation:

it seems to me that translating from one language to another [...] is like looking at Flemish tapestries from the wrong side, for although the figures are visible, they are covered by threads that obscure them, and cannot be seen with the smoothness and color of the right side. (Cervantes 2003, chap. LXII)

In the metaphor used by Don Quixote, translating means revealing a second and obscured side of the original language (that is, of the figure). However, seeing the other side of the tapestry, even if the figure appears differently, we cannot ignore that what lies before our eyes is the same material weave of threads. For Don Quixote, translating means accessing another image of the same texture.

Certainly, in the case of *facies*, this is not a matter of translation between different languages, but rather the difference between a language that belongs to the realm of the imagination and one that belongs to the adequate realm of the demonstrations in *Ethics*. As in Cervantes' metaphor, the FTU is a translation capable of revealing another side of the tapestry, which, when taken on its own, without reference to the frontal design, tells us something less about the original concept, but which, when taken together with it, is capable of telling us, perhaps, something more. The two sides are composed of the same affirmative relationships between the threads and differ only in the way these relationships are understood, and in the manner and position in which one relates to them.

Once the possibility of having a philosophical language has been restored through a strategy of redefinition (Laerke 2014, 544), one may ask whether words drawn from the realm of the common experience of natural language can be useful for knowledge, even if they are not strategically redefined. To put it another way, can an example that remains evidently and strictly tied to the realm of the imagination, as the FTU, which belongs to knowledge *ex auditu*, *ex signis*, be useful in the sense that it succeeds in clarifying and thus integrating a discourse already expressed philosophically and rigorously – that is, a thought expressed adequately? We believe so. And we believe that the example of the FTU – like perhaps other examples used by Spinoza – confirms this hypothesis.

After all, imagination, too, is expressive to a certain extent, in the sense that it shares a certain degree of power – albeit to a lesser extent – with adequate ideas, so much so that Vinciguerra (2005, 176-9) states that “by its very nature, the idea of the trace expresses a power of implication – that is, it signals and thus refers”, and this power to refer derives from the fact that “implication or causal relation encompasses, as one of its parts, implication or semiotic relation; in other words, the latter borrows part of the power of the former in order to function” (Author’s transl.). On the one hand, then, it is as if the literary quotation allowed words to take on a new meaning; from the intersection of a literary formula and a geometric language, a new form seems to emerge that is unique to neither, but which draws its evocative and expressive power from both. On the other hand, it seems that these words remain linked to some extent to their history and to a familiar context, and it is precisely for this reason that they also serve an educational function.⁸ It is a matter of rewriting in the wake of memory to reinterpret or repurpose a shared culture – in this case, a textual one – by endowing it with clarifying power, and thus an active role and the ability to produce or contribute to the production of new meanings.

To conclude, as Foucault (1977) wrote in his article “Language to Infinity”, every language, whether literary or philosophical, can be understood as arising from the creation of a duplicity that opens onto an infinite space. Much like what Cervantes wrote, language here too seems to be constitutively entangled in an intrinsic and secret duplicity, which makes it an object – or tapestry – composed of multiple parts, sides, or mirrors. Deciphering this secret side of language is possible only by starting from those “monstrous figures” such as the reverse side of the tapestry, where clarity and, above all, univocity disappear, giving way to the infinite, to reverberation.

⁸ Two interesting contributions – one with a more aesthetic focus, the other more historical and pedagogical – on the broader theme of literary works and poetic language in relation to Spinozist philosophy are those by Hervet (2020) and James (2023).

Spinoza's FTU could also be seen as this "thin space" Foucault (1977) spoke of, in which, like a wound, the possibility of interpreting – that is, of producing other words, other meanings, other images, of producing desire and curiosity – reopens. These other meanings, however, do not detract from the geometrically expressed concepts of the *Ethics*; rather, when combined with them, they allow us to explore them more deeply, clarify them, and produce adequate knowledge.

Abbreviations

CGLH = *Compendium Grammatices Linguae Hebraeae* (Hebrew Grammar).

CM = *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts*.

E = *Ethica*.

Ep = *Epistolae*.

FTU = *Facies Totius Universi*.

KV = *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*.

TdIE = *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*.

TTP = *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

For the individual parts:

c = *Corollarium*.

L = *Lemma*.

p = *Propositio*.

s = *Scholium*.

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