

Communicating Thoughts through Bodies

An Ontogenetic Approach to Spinoza's Theory of Language

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Abstract This article proposes to read Spinoza's theory of language within a conceptual framework in which communication functions as a *notio communis* that underlies every form of corporeal interaction. Language, on this reading, is the culmination of a communicative *continuum* that begins at the most elementary level of physical reality. The argument proceeds in four stages, moving from the ontology of physical communication to the analysis of linguistic communication as a specific and derivative form of it, and finally to a brief application of the proposed framework to the question of the State as individual.

Keywords Spinoza. Communication. Language. Memory. Body.

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1 Introduction

Communication and information have become, in the course of the last century, central categories not only of technology and engineering, but of scientific and philosophical inquiry at large. From Shannon's mathematical theory of communication (Shannon, Weaver 1964) to the rise of cybernetics (Wiener 1961) and, more recently, the proliferation of network-based models of reality, the concept of communication has progressively escaped the narrow domain of signal transmission to become a candidate for a fundamental description of the natural world. This expansion of scope has not been merely metaphorical: a growing number of thinkers have argued that communication and information are not secondary phenomena reducible to more basic physical categories but constitute the very fabric of reality itself. This ontological turn in communication theory finds perhaps its most rigorous philosophical expression in the tradition of structural realism (Ladyman 1998; 2007; Worrall 1989) and its informational variations (Floridi 2008; 2010). Against the Aristotelian notion of substance as a self-subsisting material substratum, structural and informational realism argues that the ultimate constituents of reality are not individual things but relational structures, whose minimal unit is the informational datum.

Against this theoretical background – rather than as a direct contribution to it – the present article proposes to read Spinoza not to assimilate his thought to contemporary debates, but to show that his framework already contains, in its own terms, a rigorous ontology of communication that anticipates some of the intuitions underlying these more recent approaches. For Spinoza, as will be argued, communication is not a phenomenon restricted to the human or linguistic domain, but a *notio communis* – a common notion alongside motion itself – that characterises every form of corporeal interaction and has not yet been thematised as such in the secondary literature. Building on this physical foundation, the article traces the emergence of specifically linguistic communication as a qualitatively distinct phenomenon: one in which the immediacy and analogicity of physical communication are both preserved – insofar as the word remains a physical event that traces the receiving body – and lost, insofar as it operates as a mnemonic pointer directed toward stored affective chains rather than toward present physical data. Language, on this reading, is not a transparent medium of thought but an irreducibly individual and error-prone communicative form, whose political consequences extend to the very question of what kind of individual a State can be said to be.

The primary object of this article is thus Spinoza's theory of language, while the ontology of communication developed in the first sections is not a parallel aim but its necessary foundation; the

concluding question of the State, in turn, serves as a test of the framework's fruitfulness – an order of exposition that reflects the systematic character of Spinoza's philosophy itself, in which physics, anthropology, and politics form a single deductive continuum.¹ The argument proceeds in four stages: first, communication is identified as a *notio communis* within Spinoza's physics, tied to corporeal interaction; second, the article examines the structural impossibility of direct communication among ideas, and the consequent necessity of the body as the sole medium through which ideas can be shared between individuals; third, the specifically linguistic form of communication is analysed as a mnemonic pointer – a physical datum whose function is to retrieve stored affective chains – and distinguished from physical communication by its inherent proneness to error and its irreducibly individual character. Finally, these results are brought to bear on the question of the State as individual – serving as a test case for the communicative approach here proposed, and suggesting that such an approach may prove fruitful for Spinoza scholarship more broadly.

2 Communication as *Notio Communis*

Communication can be identified as a common notion starting from one of the few yet most well-known and clear passages of Spinoza's physics, namely the series of lemmas following proposition 13 of the second part of the *Ethica*. This section, sometimes called the 'small physics' – or, more recently, the 'small biophysics' (Atlan 2018) – contains the fundamental principles governing the relations among Spinoza's corporeal modes, with a view to explaining how the human body functions, and reveals communication as a highly significant characteristic of any material mode, *notio communis* alongside motion. This is evident in general for composite bodies, which are always constituted by several bodies of the same or different size, pressed together in such a way as to mutually communicate their motions according to a fixed ratio,² but it also holds for the *corpora simplicissima*, which, as the secondary literature has amply demonstrated, are distinguished from composite bodies only in a nominal sense, since for Spinoza reality is infinitely divisible (Deleuze 2013, 149-69), and hence there is no body that does not possess

¹ The reading of Spinoza's system as a continuous deduction linking ontology, anthropology, and politics goes back above all to Matheron (1988); cf. also Bove 1996. Closer to the perspective developed here is Vinciguerra's semiotic reading (2005; 2012), which reconnects Spinoza's ontology and anthropology through the category of the sign, as the present article does through that of communication.

² Cf. E II, p13, ax2 and following definition (G II,99; Curley I, 460).

internal parts standing in a communicative relation of motions. Furthermore, corpuscles always move in a non-void space, and in their inescapable and inevitable collisions they produce an effect upon the body they strike³ which, in so doing, communicates its own motion. It can therefore be said that, for Spinoza from this standpoint, corpuscular kinetics and communication coexist.⁴

The status of communication as a *notio communis* can be established on the basis of Spinoza's precise definition: common notions concern what is common to all bodies and is equally in the part and in the whole.⁵ Now, all bodies agree in involving motion and rest;⁶ but motion, at the level of the finite modes, as we have just seen, never exists except as communicated – it is a *lex universalis omnium corporum*, as Spinoza himself puts it.⁷ The communication of motion is therefore exactly as common as motion itself, and it is equally in the part and in the whole, since every component of a composite body communicates motion no less than the whole individual does, as the Definition following Axiom 2 makes clear. It follows, by Spinoza's own demonstrations, that the communication of motion cannot but be conceived adequately,⁸ and that its idea is necessarily adequate in every mind:⁹ communication is therefore a *notio communis* in the full, technical sense. To speak of communication as a common notion 'alongside motion' is thus not to add a new item to Spinoza's ontology, but to make explicit the relational form in which motion actually exists among finite modes.¹⁰ This is consistent with what Cerrato has emphasised: common notions do not yield knowledge of the singular quantities of motion and rest of a given body, nor of the series of its encounters, but "allow us to recognise the fundamental elements intrinsic to any determinate extension" (Cerrato 2008, 84; Author's transl.). What is claimed here to be a common notion, accordingly, is not this or that communication of motion, but

3 The quality of the reaction then depends on the quantity of motion, as per E II, p13, L1 (G II,97; Curley I, 458). Spinoza reaffirms this in his correspondence with Oldenburg where, commenting on Boyle's text, he maintains that the velocity of the motion of nitre particles produces a different sensation on the palate.

4 "In a plenum, no body can move without causing some other body to move, i.e., without communicating its motion to some other body" (M. Lin 2005, 257).

5 E II, p37 and p38d (G II,118; Curley I, 474).

6 E II, p13, L2 (G II,98; Curley I, 459).

7 TTP IV (G III,57; Curley II, 125-6).

8 E II, p38 (G II,118; Curley I, 474).

9 E II, p39 (G II,119; Curley I, 474).

10 Throughout this paper 'communication' will have one ontological sense only, that is, the communication of motion, the sole meaning the term carries in Spinoza's own lexicon. All further uses are either identifications grounded in this sense (the affection as communicative event, argued below), functional specifications of it (the linguistic datum as a physical datum operating as a mnemonic pointer), or explicitly heuristic borrowings from modern communication theory, as will be seen.

the communicative form in which motion exists in any determinate extension whatsoever, a form constituting the sole possibility for corporeal modes to interact with one another.

3 Inter-modal Physical Communication

This inter-modal physical interaction is what Spinoza, in Axiom 1 pertaining to Lemma 3 of Proposition 13, calls an *affection*; and since every relation among bodies is, as shown above, a communicative event, we can consider the affection – the single relation between two bodies – as the minimal communicative unit. Axioms 1 and 2, moreover, define the mutual affective – and hence communicative – possibilities of bodies. Spinoza makes two significant claims: first, in Axiom 1, he holds that the manner in which a body is affected depends both on the nature of the body that receives the affection and on the nature of the body that causes it; second, in Axiom 2, he illustrates the particular case of a collision that produces no effect on the body struck, and which therefore rebounds entirely onto the acting body through a modification of its motion. Three cases may thus be schematically distinguished:

1. A body in motion strikes a body at rest in such a way that it undergoes no modification of its own motion, while causing motion in the second. In this case the second is affected by the first, but the first suffers no affection.
2. As per Axiom 2: a body in motion strikes a body at rest, but the latter does not move in turn, while nonetheless causing a modification in the motion of the first. Contrary to the preceding case, the affection is suffered exclusively by the originally moving body.
3. A body in motion strikes a body at rest, and both alter their trajectory. In this case the bodies are mutually affected according to a certain respective degree.

It follows that, from a communicative standpoint, it is not possible to define the direction of an affective transmission, at least not before it occurs: the identification of the source and the destination of the affection depends on the nature of the bodies entering into communication. The question that arises is what is meant here by the ‘nature of bodies’ and hence how the content of communication and its effect are determined. The section of the second part of the *Ethica* examined so far on this point does not provide unambiguous indications, since the term ‘nature’ is not clarified; it appears again only in Lemma 4, which concerns, however, the preservation of the nature of the Individual when some bodies are replaced by others of the same ‘nature’; it can be understood, therefore, that this is

related to its composition, that is, the capacity for bodies to adhere to one another so as to “communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner”¹¹ (E II, p13, ax2, and following def; G II,99-100; Curley I, 460). This Definition explains that the nature of the *corpus sive Individuum* is founded exclusively – as already noted at the beginning of the preceding section – upon the reciprocal communication of motions within a network of bodies; or, one might say: the bodies belonging to an Individual, in mutual communication of motion, possess the capacity to com-prise – in its etymological sense of ‘to take together’ – a certain affection, that is, a certain external communication.

Now, since a *corpus sive Individuum* is always a composition of bodies in a certain reciprocal communication, it can be affirmed that the communicative exchange established between two individuals¹² depends on the capacity of each to interact with the ratio of motions of the bodies composing the other individual, that is, to interfere with its internal communicative network. In this sense, taking up the three cases outlined above, the term agent will be used to designate that individual capable of influencing the communicative network of the other body – without necessarily undergoing a change in its own – while the term destination or recipient will designate, conversely, the individual that will experience a communicative activation within its own network of internal bodies – but which will not necessarily cause a mutation in the other’s.

Inter-modal communication exhibits a number of noteworthy characteristics. In the first place, while on the one hand it is always potentially bidirectional – that is, no collision fails to modify the receiver or the agent or both – on the other hand it can never be understood as either intentional or accidental, since it belongs to the infinite causal chain of the finite modes of the *Deus sive Natura*; conversely: if there are no collisions there is no communication, which also means that any interaction between two modes not in direct contact, or without any pre-existing communication of motion, necessarily requires at least a third mode that enters into contact with both.¹³ Second, in this type of communication there is no form of noise or error: affective transmission is necessarily true – or rather, it admits of neither truth nor falsity, but unfolds exactly as it must.¹⁴

11 All translations from Spinoza are taken from Curley (1985-2016).

12 From this point on, I shall use the term ‘individual’ to denote the aggregate of united bodies.

13 E II, p26d (G II,112; Curley I, 469).

14 As Spinoza himself explains when discussing transcendentals: “Certainty is not in things” (CM I,6; G I,247; Curley I, 313). About the true and false in language see also Bove 2014, 60.

Finally, in terms of information theory, this type of communication is ideally analogical,¹⁵ since it can assume a truly infinite number of determinations, just as infinite are the determinations of the source, of the communicative destination, and of the type of contact, or collision, through which they enter into relation – just as the modes themselves are infinite.¹⁶

The natures of the source individual and the recipient individual, by determining the mode of the affection, equally determine what may be defined as the physical datum,¹⁷ ontologically bound to the affection itself, such that if there is no affection, there is no datum.

4 **The Impossibility of Immediate Communication between Ideas**

While it is beyond doubt that bodies communicate with one another through motion, what is the status of ideas? Are they also in reciprocal communication? The moment the analysis shifts from the attribute of extension to that of thought, the question grows more complex. It is worth recalling, first of all, that the historical originality of Spinoza's thought consists precisely in a communicative removal, which derives from the substantial identification between the modes of extension and of thought: in Spinoza there is no communication between the material and the spiritual plane because:

a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways. (E II, p7s; G II,90; Curley I, 451)

This directly entails the elimination of another historically asserted communicative relation, that between soul and body and their respective faculties, which Descartes still posited both in cognitive terms¹⁸ and in operational terms.¹⁹ Against those who uphold this

15 We use the terms 'analogical', 'digital', and 'noise' in a heuristic sense, borrowing them for convenience from modern communication theory (Shannon, Weaver 1964).

16 E I, p16 (G II, p60; Curley I, 424-5).

17 On the physical *dedomena* in contemporary philosophy of information see Floridi 2010, 60-72.

18 The relationship between body and mind that proceeds from the external senses, through that common sense which "fungi vice sigilli ad easdem figuras vel ideas, a sensibus externis puras et sine corpore venientes, in phantasia vel imaginatione veluti in cera formandas". AT X,414. See also Basti 1995, 117.

19 For Descartes, although "l'ame saint jointe à tout le corps", the former exercises its functions upon the latter through the innermost part of the brain, where "una certaine glande fort petite [...] par lequel les esprits par lequel les esprits de ses cavités antérieures ont communication avec ceux de la postérieure, que les moindres mouvements qui sont en elle". (AT XI,352).

type of connection, Spinoza objects

no one knows how, or by what means, the Mind moves the body, nor how many degrees of motion it can give the body, nor with what speed it can move it. (E III, p2s; G II,142; Curley I, 495)²⁰

maintaining instead that

the Mind and the Body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of Thought, now under the attribute of Extension. (E III, p2s; G II,142; Curley I, 494)²¹

Spinoza thus defines the body as the object of the idea that constitutes the human mind,²² which perceives everything that occurs in it,²³ since to each body composing the individual there corresponds a relative idea and composition.²⁴

It must be noted, however, that Spinoza does not replace the classical scholastic theory of the intellectual reception of a sensible form with a simple correspondence between the communicative relation among ideas and that among bodies; upon closer inspection, the Dutch philosopher in the *Ethica* never speaks of a communication among ideas from an ontological standpoint. This is not to deny that ideas stand in relations of mutual determination,²⁵ but such determination is not a communication in Spinoza's technical sense, for '*communicare*', in the lexicon of the *Ethica*, is a strictly kinetic category, and what is communicated is always motion, which belongs to extension alone. Ideas do not move as bodies do; rather, they succeed one another – concatenate – according to an order and a connection which is the same as the order and connection of things,²⁶ so that the concatenation of ideas and the communication of motions

20 E III, p2s (G II,142; Curley I, 495). The Latin verb translated here by Curley with 'give' is *tribuere*, which the Italian translators Donna, Sangiacomo, and Gentile render as *comunicare*, whereas Cristofolini renders it as *dare*; this is the sense Curley's rendering follows. Significantly, Spinoza employs *communicare* in the *Ethica* only in relation to the kinetic interaction of bodies.

21 Already in the KV the soul is said to have "nothing in common with the body" (KV II,20; G I,96-7; Curley I, 136): the Dutch term is *gemeenschap*, which Sangiacomo renders as *comunicazione*.

22 E II, p13 (G II,96; Curley I, 457).

23 E II, p14d (G II,103; Curley I, 462-3).

24 E II, p15d (G II,103; Curley I, 463).

25 E II, p9 (G II,91-2; Curley I, 453-4): the idea of any singular thing is caused by another idea, and this to infinity. Cf. also E II, p6 for the intra-attributive character of this causation.

26 E II, p7 (G II,89; Curley I, 451).

among bodies are not two facts standing in a relation, but one and the same order, expressed now under the attribute of thought, now under that of extension. Moreover, since the human mind perceives nothing except through the ideas of the affections of its own body, no finite mind can perceive the ideas of another mind directly. It must therefore be concluded that, although ideas determine one another within the order and connection of thought, they are not immediately communicable between individuals: the body is the sole medium through which ideas can be shared.

This conclusion finds direct textual confirmation in the TTP where Spinoza, discussing the means of prophetic revelation and commenting in particular on the statement drawn from Deuteronomy according to which God spoke face to face with the Israelites, defines 'speaking' as "two men usually communicate their concepts to one another, by means of their two bodies" (TTP I; G III,18; Curley II, 80), insisting on the analogy shortly afterwards, when treating the difference between Moses and Christ: "Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man usually does with a companion (i.e., by means of their two bodies)" (TTP I; G III,21; Curley II, 85).

5 Communicating Ideas through the Body

The act of speaking as communication of ideas through bodies can be analysed by gradually shifting from the ontological plane to the anthropological-gnoseological one. The human mind, although as an idea having a body as its object it is not qualitatively different from any other mode expressed in the attribute of thought, is nonetheless composed of a multitude of individual ideas that are themselves equally composite, and is therefore capable of expressing highly peculiar properties. The relation between ideas and the communication of bodies may be observed, first of all and in general terms, by drawing two distinctions: the first between the theological and the modal plane, and the second among the modes themselves, according to their complexity.

In the first case, *ex parte Dei sive Natura* every idea is true, that is, adequate – meaning: every idea fully accords with its object and *ideatum*²⁷ considered in itself without relation to the object.²⁸ This means that, from an onto-theological standpoint, there is no communication of ideas through bodies, since every idea, being adequate, already possesses all the intrinsic properties and

²⁷ E II, p32 (G II,116; Curley I, 472).

²⁸ E II, def 4 (G II,85; Curley I, 447).

denominations²⁹ of the body it has as its object, including its every actual determination – motion, affection and communication – *sub specie aeternitatis*. However, *ex parte modorum*, finite and limited ideas “offer us nothing but extrinsic denominations, relations, or at most, circumstances”³⁰ of the equally finite and limited bodies they have as their objects,³¹ namely their affections, and hence communications of motion.

With respect to this latter point and concerning the second type of distinction referred to above, Spinoza’s anthropological perspective must be inscribed within a broader cosmological paradigm in which the human being is by no means a *unicum* in its communicative capacity. The fact that every body is the object of an idea implies that every individual, as Spinoza states, is animated according to a different degree of power determined by its corporeal – and hence mental – aptitude for acting or being acted upon in multiple ways simultaneously, and ultimately by its communicative capability to receive a greater number of data and to determine and express itself according to a relative and proportional capability.³² The modes, among themselves, are thus distinguished according to a certain degree of corporeal communicative capability, necessarily reflected in the ideas of which they are the object.

To understand this expressive gradation, it is necessary to return to the ‘small physics’, specifically to the group of postulates that close proposition 13, and in particular the first two,³³ where Spinoza states that corporeal complexity depends on two factors: the number of bodies composing the individual and their type – fluid, soft, and hard. Spinoza clarifies that this apparently qualitative difference translates in reality into the quantity of adhesion surface among the corpuscles composing the composite body, that is, from a communicative standpoint, into the manner in which the motions of external bodies and collisions are ‘com-prise’d’ by the individual.

M. Lin (2005, 254-8) relates it to the possibility for a body to retain memory, while Vinciguerra (2012, 33) goes as far as to connect this typological difference among bodies with their capacity to trace and to be traced, that is, of affecting and being affected.³⁴ The idea of the singular individual thus reflects two communicative capabilities

²⁹ E II, def 4 (G II,85; Curley I, 447).

³⁰ TdIE (G II,36-7; Curley I, 41).

³¹ E I, def 2 (G II,45; Curley I, 408).

³² E II, p13s (G II,96-7; Curley I, 457-8). Also see Vinciguerra (2012, 68). For a broader anti-exceptionalist tradition in Spinoza scholarship, see Sharp 2011.

³³ E II, p13, post 1-2 (G II,102; Curley I, 462).

³⁴ “By affection of the body we shall understand the trace, that is, the *vestigium*” (Vinciguerra 2012, 26; Author’s transl.).

of the body it has as its object: the immediate capability of affecting and being affected, and hence – as I have shown above – of communicating; and the mnemonic capability, which unfolds over time, of concatenating and articulating the traces received. In the case of the mind of the adult human being, this takes the form of a broad absolute perceptive capability of the body's affections, together with an equally broad articulation of new perceptions relative to memory; yet these characteristics must be supposed to be present, to different degrees, even in individuals devoid of vital functions or in the simplest forms of life, which will nonetheless exhibit a reduced or altogether absent capacity to distinguish the plurality of traces or to coordinate affections into a coherent narrative of their own persistence. In these latter cases, the scarce differentiation among hard, soft, and fluid parts reduces the body's capability to retain the impression of others without being destroyed or irreversibly modified by it; consequently, the idea of such individuals, while reflecting the *vestigia* of the body they have as their object, will lack the associative depth that allows the human mind to connect past traces with present ones. Their memory and corporeal communicative capacity thus remains a more rigid mechanical disposition, reflecting the kinetic simplicity of their components.

To summarise: between the extreme of *Deus sive Natura* in which every idea is adequate and fully possesses *sub specie aeternitatis* every communication and affection, and where one cannot therefore speak of a communication of ideas through bodies, and the other extreme of simple individuals whose minds lack an articulated memory and are therefore incommunicable even through bodies, there exists the condition of those individuals complex enough to express the persistence of physical traces in a constant and articulated mental activity. Here, the mind does not exhaust itself in the reflection of a substantial passivity with respect to current affections but concatenates images according to the order of corporeal encounters, establishing that web of cross-references that Spinoza calls memory. This opens the space for the institution of language, through which those affections can be shared, though exclusively by corporeal means.

6 Linguistic Communication

It is no coincidence that in the *Ethica*, the terms 'memory', 'image', 'error', and 'word' are defined within a handful of lines between propositions 17 and 18 of Part II. It is at this juncture that the shift in Spinoza's analytical axis occurs – from the ontological to the gnoseological; Spinoza thereby adopts the standpoint of the human being and their mind, whose internal concatenation of ideas through

the common order of Nature is now articulated.³⁵

The laws of the transmission of motion – which Spinoza in various passages defines as the ‘communication’ of motion – describe this invariable, transparent, and infinite order – that is, error-free and analogical – which, however, when considered from the standpoint of the idea constituting the human mind, according to the order of the affections of the body it has as its object, is necessarily limited, confined to the determinate existence of the individual mind and body.³⁶ Within this limitation, the human mind, however articulate and complex, does not adequately know any nature: neither that of the external individuals with which it interacts,³⁷ nor that of its own body,³⁸ nor even that of itself;³⁹ rather, it has only the perception of the affections of the bodies with which its own enters into communication, and hence possesses only a mutilated idea of them, and through this knows itself to be in communication.

Spinoza clarifies that the root of error lies not so much in this mutilation as such, but rather in the mind’s inability to perceive the terminus of affective communication when it is no longer present.⁴⁰ Error consists, that is, in what will here be called a communicative misalignment arising from the perceptual inertia of the affection, whereby the mind believes a bodily affection to be currently present even when it has ceased, and until a contrary communication/affection supervenes. Moreover, the complex and articulated human mind is capable, on the basis of current affections, of reconstructing chains of perceptions and communications received in the past and stored in memory.⁴¹ The word is one of the means by which the mind can be directed toward such a memorised communicative chain, thereby initiating the process of affective re-presentation.

In this light, one may interpret Spinoza’s well-known example of the word *pomum*⁴² which recalls the fruit to memory, just as a soldier or a farmer, seeing the hoofprints of a horse on the ground, will connect the presence of the horse to their own experience. This

35 On the fragility and ambiguity of the physics of thought, which can follow either the order of imagination or that of the intellect, see Zourabichvili 2002. The question of linguistic communication under the order of the intellect cannot be addressed here and deserves separate treatment; it is worth noting, nonetheless, that the apparent paradox of language as a vehicle for communicating philosophical truths has generated considerable scholarly debate (Savan 1958; Parkinson 1969).

36 E II, def 7 (G II,85; Curley I, 447).

37 E II, p25 (G II,111; Curley I, 469).

38 E II, p19 (G II,107; Curley I, 466).

39 E II, p23 (G II,110; Curley I, 468).

40 E II, p17s (G II,106; Curley I, 463-4).

41 E II, p18s (G II,107; Curley I, 465-6).

42 E II, p18s (G II,107; Curley I, 465-6). See also Hervet 2011, 41-2.

reading presupposes that memory has a corporeal root, and that presupposition is not uncontroversial: Laerke has maintained that “the body has no memory” (Laerke 2014, 532); for him, the body registers traces, but recollection is a function of the mind alone. Against this, L.C. Lin⁴³ has argued, drawing on this same example, that the soldier and the farmer read the same hoofprints differently precisely because their bodies, and not only their minds, have been differently shaped by past encounters. The present account sides with Lin, though it does not require settling the dispute in full: it is enough that the retention of traces varies with the corporeal complexity of the individual – as argued above – for the word to operate as a pointer towards a bodily history that is never identical in any two individuals.

Language, as an expression of a mind limited in its indefinite temporal existence, cannot but be tied to the communicative history of the body it has as its object, equally limited in the same manner. In the TdIE the philosopher is even more explicit:

since words are part of the imagination, i.e., since we feign many concepts, in accordance with the random composition of words in the memory from some disposition of the body, it is not to be doubted that words, as much as the imagination, can be the cause of many and great errors, unless we are very wary of them. (TdIE; G II,33; Curley I, 38)

One can therefore affirm that language, as a communicative medium of ideas through the body, loses the analogical character of physical communication – since it is not possible to express linguistically an image of which one has never had experience, or which is not associated with images impressed on the memory – and is constantly subject to elements of noise arising from the misalignment of the mind, which erroneously perceives as current, affections that are no longer present, owing either to perceptual inertia or to mnemonic representation. Language is therefore always limited to the affective-communicative experience of the individual who employs it.

7 The Linguistic Datum as a Mnemonic Pointer

In Spinoza’s philosophy, the linguistic datum can thus be defined as nothing other than a physical datum expressed through a precise *medium*, which the philosopher identifies in the *os* and in *scriptura*, whose purpose is to transfer images, but which is intrinsically prone to error, since it is closely bound to the particular experiences of the

43 L.C. Lin 2024, 29-30.

one who expresses it and of the one who receives it – the affective history of both the transmission source and destination – experiences that are never identical to one another but, on the contrary, may differ markedly. Whereas physical communication transfers real data, the linguistic word may be defined as a kind of mnemonic pointer, which, although it traces a receiving body at the physical level, is nonetheless nothing other than a reference to a set of physical affections – that is, of mutilated ideas – recalled to memory by the subject who employs it. This corporeal dimension of the word has been emphasised by Hervet, for whom words are “residues in memory of the affections of the body”, carrying “the history of our sensations” – so that the intellect “is not master of the constitution of the words it employs” (Hervet 2011, 91; Author’s transl.). In this sense, while neither the agent nor the addressee of transmission can entirely grasp the meaning a word holds for the other, conversely, the more similar the affective-experiential database of the two parties, the greater will be their capability to understand one another.

Language is a characteristic that belongs in a peculiar way to the human being, whose mind finds itself in a very particular condition: the body it has as its object, is limited in the time of its existence, and is therefore intrinsically incapable of knowing the true natures of individuals; yet it is also complex enough to allow the mind an imaginative capacity capable of producing notions not only disconnected from actuality by the affections themselves, but physically non-existent – pure modes of thought.⁴⁴ Spinoza does not spell out further conditions for the various kinds of complex individual; yet, since every body is animated according to different degrees of power based on the complexity of its internal communicative relations – that is, as has been observed, based on its possibilities of acting and being acted upon in multiple ways simultaneously – it is nonetheless possible to venture that in the animal world there may exist minds complex enough to be equally imaginative and, consequently, capable of exchanging images through some form of transmission. In Spinoza’s account, however, language ultimately places itself between two extremes: on one side, that of very simple bodies, the objects of equally simple and therefore wholly passive ideas, poor in – or entirely lacking – soft or fluid bodies, and hence incapable of imagination; and on the other, that of the divine mind *sub specie aeternitatis* equally incapable of feigning, imagining, and speaking.

44 This is the quintessential case of transcendental terms: “From the fact that we compare things with one another certain notions arise which nevertheless are nothing outside the things themselves but modes of thinking” CM I,5 (G I,245; Curley I, 311).

8 Linguistic Communication and Revelation

The foregoing account has been developed primarily on the basis of the *Ethica*, but an indirect confirmation of this ontological gap between God and the modes from a linguistic standpoint can be found in the first chapter of the TTP already cited above, where Spinoza must account for the voice that Moses heard from God, clearly attested in Sacred Scripture, but also for the unreasonableness of such a claim. If on the one hand “unless we wish to do violence to Scripture, we absolutely must grant that the Israelites heard a true voice”, on the other “However, this doesn’t remove every difficulty” because:

it seems quite unreasonable to maintain that a created thing, dependent on God in the same way as any other, could express, in reality or in words, or explain through his own person, the essence or existence of God, by saying in the first person, “I am the LORD your God, etc.” (TTP I; G III,18, Curley II, 80-1)

Reason denies the possibility that God could express itself as any created thing – any mode in the terms of the *Ethica* – and Spinoza clarifies this impossibility through a brief account of how the communication of ideas through bodies operates:

when someone says orally “I have understood,” no one thinks that the mouth of the man saying this has understood, but only that his mind has. Nevertheless, because the mouth is related to the nature of the man saying this, and also because he to whom it is said has previously perceived the nature of the intellect, he easily understands the thought of the man speaking by comparison with his own. (TTP I; G III,18; Curley II, 81)

The mouth is the corporeal aspect of the exchange that occurs, however, between minds; between two human beings, linguistic communication is possible through the comparison of the nature of the one – that is, of their communicative capacity and history – with that of the other.⁴⁵ A rational human being, according to Spinoza, knows that no mode, through the voice, can express the mind of God, since such a relation is absurd. Spinoza continues:

But since these people knew nothing of God but his name, and wanted to speak to him to become certain of his Existence, I do

45 Some reflections on the relationship between language and Spinoza’s biblical hermeneutics from the perspective of a relational ontology, albeit from a transindividualist standpoint, can be found in Berni 2022 and Morfino 2015.

not see how their request would be fulfilled by a creature who was no more related to God than any other creature, and who did not pertain to God's nature, saying "I am God". (TTP I G III,18; Curley II, 81)

The Hebrews, knowing only the existence of God but not his nature, could not reasonably have found any satisfaction in any mode whatsoever – human being, animal, or celestial voice – that said "I am God", since the possibility of comparing the nature of God with any mode of which they could have had experience would have been lacking.

9 The Linguistic Distinction of Nations

If linguistic communication is thus structurally precluded between God and the modes, among individuals who share a comparable nature it not only succeeds – within the limits established above – but also enables them to aggregate into political bodies. It is significant that Spinoza affirms this on the very terrain of the Hebrew people: discussing the causes of their ruin, he maintains that these are not to be ascribed to a difference in nature among human beings, for

nature creates individuals, not nations, individuals who are distinguished into nations only by differences of language, laws and accepted customs. (TTP XVII; G III,217; Curley II, 317)⁴⁶

This is one of the passages that has fuelled a longstanding debate within Spinoza scholarship concerning whether, and to what extent, the body politic can be considered an individual,⁴⁷ a debate bearing above all on the relation between politics and ontology. Matheron was the first to pose the question in these terms, concluding that "the State is, then, quite precisely an Individual in the Spinozist sense of the word" (Matheron 1988, 347; Author's transl.). The claim did not go unchallenged: Rice defends a 'metaphorical' model according to which the State has no genuine ontological individuality, functioning

⁴⁶ A parallel reading of this same passage has been proposed by L.C. Lin (2024, 57-86), who connects Spinoza's distinction of nations to the physical individuation of E II, p13, L1, and reconstructs the State's unity through a feedback loop of language, affect, and behaviour rather than through the category of communication proposed here.

⁴⁷ Together with "the Right of a state [...] is nothing more than the Right of nature, determined not by the power of each person, but by the power of a multitude, led as if by one mind" TP III,2 (G III 284-5; Curley II, 517).

rather as a historical aggregate⁴⁸ (Rice 1990, 274); on similar, conatus-based grounds, Zellmer has more recently objected that

if states are real individuals, then we should expect that they cannot be destroyed by fully internal causes. But states have fully internal features, such as laws, that might deteriorate or destroy the state. (Zellmer 2025, 60)

Without claiming any definitive resolution, and as a test of the framework proposed in this article, we may read this passage from a communicative standpoint by observing that Nature creates individuals through a direct physical communication among bodies characterised by immediacy, analogicity, and the absence of errors, whereas linguistic communication among human individuals is necessarily mediated by the use of the word as a mnemonic reference to a database of experiential-imaginative-communicative data which, although in the case of a well-defined *multitudo* will in all likelihood differ from that belonging to other nations, is nonetheless intrinsically prone to error caused by the different personal communicative history, which is never identical among persons. The passage reveals an ontological gap in the genesis between any individual – human or otherwise – and any state: the relations internal to individuals are exclusively ones of communication of motion, whereas those internal to human societies are rather ones of communication of images.

The difference is that communication of motion always provides an immediate, real, and veridical datum, whereas linguistic communication, even though always transmitted through an equally immediate, real, and veridical sensory motion, nonetheless conveys references that will only hopefully evoke similar experiences in both the sending individual and the recipient. The ‘natural’ individuality of a state will be all the more solid the more citizens have access to and are educated in the common national imaginative-experiential endowment, in which they will find the physical, real, experiential datum to which to connect linguistic references. This is what Sangiacomo has described as the ‘stabilising’ function of language:

to communicate, that is, it is necessary that the different mental associations which each individual’s imagination spontaneously produces should somehow find a point of intersection. (Sangiacomo 2013; Author’s transl.)

In this sense, one may rather agree with a later suggestion of Matheron who, replying to the objections raised against his position,

48 For an overview of both Matheron and Rice positions see Balibar 2005.

and re-reading the ‘small physics’ – from which the present work has taken its starting point – identifies in Spinoza’s account of composite individuals a scale of degrees of individual constitution. Since Spinoza, in cataloguing the variations an individual can undergo, moves from the simplest bodies to individuals of the second degree and beyond without ever restricting the series, and since the human body is already an individual of at least the fourth degree, nothing prevents the State – were it an individual – from being one of the fifth degree or higher (Matheron 2020, 185). The State can thus be considered a higher-level individual, on the understanding that the levels of individuation up to the human being are internally constituted by a physical communication among individuals, whereas the State is constituted by a linguistic communication, with all the differences – and instabilities – that this entails.

10 Conclusions

The reading proposed here has attempted to show that communication, in Spinoza, is neither a merely human phenomenon nor a metaphor borrowed from contemporary theory, but a *notio communis*. From this physical foundation two consequences follow. The first concerns the status of ideas: although ideas determine one another within the order and connection of thought, they are not immediately communicable between individuals, so that the body remains the sole medium through which ideas can be shared. The second concerns language: the word, as a physical datum operating as a mnemonic pointer, preserves the immediacy of physical communication while losing its analogicity and its freedom from error, since it refers not to a present affection but to a stored affective history that is never identical in any two individuals. The distinction between physical and linguistic communication thus marks a threshold within Spinoza’s account of individuation, whose consequences extend to the question of what kind of individual a State can be said to be: one constituted not by the communication of motion among its parts, but by the far more fragile communication of images among its citizens. Whether this communicative approach can be extended beyond the cases examined here – to the order of the intellect, to the affective life of the *multitudo*, or to the relation between language and political stability – remains open; but if the argument holds, it suggests that Spinoza’s ontology contains the resources for a theory of communication that has yet to be fully thematised.

Abbreviations

CM = *Cogitata Metaphysica*.

Curley = Spinoza, B. (1985-2016). *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2. Edited and transl. by E. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

E = *Ethica*.

G = Spinoza, B. (1925). *Spinoza Opera*. 4 vols. Edited by C. Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitaetsbuchhandlung.

KV = *Korte Verhandelng*.

TdIE = *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*.

TP = *Tractatus politicus*.

TTP = *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

For the individual parts:

ax = *Axioma*.

c = *Corollary*.

d = *Demonstratio*.

def = *Definitio*.

L = *Lemma*.

p = *Propositio*.

post = *Postulatum*.

s = *Scholium*.

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