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Spinoza on Language

edited by Emanuela Scribano

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Introduction

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The topic of linguistic analysis is not among the most popular in the literature on Spinoza's philosophy, also because of its unsystematic treatment in the philosopher's writings. Indeed, although not systematic, Spinoza's investigation of the origin, function, and cognitive value of language is present in all his works. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, and in *Ethics*, language is linked to imagination and inadequate knowledge. In *Ethics*, language also becomes the example par excellence of the association of ideas, therefore of memory and imaginative knowledge. For this reason, the same word does not necessarily correspond to the same meaning. Moreover, a word does not always correspond to an idea; it is perhaps inadequate but susceptible to univocal definition, as is the case with words that express universal notions. In cases of extreme philosophical importance, Spinoza considers language to express the most common prejudices directly. In all these texts, language proves to be the instrument of communication in the absence of adequate ideas, and an organ of expression of imaginative knowledge.

If language is the repository of the errors of the imagination, philosophy must first address the beliefs deposited in linguistic uses, and second, try to oppose them. In doing so, however, it is forced to use the same language modeled on inadequate knowledge. The problem of expressing true ideas through language gave rise to opposite interpretations by D. Savan ("Spinoza and Language", *The Philosophical Review*, 1958) and G.H.R. Parkinson ("Language and Knowledge in Spinoza", *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 1969). Pierre-François Moreau, in his *Spinoza.*

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L'expérience et l'éternité (Paris, PUF 1994) suggested that Spinoza has a "strategy of philosophical language", where modifications in common language are "consciously introduced … to make it capable of expressing what is adequate" (366-7). The problem of the relationship between language and philosophical truth was recently taken up again by Celine Hervet, *De l'imagination à l'entendement: la puissance du langage chez Spinoza*, Paris, Garnier 2012, and by Mogens Laerke, "Spinoza's Language", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 2014.

In this issue of the *Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts*, the essay by Giacomo Tore, "Ordo et connectio verborum. Spinoza on the genesis and nature of human language", is dedicated to the classic theme of the relationship between imagination and intellect, suggesting a coherent theory of the analysis of language in Spinoza's writings. Andrea Ricci Maccarini's "Communicating Thoughts through Bodies: An Ontogenetic Approach to Spinoza's Theory of Language" 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. Pierre-François Moreau's "Spinoza et le langage comme pratique" aims to bring out an implicit theory of language as social practice rather than as a system of signs**.** Language may be considered as an institution that makes collective life possible, rather than as a mere instrument of representation. Matteo Camerini and Attilia Di Corato's "Exempla desiderarem. Spinoza and the Facies Totius Universi" considers the function and status of imaginative language, particularly concerning his use of examples.

If we put to one side the unfinished *Hebrew Grammar*, Spinoza's most elaborate thoughts on language are in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. In this work it is not a question of bringing out the inadequacy of the ideas that correspond to ordinary language, but of identifying exactly the meanings of the Hebrew language, whether they are adequate ideas or not. By ignoring the linguistic habits of Hebrew, one risks attributing meanings and intentions to the speakers and to the words used by the authors that were not those of the authors themselves. The philosophical implications of Hebrew Grammar deserve a deep investigation as an example of scientific study of a language. The Italian translation of the *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*, edited by Pina Totaro (Firenze, Olschki 2012), encourages deeper exploration of this aspect of Spinoza's thought. Pina Totaro, in his "The 'Style of God': Language as Historical Mediation and the Transformation of Biblical Authority in Spinoza", included in this issue, argues that Spinoza's notion of the "style of Scripture" provides the methodological key to his historical conception of revelation and, more broadly, to a new theory of linguistic mediation. A comparative analysis with Robert Boyle's theory of accommodation highlights two distinct early modern strategies for stabilizing scriptural authority:

one grounded in divinely regulated linguistic adaptation, the other in historical-philological reconstruction. In the essay "Spinoza and the Language of Scripture", Steven Nadler wonders whether the irremediable gaps in our knowledge of ancient Hebrew do not undermine the moral motivational role that the Bible is supposed to play for those ignorant people who read it, in particular the masses.

Finally, the political use of language underlined in *Theological-Political Treatise* and in *Political Treatise* deserves closer attention, as Laurent Bove has suggested in "La théorie du langage chez Spinoza", *L'Enseignement philosophique*, 1991. In this direction, Filippo Mignini's essay "'Ad captum vulgi'. The Meaning and Limits of a Spinozian Syntagm" distinguishes between projects of popular emancipation to be conducted through oral teaching and the possibility of disseminating philosophical knowledge through writing, which Spinoza considered difficult and dangerous. A comparison with the theses supported by Koerbagh further illuminates Spinoza's stance.

By investigating the different aspects of the analysis of language in Spinoza – its cognitive function, its role in orienting beliefs, its cultural meaning, its relationship with truth and with different cultural contexts – the essays included in this issue intend to show how language is a theme that emerges repeatedly and with different intentions in Spinoza's entire work. The lack of an organic treatment of language thus also appears to be the consequence of the multiplicity of meanings that language assumes in the different contexts in which it operates.

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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.

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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 it[1] – 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, Guéroult, 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 audito* 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. 1 8, 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 quot-action, 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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"Ad captum vulgi". The Meaning and Limits of a Spinozian Syntagm

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Abstract Spinoza's question of language is examined through the use of the syntagm *Ad captum vulgi*, a recurring theme in various passages of his works. The first rule of life set forth in the TdIE requires the philosopher, guided by prudence, to adapt language to the understanding of the common people, both for the practical benefits it can bring and to more easily dispose the common people, dominated by ignorance and passion, to listen to the truth. However, the common people are rigorously excluded from his written works, in which philosophy is explored and promoted with its own demonstrative language inspired by the mathematical model. In his written works in particular, the philosopher's interest is not in language, but in the "things" or doctrines to be communicated.

Keywords Language. Common people. Philosophy. Revelation. Prudence.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 *Ad captum vulgi loqui*. – 3 Nature and Power of the *vulgus*. – 4 Philosophical Language and the *vulgus*. – 5 Written Language and Its Audience. – 6 Conclusion.

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> I know that these names, in common use, mean something else. My purpose, however, is not to clarify the meaning of the words, but the nature of things, indicating them with those terms whose usual meaning does not entirely exclude the meaning in which I wish to use them. Let this warning suffice once and for all.
> (E III, AfDef 20, expl)

1 Introduction

Spinoza does not formally define 'language' but he does address the spoken and written word and signs. These are understood both as conventional symbolic representations and as spontaneous or controlled behaviours that, in a given context, acquire meaning and communicative value. We could therefore offer Spinoza a definition of 'language' as a system of signs developed for knowledge, communication and action.

This system of signs is elaborated mainly by the imagination, while intellectual knowledge is produced by the pure mind, unfettered by words and images, i.e., immediately, as occurred in the intellect of Christ;[1] but if this is so, how is it possible to express the concepts of the pure mind with signs? The question has not been ignored by interpreters and has even given rise to opposing positions, between supporters of the overall coherence of the system and its opponents convinced that this question would introduce an irreparable fracture.[2]

On my part, I have had the opportunity to discuss the problem on several occasions, starting with *Ars imaginandi*, examining the question against the backdrop of the general theory of imagination and in relation to the themes of representation and expression.[3] Here I show that, while it is true that the pure concepts of the intellect cannot be formed through words and signs, this does not prevent them from being expressed through the imagination, of which memory is a part, on the basis of the doctrine of the ontological identity of body

1 TTP 4,10; cf. TTP 1,28. Citations are given according to the PUF edition (Spinoza, *Oeuvres*, sous la Direction de Pierre-François Moreau: I, *Premiers Écrits*, 2009; III, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, 1999; IV, Ethique, 2020; V, Tractatus politicus, 2005) with reference to the volume number, page and lines. For works not published in the ed. PUF, I follow the Gebhardt edition, indicated by the abbreviation G. For textual references that are not citations, I indicate the acronym of the work, the chapter and the paragraph. The English translations of the cited texts are mine.

2 Criticizing the position taken by Hampshire 1951, Savan 1958 argues for the aporetic nature of Spinoza's philosophy regarding the question of language, a position taken up and refuted by Parkinson 1969; for subsequent discussions see Chiereghin 1976; Dascal 1977; Zac 1977; Dominguez 1978; Moreau 1994; Messeri 1995; Diodato 1995; Vinciguerra 2005; 2006; Hervet 2012; Martinet 2013; Sangiacomo 2013; Laerke 2014.

3 Mignini 1981, 196-217.

and mind formulated in E II, p7: there is nothing in the mind that does not also have expression in the body, and vice versa. Therefore, if words and signs are expressions of the body, appropriately ordered (for example, through the geometric method), they can, indeed must, be able to, also express the pure concepts of the intellect, without demanding a perfect correspondence between the common use of words and the meaning that the philosopher attributes to them, as he declares "once and for all" in the exergue I placed at the beginning. If this were not the case, the fundamental thesis of the ontological identity of mind and body would be undermined.[4] I have returned to this topic on other occasions, studying the question of language both in relation to the general theme of communication and to that of representation and expression. For a more detailed analysis of these themes, please refer to these works.[5]

Here I will attempt to examine the question of language from the perspective of communicating philosophy in a political perspective,[6] commenting on the syntagm *ad captum vulg*i, interpreted in relation to spoken and written language. This question should also be examined, complementarily, from the perspective of the institutional strategies for containing the *vulgus* and its transformation into *cives*, as developed in the TP, which also relate to the question of language, but in a broader sense. For reasons of space, this second part will be examined on another occasion.

2 *Ad captum vulgi loqui*

The expression appears in the first of the three rules of life set forth in the TdIE in § 17, immediately after having specified that all our knowledge must be directed towards a single goal, that is, "the achievement of supreme human perfection".[7] The first rule concerns the language and practices of external life to be followed in relation to the *vulgus*:

> To speak according to the understanding of the common people and to perform all those actions that do not pose any obstacle to the achievement of our goal. Indeed, we can gain no small advantage from them if we adapt ourselves, as far as possible, to their understanding. Add that in this way they will lend friendly ears to the truth. (I,72,18-21)

4 E II, p7 and s; E III, p2s.

5 Mignini 2000; 2007a; 2007b; 2009.

6 A reference to this perspective can be found in Bove 1991.

7 TdIE 16: I,72,10-11.

The rule requires that spoken language (*loqui*) and lifestyles should conform to the understanding and behaviour of the common people to the extent that this does not compromise, or jeopardise, the goal of perfection. This rule has two purposes: the benefits that can be derived from its inevitable presence in daily life; and so the possibility of thus directing it, thanks to the honour it can earn, towards listening to the truth. Since the pursuit of human perfection is not achieved singularly and in isolation, but with the greatest possible number of other individuals,[8] the conditions for the effective communication of philosophy must be created. The moral dimension of this rule, guaranteed by the benefit achieved, and the political significance of its object, the community to which one belongs which is constituted, overwhelmingly, by the common people, are clear here.

The reason why the project of human perfection cannot be implemented without involving the common people, even though they are entirely alien to it, is also clear, both in Spinoza's political works and in the thinking of his fellow authors with whom he collaborated in pursuit of the same goals:[9] the society to which one belongs is formed by the totality of citizens gathered under a common law, the ultimate holder of the power of that society and of the State.[10] Here, then, is the political reason for the first rule of life, not provisional, as it might appear with Descartes in mind, but permanent and stable, which prescribes the use of a language calibrated to the capacity of the common people to understand.

If this rule therefore appears necessary and permanent, always valid, so long as there are imperfect human societies, one must ask whether it is actually productive,[11] given the characteristics that Spinoza also attributes to the *vulgus*, also on the basis of an ancient tradition.

3 Nature and Power of the *vulgus*

To approach Spinoza's notion of the *vulgus*, let us examine how this Latin term is rendered in the parallel passage of the Dutch translation of the *Nagelate Schriften:*[12] "Naar de bevatting van 't gemeen te spreken…". The closest translation of *het gemeen* is "the common

8 TdIE 13-15.

9 Bordoli 2001.

10 TP, chap. 8, § 3 ad finem: "If there is absolute sovereignty, it is that held by the entire multitude". Cf. the analogous position of A. Koerbagh, below, p. 8.

11 Sangiacomo 2013 p. 207 et seq. notes the issue, considering it aporetic and interpreting it differently from the one proposed here.

12 Spinoza 1677.

people", who constitute the majority of a country's population that Spinoza, elsewhere, also refers to with the terms of *plebs*, *multitudo*, and *populus*.[13]

The first difficulty in realizing the program envisioned by the first rule arises from the natural inclinations of the vulgar, who seek things contrary to their own preservation:

> But all those things which the common people follow not only do not offer any benefit to the preservation of our being, but may even hinder it: they are often the cause of the ruin of those who possess them (if one can say 'possess') and are always the cause of the ruin of those who are possessed by them. (TdIE § 7; G II,7,5-9)

The main weakness of the *vulgus* is therefore a radical compromise, due to ignorance, of the *conatus* which, instead of achieving preservation and empowerment, achieves, despite illusions, the destruction of its own being. Note that here it is not only individual preservation that is at stake but, due to the large number of individuals bent on destroying their own being, also that of society as a whole. The *vulgus*, elevated to political decision-making status, is necessarily destructive, as both history and our own present, demonstrate with dramatic clarity.

Why are the common people unable to provide for the preservation of their own being, both individual and collective? First of all, because of the weakness and fragility (*imbecillitas*) of their *ingenium*,[14] that is totally dominated by the power of the imagination. The notions with which common people usually explain nature are imaginative,[15] as is their idea of the power of God.[16] From this it follows that their *animus* is *tenuis* and *impotens*,[17] *rudis*,[18] *varius et inconstans*,[19] therefore extremely changeable and unreliable. His opinions are *praeconceptae*,[20] that is, the legacy of ancient traditions that have not been examined and discussed, hence *praejudicia*.[21] From all this it follows that the vulgus is *superstitioni addictus*, because it loves

13 On this topic and on the fluctuations in meaning of these terms, see Saccaro Battistii 1984; Cristofolini 2008.

14 TTP 5,18: III,232,10.

15 E I, App 9: IV,158,9-13.

16 E II, p3s: IV,164,21-4; cf. in this regard Ep 54: G IV,251,9-11.

17 E V, p41s: IV,494,20.

18 TTP 13,9: III,460,20-1.

19 TTP Praef. 5: III,60,16-24; cf. 14,1: III,464,1-11.

20 TTP 15,1: III,482,10; 180,25-6)

21 TTP 15,1; III,482,15.

time more than eternity and adores the books of Scripture more than the word of God itself.[22]

We know what the books of Scripture are; what Spinoza means here by the word of God, as opposed to the books of Scripture, which latter he considers be not the true word of God, must be explained. For Spinoza, "word of God" means "a simple concept of divine thought revealed to the prophets: obeying God with a pure heart, cultivating justice and charity".[23] But since this concept coincides with the dictates of reason, by the "true word of God" we can consider both human reason, granted identically to all men, and nature with its laws, which reason is able to understand and explain. The common people, however, detest natural knowledge[24] and have no sound concept of either nature or of God.[25]

One essential consideration that helps understand the nature of the *vulgus* is its relationship with Sacred Scripture. In fact, the latter was constituted *ad captum vulgi*,[26] and equally the main instrument of accrediting Scripture, the miracle,[27] was instituted *ad captum vulgi*, because the *vulgus* judges the power of God by the occurrence of unusual things.[28] However, although Scripture was constituted in order to conform with both the ability of the *vulgus* to understand, and with its opinions,[29] the *vulgus* does not seek to live according to the precepts of the former.[30] This means that, although a bond of mutual nourishment has been established between the *vulgus* and Scripture, what there is in Scripture that conforms with reason is not enough to modify the mind of the *vulgus*. How is it possible then to think that, where Scripture, with its language drawn from the vulgar and composed for the vulgar, has failed, philosophy can succeed, striving to also speak *ad captum vulgi*? Spinoza's answer distinguishes between oral and written language. The philosopher's oral language must adapt to the understanding of the masses; written philosophy excludes such adaptation, as we will see, since it addresses itself only to philosophers.

A further reflection concerns the origin and nature of words, born within the *vulgus* and constituted *ad libitum et captum vulgi*, can

22 TTP Praef. 10: III,70,10-13.

23 TTP Praef. 10: III,70,13-17.

24 TTP 1,2: III,78,17; 79,12.

25 TTP 6,1: III,240,21-5. See also E I, App: IV,158,9-11.

26 TTP 6,13: III,260,2-8; TTP 14,11: III,478,9-11.

27 TTP 6,5: III,246,2-9.

28 TTP 6,1: III,238,1-12; 240,1-6.

29 Ep 78: G IV,328,2-3.

30 TTP 7,1: III,276,3-15. Here the reference is also to theologians, who in this respect are also part of the common people.

be read in the TdIE.[31] Also in the CM Spinoza states that words were initially discovered by the *vulgus* and that to understand their meaning today we must understand, or rediscover, their original, past, meanings.[32] However, this being the case, the difficulty seems to increase: if all words, including those of philosophy, derive from the *vulgus* and must be used knowing the meaning that the *vulgus* originally gave them, how will it be possible to use vulgar words in the work of emendation? In fact, words must be used with the meaning assigned to them by the *vulgus*, because otherwise they would not understand and the first rule would be contravened; on the other hand, if all these words express the power of the imagination, how can use them to expound concepts and rules of reason?

In the exergue I placed at the beginning, Spinoza declares that he is not interested in explaining the meaning of words. This statement has no critical value for those who dedicate themselves to this task, as, for example, his friends Louis Meyer and Adriaan Koerbagh do in their dictionaries. He intends to clarify his task: to explain the nature of things. And since he must use words, he uses common words with the meaning closest to the nature of the thing he wishes to express, provided that it falls within the general meaning of the common word used. Thus, the connection with the *vulgus* is not completely severed in the use of language, even in his writings, given the vernacular origin of the words. However, it is the particular meaning that Spinoza attributes to common words and, above all, the often new revelation of the nature of things that renders the *vulgus* unsuitable for philosophy.

Since the notion of *vulgus* is central to the attempt to reconstruct a Spinozian theory of language, it is useful to examine another text to understand the Spinozian conception of the *vulgus* and consequently of language. This is a passage from chapter 16 of the TTP in which the author illustrates his own conception of natural law:

> The natural right of each man is determined not by sound reason, but by desire (*cupiditate*) and power. For not all are naturally determined to act according to the rules and laws of reason; on the contrary, all are born ignorant of everything, and before they can know the true rule of life and acquire the habit of virtue, a great part of their life passes, even if they have received a good education. And yet, in the meantime, they are bound to live and preserve, as far as they can, themselves: that is, by the sole impulse of appetite, since nature has granted them nothing else and has denied them the actual power to live according to sound reason.

31 TdIE, 88: I,120,6-1; cf. Ep 6: G IV,28,10; 29,6-8.

32 CM, 1,6.

> Therefore, they are no more bound to live according to the laws of a sound mind than a cat by the laws of leonine nature. Therefore, considered under the sole dominion of nature, whatever anyone deems useful to himself, whether guided by sound reason or moved by the emotions, he is permitted by the supreme right of nature to desire and to take, in any way, by force, deceit, entreaties, or as he can most easily, consequently considering as his enemy anyone who would prevent him from satisfying his desire (*animum*). (III,506,27–508,11)

This is the human condition in the state of nature. But since nature is not suspended with the constitution of the social body,[33] the impulse of *cupiditas* and power continue to be active causes of action, within the limits of a law suffered or tolerated, certainly not loved. Still today, what most moves the common people, yesterday as today, especially when they reach positions of power, is the idea of, and greed for money, as we read in E IV, App 28-9: a particular vice "in those who seek money not out of poverty or to satisfy needs, but because they have learned the arts of profit, which they proudly boast about".

In conclusion, far more than the tyrant, or the external enemy, it is the common people who are the true danger for human society, because tyranny is more easily established where it is dominant, and also creates conditions of internal weakness within the State which make it easy prey for external enemies. And if, unfortunately, the vulgus were to gain direct control of the State, it would become the greatest danger to itself and to the rest of humanity, in proportion to the power it wields. There have been tragic examples of this. Therefore, Spinoza is not afraid to repeat Tacitus's ancient warning: "*Terret vulgus, nisi metuat*"[34] (unless subjugated by fear, the vulgar inspire terror). This is why reflection on the nature of the vulgar, and on the political regimes able to contain its destructive impulse constitutes the core of Spinozian politics.

33 Ep. 50 to J. Jelles: "As regards politics, the difference between Hobbes and me, about whom you ask, consists in this: I always leave natural law in its integrity and maintain that in the condition of society the sovereign power has more right over the subject only in proportion as it has more power than the subject. And this always takes place in the state of nature" (G IV: 238,25–239,4).

34 E IV, p54s; TP 7,27.

4 Philosophical Language and the *vulgus*

If the words (*verba*), including those considered sacred, were composed *ad libitum et captum vulgi*[35] or, to put it another way, if faith was revealed and written according to the capacities and opinions of the prophets and the common people of the time in which they were spoken and written,[36] those words and the languages constructed from them have nothing to do with truth or philosophy, but can be understood and embraced by everyone, at any time, according to their own opinion or point of view, because they seek piety through obedience: "It is not necessarily the case that he who presents excellent arguments demonstrates the best faith, but rather the case that he who displays excellent works of justice and charity".[37] Spinoza therefore adopts praxis, that is, the conduct of life in accordance with justice and charity, as the criterion for evaluating not only individual merit but also the doctrines, messages, and languages forged by the imagination to which one refers. These do not have value in themselves, but only to the extent that they are able to produce those practical results.

Now, if the life orientation of the common people runs contrary to the preservation of being, and therefore cannot be followed by those who live by reason, how will it be possible to speak to them and to be understood (for example, using their own national language or even their dialect) if the content of the discourse must necessarily conform to reason, which is completely alien, if not in conflict, with the interlocutor's view? What type of language must be adopted so as not to be rejected, but rather to inspire respect and consideration from the common people, so that they gradually become capable of understanding words of truth? The question of language concerns not only the form – that is, the language used, the style, the rhetorical resources – but also and essentially the contents, themes, and concepts expressed, that may not be understood. The question of language concerns not only the 'how' to say, but also, and primarily, the 'what,' 'how much,' and 'when' to say.

One example of Spinoza's *ad captum vulgi* oral language, reported by Colerus,[38] can be found in his conversation with his landlady in The Hague. When Mrs. Van der Spyck asked him whether his religion was good and capable of leading her to salvation, Spinoza is said to have replied: "Your religion is fine: you don't need to seek another to be saved, as long as you apply yourself to a peaceful and pious

35 TdIE 88: I,120,10.

36 TTP 14,11: III,478,10-11.

37 TTP 14,11: III,478,17-19.

38 Colerus, Lucas 2015,77.

life". Given that Colerus gathered this information directly from his landlady, the philosopher's words appear to be reliable. The response appears to be consistent with the lady's capacity for understanding, as she was reassured of the goodness of her religion, of the lack of need to seek another, and of the attainment of salvation through it, to the extent that she was able to lead a peaceful and pious life. A reasonable response and, as such, also true, although it did not express all the philosophical truth Spinoza had in mind. It is true that, in inviting the lady to lead a quiet and pious life, in which true salvation consists,[39] he was adhering to the doctrine supported in chapter XIV of the TTP mentioned above, that is, the indifference of the ways or opinions (in this case religions) with which the precept to live according to justice and charity is interpreted. However, Mrs. Van der Spyck was thinking of eternal salvation after death, which only her religion, she was convinced, could guarantee her: something on which Spinoza stays silent. Here the philosopher limits himself to asserting, in addition to the theorized argument of the indifference of the historical religions practiced, the same consideration as that in letter 21 to De Blyenbergh, of 1665, he addresses to himself:

> And if I should ever perceive that the fruit I have already gathered from the natural understanding is false, it would make me fortunate, since I enjoy it and try to pass through life not with fear and tears, but in serenity, joy, and mirth, and from time to time I ascend a step. (G IV,127,1-5)

Therefore, an answer, and a language, *ad captum dominae*, but still far from philosophical truth.

What guides Spinoza's response? Is it a philosophically established rule and doctrine, or is it the prudence of someone who must, from time to time, assess the interlocutor's degree of 'vulgarity', their knowledge, their willingness to listen, and their capacity for learning, and then tailor the appropriate language to suit them? This seems to be the case. Therefore, the word and language to be used with the *vulgus* are determined by the philosopher's prudence and inspired by his benevolence toward the mankind.

However, in the TdIE, Spinoza envisions the parallel development of other instruments that sought to liberate the *vulgus*: first and foremost, a politics, for the construction of a society that is able to transform the *vulgus* into *cives*, the term preferred in the TP. To this end, a new moral philosophy and a pedagogy are necessary to better

39 The concept of 'salvation' is expressed by the Latin term *salus* and the Dutch *heyl*, which mean 'health', not eternal, but temporal, coinciding with the concept of physical and mental well-being (*welstand*).

educate children and young people: in the Amsterdam where Spinoza wrote this passage, J.A. Comenius already lived. The development of "a complete medical science" and a "mechanics" or technology capable of "gaining much time and leisure" to devote to the free arts of educating the soul are also important. Thus the project of perfecting human nature, to be achieved socially, therefore envisages the combined use of various sciences and arts, to which the oral intervention of the philosopher and his *exemplum vitae* is added.

5 Written Language and Its Audience

Spinoza completely changes his perspective when considering the use of written language. In the preface to the TTP, after twice explicitly addressing the "philosopher reader", not only does he not address the common people, but he explicitly states that he does not want them to read his work, which would certainly be misunderstood:

> For I know how persistently those prejudices which the mind has embraced under the name of religion are fixed in the mind; I know also that it is equally impossible to free the common people from superstition or fear; I know, finally, that the constancy of the common people is equivalent to obstinacy, and that they cannot be guided by reason, but are carried away by blind impulse to praise or to blame. Therefore, I do not invite the common people or all those who, like the common people, are prey to the same passions, to read these things; I would rather they were ignorant of this book than cause trouble by distorting it, as is their custom. And while they do not benefit themselves in any way, they are a hindrance to others, who would devote themselves more freely to philosophy if they were not hindered by one obstacle, namely, the belief that reason should be the handmaid of theology, for I trust that to such people this work will prove most useful. (G IV,127,1-5)

This passage is extremely clear about who Spinoza is addressing in the treatise and in his other writings. First and foremost, and without any restriction, it is intended for all those who are devoted to philosophy; secondly, for all those who could understand it and for whom it would be very useful, if they were not hindered by a single obstacle, the conviction that reason must be the handmaid of theology. Spinoza therefore seems to be addressing theologians and the clergy in general, followers of the Scholastic doctrine of reason as

ancilla theologiae.[40] The common people, on the other hand, are totally excluded from reading the text, because it is impossible to free them from superstition or guide them with reason. In this tripartite division it is not difficult to recognize the ancient Averroist division of the interpretation of Scripture for the use of philosophers, of theologians, and of the common people.[41] This does not mean, however, that the *vulgus*, even though it was not the addressee of the written text, continues to be the nodal centre of Spinoza's political reflection.

In February 1671, when Spinoza heard that someone had translated the TTP into Dutch and intended to publish it, he wrote to Jarig Jelles, seriously worried, asking him to find out and to try to stop it being printed because if it were, the work would certainly be prohibited,[42] indeed it eventually was.[43] We can assume that Spinoza had been profoundly affected by the story and fate of his friend Adriaan Koerbagh, tried in 1668 for the publication of *Een Ligt* and who had died in prison just two years earlier.[44] Koerbagh, as he admitted during the interrogations at the trial, knew Spinoza well and had been to his house several times; in the work that was tried and prohibited he had adopted the ontology of the KV and perhaps of the first two (not definitive) parts of the *Ethics*; lastly, he, Spinoza and other friends, such as Meyer, shared the project for the cultural liberation of the Dutch people.[45] However, unlike Spinoza, who wanted to limit his direct engagement with the common people to communication and oral language, Koerbagh wanted to address the common people through his writings as well. He wrote not in Latin but in Dutch, using rhetorical forms and stylistic devices more suited to the comprehension of a common reader. Let us briefly outline Koerbagh's linguistic experience so as to better understand Spinoza's.

At the § 2 of chapter 1, dedicated to Being or God, the author declares the purpose of the work, clarifying it for its intended audience from the outset:

> Since we have proposed, with God's blessing, to deal in writing with the principal matters of theology and religion, in order

40 The ancillary nature of philosophy to theology had been established in a letter from Gregory IX to the theology masters of the University of Paris dated 7 July 1228 ("*Si doctrina celestis eloquii*"); Bonaventure took up the doctrine of subordination again in *De reductione artium ad Theologiam* (c. 1256); Thomas, *Summa theologica*, 1, q.1, a. 5, *ad secundum*.

41 Averroes 2019.

42 Ep 44: G IV,227,6-17.

43 Spinoza's TTP, together with Hobbes's *Leviathan* and L. Meyer's *Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres*, was publicly condemned in 1674.

44 Koerbagh 2011; 2027.

45 Bordoli 2001.

> to thereby make known to the people of our country our inner reasoning on these matters, we have resolved, so as not to incur wasted effort or vain labour from which no one could derive fruit or benefit, to use the language that is already known, or should be, to all the people. For the matters we will treat in all seriousness for the benefit of the people and the State (although at times, with good reason, we will speak jokingly), concern the entire people.

The term used here by Koerbagh for people is *volk*, corresponding to the Latin *populus*. The aim of the work is therefore to free the Dutch people from prejudices and errors regarding theology and religion; and since he addresses "all the people", he decides to use the language they are or should be familiar with: Dutch. The reference to the potential waste of effort in using a language unknown to the people might recall the similar recommendation Spinoza makes at the end of the KV, when he asks the friends he composed it for, in order not to waste their labour in communicating those doctrines to others, to consider, carefully, whether those to whom they are communicated are capable of understanding such doctrines. Clearly, here, Spinoza is not talking about language, but about "things".

> And since you are not unaware of the condition of the times in which we live, I still want to insist, urging you to be very careful about communicating these things to others. I do not mean that you should keep them to yourself, but only that, if you ever begin to communicate them to anyone, let no motive or purpose drive you other than the health of your neighbour, since you have clearly assured yourself, with regard to him, that you will not lose this reward for your labour. (KV 2,26,10)

The reference to the "condition of the times in which we live" constitutes the context and reason for the author's recommendation to friends. We must higlight at least three characteristics of this condition: the widespread ignorance of the people; the dominance of theological doctrines, whatever they may be, and of the prejudices and superstitions they foster among the masses; and the lack of freedom of expression, especially for dissonant or alternative doctrines. This condition requires the utmost prudence, the virtue that Spinoza adopted as his own motto in the emblem inspired by the dog rose: "Caute".[46]

Thus Spinoza, unlike Koerbagh, did not believe that his text could be used for the liberation of the entire Dutch people: which is why it was not published, but only circulated, in manuscript form, among his

46 Mignini 1981.

friends. Indeed, he believed that language and communication must be carefully tailored to the understanding of those to whom they are addressed, in a progressive, extremely prudent, and therefore slow, process of liberation. This does not alter the fact that this work was also necessary for Spinoza, because, like Koerbagh, he believed that the power of the State resides in the multitude of its citizens. Indeed, Koerbagh was explicit on this point on several occasions. See, for example, note g of the first chapter:

> It is a good use of power when the government uses the power granted to it by the people, in all cases, in the interest of the nation, to protect the freedom, well-being, and advantage of the people. And these are indeed powerful, but not above the power of the people.

The thesis supported here, and, as we have seen, also shared by Spinoza in the TP, is that the people (Spinoza in the TP prefers the term *multitudo*)[47] are the source of State power. Rulers receive the power they exercise from the people, and this is just, not abused, only if it is exercised in the nation's interest, to safeguard the freedom, material well-being, and every kind of benefit for the people whose power can never be exceeded by the power of the rulers. But if this is the case, since the nation is largely made up of common people, the nation's primary interest is the transformation of the *vulgus* into *cives*,[48] that is, into subjects (citizens) aware of and responsible for their own power.

In note c of the second chapter, Koerbagh clarifies what he means by common people (*het gemeene*): those devoid of knowledge and dominated by passions, regardless of their wealth or social status. This definition corresponds exactly to the Spinozian *vulgus*. Lack of knowledge and an abundance of prejudices prevent common people from recognizing the disinformation they are fed, in order to maintain and support the power of those who systematically deceive them, namely, the clergy of any historical religion.

> If common people, who are the majority – and I don't mean common people in term of social status or poor in money or wealth – but common people in terms of knowledge, judgment, and practice of knowledge, whether noble or not, rich or poor – if those people were a little more gifted in knowledge, judgement, and in the practice of knowledge and were a little less prejudiced, that is, if they didn't distrust others too much, they would realize that they are being led by the nose, as they say.

47 *Populus* is absent there.

48 *Civis* is Spinoza's preferred term in the TP, starting with the subtitle.

Could the common people be saved from ignorance? The text Koerbagh is writing, and other similar texts, could offer a tool. But already in chapter 2, devoted to the discussion of the false doctrine of the Trinity, the author begins to express doubts about the treatise's intended audience. At the end of paragraph 3, we read:

> This [text] is written only for the intelligent who can understand it, because the clergy do not want to understand it or comprehend it; and there is not yet the possibility of communicating it to the common people.

Here the author seems to contradict the purpose stated at the beginning of the first chapter, in which he declares his intention to address all people. But if the text cannot be addressed to the common people, who are incapable of understanding; if it is not addressed to the clergy, who could understand but are unwilling to; it only remains that it can be addressed to the "intelligent", that is, to those who are capable of understanding and are at the same time animated by a love of truth and a willingness to listen, namely, the readers the author addresses in the preface to the work: "Benevolent lovers of truth, peaceful and intelligent readers". A category of people corresponding to Spinoza's "philosophers". The author then admits bitterly that it is "not yet" possible to address the common people directly, because they are incapable of understanding. "Yet" constitutes a significant difference from Spinoza, for whom, in the afore mentioned preface to the TTP, the common people will "never" be capable of understanding.

However, Spinoza in the TdIE does not seem to share this thesis, because that text clearly expresses the hope that the common people might come to listen attentively to the truth. The reference to the clergy is surprising. They are the constant target of criticism throughout Koerbagh's treatise, who acknowledges that they are capable of understanding, "but unwilling". The author, in fact, addresses them again in § 11, inviting them to distinguish between certain knowledge and faith which, by its very nature, is always doubtful. How, when the clergy act as teachers or masters, can they teach others if they are uncertain of what they teach?

In another text, in note e of chapter 3, the author returns to the topic, declaring that the treatise is addressed "to the learned, or to those who call themselves learned". Again, the reference seems to be to the clergy, invited to distinguish between certain knowledge and belief and to embrace only certain knowledge:

> I speak here primarily to the learned, or to those who call themselves learned. Indeed, to consider all people wise and sensible, to the point of not having to believe, would be impossible. Therefore, I do not want or cannot take away the entire religion

> of the common people, who have no opportunity to investigate. I only want teachers to no longer have propositions in which they say they believe, but that they must know and understand with certainty; and if everyone knew with certainty, they would soon agree, and there would soon be a certain unity in doctrine and among the people.

This passage is noteworthy because the author reiterates the treatise's intended audience, namely the clergy, who are invited to accept and teach only certain doctrines, which would necessarily lead to harmony among religious denominations and within the entire population. On the other hand, it is stated, if I am not mistaken, for the first and only time, that the common people cannot be deprived of any form of religion, due to their inability to research and analyse rationally. Here, Koerbagh's initial intention regarding his intended audience seems to be denied once again: not the entire population, incapable of understanding; not the clergy, who could understand but do not want to; so only the few intelligent and well-disposed readers, lovers of truth, namely philosophers, remain. A conclusion very close, despite its intentions, to Spinoza's.

6 Conclusion

Some schematic conclusions can be drawn from the considerations above.

1. It must be reiterated 'once and for all' that Spinoza's aim is not to clarify the nature of words, but of things. Not language, but philosophy; and therefore, not a philosophy of language.
2. Words and language in general will necessarily follow the construction of the intellect, given that mind and body are a single individual, expressed simultaneously in different ways. Spinoza here seems to follow the admonition of the ancient Varro: "*Rem tene, verba sequentur*".
3. Spinoza's political meditation is central to his reflection on the *vulgus* and the dual relationship between philosophy and the *vulgus*.
4. The philosopher, as a single human being, lives among the common people adapting, much as they can, to their language and lifestyles so as to lead as many people as possible to freedom.
5. Philosophy, in its written practice, cannot have the common people as its addressees, yet they remain a core object of inquiry.
6. The centrality of philosophical reflection on the common people is expressed in the construction of a social and

institutional architecture, equipped with its own language, able to guarantee, in itself, freedom and security, leading to a progressive transformation of the *multitudo* into *civitas*. But we will discuss this topic on another occasion.

Abbreviations

For Spinoza's works:
CGLH = *Compendium Grammatices linguae Hebraeae.*
E = *Ethica*.
Ep = *Epistola.*
G = Spinoza, B. (1925). *Spinoza Opera*. 4 vols. Edited by C. Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitaetsbuchhandlung.
KV = *Korte Verhandeling.*
TdIE = *Tractatus de intellectus emendatio*ne.
TP = *Tractatus politicus*.
TTP = *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

For the individual parts:
AfDef = *Affectum Definitio.*
App = Appendix.
c = *Corollary.*
d = *Demonstration.*
expl = *Explicatio.*
p = *Propositio.*
s = *Scholium.*

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Spinoza et le langage comme pratique

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Abstract Spinoza develops an implicit theory of language as social practice rather than as a system of signs. Through a reading of the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Ethics*, on can show that meanings arise from embodied habits (*consuetudo*), vary according to social functions, and are transformed by philosophical practice itself. Language thus appears as an institution that makes communication, law and collective life possible, rather than as a mere instrument of representation.

Keywords Prophecy. Anthropogenesis. Imagination. Intuitive knowledge. Body.

Sommaire 1 Le chapitre I du TTP. – 2 Le chapitre XI du TTP. – 3 Le scolie d'*Éthique* II, 18. – 4 Éthique V, prop. 21-42.

1 Le chapitre I du TTP

J'ai déjà abordé plusieurs fois la question du langage chez Spinoza : sur les rapports entre *ratio* et *usus*,[1] sur la question du pouvoir,[2] sur l'emploi du latin.[3] Je vais ici traiter un autre aspect : la pragmatique du langage, en analysant quelques textes que l'on n'étudie pas souvent dans cette perspective.

1 Moreau 1994.
2 Moreau 1985 ; 2001.
3 Moreau 2027a.

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Spinoza entame le *Traité théologico-politique* par une analyse des conditions de la prophétie. Conformément à sa décision de partir du texte biblique lui-même, il relève, dans un certain nombre de passages, toutes les indications qui permettent de cerner les circonstances dans lesquelles la parole divine s'adresse aux prophètes : paroles imaginaires, figures, songes, etc. En fait, elles semblent bien relever toutes de l'imagination, au sens où l'entend Spinoza, c'est-à-dire de processus corporels dont les corollaires s'enchaînent dans l'âme selon l'ordre des rencontres du corps. Il y a toutefois une exception : la façon dont la loi a été donnée à Moïse et au peuple hébreu sur le Sinaï. En quoi cette révélation se distingue-t-elle de toutes les autres révélations ? Aussi bien les textes qui la décrivent qu'un principe énoncé par la Bible elle-même (Moïse est différent des autres prophètes) paraissent indiquer que cette fois-là, la révélation a eu lieu par des paroles véritables (autrement dit : réelles – distinctes, donc, des paroles imaginaires d'autres épisodes) :

> [8] C'est par une voix véritable (*voce vera*) que Dieu a révélé à Moïse les lois qu'il voulait prescrire aux Hébreux, comme cela est clair par Ex 25 : 22, où il dit : *Et là je serai prêt pour toi et je te parlerai de cette partie de la couverture de l'arche qui est entre les deux chérubins* , ce qui montre que Dieu se servait d'une voix véritable, puisque Moïse, chaque fois qu'il le désirait, trouvait là Dieu prêt à lui parler; et cette voix, celle par laquelle la Loi fut prononcée, fut la seule voix véritable, comme je le montrerai bientôt. (TTP I,8,86-7).

Spinoza étend même cette dimension de « vérité » à la révélation du Décalogue faite à l'ensemble du peuple hébreu. Il n'ignore pas les difficultés que cela présente : d'une part, cela s'accorde mal avec les différences de formulation entre les versions de cette révélation dans l'Exode et dans le Deutéronome – ce qui a poussé certains exégètes juifs à supposer qu'il s'agissait d'une communication par l'esprit seulement[4] ; d'autre part, pourquoi une telle voix créée aurait-elle eu l'autorité pour se proclamer divine ? Néanmoins, il maintient son attachement sur ce point à la lettre du texte. Or nous savons qu'il n'hésite pas, dans d'autres cas, à interpréter les expressions bibliques en termes de métaphore ou selon la mentalité des locuteurs ou des auditeurs. S'il tient donc tellement, ici, à une lecture littérale, nous devons penser qu'elle indique quelque chose de fondamental. Cela ne signifie évidemment pas qu'il pense, en termes métaphysiques, que la Substance éternelle a réellement créé une voix en dehors de toutes

4 Spinoza renvoie, pour l'explication de cette difficulté, à ce qu'il dira au chap. VIII : la différence se justifie par les deux fonctions différentes des deux livres.

les lois de la Nature ; mais cela montre que pour lui nous sommes ici face à la traduction en langage anthropomorphique d'une réalité essentielle.[5] Reste à savoir laquelle, et pour cela il faut examiner le texte au plus près, notamment la justification qu'il donne de son choix :

> [11] si nous ne voulons pas faire violence à l'Écriture, il faut absolument accorder que les Israélites ont entendu une voix véritable (*veram vocem*). En effet, l'Écriture dit expressément (Dt 5 : 4) : *Dieu a parlé avec vous face à face*, etc., c'est-à-dire comme font d'habitude deux hommes qui se communiquent mutuellement leurs idées par l'intermédiaire de leurs deux corps (*ut duo homines suos conceptus invicem, mediantibus suis duobus corporibus, communicare solent*). C'est pourquoi il semble mieux convenir au texte de l'Écriture d'admettre que Dieu a véritablement créé une voix (*aliquam vocem vere creavit*), par l'intermédiaire de laquelle il a révélé le Décalogue. (TTP I,11,88-9)

Bien entendu, aussi bien la voix réelle que la voix imaginaire relèvent en fait, pour Spinoza, de l'imagination, et dans les deux cas le corps est en jeu – mais il faut noter qu'ici il n'est pas question des affections d'un corps, comme d'habitude quand on parle de l'imagination, mais de l'interaction de deux corps qui, par la voix, communiquent (c'est bien le verbe utilisé ici) entre eux. La différence ne porte donc pas sur le mode de connaissance. Ce qui distingue la voix réelle est ailleurs. Spinoza la caractérise immédiatement par une comparaison, qu'il ancre dans l'expression « face à face » du texte biblique : Dieu parle « Cette précision est décisive. Si Spinoza voulait seulement affirmer la réalité physique du phénomène acoustique, il lui suffirait de dire que Dieu produisit un son. Or il définit la voix par sa fonction : elle est le moyen par lequel deux hommes communiquent leurs pensées à travers leurs corps. La réalité de la voix n'est donc pas seulement acoustique ; elle est interhumaine et, plus exactement, intercorporelle. Ainsi, la comparaison avec ce qui se passe entre deux hommes déplace effectivement l'attention vers un phénomène qui n'est plus celui de l'image prophétique, mais celui de la communication. Or c'est précisément ce déplacement qui est intéressant. Car il introduit, au cœur même du récit biblique, quelque chose qui ressemble à une définition minimale du langage : la communication de pensées par l'intermédiaire des corps. Elle ne définit ni une langue, ni un système de signes, ni une faculté de l'esprit ; elle définit une pratique corporelle de l'interlocution.

Cette comparaison ne sert donc pas simplement à rendre le texte biblique plus intelligible. Elle indique ce qui fait, pour Spinoza, la

5 Selon la règle qu'il formule à propos des énoncés du « credo minimal », TTP XIV,11.

spécificité de la révélation du Décalogue. La loi n'est pas seulement énoncée par un langage ; elle est communiquée selon la forme même qui caractérise le langage humain comme relation entre les hommes. Autrement dit, la révélation ne suspend pas les conditions ordinaires de la communication, qui sont des lois de la Nature ; elle les confirme. Cela expliquerait pourquoi Spinoza insiste tellement sur cette «voix réelle». Ce n'est pas, ou pas seulement, un miracle qui impressionne les Israélites ; c'est la condition pour que la Loi puisse être reçue comme une loi. La tradition du commentaire biblique dit souvent : l'Écriture parle le langage des hommes. Mais Spinoza semble dire quelque chose d'un peu différent : pour qu'il y ait loi, il faut que même Dieu parle comme parlent les hommes lorsqu'ils s'adressent les uns aux autres. Ainsi, la forme humaine du langage n'est pas un accident de la révélation. Elle appartient à la définition même de la loi. Cela confère au passage une portée beaucoup plus anthropologique que théologique.

Une loi en effet n'est jamais un simple contenu normatif. Elle est une pratique de communication. Elle suppose un locuteur, des destinataires, une langue commune et une compréhension commune. Elle suppose donc déjà une communauté linguistique. Dans cette perspective, la première institution politique apparaît en même temps comme une institution linguistique. La comparaison avec ce que font « deux hommes » n'est pas un simple exemple : elle désigne la condition anthropologique de la législation. Non pas seulement au sens où le langage est un effet de la société, mais aussi au sens où le langage appartient aux conditions de possibilité de la société historique.

Or, ensuite, dans les passages de la première partie du Traité où Spinoza pense l'institution de la société (chap. III et V), il cite l'excès des besoins de chacun sur les capacités individuelles, la division nécessaire du travail, les effets bénéfiques de celle-ci en termes de civilisation, la nécessité des lois,[6] mais il ne mentionne pas explicitement le langage ; on peut penser néanmoins que celui-ci est nécessaire, mais enfin il n'est pas cité. En revanche, il est cité– comment faire autrement ? – lorsque les derniers chapitres, pour les besoins de la démonstration sur les droits respectifs des citoyens et de l'État, décrivent ces droits en termes de liberté de parole[7] : c'est-à-dire que la liberté de philosopher concerne non seulement la pensée, mais aussi et surtout l'acte par lequel on la communique. Mieux encore, lorsqu'il traite, aussitôt après, de l'institution de la

6 TTP III,5 et V,7-8.

7 « C›est pourquoi il est temps de rechercher jusqu›où s›étend, dans la meilleure république, cette liberté de penser et, pour chacun, de dire ce qu›il pense », TTP XVI,1,504-5. Le chapitre XX sera entièrement consacré à cette question.

société – dont la forme va servir à penser ces droits – il la traduit de nouveau en registre langagier. Le chapitre XVI, qui renvoie d'ailleurs expressément à la démonstration du chapitre V,[8] l'aborde en effet en termes de communication, sous la forme de la communication et de la promesse : « ils ont nécessairement dû s'accorder mutuellement […] ils ont donc dû stipuler et promettre très fermement … ».[9] Tout le paragraphe qui suit s'interroge sur les conditions de la promesse, particulièrement sur le fait que l'on n'est tenu de la respecter que si sa mise en œuvre ne contredit pas l'intérêt de celui qui a promis – en somme le langage n'y est appréhendé qu'en tant qu'il est ancré dans les circonstances réelles de la vie des hommes et dans leurs rapports. Exactement comme au premier chapitre, l'institution de la République appelle le langage comme pratique interhumaine : non pas pour décrire la réalité, non pas pour s'adresser à une divinité, non pas comme expression de la pensée ou comme système de signes, mais d'abord comme procès de communication entre deux ou plusieurs hommes. Le langage, absent du récit génétique, devient explicitement présent, et sous cette forme déterminée, dès qu'il s'agit de penser la médiation entre les hommes.

2 Le chapitre XI du TTP

Tout cela ne nous indique pas le rôle spécifique que jouent les individus dans cette histoire. On pourrait croire en trouver une illustration dans le chapitre II du Traité, lorsque Spinoza souligne les différences de style des différents prophètes. Il indique que ces différences peuvent tenir à leur structure corporelle, mais ne s'y attarde pas[10] ; il met en doute les explications traditionnelles par l'origine sociale.[11] C'est surtout qu'en ce passage, son but n'est pas tant d'analyser les différences individuelles pour elles-mêmes que de montrer que c'est l'imagination, dans sa diversité, qui provoque la prophétie, et non l'entendement, donc que l'on ne peut attendre d'un prophète des informations rationnelles sur des questions qui relèvent de la science. Surtout, il ne s'intéresse pas ici à ce qui pourrait caractériser le style des prophètes dans leur ensemble : cela ne servirait en rien à sa démonstration dans ce chapitre.

8 « Si nous considérons également que, sans un secours mutuel, les hommes vivraient nécessairement de façon très misérable et sans pouvoir cultiver la raison, comme nous l›avons montré au chapitre V », TTP XVI,5,510-11.

9 TTP XVI,5,510-11.

10 « en fonction des divers tempéraments de leur corps, les prophètes étaient plus aptes à telle révélation qu'à telle autre », TTP II,8,122-3.

11 TTP II,8,10,122-5.

En revanche, on va le voir aborder ces questions au chapitre XI, lorsqu'il s'agira d'expliquer que les apôtres interviennent parfois comme prophètes (lorsqu'ils prêchent devant la foule) et parfois comme docteurs (dans les épîtres qui leur sont attribuées par le Nouveau Testament).[12] On considère le plus souvent que cette distinction concerne le contenu de leur enseignement. Effectivement, la distinction entre deux fonctions exercées par les apôtres implique des contenus et des modes de transmission différents : ils apparaissent tantôt bénéficiaires d'une révélation adaptée à leur imagination, tantôt chargés d'enseigner une doctrine universelle accessible à la raison. Mais ce n'est pas le seul caractère de cette différence. En fait, les apôtres ne changent pas seulement de méthode ; ils changent de langage. Et du coup, en repérant ce qui caractérise le style des apôtres quand ils s'expriment par la raison naturelle, Spinoza est amené à faire ce qu'il n'avait pas fait dans les deux premiers chapitres : il caractérise aussi, par opposition, le style des prophètes (qui dès lors apparaissent non dans ce qui les distingue les uns des autres, mais dans ce qui les unit). Ce qui sous-tend la différence des styles, c'est une différence de position dans la communication : le prophète (y compris l'apôtre lorsqu'il prophétise) parle avec autorité à des auditeurs qui ne sont pas dans la même position que lui, et qu'il n'essaie pas de convaincre par le raisonnement ; l'apôtre-docteur parle à des égaux, à qui il propose modestement des arguments – modestement parce qu'il les considère comme aussi sages que lui et capables de discuter ce qu'il leur enseigne. Dans un cas l'orateur est investi de l'autorité divine, qui ne souffre pas la discussion ; dans l'autre, l'orateur et l'auditeur, ou l'auteur et le destinataire de l'épître, sont au même niveau face à la vérité.

> Il était extrêmement coutumier aux prophètes d'attester partout qu'ils parlaient en vertu d'une déclaration de Dieu […] Mais dans les épîtres des apôtres, nous ne lisons rien de tel. Au contraire, dans I Cor 7 ; 40, Paul parle selon son sentiment. Bien plus, dans de très nombreux passages, on trouve des locutions qui expriment l'hésitation et la perplexité […] l'autorité d'un prophète ne souffre pas le raisonnement ; car celui qui veut confirmer ses dogmes par la raison les soumet par là même à l'arbitrage du jugement de chacun – ce que Paul semble avoir fait, puisqu'il argumente rationnellement lorsqu'il dit dans I Cor 10 : 15 *: Je vous parle comme à des personnes sages ; jugez vous-mêmes de ce que j'ai dit*. (TTPXI,1 et 2,410-13)

12 « Nous concluons donc que les apôtres n›ont eu de révélation particulière que pour ce qu›ils ont prêché de vive voix et confirmé par des signes (voir ce que nous avons montré au début du chap. II) ; mais ce qu›ils ont enseigné de vive voix ou par écrit, simplement et sans l›attester par des signes, ils l›ont dit ou écrit par une connaissance naturelle », TTP XI,6,418-19.

Ainsi Spinoza est alors amené à distinguer, dans le cas des apôtres, entre les deux styles associés aux deux rôles.[13] Ce qui détermine la forme du discours n'est pas seulement le degré de connaissance du locuteur, mais la fonction pratique qu'il remplit dans une situation donnée. Ce n'est pas le même individu qui parle différemment parce qu'il possède plusieurs connaissances ; c'est le même individu qui adopte un autre régime de discours parce qu'il exerce une autre fonction. En ce sens, le langage n'est pas une propriété du sujet. Il appartient à une relation. Le prophète ne parle pas comme le docteur. Le philosophe ne parle pas comme le citoyen. Le souverain ne parle pas comme le pédagogue. Autrement dit, ce qui détermine la forme du discours est la fonction exercée, et ce qu'elle implique de rapport à autrui. Le rôle induit une position d'énonciation.

On a vu plus haut que Dieu parle comme parlent les hommes. On voit maintenant que les hommes ne parlent pas toujours de la même manière. Les conditions anthropologiques du langage débouchent sur la différenciation pratique et sociale des usages du langage. Cette hypothèse invite alors à relire la question du langage sous un angle nouveau. Il ne s'agit plus seulement d'opposer imagination et raison, mais d'étudier les différents régimes de discours qu'impliquent les diverses pratiques humaines : le prophète, le docteur, le philosophe, le citoyen, le législateur ou le souverain. Le problème du langage devient ainsi inséparable d'une théorie des fonctions de la parole. La vérité elle-même n'impose jamais un langage unique. La même vérité peut être annoncée prophétiquement, ou pédagogiquement, ou rationnellement. Autrement dit, la vérité ne détermine pas à elle seule son mode d'énonciation. Celui-ci dépend de la pratique interhumaine dans laquelle le discours intervient. On est ainsi face non seulement à une théorie des genres de discours, mais à une véritable pragmatique spinoziste, où le sens d'un énoncé dépend inséparablement de celui qui parle, de la fonction qu'il exerce, du destinataire auquel il s'adresse et de l'effet pratique recherché.

On remarquera que cette analyse est parfaitement cohérente avec la philosophie spinoziste des affects. Les affects ne sont jamais indépendants des rencontres ; de même, les formes du langage dépendent des rapports pratiques dans lesquels les hommes sont engagés. Le langage apparaît ainsi comme une modalité de l'action plutôt que comme un simple véhicule de représentations.

13 Sur cette notion de rôle (*persona*), voir mes études Moreau 2027b et c.

3 Le scolie d'*Éthique* II, 18

Le scolie de la proposition 18 de la deuxième partie de l'*Éthique* constitue sans doute le texte où Spinoza s'approche le plus d'une théorie du langage. Il est généralement cité pour illustrer le caractère arbitraire du signe : rien ne ressemble moins à un fruit que le mot *pomum*, et pourtant un Romain passe immédiatement de l'un à l'autre. Cette lecture est exacte, mais elle demeure insuffisante. Le véritable problème de Spinoza n'est pas l'arbitraire du signe ; c'est l'origine de cette association – donc justement son caractère motivé, mais par autre chose que la ressemblance.

> Et par là, en outre, nous comprenons clairement pourquoi l'âme, de la pensée d'une chose, passe aussitôt à la pensée d'une autre qui n'a aucune ressemblance avec la première ; par exemple, de la pensée du mot *pomum*, un Romain passe aussitôt à la pensée d'un fruit qui n'a aucune ressemblance ni rien de commun avec ce son articulé, si ce n'est que le corps de ce même homme a souvent été affecté par les deux à la fois, c'est-à-dire que cet homme a souvent entendu le mot *pomum* en même temps qu'il voyait le fruit. (E II, 18s,194-7)

Le texte ne dit pas que le mot signifie naturellement le fruit, ni même que cette signification résulte d'une convention abstraite. Il affirme que le corps d'un même individu a été affecté simultanément par un son et par une chose. L'association entre le mot et le fruit n'est donc pas d'abord linguistique ; elle est corporelle. Le sens ne procède pas d'un rapport logique entre un signifiant et un signifié ; il résulte d'une histoire des affections du corps. Ce que l'usage contemporain nommerait « signification » apparaît ici comme l'effet d'une pratique répétée. Cette interprétation reçoit une confirmation dans les exemples qui suivent immédiatement :

> et ainsi chacun passera d'une pensée à l'autre selon la façon dont, dans son corps, l'habitude a ordonné les images des choses. En effet, si un soldat, par exemple, a vu sur le sable les traces d'un cheval, il passera de la pensée du cheval à celle du cavalier, et de là à celle de la guerre, etc. Mais un paysan passera de la pensée du cheval à celle de la charrue, du champ, etc. ; et ainsi chacun passera d'une pensée à telle ou telle autre selon l'habitude qu'il a prise de joindre et d'enchaîner les images de telle ou telle façon. (E II, 18s,196-7)

Le soldat, voyant les traces d'un cheval, pense au cavalier puis à la guerre ; le paysan pense à la charrue, au champ et aux travaux agricoles. On a souvent vu dans cette comparaison une simple

illustration psychologique de l'association des idées. Mais elle a une portée plus générale. Ce qui distingue le soldat du paysan n'est pas leur constitution individuelle ; c'est la pratique dans laquelle chacun est engagé. Les chaînes d'associations ne sont pas produites par une subjectivité abstraite, mais par une forme de vie. Chaque pratique sociale crée sa syntaxe des associations. Le texte introduit ainsi une dimension sociale qui passe souvent inaperçue. Les mêmes objets, les mêmes mots, les mêmes perceptions n'engendrent pas les mêmes enchaînements de pensée selon les pratiques auxquelles les individus ont été formés. Le soldat, le paysan, mais aussi le prophète et le docteur du chapitre XI du *Traité théologico-politique*, n'habitent pas le même réseau de significations parce qu'ils n'occupent pas les mêmes positions dans l'activité sociale. Les mots ne possèdent donc pas une signification définitivement fixée; ils ont un point de départ et acquièrent des trajectoires différentes selon les usages auxquels les corps ont été accoutumés.

Le terme sur lequel insiste Spinoza est à cet égard particulièrement révélateur : *consuetudo*. Il écrit que chacun passe d'une pensée à une autre « selon que l'habitude (*consuetudo*) a ordonné (*ordinavit*) les images des choses ». Il ne parle ni de nature individuelle, ni de tempérament, mais de *consuetudo*, terme qui renvoie à des habitudes acquises, socialement et historiquement formées.[14] Cela ouvre la possibilité de lire ce scolie non comme une simple psychologie de l'association, mais comme une théorie de la formation sociale des significations. Le verbe *ordinare* mérite d'être pris au sérieux. Il ne désigne pas une simple répétition mécanique, mais l'établissement d'un ordre. L'habitude n'accumule pas des associations ; elle organise un monde. Les significations ne sont donc jamais données une fois pour toutes : elles sont le résultat d'un ordre pratique progressivement constitué par les expériences corporelles et sociales. Cette lecture conduit à relire l'opposition classique entre imagination et raison. On présente volontiers les associations imaginatives comme subjectives, tandis que la raison seule accéderait à l'objectivité. Le texte suggère une autre perspective. Les associations imaginatives ne sont pas arbitraires ; elles obéissent elles aussi à une logique. Mais cette logique est historique. Elle est produite par les pratiques au sein desquelles les individus vivent, travaillent, combattent, enseignent ou obéissent. Elle produit autant de rationalités locales qu'il y a d'histoires spécifiques. L'imagination possède ainsi sa propre rationalité, non parce qu'elle reproduirait l'ordre des essences, mais parce qu'elle exprime l'ordre des habitudes.

14 Voir l'Explication du repentir, E III, AfDef 27 et l'indication de l'utilité des liens sociaux, E IV, App 12 et 26.

Le sens d'un mot ne consiste donc pas dans une définition immobile. Il réside dans les parcours qu'il rend possibles à l'intérieur d'un ordre d'associations. La signification apparaît moins comme une correspondance que comme une trajectoire. Ainsi, ce scolie d'*Éthique* II, 18 permet de relire sous un même éclairage les analyses précédentes. La *vox vera* du *Traité théologico-politique* définissait déjà le langage comme communication des pensées par l'intermédiaire des corps ; le chapitre XI montrait que les formes du discours varient selon les fonctions exercées ; ce scolie révèle enfin le principe commun de ces phénomènes : les significations sont produites par des pratiques qui ordonnent simultanément les corps, la mémoire et les enchaînements de pensée. Ce que Spinoza esquisse ici n'est donc pas une théorie du langage comme système de signes, mais une théorie du langage comme pratique.

On peut alors se demander ce que cela nous révèle sur la méthode géométrique comme construction d'un usage pratique. Les démonstrations n'ont pas seulement pour fonction d'établir des propositions vraies – elles le font, et cela tient à leur appartenance à un système d'idéalités logico-mathématiques ; mais elles visent aussi à transformer les habitudes intellectuelles du lecteur – c'est-à-dire à faire accéder celui qui était support de l'imagination au statut nouveau de « sujet » de la science. Elles substituent progressivement un nouvel ordre des enchaînements conceptuels à celui que l'expérience ordinaire avait inscrit dans le corps. La démonstration apparaît alors comme une pratique de rééducation de la *consuetudo*.

On découvre ainsi une « pragmatique du langage » qui consiste en une théorie de l'institution des significations. Les significations ne sont ni naturelles, ni conventionnelles au sens classique ; elles sont instituées par des pratiques corporelles répétées (l'ordre de la *consuetudo*), différenciées selon des fonctions (prophète, docteur, soldat, paysan), puis réinstituées par le travail philosophique lui-même dans l'*Éthique*. Il reste à nous demander comment le philosophe, précisément, devra instituer ce nouveau régime de langage pour rendre pensable la science intuitive.

4 *Éthique* V, prop. 21-42

Dans la seconde moitié de la Ve partie de l'*Éthique*, celle qui étudie « la durée de l'âme sans relation au corps » (à partir de la proposition 21, jusqu'à la fin), le vocabulaire de Spinoza semble changer. On voit apparaître des expressions dont certaines sont nouvelles (*amor*

intellectualis Dei),[15] dont d'autres, jusque-là simplement annoncées, trouvent enfin leur place (*cognitio intuitiva*),[16] et dont d'autres enfin, par un changement d'attribution (*sub specie aeternitatis*),[17] ou par une variation d'élément (*animi*/*mentis acquiescentia*)[18] produisent une signification nouvelle. Or ces notions ne correspondent à aucune expérience que l'imagination puisse aisément représenter. Il s'agit désormais de trouver un langage pour parler de la science intuitive, de l'éternité, de l'âme indépendamment non du corps, mais de sa durée. Nous retrouvons donc un problème d'énonciation : comment parler de ce qui dépasse les catégories ordinaires de l'imagination ? La solution consiste non à créer des mots nouveaux, mais à faire varier, par la pression du système, le sens de termes qui, antérieurement, parlaient à l'imagination sur d'autres sujets. Il faut éduquer le lecteur à un transfert sémantique, à partir des usages auxquels il est habitué vers de nouveaux usages qui correspondent à ce stade de la réflexion. Ce transfert, qui aboutit dans la dernière section, a été préparé dans le parcours de la IIIe et de la IVe partie, ainsi que dans les vingt premières propositions de la Ve. Il ne s'agit pas d'un saut brusque (auquel cas le lecteur ne reconnaîtrait tout simplement pas le mot ou l'expression et croirait à une homonymie), mais d'un patient travail de concrétisation et de reconstruction : à partir d'un terme du langage ordinaire, ou psychologique ou théologique, une série de redéfinitions implicites et de déplacements assumés conduisent à rendre représentable ce qui aurait dans un premier temps dû échapper à la représentation.

Prenons l'exemple d'*acquiescentia*. L'*acquiescentia in se ipso*, la satisfaction de soi-même, avait été introduite d'abord comme « joie accompagnée de l'idée d'une cause intérieure » (III, 30, sc.), ce qui est compréhensible, dans le langage courant, même par un lecteur qui n'aurait pas encore pénétré dans la logique du système. Plus

15 Il n'émerge que dans le corollaire de la P V,32, et occupe le centre de la réflexion jusqu'à la P. 37. Jusque-là il n'avait été question que de l'*amor erga Deum*.

16 Dans la IIe partie, le second scolie de la prop. 40 avait annoncé, au futur, la *scientia intuitiva* (c'est la seule occurrence) ; dans la IVe partie, l'Appendice, chap. IV, mentionnait la *cognitio intuitiva* ; mais c'est seulement le scolie du corollaire de la prop. 36 de la Ve partie qui déploie le fonctionnement de celle-ci, pour la distinguer du deuxième genre de connaissance.

17 Jusque-là, c'était une caractéristique de la raison et elle indiquait sous quel mode celle-ci connaît les choses : éternité y était contextuellement synonyme de nécessité (E II, p44c2 et s) ; mais dans la P V,22 et le scolie de V, 23, il s'agit désormais d'une idée en Dieu qui exprime l'essence du corps sous l'aspect de l'éternité. On passe de l'épistémologie à l'ontologie. Le scolie de P 29 réunira les deux registres.

18 La IIIe et la IVe parties ont raisonné sur l'*acquiescentia in se ipso* ; l'*acquiescentia animi* apparaît dans l'Appendice de la IVe partie, et réapparaît dans les deux sections de la Ve, jusque dans l'ultime scolie ; mais c'est seulement à la P 27 de la Ve partie que se présente l'hapax *mentis acquiescentia*.

loin la « cause intérieure » était précisée par « l'idée de soi-même » (III, 51 sc.) et donnée comme équivalente à « *philautia* », que l'on peut rendre, en langage classique, par « amour-propre » (III, 55, sc.) : l'intérieur est donc concrétisé par une idée (qui n'est pas nécessairement adéquate) – la preuve, c'est qu'une telle satisfaction peut engendrer la *superbia* (Déf. des affects 28 et sc.) et la vaine gloire (IV 58). Entretemps, cette cause interne qu'est l'idée de soi a été concrétisée par la « contemplation de sa propre puissance d'agir », et là, le langage courant est tiré un peu plus vers le lexique proprement spinozien ; désormais, l'expression pourra être redéfinie comme *animi acquiescentia*, satisfaction intérieure qui, elle, sera dépourvue d'ambiguïté, et associée à la vraie connaissance de Dieu et à la béatitude ; enfin, lorsque sera établie la connexion avec le troisième genre de connaissance, le mot *animus*, substantif de sens faible dans l'*Éthique*, cèdera la place à *mens*, qui désigne l'âme en tant que procès de connaissance, ce qui affirme la dimension intellectualiste du salut et coupe les racines avec la psychologie des affects – par laquelle pourtant il a fallu passer pour initier le parcours de compréhension de ce qu'est l'*acquiescentia*.

En somme, la cinquième partie de l'*Éthique* ne développe pas seulement une théorie de la science intuitive ; elle met progressivement en place le langage capable de la dire. Cette perspective interdit de lire la dernière section comme un appendice mystique, ou comme une précaution destinée à cacher l'incroyance de l'auteur, ou comme une retombée dans des préjugés anciens. On sait que toutes ces hypothèses ont été formulées : elles négligent toutes le travail effectué par le texte. Au contraire, il faut comprendre cette section comme une réflexion sur les ressources et les limites du langage philosophique lui-même. Le philosophe ne renonce pas au discours démonstratif ; il le pousse jusqu'au point où il doit remodeler le sens des mots qu'il emploie. Il n'y a pas d'ineffable (un mot qui en français n'a pas d'antonyme) ; tout au plus y a-t-il de l'indicible au sens de pas encore dicible ou plutôt de ce qui doit être transformé en dicible – et l'on assiste à la construction d'un appareil pour effectuer cette transformation.

En un sens, on pourrait dire que Spinoza est confronté à un problème comparable à celui qu'il attribue aux apôtres dans le TTP. Non pas qu'il devienne prophète – ce serait contraire à tout son projet –, mais en ce qu'il doit inventer un régime de discours adapté à un objet qui ne relève plus des premiers genres de connaissance. Les apôtres parlent différemment selon qu'ils exercent une fonction prophétique ou une fonction doctrinale. De même, Spinoza peut être conduit à modifier sa manière de parler lorsqu'il traite de la connaissance intuitive. Il ne change pas de méthode démonstrative – les propositions restent démontrées –, mais il change de langage philosophique**,** parce que le référent change.

L'interprétation proposée jusqu'ici permet peut-être de comprendre un trait souvent remarqué de la cinquième partie de l'*Éthique* : la réapparition d'un terme emprunté au vocabulaire biblique, la *gloire*.[19] On voit généralement dans cet emploi soit une concession au langage traditionnel, soit un simple emprunt lexical. Il est pourtant possible de lui donner une tout autre portée. Le terme *gloria* n'est pas nouveau dans l'œuvre de Spinoza. Il est présent en plusieurs sens dans le TTP, mais notamment pour parler de la gloire de Dieu. Dans l'*Éthique* il appartient d'abord à l'analyse des affects. Dans la troisième partie il désigne une joie inséparable de l'idée de l'approbation d'autrui ; il relève donc du domaine de la reconnaissance sociale. La quatrième partie introduit déjà une distinction essentielle entre la gloire conforme à la raison et la vaine gloire (*vana gloria*), entretenue par l'opinion de la multitude : « La gloire n'est pas opposée à la raison, mais elle peut naître d'elle […] ce qu'on appelle la vaine gloire est une satisfaction de soi-même qui n'est entretenue que par l'opinion de la foule. »[20] Dans les deux cas cependant, la gloire demeure liée à la louange et au regard d'autrui. Et nous savons par le TTP que cette vaine gloire, lorsqu'elle est insérée dans les mécanismes de domination, peut même conduire à mourir pour qu'un autre reçoive des louanges.[21] C'est précisément ce lien que la cinquième partie va progressivement dissoudre. Lorsque Spinoza affirme que « la béatitude n'est pas le prix de la vertu, mais la vertu elle-même », la reconnaissance humaine cesse d'être le principe de la gloire. Celle-ci ne dépend plus d'une approbation extérieure ; elle procède de l'intelligibilité même, c'est-à-dire de l'amour intellectuel de Dieu. Le mot demeure identique, et une part de son contenu subsiste, mais le régime affectif auquel il appartient s'est entièrement transformé. La gloire cesse d'être reconnaissance par autrui pour devenir adéquation à l'ordre éternel de la Nature. Cette transformation éclaire la stratégie linguistique de Spinoza. Dans le *Traité théologico-politique*, il avait montré que les prophètes parlent le langage de l'imagination, tandis que les docteurs en dégagent le contenu rationnel. Dans la cinquième partie de l'*Éthique*, le mouvement semble s'inverser. Il ne s'agit plus de passer du langage prophétique au discours démonstratif, mais de trouver, à l'intérieur même de ce discours, des mots capables de rendre pensable une expérience qui excède les catégories ordinaires de l'imagination. *Gloria* est l'un de ces mots. Il ne réintroduit pas la

19 « C'est cet amour ou béatitude qui est appelé gloire dans les saintes Écritures, et à très juste titre. Car cet amour, qu'on le rapporte à Dieu ou à l'âme, peut correctement s'appeler satisfaction intérieure, laquelle en réalité ne se distingue pas vraiment de la gloire », E V, p36s.

20 IV 58 et s.

21 « Une fois que les rois furent maîtres de l'État, il fallut combattre non plus comme auparavant pour la paix et la liberté, mais pour la gloire », TTP XIX,5,594-5.

théologie ; il fait passer un terme issu du langage biblique dans un tout autre régime d'intelligibilité.

On retrouve ici une constante de la méthode spinoziste. Plutôt que d'inventer un vocabulaire philosophique entièrement nouveau, Spinoza réinvestit les mots de la tradition en les soumettant à un travail de redéfinition progressive. Ce n'est pas le lexique qui change ; c'est son mode de fonctionnement. Les démonstrations de l'*Éthique* modifient peu à peu les chaînes d'associations attachées à des mots tels que *Dieu*, *éternité*, *amour*, *béatitude* ou *gloire*, jusqu'à leur faire exprimer un contenu conceptuel entièrement différent de celui qu'ils possédaient dans le langage religieux ou dans l'usage commun. À cet égard, *gloria* occupe une position singulière. On peut se demander si ce terme ne constitue pas l'un des points de rencontre entre les deux grandes œuvres de Spinoza. Dans le *Traité théologico-politique*, il appartient encore au langage de l'Écriture, destiné à des hommes vivant principalement sous la conduite de l'imagination. À la fin de l'*Éthique*, il désigne la joie qui accompagne la connaissance de la nécessité divine. Le mot est le même, mais le régime de discours auquel il appartient s'est entièrement déplacé. La continuité du vocabulaire masque ainsi une profonde mutation de son usage. Cette mutation peut être comprise, de nouveau, à partir du scolie d'*Éthique* II, 18. Nous y avions vu que les mots ne renvoient pas immédiatement à des essences, mais à des chaînes d'associations progressivement constituées par la *consuetudo*. Les significations ne sont jamais données une fois pour toutes ; elles sont instituées par des pratiques. Les grands termes de la tradition religieuse arrivent ainsi dans l'*Éthique* déjà chargés d'une longue histoire sémantique. « Dieu » évoque spontanément une personne souveraine ; « éternité », une durée sans fin ; « gloire », la louange ou la reconnaissance accordée par autrui. Ces associations ne sont pas de simples erreurs individuelles : elles constituent l'ordre même dans lequel l'imagination a appris à penser. La tâche du philosophe n'est donc pas de substituer brutalement un vocabulaire nouveau au langage reçu. Elle consiste à travailler sur ces habitudes d'association pour les transformer de l'intérieur. En conservant des mots tels que *Deus*, *amor*, *beatitudo*, *gloria* ou *aeternitas*, Spinoza ne cède pas au poids de la tradition ; il fait de cette tradition le matériau même de son travail philosophique. On pourrait dire que, chez Spinoza, les définitions ont une temporalité. Elles ne livrent pas immédiatement tout leur contenu ; elles attendent que le lecteur soit devenu capable de les pratiquer. Ainsi, lorsqu'il définit l'éternité au début de la première partie, cette définition est parfaitement rigoureuse. Mais ce n'est qu'au terme de la cinquième partie que le lecteur apprend véritablement à s'en servir pour penser l'existence de l'esprit *sub specie aeternitatis*. La définition était exacte dès le début ; pourtant son usage n'était pas encore acquis. Les démonstrations géométriques réorganisent progressivement les parcours intellectuels auxquels ces mots donnaient spontanément accès.

Le lecteur est ainsi conduit à quitter peu à peu les associations imposées par la *consuetudo* pour en acquérir d'autres, conformes à l'ordre de la raison, puis à celui de la science intuitive. Le travail philosophique porte moins sur le lexique que sur les opérations intellectuelles que ce lexique rend possibles. En ce sens, la méthode géométrique apparaît comme une véritable pédagogie des significations : elle ne définit pas seulement les concepts, elle réforme progressivement les habitudes de pensée auxquelles les mots étaient associés.

Cette analyse confirme l'hypothèse développée dans les sections précédentes. Spinoza ne cherche pas à élaborer une langue philosophique séparée de la langue commune ou du langage biblique. Il travaille au contraire sur les ressources de cette langue elle-même, en transformant progressivement le fonctionnement de certains de ses termes ou de certaines de ses expressions. La nouveauté de son langage ne réside donc pas dans l'invention d'un lexique inédit, mais dans la réinstitution de significations nouvelles au sein même des mots hérités de la tradition.

Résumons : la Loi exige une forme humaine de communication (TTP I) ; le langage varie avec la fonction exercée (TTP XI) ; les significations dépendent de la *consuetudo* (*Éthique* II, 18) ; le philosophe doit transformer les habitudes d'énonciation pour rendre pensable la science intuitive (fin d'*Éthique* V). Pris ensemble, ces quatre textes dessinent une même conception : le langage n'est pas défini seulement par sa capacité à représenter le monde, mais par les pratiques corporelles et sociales qui rendent possible la communication et instituent des rapports entre les hommes. Spinoza ne propose jamais une théorie générale du langage comparable à celles que développeront le XVIII^{e} siècle ou la philosophie contemporaine. Pourtant, les principaux moments où le langage devient philosophiquement décisif (la Loi, la prophétie, la *consuetudo*, la science intuitive) obéissent à une même logique. Cette logique conduit à définir le langage non seulement comme un système de signes, mais d'abord comme une pratique d'institution et de transformation des significations. Si cette reconstruction est juste, il faut chercher dans le spinozisme non une philosophie du signe ou de la signification, mais une théorie des institutions du langage. Dans cette perspective, le langage n'est pas seulement une conséquence de la vie sociale ; il est l'une des opérations par lesquelles une multitude devient un peuple capable de recevoir, de transmettre et de maintenir une loi. Chez Spinoza, le langage ne doit plus être étudié principalement comme un problème de signification ou de connaissance, mais comme un moment de l'anthropogenèse matérielle : il naît des pratiques collectives par lesquelles les hommes augmentent leur puissance d'agir, instituent des formes de coopération et, simultanément, des rapports de domination.

Abréviations

E = Spinoza (2020). *Ethica.* Édition par F. Akkerman et P. Steenbakkers, trad. par P.-F. Moreau. Paris: Puf.
TTP = Spinoza (1998). *Traité théologico-politique*. Édition par F. Akkerman, trad. par J. Lagrée et P.-F. Moreau. Paris: Puf.

Références

AfDef = *Affectum Definitio*.
App = *Appendix*.
c = *Corollarium*.
d = *Demonstratio*.
p = *Propositio.*
s = *Scholium*.

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Spinoza and the Language of Scripture

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Abstract In his works Spinoza remarks on the relationship between Hebrew and the culture of the ancient Israelites. Thus, the more we unerstand Hebrew, the better we understand the Bible. Moreover, understanding the Bible is for the non-philosophical masses essential for motivating lives of virtue. However, there are irremediable gaps in our knowledge of ancient Hebrew, and this might appear to undermine the moral motivational role that the Bible is supposed to play. But I suggest that the philological deficiency and the hermeneutical impediment should not effectively thwart the Bible's properly edifying effect on non-philosophical readers.

Keywords Spinoza. Hebrew. Language. Bible. Hermeneutics. Virtue.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 A New Kind of Hebrew Grammar? – 3 How to Read Scripture. – 4 Language and Culture. – 5 A Stumbling Block? – 6 Hermeneutics and Moral Improvement. – 7 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Sometime in the early 1670s, while dealing with the fallout over the "scandalous" *Theological-Political Treatise,* Spinoza began writing a grammar of the Hebrew language. The impetus for this project, we are told, was his friends' desire to learn Hebrew, presumably so that they might study the "Old Testament" in its original language, as Spinoza recommends in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP). In the *Admonitio Ad Lectorem* for the *Compendium Grammatices Linguae Hebraeae* (Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language), written by those friends for the *Opera Posthuma* they published

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the year after Spinoza's death, they say that Spinoza undertook to compose a Hebrew grammar "at the request of some of his friends, who were very eager to study the sacred language", and that "because of the untimely death of its author …it remains incomplete" (G I,286).

The *Compendium* is undoubtedly the philosopher's least studied work, for understandable reasons. It is not a philosophical, political or theological-political treatise, and so Spinoza scholars and other historians of philosophy have not shown much interest in it. And because Spinoza, while obviously a Hebraist of some skill, was not primarily a linguist or grammarian, his work on Hebrew, while occasionally acknowledged for its historical significance, tends to be overlooked by scholars of that language in favor of the grammars of more prominent medieval and early modern Hebraists, Jewish and Christian, such as Moses Kimhi (1127-1190), Abraham ben Meir Balmes (ca. 1440-1523), Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) and Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629).[1]

Still, the *Compendium* is not without philosophical interest. The work contains some very intriguing, if spare, comments by Spinoza on the nature of language itself. Thus, any investigation of Spinoza as a philosopher of language – if indeed he truly has a philosophy of language – will have to take account of the *Compendium*.[2] For example, this work is *the* source for Spinoza's conception of the role that rules play in language.

In this essay, however, I will not be concerned with what Spinoza has to say philosophically about language in general. Rather, my focus will be on a more particular set of issues.

In the *Compendium* Spinoza offers some brief remarks on the relationship between a language and its home culture – in this case, between Hebrew and the culture of the ancient Israelites for whom it was the *lingua franca* – and what the former can reveal about the latter. Thus, the more we understand Hebrew, the better we are able to understand the Bible, not just because we can read it in its original language but also because we will be better equipped to know the culture from which it arose – including something about its authors, their audience, and why they were writing – which is key for its interpretation. Moreover, understanding the Bible – grasping

1 Early studies of Spinoza's *Compendium* include Bernays 1850; Chajes 1869; Hillesum 1921; and Porges 1922, as well as, more recently, Gruntfest 1979; Klijnsmit 1986, 1988a, 1988b, 1990; and Levy 1989. Even more recently, the *Compendium*'s star has been somewhat on the rise and has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention, with studies by Cassuto 1999 and 2006; Harvey 2002; Hervet 2012; Mock 2016 and 2019; Proietti 2010 and 2013; and Totaro 2019. The essays in Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach and Totaro 2019 are especially relevant.

2 See, for example, Hillesum 1921 and Porges 1922. There are also the more recent studies: Savan 1979; Bove 1991; and Vinciguerra 2006.

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its universal teachings – is for most people (namely, the *vulgus* or non-philosophical masses) essential for motivating lives of virtue. Therefore, it would seem to follow that a thorough understanding of the Hebrew language should be necessary for virtuous living.

However, there may be a tension within Spinoza's account of the language of Scripture. There are significant, irremediable gaps in our knowledge of ancient Hebrew: gaps that must prevent us from using the Bible's language fully to access and understand the culture of the ancient Hebrews, and thus gaps that would seem to stand in the way of a thoroughly informed interpretation of the texts' meanings. And this hermeneutical obstacle, in turn, would appear to undermine the moral motivational role that the Bible is supposed to play for those who read it, in particular, the masses. It would be hard to be inspired by a work that you do not properly understand. Nonetheless, I suggest that, in the end, the philological deficiency and the hermeneutical impediment it represents does not, for Spinoza, effectively thwart the Bible's capacity to have its appropriately edifying effect on non-philosophical readers.

2 A New Kind of Hebrew Grammar?

Spinoza is quite clear about his goal in composing his *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*. He insists that the Hebrew grammars available in his time, composed in the Middle Ages and later – by Jews and gentiles, and including those that, like his own *Grammar*, were written primarily in Latin – all treat Hebrew in a very limited manner: as a "sacred tongue". What he means by this is that all previous grammars regard Hebrew as a holy language of a uniquely holy book – as the language of divine Scripture alone – and thus as a special written language used by a particular literate caste for composing texts for worship and religious study. This tendency, informed as it is by certain ideologically driven but false and superstitious assumptions about Scripture itself – especially the assumption that its author is God – has had, Spinoza insists, the unfortunate result of generating significant misunderstandings of the nature of the Hebrew language. For example, by taking the Bible, which these grammarians believed to be a uniform and internally consistent work of literature (as befitting its divine author), as their sole linguistic source for Hebrew, they concluded – wrongly, Spinoza intends to show – that it is a highly irregular language, full of exceptions to incomplete rules.

Spinoza's project, on the other hand, is to write not a grammar of the Bible's Hebrew, but rather a grammar of the Hebrew that, among other things, was also used in writing the Bible. He proposes, that is, to write a guide to Hebrew as a natural language, as the vernacular of a particular historical people, which, he argues, it surely was. "There

are many who have written a grammar of Scripture, but no one who has written a grammar of the Hebrew language" (*Compendium*, G I,310). If the Bible is, as Spinoza argues in the TTP, a literary work of human hands, composed over time in the natural way in which all books are produced, then its language should be understood not as the supernatural language of some transcendent deity but as the mundane, lived language of a specific people, of a historical linguistic community. As Scripture is just another human text, so Hebrew is just another human tongue. It was used not only by prophets, scribes, priests, rabbis and other members of an exceptional class, but by all kinds of people. It functioned not only for worship and other liturgical and ceremonial practices, but in daily lives, whether at home, in the marketplace or in political and military matters. Spinoza is thus engaged in a kind of linguistic archaeology, based on extant texts but aimed at recovering the lost spoken vernacular of an ancient tribe.

Spinoza thus writes in the *Compendium*, as he is discussing the inflection of prepositions from the singular to the plural, that "in this way, many prepositions, as well as adverbs, can be formed, although in Scripture they are never found so formed" (*Compendium* X, G I,328). He takes this as evidence that the etymology and syntax he is describing is not just that of the Bible. To be sure, a reader of the *Compendium* might legitimately wonder whether Scripture is, in fact, Spinoza's sole source for his grammar. Some scholars contend that all of the Hebrew cited in the *Compendium* – every sample word, phrase or passage, whether explicitly cited as a Biblical text or not – comes from the Hebrew Bible; they then ask how Spinoza can justifiably claim to be composing a grammar of the language of the ancient Hebrews, as opposed to just the language of the Hebrew Bible.[3] Other scholars, however, insist that the Hebrew texts inserted by Spinoza that do not explicitly have a Biblical citation come from later Hebrew literature, such as the Talmud (the Mishnah and the Gemara) or rabbinic commentaries.[4]

Be all that as it may, Spinoza envisions the *Compendium* as providing a kind of secularization and even re-animation of Hebrew by reconstructing its rules and practices as a living natural language, as a conversational tongue. His treatise is, he says, a work "for those who want to speak Hebrew but not chant it" (G I,300). This kind of knowledge of Hebrew, "the language in which the books of Scripture were written, and which their authors were accustomed to speak", is, Spinoza insists in the TTP, essential for interpreting Scripture properly. He notes that the "history" of Scripture that needs to be compiled before the hard hermeneutical work begins must focus on

3 See Levy 1989, 159; Klijnsmit 1986.

4 See, for example, Mock 2016, 284-6 and Mock 2019.

> all the meanings each utterance can admit in ordinary conversational usage. Because all the writers, both of the Old Testament and the New, were Hebrews, it is certain that the history of the Hebrew language is necessary above all others, not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament, which were written in this language, but also for understanding those of the New. For though they have been circulated in other languages, nevertheless they are expressed in a Hebrew manner. (TTP VII, G III,99-100/Curley II,173)

3 How to Read Scripture

Spinoza thus believes that his Hebrew grammar will, more than all other grammars, aid us in our attempts to discover what Scripture's texts are saying. It will help us, that is, to interpret Scripture not in order to uncover some eternal divine truths, or indeed any truths whatsoever – philosophical, theological, natural, or otherwise – but simply to learn the minds of its authors and what claims they intended to express through their sometimes ambiguous, often inconsistent sentences. The sole hermeneutical goal here is meaning, not truth.

In the TTP, Spinoza rejects the idea that the Bible was literally authored by God. Spinoza's God (*Deus*) is Nature (*Natura*), and thus cannot write or dictate anything. The Bible as we have it is, rather, the work of human beings writing over generations in very particular historical and political circumstances. Thus, Spinoza concludes, Scripture, like any work of human literature, must be interpreted on its own terms and not by reference to anything beyond the text, the evolution of its composition and canonization, and the personal histories of its authors.

In particular, Spinoza argues against the rationalist type of exegesis proposed by Maimonides. As the twelfth-century rabbi explains in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, philosophy, broadly construed, is the touchstone for interpreting the Bible. If a literal reading of any passage is inconsistent with what can be demonstrated as philosophically true with absolute certainty, then the sentence must be read figuratively. For Spinoza, this approach is illegitimate in so far as it goes beyond Scripture itself – to an external canon of reason and philosophy – in order to interpret Scripture. He says that "to know whether Moses believed that God is a fire, we must in no way infer our answer from the fact that this sentence [taken literally] agrees with reason or is contrary to it. Instead, we must rely only on other statements Moses himself made" (TTP VII, G III,100/Curley II,174). In other words, there is an important distinction between the *meaning* of Scripture – what the books say, that is, what propositions the authors

intended to convey – which is what one is after when interpreting any literary text, and what is philosophically or historically *true*.

> We are concerned only with the meaning of the utterances, not with their truth. Indeed, we must take great care, so long as we are looking for the meaning of Scripture, not to be predisposed by our own reasoning, insofar as it is founded on the principles of natural knowledge (not to mention our own prejudices). In order not to confuse the true meaning with the truth of things, we must seek that meaning solely from linguistic usage, or from reasoning which recognizes no other foundation than Scripture. (TTP VII, G III,100/Curley II,173)

Much of what Scripture relates is *not*, in fact, true, no more so than what is related by any other work of human literature. When we read a novel – say, *Emma*, by Jane Austen – we do not decide on the interpretation of a passage in this work of fiction by appealing to what may or may not be objectively (scientifically, philosophically, psychologically) true in the world outside the novel and its author's life and projects. Rather, we rely on Austen's language (such as her use of irony) and other things that have been happening in the story – for example, we interpret Emma's behavior in this or that instance by what we already know of her character. We may also bring in things we know about Austen herself, the milieu in which she lived, her social circle, and so on; as part of the "history" of the text, these are all relevant factors in our hermeneutical endeavor. For Spinoza, if what Scripture states does, in some cases, happen to be true, it is not, despite what Maimonides (who claims that the prophetic authors of Scripture were themselves knowledgeable philosophers) says, *necessarily* the case that what it states is true.

4 Language and Culture

One of Spinoza's most noteworthy remarks about language occurs during his discussion of Scriptural hermeneutics. Throughout the *Compendium*, Spinoza refers not only to the "Hebrew language [*lingua Hebraea*]", but to linguistic practices "among the Hebrews [*apud Hebraeos*]". For example, we are told that "the Latins divide discourse into eight parts, but it is unclear whether the Hebrews also divide it into so many parts", and "the mode that the Latins call the infinitive is, among the Hebrews, a pure and simple noun" (G I,303). It is as if Spinoza envisions more than just a linguistic archaeology and the recovery of a language, but a cultural archaeology by way of language.

Spinoza regards language as embedded in sense experience and a product of the imagination. It belongs to what in the *Ethics* he calls the "first kind of knowledge" (to be contrasted with two kinds of intellect-based knowledge: reason, the second kind, and intuition, the third kind). The first kind of knowledge comprises two ways in which we "perceive many things and form universal notions":

I. From singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused and without order for the intellect; for that reason, I chave been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience.

II. From signs, e.g., from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things. These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination. (E II, p40s2)

The "inadequate" ideas acquired through both sense experience and language (hearsay and literary sources) stand in contrast with the "adequate" ideas produced by reason. The former are concrete and particular ideas that reflect our random interactions with things in the world through the body (including sounds and words), and may be false; the latter are properly and logically ordered by the intellect, and necessarily are true. In the "Metaphysical Thoughts" that were published as an appendix to his *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I, & II*, a geometric summary of parts 1 and 2 of Descartes's *Principia Philosophiae*, as Spinoza is discussing "what the true and false are, both among ordinary people and among philosophers", he notes that

> ordinary people first invent words, which afterwards are used by the philosophers, it seems desirable for one seeking the original meaning of a term to ask what it first denoted among ordinary people particularly where we lack other causes that could be used to investigate that [meaning], causes drawn from the nature of language. (G I,246/Curley I,312)

The original institution of language is thus grounded in ordinary experience. As such, language is deeply reflective both of a culture's relationship to nature and of its quotidian affairs. What gets embodied and expressed in language – its vocabulary and grammar, along with its modes of speech and its uses – is a linguistic nation's way of responding, conceptually and practically, to its natural and social environments, indeed, to the cosmos itself.

For this reason, Spinoza believes that the study of a lived language can tell us something about a culture's *mentalité*, its itemizing and classification of things as well as its values.[5] Through a familiarity with language as a spoken and written medium of communication, the use of words not just in high and holy literary production but in everyday life, we can, he says, know much about the "character and concerns [*mores ac studia*]," the "spirit and mentality [*genium & ingenium*]" of its users (TTP VII, G III,102/Curley II,175)

In the case of the ancient Hebrews, certain aspects of their language are supposed to be indicative of the way in which they looked at and conceived the world. For example, from the fact that Hebrew divides all nouns into masculine and feminine, we can surmise that the Hebrews were "accustomed to giving all things human attributes, such as 'the land hears', 'it heard', etc." (*Compendium*, G I,304); and from the tenses of the Hebrew verb, we can know something about how they conceived of time and action (*Compendium*, G I,343). Then there is the wonderful claim that Spinoza offers right at the beginning of the treatise, that the Hebrews "call vowels the *souls of letters* [*literarum animae*] and letters without vowels *bodies without souls*" (G I,287), a remark that one scholar regards as of "*immense portée*".[6] For Spinoza, such linguistic phenomena are a potentially rich source for the ancient Hebrews' metaphysical worldview.

The knowledge of Hebrew, then, is more than just a matter of being able to read the words on the Biblical page. As Spinoza claims in the TTP, the *interpretation* of Scripture requires not only a technical knowledge of its language – the *alef-bet*, the vocalizations, the rules of declension and conjugation, etc. – but also a knowledge of the historical and biographical contexts of its composition. That is, one needs to know something about its various authors, their personal, social and cultural backgrounds, and the historical and political circumstances in which they wrote. "To know which sentences [in Scripture] are put forward as laws and which as moral teachings, it is important to know the life, character, and concerns of the author. The better we know someone's spirit and mentality, the more easily we can explain his words" (TTP VII, G III,101-2/Curley II,175).

A deep and cultural knowledge of the Hebrew in which Scripture was written – the historical language of its people – thereby does important exegetical work. The *Compendium* thus functions as a kind of auxiliary to the TTP, one in which Spinoza demonstrates

5 As Savan puts it (1979, 61), for Spinoza "words arise from experience and refer to experience". Savan's point is that, on Spinoza's principles, ordinary language is inadequate for the communication of philosophical truth, although it does serve to express a confused understanding of things according to how one's body is affected by things in the world.

6 Spinoza 2013, 16.

just that knowledge of the Hebrew language that is essential for understanding Scripture, its history and its authors.

> The history of the Hebrew language is necessary, above all others, not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament, which were written in this language, but also for understanding those of the New. For although they've been circulated in other languages, nevertheless they [the books of the New Testament] are expressed in a Hebrew manner (TTP VII, G III,100/Curley II,173)

A grammar that treats Hebrew only as a sacred language cannot possibly meet this task, or so Spinoza insists.

5 A Stumbling Block?

Unfortunately, the project to uncover the *mentalité* of the ancient Hebrews through the study of their language faces somes serious obstacles. There is, of course, the great chronological distance and difference in historical circumstances standing between the ancient Israelite tribes and their later kingdoms and the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic.

More to the point, there is our inadequate understanding of ancient Hebrew itself. Spinoza claims that the interpretation of Scripture "requires a complete knowledge of the Hebrew language" (TTP VII, G III,106/Curley II,180). But so much of that language has been lost, especially in just those areas that would be most informative about the everyday world of the Hebrews. In the TTP, Spinoza notes that the people who actually *used* Hebrew on an everyday basis have left behind no information concerning the basic principles of their language. "Those who spoke and wrote Hebrew in ancient times left nothing to posterity regarding its foundations and teaching. Or at least we have nothing from them: no dictionary, no grammar, no rhetoric" (TTP VII, G III,106/Curley II,180). Thus, there are certain irremediable problems that will necessarily plague any latter-day account of the Hebrew language and any efforts to interpret ancient Hebrew texts on that basis. For instance, we lack the words that the ancient Hebrews used for various foods, animals and other mundane items, as well as numerous idiomatic expressions and modes of speech.

> For almost all the names of fruits, birds, fish, and many other things have perished in the injustice of the ages. Again, the meaning of many nouns and verbs that occur in the Bible is either completely unknown or is disputed. We lack not only all these things, but also and especially, a phraseology of this language. For time, the

> devourer, has obliterated from the memory of men almost all the idioms and manners of speaking peculiar to the Hebrew nation. (TTP VII, G III,106/Curley II,180)

Too many features of the Hebrew language "have been consigned to oblivion by the ravages of time" to make it possible to completely reclaim this ancient tongue. The best that can be done now is to try to reconstruct the elements and rules of ancient Hebrew from what is extant in its literature. This requires a good deal of inference, reconstruction and speculation. This is the project that Spinoza has set himself in the *Compendium*.

Obviously these linguistic lacunae will have implications for the task of interpreting Scripture. We cannot grasp the meanings of passages if we are unsure of the meanings of the words that compose it. And if we lack the words for all those creatures, objects and activities that made up everyday experience for the ancient Hebrews, many dimensions of their culture and *mentalité* will be in accessible to us. And with much of that "spirit and mentality" out of reach, there will be problems for the interpretation of Scripture.

Does it follow that the Bible will also fail in its most basic operation? Will ignorance of the Hebrew language and the consequent breakdown in interpretation mean that Scripture cannot perform what Spinoza considers to be its morally edifying role? How can a reader of Scripture be inspired to virtue if he cannot access the minds of its authors and the meanings of many of its passages – that is, if he cannot understand the text?

6 Hermeneutics and Moral Improvement

Spinoza's early biographer, the generally unsympathetic Johannes Colerus writing at the beginning of the eighteenth century, found himself at one point occupying the same rooms in The Hague that Spinoza did in the final years of his life. Colerus spoke to his Lutheran landlord, Hendrik van der Spyck, and his family about Spinoza, and relates that the philosopher enjoyed cordial relations with them. Spinoza seems to have had a particular interest in the family's religious observance. "When the members of the household returned from church, he often asked them what they had learned from the sermon". Colerus himself was a Lutheran preacher, and says that Spinoza held his predecessor in the local church in high esteem, even going to hear him preach on occasion. Spinoza reportedly advised Van der Spyck and his family "not to miss any sermon of so excellent a preacher". Spinoza even praised the Lutheran faith of his hosts, although possibly more out of politeness than anything else. One day, when Van der Spyck's wife asked Spinoza whether he thought she

could be saved in the religion that she professed, he replied: "Your religion is good, and you need not search for another one in order to be saved, as long as you apply yourself to a peaceful and pious life".[7]

These anecdotes are telling, in a number of ways. Spinoza's comforting words to his landlord's wife are a fine personal expression of his philosophical commitment to toleration, including the toleration of diversity in religious belief. It does not matter which organized sectarian faith one belongs to, or even that one's beliefs are false and superstitious, as long as those beliefs lead to truly pious behavior. The episode also calls to mind Spinoza's definition of piety as consisting in love of one's neighbor, that is, justice and charity toward others, and his allowance that there can be different motivational sources of such moral behavior, including the sermons of a good preacher from which the right lessons could be gleaned. What matters is not the *why* but the *what* – that is, how one behaves and treats others.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza draws a clear distinction between *benevolentia*, benevolent behavior toward others grounded in the passions and which he defines as "the will or appetite to do good born of our pity for the thing on which we wish to confer a benefit", and what he calls *pietas*, "the desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason" (E III, p27c3s and IV, p37s1).[8] *Pietas* might also be called "active benevolence" (as opposed to the benevolence grounded in passive affects like pity, love or fear).

Now the paragon of virtue, rationality and activity that Spinoza calls the "free person [*homo liber*]" is moved by *pietas*, not *benevolentia*. She treats others in benevolent and life-improving ways not out of pity or sympathy or love or hope for benevolence in return, but because reason directs her to do so. The person who is acting according to the dictates of reason will promote the virtue and rationality of other human beings so that their natures will be more like her own. That is, she will treat others in such a way that they become more rationally virtuous, and that their life is thereby improved. And she will do so because she, motivated by the rational pursuit of her own flourishing, recognizes through reason alone that it is to her own benefit. She knows that other individuals that share her rational nature are good for her (E IV, p35c1) and that she is better off surrounded by and living cooperatively with other rationally virtuous individuals, all of whom are striving for the same thing: the maximization of the true

7 Freudenthal, Walther and Czelinski 2006, I,124. For a discussion of this report and both its reliability and its consistency with Spinoza's philosophy, see Cook 1995.

8 Spinoza also uses the term *generositas* – generosity or (in Curley's translation) nobility – for practically the same phenomenon, "the desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship" (E III, p59s).

human good – which Spinoza equates with the understanding of God or Nature. The free person will therefore undertake, through her actions, to help others reach this condition of rational virtue. That is, she will treat other human beings with active benevolence.

Spinoza's account of rational benevolence in the *Ethics* covers two virtues that typically make the canonical list: justice and charity.

> Men who are governed by reason i.e., men who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage want nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men. Hence, they are just [*justos*], honest and honorable. (E IV, p18s)

Thus, the free and virtuous person – the person who is rationally motivated – will treat others with justice and charity because she sees, through reason, that it is good and right to do so, that it is in her own best interest and serves her well in her project of perseverance. She sees that dealing with others justly and charitably, working to improve their lives, is what is most supportive of her own *conatus* or power.

There is, however, another, less epistemically rigorous route to justice and charity in one's ongoing comportment with others, a route to benevolence that, while not rationally motivated and active in the manner of *pietas* but grounded in the imagination, is the best most people can do. It is accessible to the multitude who are not – or, at least, not yet – at the level of true freedom and virtue.

In the TTP, Spinoza explains that "true religion" and the "divine law" have nothing to do with ceremonies, dietary rituals or other superstitious activities. Rather, they consists in a simple moral practice, namely, "to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself" (TTP VIII, G III,165/Curley II,255). The divine law, that is, commands us to treat other human beings with justice and charity. And true religion is just obedience to that law. As he puts it, "the whole law consists only in this: loving one's neighbor" (TTP XIV, G III,173-4/Curley II,264-5).

As with the free and rationally virtuous person, then, what Spinoza considers to be "the practice of piety and religion" consists only in justice and charity. "A person believes something piously only insofar as his opinions move him to obedience [to God's law]" (TTP XIII, G III,172/Curley II,263). The difference is that, whereas the free and virtuous person is guided by reason in her actions, the multitude are led to obey the divine law not through reason but through imaginative and inspiring narratives and by accepting certain fundamental but (depending on how they are interpreted) not necessarily true beliefs about God. Spinoza sums these up as the "doctrines of universal faith": God, a supremely just and merciful being, exists; God is unique; God is present everywhere; God has the supreme right and

dominion over all things; the worship of God and obedience to him consist only in justice and loving-kindness [*charitas*] or in love toward one's neighbor; everyone who obeys God by living in this way is saved; and God pardons the sins of those who repent (TTP XIV, G III,177-8/C II,268-9). It does not really matter how one interprets these doctrines; from a Spinozistic perspective, they seem very difficult to reconcile with what is philosophically true. But it does not matter whether they are true or not. As long as one believes them, one will act in the correct ways and "practice justice and loving-kindness toward his neighbor". As Spinoza puts it, even "if [a person] becomes obedient [to God's law] by believing falsehoods, he has a pious faith" (TTP XIII, G III,172/Curley II,263).

To adapt a now-familiar distinction, the multitude who, inspired by stories, sermons, and admirable role models, follow the divine law and treat others with justice and charity out of "obedience" are acting merely *in accordance with* virtue. The rationally virtous person, by contrast, is acting justly and charitably not from "obedience" to some imagined (divine) lawgiver but from a deep understanding of what is good and right. The free person, that is, is just and charitable *from* virtue, from an abiding disposition to seek his own advantage under the guidance of reason. The philosopher knows, without aid of the imagination or edifying storytelling, that she should treat other human beings in certain ways – precisely the treatment of others embodied in the virtue of rational benevolence. These philosophical folk, then, unlike the multitude, have no need of imaginative stories for motivating their pious lives; they come to piety, to moral behavior, through reason alone.

Now it turns out that the imaginative stories that Spinoza thinks are best suited for conveying those doctrines of universal faith and thus moving the non-philosophical crowd to virtuous behavior are found in the Bible. While the rationally virtuous do not need the Bible to motivate their piety, the multitude do.

The prophetic writings of the Bible are, in Spinoza's view, especially good at inspiring readers to justice and charity. This is because their authors, though not especially learned, were nonetheless gifted in certain ways. Moses and other prophets did not enjoy a high level of education or intellectual sophistication. They certainly were not physicists or astronomers, so there are no truths about nature or the cosmos to be found in their writings; Joshua apparently did believe that the sun revolved around the earth. But neither were the ancient prophets philosophers, and so the Bible is not to be read as a source of metaphysical or even theological truths. The prophets often had simple, naïve, even philosophically false beliefs about God. But they were indeed above the ordinary in two respects. First, they were especially virtuous and "cultivated piety with exceptional constancy of heart … and perceived God's mind or judgment" (TTP I, G III,27/

Curley II,91). The prophets, Spinoza says, "had a heart inclined only to the right and the good … the Prophets are praised, and so greatly commended, not for the loftiness and excellence of their understanding but for their piety and constancy of heart" (TTP II, G III,31,37/G II,96,102). Second, the prophets had especially vivid imaginations, "a power of imagining unusually vividly" (TTP II, G III,29/Curley II,93). This means they were exceptional storytellers. These two traits taken together mean that the ancient prophets were good at crafting inspiring and morally edifying narratives, stories that could move those of us not living under the guidance of reason to piety. As Spinoza puts it, because of the special powers of the prophets, especially "to imagine things", their narratives proceed "in a style and with expressions most apt to move ordinary people's hearts" (TTP XIII, G III,167/Curley II,257).

Spinoza insists that informing all of Scripture's stories – all of the things its prophetic authors say about God, human characters, the world, and so on – and despite all the linguistic gaps and textual problems that the Bible as we have it presents, there is a straightforward message or meaning that Spinoza says comes through loud and a clear and in a "non-mutilated" form. The ultimate teaching of Scripture, whether the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Gospels, is the rather simple one that constitutes the divine law itself: Practice justice and loving-kindness to your fellow human beings – again, precisely the same message that the philosophically gifted person understands through reason alone.

That basic moral message – "to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself" – is the point of all the commandments and the consistent lesson of all the narratives of Scripture, surviving whole and unadulterated through all the differences in language and all the copies, alterations, corruptions, and scribal errors that have crept into the text over the centuries. It is, Spinoza insists, there in the Hebrew prophets and it is in Paul's letters. Spinoza writes that "this I can certainly affirm: that I have not noticed, concerning moral teachings, any error, or any alternative reading, which could make them obscure or doubtful" (TTP IX, G III,135/Curley II,217). The moral doctrine is the clear and universal message of the Bible, at least for those who are not prevented from reading it properly by prejudice, superstition, or a thirst for power. It is, in short, the sum of revelation.

Scripture conveys this moral message not only through the visions of the prophets, but especially through what Spinoza sees as its portrayal of God as a just, wise, and merciful being. Spinoza allows that there is no expectation that everyone is to come to know God's true attributes, his essential nature; this "intellectual or exact knowledge of God" is for an elite, for philosophers who, for example, can follow the demonstrations offered by Spinoza in his *Ethics*. But

it is incumbent upon even the non-philosophical masses to *obey* "the word of God", and this means believing in God's justice and charity and emulating those traits in their own actions. "Obedience to God consists only in the love of your neighbor … [T]he knowledge that God, through the prophets, has demanded of everyone, without exception, is nothing but knowledge of his divine justice and loving-kindness" (TTP XIII, G III,168/Curley II,258-9).

Spinoza claims that those who, in the right frame of mind, read Scripture and its account of a God who "exercises and delights in loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the world", a God who is "supremely just and supremely merciful", both (a) come to a proper (if not deep philosophical) knowledge of God and his actions; and (b) are, through Scripture's literary portrayal of this exemplary moral character and related stories, inspired to act with similar justice and charity toward others. "The teaching of loving-kindness", in particular, is something that "both Testaments commend everywhere, in the strongest terms" (TTP XII, G III,166/C II,256), and attentive and properly prepared readers cannot but be moved toward pious actions themselves.

Spinoza's account of the role that Scripture can play in individuals' moral lives, and in society generally, suggests that despite the shortcomings in our knowledge of the Hebrew language and the consequent impediment to our gaining a deeper understanding of ancient Israelite culture and *mentalité*, all of which undermines the possibility of a thorough "historical" hermeneutics of Scripture, the Bible can still do what it does best.

For Spinoza, there is clear distinction between, on one hand, the interpretation of Scripture as this should ideally be practiced by the properly equipped scholar using Spinoza's historical method – the same method of gathering data and drawing and testing general conclusions from them that, he insists in the TTP, is employed in natural science (TTP VII, G III,98/Curley II,171) – and, on the other hand, the more basic and edifying reading of Scripture's narratives by common folk. The multitude who are supposed to be inspired to virtuous lives by the stories are unlikely to have the intellectual resources and scholarly tools that Biblical hermeneutics call upon. But this is not a problem. All they really need to get from their reading of the Bible are some basic theological beliefs – those doctrines of universal faith – that are necessary and sufficient for obedience to God's law, that is, for the practice of justice and charity. These beliefs do not require any real knowledge of Hebrew – a vernacular translation will do – or understanding of ancient Israelite attitudes toward the cosmos. Referring to those doctrines, he says that "scripture teaches these and similar things everywhere, so clearly and explicitly that there has never been anyone who disputed the meaning of Scripture concerning these things" (TTP VII, G III,102/C II,176).

No deep hermeneutic method is required for finding in the Bible its "universal [moral] teaching" and the basic principles that ground it. There is a simple path to virtue for simple minds. It is only for more complicated and detailed matters – including such questions as "what [the prophets believed] God is, and in what way he sees all things and provides for them", and especially when "we find any things which are contrary to one another" – that the more concentrated historical approach is required. But as to what Scripture says about "the way we should conduct our lives […] this can be investigated more easily" (TTP VII, G III,104/Curley II,178).

Spinoza compares the reading of Scripture in this regard to reading Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*.

> Euclid wrote only about things quite simple and most intelligible. Anyone can easily explain his work in any language. To grasp his intention and be certain of his true meaning we do not need a complete knowledge of the language he wrote in, but only a quite ordinary almost childish! knowledge. Nor do we need to know about his life, concerns and customs, or in what language, to whom and when he wrote or the fate of his book, or its various readings, or how and by whose deliberation it was accepted.

Likewise, he continues,

> what I have said here about Euclid must be said about everyone who has written about things by their nature perceptible. So we conclude that the history available to us is enough to easily grasp the intention of Scripture concerning moral teachings. In that area we can be certain of its true meaning. For the teachings of true piety are expressed in the most familiar words, since they are very ordinary and no less simple and easy to understand. (TTP VII, G III,111/Curley II,185)

Indeed, if Spinoza's sophisticated historical method for interpreting the Bible *was* required for getting the book's primary message and being inspired to justice and charity, then Spinoza's account would fall prey to the same objection he raises against Maimonides' view, which he insists is detrimental to the Bible's effectiveness in motivating obedience to God's law. If Maimonides is right, Spinoza complains, then most ordinary people cannot have any access to much of the meaning of Scripture. "His [Maimonides'] method completely takes away all the certainty the common people can have about the meaning of Scripture from a natural reading of it". The multitude do not have the philosophical training and speculative knowledge that would allow them to evaluate whether the reading of this or that Biblical passage is consistent with what is demonstrably true; they would

therefore have no idea when to stick with a literal interpretation and when to opt for a figurative one. Spinoza's judgment is that "we condemn Maimonides' opinion as not only useless, but harmful and absurd" (TTP VII, G III,116/Curley II,190).

But, of course, if a knowledge of Hebrew and the corresponding exegetical skills and erudition were required for getting even the most basic message of the Bible and reading it in a morally edifying way, then only learned scholars would be able to do it. Spinoza's method would, by his own criteria, be no better off than Maimonides' method.

7 Conclusion

Spinoza's discussion of the language of Scripture in both the *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* highlights a duality in the reading of the Bible. There is the "meaning [of] the whole of Scripture", which he insists is "to be determined only from its history", that is, a scholarly study of its language, texts, authors, composition, etc. (TTP XV, G III,185/C II,278). This approach confronts serious hermeneutical difficulties, especially given our inadequate knowledge of Hebrew. Fortunately, there is also the more superficial but effective reading to be practiced by ordinary folk. This is why Spinoza draws a distinction between a study of Scripture based on the history of the texts (broadly construed) – which allows us to "infer [...] the mind of Scripture's authors" and thus grasp the various meanings of their passages (for example, whether Moses really believed "that God is a fire and that God is jealous" [TTP VII, G III,100/Curley II,173]) – and a reading which conveys "the moral teachings also contained in the Bible" (TTP VII, G III,99/Curley II,171). The former is an important enterprise; the latter is a more urgent one.

Abbreviations

Curley = Spinoza, B. (2016). *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2. Edited and translated by E. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
G = Spinoza, B. (1925). *Spinoza Opera*. 4 vols. Edited by C. Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitaetsbuchhandlung.
E = *Ethica*.
TTP = *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

For the individual parts:
c = *Corollarium*.
s = *Scholium*.
p = *Propositio*.

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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.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 Communication as *Notio Communis*. – 3 Inter-modal Physical Communication. – 4 The Impossibility of Immediate Communication between Ideas. – 5 Communicating Ideas through the Body. – 6 Linguistic Communication. – 7 The Linguistic Datum as a Mnemonic Pointer. – 8 Linguistic Communication and Revelation. – 9 The Linguistic Distinction of Nations. – 10 Conclusions.

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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 strike[3] 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 individuals[12] 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 terms[18] 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 soint 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 intellective 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).

denominations[29] 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-prised' 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. Lin[43] 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).

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rather as a historical aggregate[48] (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 Verhandeling*.
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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Ordo et connexio verborum Spinoza on the Genesis and Nature of Human Language

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Abstract Spinoza's remarks on language are often treated as fragmentary and inconsistent with his philosophy. This paper argues that they become intelligible when situated within his account of the imaginative origin of language. Drawing on Part II of the Ethics, it shows how linguistic signs arise from stabilized associations among ideas and develops a unified account of universals, linguistic custom (*usus*, *consuetudo*), and the limits of *cognitio ex signis*, explaining both the emergence of meaning and its epistemic instability.

Keywords Spinoza. Language. Signs. Words. Knowledge.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 The Semiotic Physiology of Perception in *Ethics* II. – 3 Association and Meaning: the Genesis of Words (*Verba*). – 4 From Denotation to Convention: the Analogical Use of Language. – 5 Exceeding the Limits of Reason: Spinoza's Critique of *Cognitio ex signis*. – 6 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

The ongoing renaissance of Spinoza studies has brought renewed attention to aspects of his thought that had long remained in the

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background, including his remarks on signs and language.[1] Although Spinoza does not develop a systematic philosophy of language, his works contain scattered indications of an underlying conception that calls for reconstruction. Yet a part of the literature has approached these remarks in isolation, treating them as independent claims rather than as moments of a broader account of human language. As a result, they have often been taken to be fragmentary, or even in tension with his broader philosophical project.[2]

This paper argues, by contrast, that Spinoza's remarks on language become fully intelligible only when situated within his broader account of the imaginative origin and nature of human language. Far from being a marginal concern, from the TdIE to the *Ethics* Spinoza consistently stresses the need to understand the genesis of language in order to guard against its potentially misleading character. Viewed in this light, his scattered remarks no longer appear as isolated observations, but as integral to his account of cognition and its limits. On this basis, the paper reconstructs Spinoza's theory of the genesis and nature of linguistic signs through a close reading of his texts, in dialogue with the relevant scholarship.

An important first step in this direction was taken by Parkinson (1969), who first pointed to the connection between Spinoza's theory of language and his physiology of imagination, and was further developed by Moreau (1994) in his account of experience. Building on these insights, Vinciguerra's study of the semiotic character of imagination (2005) offers one of the first systematic discussions of the internal logic of imaginative processes, thereby providing a framework for a more comprehensive reconstruction, later taken up in studies such as Vinciguerra (2006), Hervet (2012), and Martinet (2014).

The article develops this argument in four steps. It first offers a semiotic reading of the physical digression in the *Ethics*, following Vinciguerra's interpretation (§ 2). It then examines how words acquire semantic content through the stabilization of associative mechanisms that render certain features of experience salient and recallable (§ 3). The discussion then turns to the customary dimension of language

1 I include here a selective – though not exhaustive – bibliography on the subject, arranged in chronological order: Kaufmann 1940; Savan 1958; Zac 1965; Parkinson 1969; Gueroult 1974; Chiereghin 1976; Dascal 1977; Zac 1977; Dominguez 1978; Robinet 1978; Gruntfest 1979; Giannetto 1980; Kaye 1980; Vinti 1984; Klijnsmit 1989; Dascal 1990; Bove 1991; Moreau 1994; Diodato 1995; Harvey 2002; Zourabichvili 2002; Vinciguerra 2005; Totaro 2006; Vinciguerra 2006; Narváez 2008; Dobbs-Weinstein 2009; Lærke 2009; Licata 2009; Hervet 2012; Martinet 2013; Lærke 2014; Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, Totaro 2019; Leblanc 2021; Hübner 2024.

2 Such is the case with Savan 1959; Chiereghin 1976; Dascal 1977; 1990. Five objections to these interpretations can be found in Parkinson 1969; Zac 1977; Moreau 1994; Narváez 2010; Lærke 2014.

and the role of *usus* and *consuetudo* in shaping linguistic practices (§ 4). Finally, it addresses the epistemological implications of this account through Spinoza's critique of *cognitio ex signis* (§ 5). The article thus shows that Spinoza's scattered remarks on language can be reconstructed as a coherent account grounded in the dynamics of imagination, which explains both the emergence of linguistic meaning and its ambivalent nature.

2 The Semiotic Physiology of Perception in *Ethics* II

To understand Spinoza's account of the origin and nature of human language, one must first clarify his theory of imagination and perception, which presupposes the semiotic physiology developed in *Ethics* II. In this part, Spinoza analyses the operations of the human mind to account for its specificity, laying the groundwork for his later explanation of human bondage to the affects (Parts III-IV) as well as the possibility of freedom grounded in adequate knowledge (Part V). The physiological account of bodies constitutes the first step in this explanatory strategy, tracing first the dynamics of extended things (Props. 13-19) and then those of thought (Props. 20-40).

Within this framework, Spinoza develops a purely physical account of bodily nature, describing bodies from the simplest to the most complex without invoking any external or immaterial agency.[3] As scholarship has emphasized,[4] the aim is not to contribute to contemporary natural philosophy in a technical sense, but to articulate a general explanatory schema[5] capable of withstanding shifts within the Cartesian paradigm[6] while reworking its metaphysical assumptions from within.[7]

The physical digression of *Ethics* II gives this schema its most explicit formulation. Here Spinoza grounds the complexity of bodies and minds in their structural composition, rejecting any appeal to

3 In this respect, Spinoza is undoubtedly indebted to Descartes's account of human physiology, as presented in the posthumous work *Traité de l'homme*, first published in Latin in 1662 and in French in 1664. The early circulation of manuscript copies of these treatises within the Leiden *milieu* surrounding Adriaan Heereboord and Johannes de Raey can scarcely be doubted, as has recently been argued by Andrea Strazzoni (2025, 5-24). This circulation coincides with the period in which Spinoza moved from Amsterdam to Rijnsburg, while several of his friends were attending courses in philosophy and medicine at the University of Leiden (see Bordoli 2001).

4 See Adler 1996, 253-76; Andrault 2019, 214-43.

5 See Adler 1996, 260-1.

6 See Andrault 2019.

7 The most conspicuous absence concerns the animal spirits, already called into question by Niels Stensen, see Andrault 2019, 11-2.

intrinsic properties of underlying substances. Insofar as they are modes rather than substances in the proper sense, simple bodies are distinguished solely by the ratio of motion and rest that characterizes them.[8] Individuals, that is, composite bodies, differ instead in their capacity to preserve the same degree of motion and the same overall ratio among their parts,[9] even in cases where internal variations do not affect the general structure of the individual.[10] In this way, Spinoza arrives at a functionally oriented description of the relations among bodies without having to rely on supposed intrinsic properties of organs and systems, as was largely the case in the preceding tradition.

The human body is no exception to this framework. It is conceived as an aggregate of individual components, each of which in turn possesses a composite nature.[11] It is precisely by virtue of the complexity and contiguity of the parts constituting these individuals that complex bodies such as the human body can exist – bodies whose parts exhibit hard, soft, or fluid surfaces[12] and are therefore susceptible to modification.[13] In simple bodies, variations of this kind would in fact radically alter the proportion of motion and rest that defines them; likewise, in composite individuals there would be no room for changes that do not preserve their equilibrium. Only highly complex structures, such as the human body, can undergo modifications both at the level of their individual components and in the arrangement of these parts with respect to the whole, provided that the distinctive individual ratio is preserved. This, then, is the complexity that Spinoza attributes to the human body and that allows him to distinguish it from less articulated organisms without appealing to a difference of substance.

Corresponding to this complexity is a perceptual capacity of equal degree.[14] When the soft components undergo modifications that temporarily alter the surfaces of that body, the internal proportion of the individual component is thereby changed, while its relation to the entire human body remains unchanged. In this way, although

8 See E II, DigPhy, L1 (G II,97,25-6) and ax2 (G II,99,23-5).

9 See E II, DigPhy, def (G II,99,26–100,5).

10 See E II, DigPhy, L4-6 (G II,100,16–101,12).

11 See E II DigPhy, post 1 (G II,102,20-2).

12 See E II DigPhy, post 2 (G II,102,23-5).

13 See E II DigPhy, post 3 (G II,102,26-8).

14 In this sense, Spinoza states in Part III that differences in affects correspond to differences in essence. Hence, the affects of non-human animals differ from human ones insofar as their nature differs. Even when the same terms (e.g., desire or pleasure) are used, they express fundamentally different modes of existence across species, see E III, p57s (G II,187,6-23).

the part is in a certain sense estranged from its previous nature, its modification (*affectio*) is absorbed and preserved by the whole in the form of a trace (*vestigium*).[15] Starting from this physiological receptivity, Spinoza lays the groundwork for his theory of perception.

Just as traces (*vestigia*) depend both on the nature of the modifying body (*afficiens*) and on that of the modified body (*affectum*),[16] so, under the attribute of thought, the idea of a modification (*idea affectionis*)[17] involves (*involvit*) both the nature of the perceiving human body and that of the external body perceived.[18] The pair *vestigia-idea affectionis* thus makes it possible to clarify, *in nuce*, the functioning of human perception: whatever leaves a trace is thereby perceived as present or actually existing, insofar as it implies (*involvendo*) the nature of an external body, until a new modification of the body alters that imprint.[19]

From this description it follows that the idea we have of an external object, when obtained in this way, is intrinsically confused – an *experientia vaga*[20] – which remains in the foreground until it is replaced by another modification. Unlike other forms of experience,[21] this perceptual modality is characterized by contingency, instability, and self-referentiality, and is therefore unsuited to provide adequate knowledge of the body that has produced it.[22]

The same holds when traces persist beyond the duration of the immediate action of external bodies, giving rise to the phenomenon of imagination.[23] When the soft parts of the body are frequently (*saepe*) imprinted by external bodies so that their surfaces are modified in a more lasting way, the body acquires the capacity to relive that perception through a spontaneous motion (*suo spontaneo motu*) of the

15 See E II, DigPhy, post 5 (G II,102,32–103,3). For a discussion upon Spinoza's theory of *vestigia*, see Vinciguerra 2005, 93-6.

16 See E II, DigPhy, ax1, post L3c (G II,99,9-14).

17 This type of idea is discussed by Moreau (1994, 319-27) and Vinciguerra (2005, 171-83), who refers to it as *idée de trace or idée du signe*. As shown by the latter, his interpretation differs from those of Gueroult and Macherey.

18 See E II, p16 (G II,103,27-30). For the relation between causality and the ideas of affections see Vinciguerra 2005, 20-2 and 179-83.

19 See E II, p17 (G II,104,18-22).

20 Namely one of the four modes of cognition outlined in TdIE §19 (G II,10,10-11) and E II, p40s2 (G II,122,2-11).

21 A form of knowledge which, as Moreau (1994) has shown at length, plays a crucial role in Spinoza's philosophy.

22 In this sense, Messeri, Leblanc, and Vinciguerra agree in treating the idea of the *affectio* as an imperfect sign of an underlying causal process (see Messeri 1990, 195; Leblanc 2023, 133-4). Spinoza himself describes the ideas of affections as consequences without premises in E II, p38d (G II,118,14-8).

23 See E II, p17c (G II,105,2-4). See also Vinciguerra 2005, 165-95 and particularly 185-95.

fluid parts across the new enduring surfaces (*novis planis*) produced by the modification.[24]

In this sense, making a concession to the vocabulary of his time, Spinoza calls these ideas of the body's modifications (*ideae affectionum*) "images of things" (*rerum imagines*), insofar as they in part represent (*repraesentant*) external bodies as if they were present; nevertheless, he firmly maintains that they bear no resemblance whatsoever to the thing represented.[25] In this way, even the ideas of affections arising from imagination are reduced to being signs of the things that have generated them, since, as already in perception, they imply their objects rather than depict their essence. Thus, making a further concession to the vocabulary of the period, Spinoza designates this first kind of knowledge by the term 'imagination'; yet, had he possessed Locke's knowledge of Greek and the inclination to innovate the philosophical lexicon of his time, he could just as well have spoken of semiotics, insofar he appears to describe these ideas of the body's modifications as signs of things rather than as faint mental likenesses of them.[26]

3 Association and Meaning: the Genesis of Words (*Verba*)

The account developed so far allows us to move beyond a merely semiotic characterization of imagination and to explain the emergence of linguistic meaning. For Spinoza, language does not introduce a new order of signs, but rather arises from a duplication of the very mechanisms that govern imaginative cognition.[27] Words are not simply arbitrary conventions superimposed on experience; they are second-order signs generated within the same associative processes that structure the first-order signification of bodily affections.

At the most basic level, imaginative cognition is already semiotic. As we have seen, ideas of affections (*ideae affectionum*) function as signs insofar as they involve both the nature of the affected body and that of the affecting body. However, this first-order signification remains tied to the immediate or remembered presence of bodily traces (*vestigia*). The transition to language occurs when this

24 See E II, p17c,d (G II,105,6-20). See on this topic also Vinciguerra 2005, 97-108.

25 See E II, p17s (G II,106,6-11). On the non-mimetic character of Spinoza's *imagines* see Vinciguerra 2005, 189-90.

26 As Vinciguerra (2005, 190-3, 234) observes, in this text *vestigium*, *signum*, and *imago* are largely interchangeable, insofar as they refer to the same object. On the possibility that Locke coined the term σημειωτική to describe a theory of representation encompassing both ideas and words, see Leblanc 2023, 136-47.

27 Here I partially follow some of the insights of Vinciguerra 2006, 262-5 and Hervet 2012, 89-110.

associative mechanism is iterated: one sign becomes the sign of another sign.

Spinoza describes this process in terms of association and habit. When two or more traces are impressed simultaneously (*simul*) upon the body, the idea of one recalls the others by virtue of memory.[28] In itself, this mechanism explains only the passage from one image to another. Yet through repeated associations governed by *consuetudo*, a further step is taken: an acoustic or graphic image, already linked to a bodily affection, becomes stably associated with a cluster of images, and thus comes to function as a sign of their *experientia vaga*.

The well-known example of the Roman who passes from the sound '*pomum*' to the image of a fruit illustrates precisely this point.[29] The sound bears no resemblance to the object, nor does it possess any intrinsic connection to it; its signifying function is entirely grounded in the contingent history of bodily affections that have linked the two. Crucially, however, the sound is itself already an image – an affection of the body – and therefore already a sign. The linguistic sign emerges precisely at the point where this first-order sign is stabilized, through habitual association, as the sign of another sign, namely the perceptual image of the thing.[30] The same logic applies to proper names. A name such as 'Peter' does not refer to an individual as such, but to a feature or image that has most strongly affected the speaker and has been fixed through use, thereby functioning as a second-order sign within the associative laws of imagination.[31]

In this sense, it becomes clear why Spinoza defines dialogue as an exchange of concepts between two individuals who communicate through their bodies.[32] When someone says "I understand", the listener understands that it is not merely the mouth that speaks, but the mind behind it.[33] When two people engage in dialogue, each understands the other by comparison with the way in which they themselves use language, in the first person, to express their thoughts. Although one has no direct access to the image associated in the mind of one's interlocutor, in most cases it is shared experience that makes mutual

28 See E II, p18 (G II,106,22-4). A similar thesis was already put forward by Descartes in *Principia*, Art. 74 (AT VIII 37-8).

29 See E II, p18s (G II,107,13-23).

30 As Moreau (1994, 322) rightly observes, a word can be defined as an "image d'une image". Vinciguerra (2005, 193-5) and Lærke (2014, 533) have emphasized the order and concatenation of affections within the linguistic phenomenon. The presence of confused ideas in the semantics of language is clearly highlighted by Licata (2009, 648).

31 The affective criterion in Spinoza is no longer Cartesian attention but *admiratio*, which suspends the normal course of the flow of thought and fixes it on a feature that is particularly salient for the perceiver's lived experience, see Vinciguerra 2005, 43-8.

32 See TTP 1 (G III,18,16-8).

33 See TTP 1 (G III,18,27-31).

understanding possible and prevents misunderstanding. Spinoza illustrates this point with his example of the hen:

> Indeed, most errors consist simply in our not applying names correctly to things. For when someone says that the lines drawn from the centre of a circle to its circumference are unequal, he at least understands by 'circle', at that moment, something different from what mathematicians understand by it. Likewise, when people make a mistake in calculation, they have in mind numbers different from those written on the page. From their own point of view, therefore, they are not in error; they merely appear to be so, because we assume that they have in mind the same numbers that are on the page. If this were not the case, we would not regard them as mistaken at all – just as I did not consider mistaken a man whom I recently heard shouting, although his words were nonsensical, that his courtyard had flown into his neighbour's hen, since what he had in mind seemed sufficiently clear to me. Most controversies arise from this, namely, that people either fail to explain correctly what they have in mind or else misinterpret what others have in mind. For in fact, even when they are in the greatest disagreement, they are thinking either of the same things or of things that are entirely unrelated – so that what they take to be others' errors and absurdities may in fact be neither. (Author's translation; Spinoza, E II, p47s; G II,128,23–129,6)

4 From Denotation to Convention: the Analogical Use of Language

From the genesis outlined so far, it would appear that the basic functioning of any language consists in assigning names to those features of experience that most strongly affect us. Traces of this primordial stage of language can be easily found in the onomatocentric syntax of Hebrew. According to Spinoza, Hebrew does not divide its parts of speech into eight categories, as Latin does, but instead organizes everything around the grammatical category of the noun.[34] The universe it describes is primarily composed of things and actions, to which adjectives, adverbs, and participles add only circumstantial specifications.[35] Proper names would thus appear to be the most representative case of the ordinary functioning of Hebrew, as they are the only instance in which a one-to-one correspondence between

34 The central role of the noun in the Hebrew of the CGLH is clearly brought out in Licata's account (2009, 646-53).

35 See CGLH 5 (G I,303,16–304,2).

word and thing is maintained.[36]

However, every natural language – including Hebrew – soon develops analogical usages which, while reducing its descriptive precision, enhance its practical efficiency.[37] This is the case with common nouns, which Spinoza, following the grammatical terminology of his time, refers to as *nomina appellativa*.[38] Such nouns can be applied to multiple individuals and allow speakers to economize on the imposition of names; unfortunately, the cost of this pragmatic choice is high.

> From similar causes arise those notions that are called *universals*, such as 'man', 'horse', 'dog', and the like. This happens because so many images – for example, of men – are formed simultaneously in the human body that they exceed the capacity of the imagination, not to the point of completely destroying it, but sufficiently to render the mind incapable of imagining the small differences among individuals (such as color, stature, and so on) and their determinate number. As a result, the mind distinctly imagines only what is common to all, insofar as the body is affected by them in the same way. For the body has been most affected by this, namely by what is common to each singular thing; and this it expresses by the name 'man', predicating it of infinitely many individuals, since, as we have said, it is unable to imagine a determinate number of them. It should be noted, however, that these notions are not formed in the same way by everyone, but vary in each individual according to the thing by which the body has most frequently been affected […]. For example, one who has most often been struck by the stature of human beings will understand by the name 'man' an animal of upright stature; whereas another, accustomed to noticing something else, will form a different common image of human beings – for instance, an animal capable of laughter, a featherless biped, or a rational animal. And so, with regard to other things, each person forms universal images according to the disposition of their own body. (Author's translation; Spinoza, E II, p40s1, G II,121,12-35)

Universal notions and common nouns operate according to the same associative mechanism that governs the formation of proper names; however, they can give rise to the illusion that the shared image

36 See CGLH 5 (G I,304,11-6).

37 On the use of linguistic analogy in the CGLH, see Licata 2009, 644-6. For an initial study of the more complex notion of metaphysical analogy, see Di Vona 1960-69. The interrelation between the two in Spinoza's thought cannot be explored here; in what follows, I limit myself to describing his use of them.

38 See CGLH 9 (G I,322,6-16).

(*imago communis*) applied to a plurality of individuals corresponds to a real ontological property.[39] The highest degree of confusion is reached with the transcendental notions, which lack even such a common image and, for this reason, are devoid of any distinct meaning.

> However, in order not to omit anything necessary for understanding this matter, I shall briefly add the causes from which the so-called *transcendental* terms – such as 'being', 'thing', and 'something' – originate. These terms arise from the fact that the human body, being limited, is capable of forming within itself only a certain number of images simultaneously and distinctly (what an image is I have explained in the scholium to Proposition 17 of this Part). If this number is exceeded, the images begin to become confused; and if it is exceeded by a large margin, all the images become completely confused with one another. Given this, it is clear from the Corollary to Proposition 17 and from Proposition 18 of this Part that the human mind can imagine simultaneously and distinctly as many bodies as there can be images formed simultaneously in its body. But when the images in the body are entirely confused, the mind also imagines all bodies in a confused manner, without any distinction, and comprehends them, as it were, under a single attribute – namely under the attribute of being, thing, and so on. This can also be inferred from the fact that images do not always possess the same vividness, as well as from other similar causes which it is not necessary to explain here; for, for the purposes at hand, it is sufficient to consider just one. All such terms ultimately come down to this: they signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree. (Author's translation; E II, p40s1, G II,120,27–121,12)

In addition to semantics, the principle of analogical use also shapes the codification of a language's syntax. Everyday usage shapes language to such an extent that, as in the case of Hebrew, not only are genders attributed to inanimate objects, but nature and lifeless entities are also spoken of through personification.[40] In natural languages, it is therefore *usus*, rather than any original referential function for which they originally emerged, that ultimately governs

39 The nature of the common images (*imagines communes*) has been emphasized by Gueroult 1974, 590-2 and Vinciguerra 2005, 213-8.

40 See CGLH 5 (G I,304,17-23).

the life of linguistic signs.[41] Not even scholars, however much they might wish to do so, are able to guide speakers or to alter the historical development of proverbial expressions and fixed phrases.[42] It follows that understanding a language cannot be reduced to a dictionary knowledge of its vocabulary, but also requires the reconstruction of the syntactic forms (*eloquentia – syntaxis*) through which a population expresses itself.[43]

In order to clarify the characteristic phraseology of a language, one must therefore possess knowledge of the history of the people who speak it, of the material conditions in which they live and have lived, and undertake an examination of the *corpus* of texts they have produced, through a methodical comparison (*collatio orationum*) of the documents that have come down to us.[44] In short, as in the CGLH, it is only through a *cognitio universalis*, or rather an *integra cognitio*, of a language and its uses that its functioning can truly be understood.[45]

5 Exceeding the Limits of Reason: Spinoza's Critique of *Cognitio ex signis*

Having seen his account of the origin and nature of human language, we can easily understand Spinoza's critique of *cognitio ex signis*. Spinoza employs this expression in his expositions of the theory of knowledge to designate one of the four modes of perception characteristic of human beings: knowledge mediated by linguistic signs, whether they be written signs or acquired through hearsay.[46]

41 Despite Harvey's claims (2002, 110), the impermeability of Spinoza's thought to the myth of a universal language has been stressed by Licata (2009, 639) and Lærke (2014, 534-5), who also underline his opposition to the Kabbalistic model. Spinoza's distance from projects of a universal language is further illustrated by an episode reported by Tschirnhaus to Leibniz (LSSB R 3 B 2, April/May 1679, 717-19, n. 301). When shown Descartes' letter concerning a philosophical language capable of enabling even a peasant to advance in the search for truth (now in AT 1.76-82: Letter 15), Spinoza reportedly replied: "Do you believe, my friend, that everything Descartes said is true?", adding a laugh as if the matter did not concern him further.

42 See TTP 7 (G III,105,27–106,8).

43 See CGLH 5 (G I,303,3-10). An eloquent example of such an approach is the methodical reconstruction of the semantics of the biblical phrases *Spiritus Dei* and *Spiritus Jehovae* in TTP 1 (G III,27,15-33) and ATTP III (G III,252,3-12).

44 Something that, unfortunately, due to the lack of documentation, is impossible for Biblical Hebrew to do, see TTP 7 (G III,109,3-13), and which is reconstructed on a theoretical basis by grammatical analogy in CGLH, see Licata 2009, 630-40.

45 The significance and implications of this complete reconstruction of a language in the CGLH have been emphasized by Licata 2009, 629.

46 See TdIE §19 (G II,10,9-10), KV II 1(2) (G I,54,10-2) and E II, p40s2 (G II,122,2-11).

As is already evident from the TdIE, the order and connection of these signs are primarily tied to those of the affections of the body.

> Moreover, since words are part of the imagination – that is, since, insofar as they are composed (*componuntur*) in memory in a vague way from some disposition of the body, we fabricate (*fingamus*) many concepts – there is no doubt that words, no less than the imagination, can be the cause of many and serious errors, unless we guard against them with the utmost care. Add to this that they are formed according to the arbitrariness and the capacity of understanding of the common people (*ad libitum et captum vulgi*), so that they are nothing but signs of things (*signa rerum*) as they are in the imagination, and not as they are in the intellect. This is clearly shown by the fact that names are often assigned in a negative form to things that exist only in the intellect and not in the imagination – such as 'incorporeal', 'infinite', and the like – and that many things which are in fact affirmative are nevertheless expressed negatively, and vice versa, such as 'uncreated', 'independent', 'infinite', 'immortal', and so on. For, in truth, their opposites are far more easily imagined and therefore first presented themselves to human beings, who accordingly used them as positive names. We affirm and deny many things because the nature of words allows us to affirm and deny, not because the nature of things does so; and thus, through this ignorance, we can easily take what is false to be true. (Author's translation; Spinoza, TdIE §§88-89; G II,33,8-24)

In light of what has emerged regarding the nature of verbal signs, it is possible to fully clarify the otherwise vague references contained in this text and similar claims.[47] Words are presented from the outset as an epiphenomenon of imagination (*pars imaginationis*), in the sense that their formation depends both on the memory of individual subjects and on shared linguistic usages. They are therefore signs of things not as they are in the intellect, but as they are perceived through imagination.

The example Spinoza provides illustrates the arbitrariness of linguistic usage: many concepts that are positive for the intellect are expressed through grammatically negative terms (incorporeal, infinite), while affirmatively characterized realities are designated by formally negative terms (uncreated, independent, infinite, immortal), since imagination more easily represents their opposites. It follows that our affirmations and negations reflect more the *natura verborum*,

47 See for example E II, p49s (G II,131,30–132,22).

that is, linguistic usage, than the *natura rerum*; hence we are easily led to mistake the false for the true.

For this reason, Spinoza frequently advances a critique of the *philosophi verbales*,[48] aimed at highlighting those cases in which the rules of usage and the combinatory structure of a historical language exceed the limits of adequate knowledge.[49] The *ordo et connexio verborum* is only partially coextensive with the *ordo et connexio causarum*: yet this is not a rejection of language as such, but an attempt to show that it does not necessarily mirror the order of things, while still affirming – most clearly in the TTP – the need for clarity of expression to better align the two.[50]

6 Conclusions

To summarize the main results of this inquiry, this paper reconstructs Spinoza's conception of the genesis and nature of human language within the dynamics of imagination. By outlining, in Section 2, his physiological theory of perception and emphasizing its intrinsically semiotic character, it shows how the imaginative mechanisms analysed in the Ethics ground the emergence of linguistic signs. Building on this account, Section 3 reconstructs the imaginative logic underlying the origin of language, arguing that words arise not as an autonomous system, but from a duplication of the associative processes structuring imaginative cognition. Sections 4 and 5 extend this framework to explain, respectively, the customary organization of linguistic practices and Spinoza's critique of *cognitio ex signis*.

On this basis, the paper argues that words are best understood as second-order signs: they inherit both their expressive power and their epistemic limitations from the bodily processes on which they depend. This unified genetic account explains, within a single model, the emergence of semantic content, the formation of universals, and the role of *usus* and *consuetudo* in shaping language, while also accounting for systematic sources of error that affect sign-based cognition. Because the order and connection of words largely follow the contingent order of bodily affections rather than the causal order of things, language is both a powerful vehicle for expressing this order and a potentially unreliable guide to it.

48 See for example CM I,1 (G I,235,6-9).

49 A similar critique can be found in the account of prophetic knowledge, see TTP 1 (G II,28,21-5).

50 See TTP 7 (G III,111,8-24). On this point, see Vinciguerra 2006, 265-8; Hervet 2012, 151-224.

Spinoza's theory of language, so understood, is therefore not a marginal or merely critical component of his philosophy, but a necessary extension of his theory of imagination and a condition for assessing the first kind of knowledge. Clarifying the relation between the *ordo et connexio verborum* and the *ordo et connexio rerum* is essential not only for understanding the positive function of natural language, but also for grasping the limits that Spinoza assigns to *cognitio ex signis* within his broader epistemological project.

Abbreviations

AT = Descartes, R. (1964-74). *Œuvres*. Ed. by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, 12 vols. Paris: Vrin/CNRS.
ATTP = *Annotations on the Theological-Political Treatise*.
CGLH = *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language*.
CM = *Metaphysical Thoughts*.
E = *Ethics*.
G = Spinoza, B. (1925). *Spinoza Opera*. 4 vols. Edited by C. Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitaetsbuchhandlun.
LSSB = Leibniz, G.W. (1987-). *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. Ed. by the Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (later Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften). Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
TdIE = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.
TTP = *Theological-Political Treatise*.

For the individual parts:
ax = *Axioma.*
c = *Corollary*.
d = *Demonstratio*.
def = *Definitio*.
DigPhy = Physical Digression.
L = *Lemma*.
p = *Propositio.*
post = *Postulatum*.
s = *Scholium*.

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The "Style of God". Language as Historical Mediation and Transformation of Biblical Authority in Spinoza

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Abstract This article argues that Spinoza's notion of the "style of Scripture" provides the methodological key to his historical conception of revelation and, more broadly, to a new theory of linguistic mediation. A comparative analysis with Robert Boyle's theory of accommodation highlights two distinct early modern strategies for stabilizing scriptural authority: one grounded in divinely regulated linguistic adaptation, the other in historical-philological reconstruction. The divergence between these models reflects not a rupture between tradition and modernity, but competing attempts to account for the epistemic status of language and scriptural language in the early modern period.

Keywords Spinoza. Language. Style. Scripture. Biblical interpretation. Accommodation. Early modern philosophy. Tractatus theologico-politicus. Historical criticism. Hermeneutics.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 From Correspondence to Linguistic Mediation. – 3 Historical Method and the Linguistic Mediation of Scripture. – 4 Divine Language and Prophetic Imagination. – 5 Miracle, Language, and Historical Mediation. – 6 Language, Method, and the Separation of Philosophy from Theology. – 7 Style as Historical Index and the Emergence of Critical Interpretation. – 8 The Style of Scripture between Divine Accommodation and Historical Mediation: Boyle and Spinoza. – 9 Language, Authority, and Revelation. Two Early Modern Theories of Scriptural Style. – 10 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

The question of scriptural language occupies a central place in seventeenth-century debates concerning authority, interpretation, and the epistemology of texts. The emergence of philological methods and the reconfiguration of natural philosophy destabilized inherited accounts of biblical unity and divine authorship. Within this context, the notion of 'style of Scripture' became a crucial conceptual locus for rethinking the relationship between linguistic form, theological meaning and the epistemological status of revelation.

Throughout the seventeenth century, conceptions of language underwent a profound transformation that simultaneously affected the scientific, theological, and philosophical domains. The humanist rhetorical ideal, grounded in stylistic ornamentation and the imitation of classical models, was progressively replaced by a paradigm that privileged clarity, communicative effectiveness, and transparency of expression. This paradigm also came to characterize the language of the new science. Even more significant, however, was the transformation in the epistemological status of language itself. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the traditional bond between words and things began to break down: language gradually ceased to be regarded as the privileged locus for the manifestation of truth and lost the epistemic function that the tradition had attributed to it.

Spinoza's treatment of the question of style represents one of the most original and radical moments in this transformation. In his perspective, style constitutes the point of intersection between the philosophy of language, the theory of the imagination, biblical criticism, and historical method. It is no longer a property of the divine word, but rather a characteristic of the human author who conveys the revealed message.

Spinoza thus transfers the style of Scripture from God to the prophet. The stylistic diversity of the biblical texts does not reflect different modes of divine speech, but rather differences in the authors' temperament, cultural background, imagination, eloquence, and historical circumstances. This redefinition entails a profound transformation of the very notion of revelation. What varies is not the content of revealed truth, but the historical and linguistic form through which it is conveyed. Style therefore ceases to be an attribute of the word of God and becomes instead an index of the plurality of

authors, historical contexts, and cultural conditions within which revelation assumes textual form.[1]

Through a comparison with Robert Boyle's theory of accommodation, this article argues that the decisive divergence between Boyle and Spinoza does not concern the simplicity or stylistic variety of Scripture as such, but the subject of linguistic mediation. While Boyle attributes the mediation of revelation to God's intentional accommodation to human capacities, Spinoza relocates that mediation to the historical activity of prophetic authors. The notion of style is the methodological category through which this shift becomes visible and through which the historical interpretation of Scripture becomes possible.

From this perspective, the present article argues that the notion of style provides the methodological key to Spinoza's historical conception of Scripture. More specifically, it shows that, through the notion of style, Spinoza reformulates the very problem of the linguistic mediation of revelation. The question of divine language no longer concerns the way God speaks, but rather the way human beings construct the very idea of a divine language. Spinoza's historical reading of Scripture therefore constitutes not merely a new exegetical methodology, but presupposes an even more profound transformation in the theory of language.[2] It is this reconfiguration of linguistic mediation that makes possible a historical conception of revelation and, consequently, a reconceptualization of the foundation of biblical authority.

1 Spinoza does not merely propose a new exegetical method, but redefines the linguistic conditions of revelation. For this very reason, the style of Scripture becomes the theoretical locus in which the philosophy of language, the theory of imagination, historical criticism, and reflection on the authority of the biblical text converge. As I will attempt to demonstrate in this article, the discussion of style becomes the conceptual device through which Spinoza historicizes the language of revelation and makes possible the separation between theology and philosophy.

2 The expression "style of Scripture" is the traditional category that Spinoza inherits from the philosophical tradition and subjects to critique. For Augustine, for example, God possesses a distinctive style of acting and speaking. Lettieri 2001 has read this divine style as an attribute of the Word of God, particularly in the final two chapters of his monograph. In the TTP, in particular, Spinoza reconceives style as an epistemological category that identifies the historically conditioned mode of linguistic mediation through which revelation is communicated. Here Spinoza does not merely interpret the Bible historically: he can interpret the Bible historically because he first transforms the theory of language. The historicization of Scripture is the effect of the historicization of language. In this sense, Spinoza does not simply establish modern biblical criticism; rather, modern biblical criticism becomes possible because Spinoza first reconfigures the concept of language. Biblical authority itself is thus reconfigured through a new theory of linguistic mediation. Spinoza replaces, that is, a theory of revelation with a theory of mediation. This marks a fundamental transformation in early modern philosophy.

2 From Correspondence to Linguistic Mediation

Until the seventeenth century, the dominant conception of truth was grounded in the principle of *adaequatio*, understood as the correspondence between reality and the idea that the knowing subject forms of it. Truth thus consisted in the *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, that is, in the correspondence between the content of thought and external reality. Within this framework, language was not merely an instrument of representation, but the medium through which this correspondence was made manifest and secured.[3] Indeed, the very possibility of knowledge presupposed a fundamental continuity between thought, language, and the world.

The epistemological displacement of language inaugurated by Descartes provides one of the key conditions for understanding Spinoza's conception of Scripture as a historical and linguistic artifact rather than as the transparent vehicle of divine truth. Already in the *Recherche de la vérité par les lumières naturelles*, and especially in the *Le Monde ou traité de la lumière*, Descartes calls into question the traditionally assumed relationship between things and the words that designate ideas. The connection between reality and representation is no longer conceived as natural, but rather as a relation mediated by symbolic processes. At the beginning of the *Traité de la lumière*, Descartes observes that the relationship between external bodies and the ideas we have of them is analogous to that between words and the things they signify. Words, in fact, "ne signifient rien que par l'institution des hommes" and "suffisent pour nous faire concevoir des choses auxquelles elles ne ressemblent en aucune façon".[4]

This linguistic conventionalism provides one of the main preconditions for Spinoza's historical conception of scriptural language. The redefinition of the relationship between language and reality finds an important formulation in Descartes' correspondence with Marin Mersenne. On 16 October 1639, Descartes replied to a letter in which Mersenne had sent him his own translation of Edward Herbert of Cherbury's *De veritate*. While acknowledging that Mersenne's work "traite d'un sujet auquel j'ai travaillé toute ma vie",

3 The first sources of this theory can be traced back to Aristotle (*Met.*, IV, 7, 1011b, 27), but above all to medieval scholastic philosophy, as well as to Jewish and Arabic philosophy: in Thomas Aquinas, for example, in the first *quaestio* of the *De Veritate* where the expression "*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*" appears. The idea of a "correspondence", of a *convenientia* or *adaequatio*, is also found in Averroes, Gersonides, Hasdai Crescas, and other authors.

4 AT XI,3-4. For the English translation, see CSM I,81. The analogy between conventional signs (words) and natural signs (the sensations produced by bodily movements) was further developed in the *Dioptrique* (AT VI,112-13) and in the *Meditationes* (especially in the *Sixth Meditation*), becoming one of the fundamental principles of the Cartesian theory of perception.

Descartes specifies that Herbert follows a path very different from his own ("il tient un chemin fort différent de celui que j'ai suivi").[5] The divergence concerns precisely the foundation of truth.[6] For Descartes, indeed, what is true is that which is grasped through clear and distinct ideas: the criterion of truth no longer resides in an external ontological order, but in the constitutive structures of human reason.[7] The *cogito* thus becomes the foundational principle of the entire process of knowledge, not only because it guarantees the certainty of the existence of the thinking subject, but also because it constitutes the premise for affirming the existence of the external world and the validity of knowledge itself.

With Descartes and, more generally, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what comes into question is not correspondence as such, but the natural conception of the relationship between words and things. Descartes, in fact, does not abandon a theory of truth as correspondence in the contemporary sense of the term; rather, he redefines the foundation of certainty and the role of language. Truth thus ceases to be a transcendent principle to which the intellect must conform and becomes the result of the activity of reason, which assumes the role of the ultimate criterion of certainty. In the second of the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, Descartes identifies rational deduction as the foundation of certain knowledge and states that "those who seek the right road to truth should not occupy themselves with any object about which they cannot have a certainty equal to the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry".[8] The mathematical method, founded on rigorous deductive chains, thus becomes the model of authentic knowledge, whereas sensory experience, dependent on the variability of the senses, remains exposed to error and uncertainty.

5 AT II,596-8; CSM III,142.

6 Herbert and Descartes address the same problem through radically different methods: Herbert develops a theory of truth by inquiring into its nature and into the criteria that guarantee its validity; Descartes, by contrast, considers the notion of truth a primitive concept, that is, one so evident that it cannot be defined without making it more obscure. For him, the decisive question is not "what is truth?", but rather how it is possible to arrive at true judgments through method and evidence. In the Cartesian passage, words are considered conventional signs ("par l'institution des hommes"), whereas the modifications of the nerves and the brain produced by external bodies are natural signs, instituted by nature. In both cases, no resemblance between the sign and what it signifies is required. This passage is considered one of the foundational texts of the modern conception of representation and semiotics.

7 *Discours de la méthode* (AT VI,1-2; CSM I,111-12).

8 "Qui enim veritatis viam rectam quaerunt, de nulla re debent occupare se, circa quam non possint habere certitudinem aequalem demonstrationibus Arithmeticis et Geometricis" (AT X,366; CSM I,12-13).

3 Historical Method and the Linguistic Mediation of Scripture

Spinoza addresses the problem of the interpretation of Scripture within the framework of the broader search for a criterion of truth capable of reducing the contingent character of things to an intelligible order grounded in an internal necessity.[9] The reflection on language constitutes an essential moment in this philosophical project. Both in the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* and in the *Ethica*, Spinoza insists on the intrinsically equivocal character of words and on the necessity of determining their meaning with precision, so that language does not become a source of error and confusion.[10]

In the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, this analysis takes on a more specific and systematic form. Attention is focused on the language of Scripture, on the linguistic peculiarities of the individual biblical books, and, above all, on the notiaon of the 'style of Scripture'. The composition of the *Compendium grammatices linguae Hebraeae* also belongs to this broader philosophical project, aimed at exposing the beliefs, superstitions, and interpretative errors produced by an unreflective use of language.[11] In the author's intentions, the

9 According to Spinoza, the fortuitous and the contingent belong to the human and imaginative way of perceiving the succession of events: we perceive encounters, changes, and occurrences as isolated events because we do not know the entire causal chain. From the perspective of the intellect, however, everything appears as necessary ("res, ut necessarias, et non, ut contingentes", E II, p44d; G II,126; C I,481). See also E II, p29s (G II,114; Curley I, 471).

10 Cf. TIE, §§84-85 (G II,32-3; C I,36-7), where Spinoza attributes the conventional origin of language to the imagination. An echo of Descartes' statement in PPH I, art. 74 can also be found in E IIp40s1 (G I,121; C I,477-8), and in E I, app (G II,77-8), where it is shown that ordinary language participates in the prejudices of the imagination. According to Spinoza, philosophy requires a reform of language, since words must be traced back to determinate and adequate ideas, so that the linguistic sign does not replace the intellect. For different interpretations of Spinoza's theory of language, cf.: Deleuze 1968; Savan 1972; Robinet 1978; Pariente 1985; Bove 1991; Vinciguerra 2006.

11 I have already discussed some of these issues in my Introduction to the Italian translation of Spinoza's *Grammatica*, published in 2013. With regard to the question of whether the *Compendium* should be considered a grammar of the Hebrew language or a biblical grammar, Klijnsmit observes that "he did not include post-biblical elements in his description of Hebrew" and that "yet, although he described only Biblical Hebrew, he cannot be called 'a grammarian of the Bible'" (Klijnsmit 1992, 191). In the *Compendium*, Spinoza explains that previous authors had considered Hebrew primarily as a tool for the interpretation of the Bible, rather than as a natural language endowed with its own grammatical structure. Consequently, grammarians did not actually compose a grammar of the Hebrew language as such, but rather grammars aimed at the understanding of Scripture. This distinction is decisive, since it separates the historical-linguistic study of Hebrew from exegetical purposes, that is, from the theological study of biblical interpretation: "Plures sunt, qui Scripturae, at nullus, qui linguae Hebraeae Grammaticam scripsit" (G I,310); "Nimirum Grammaticam, uti diximus, Scripturae, non linguae scripserunt" (G I,358).

Compendium was not meant to be merely a compendium of biblical Hebrew constructed exclusively on the basis of the text of Scripture, but rather to describe the properties and functioning of a language considered as the living language of a people, a culture, and a history. The *Compendium* therefore does not constitute an ancillary grammatical work, but rather the methodological completion of the *Tractatus*. It represents the linguistic dimension of the same philosophical project that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* develops on the hermeneutical level: a kind of the linguistic laboratory of the *Tractatus*.[12]

On the basis primarily of these two works, this article argues that the historical method is not the premise of Spinoza's philosophy of language; it is the consequence of it. The historical reading of Scripture becomes possible only because Spinoza first transforms the philosophical conception of language itself. The analysis of the presumed divine language and, more precisely, of the style through which God would speak in the Bible, thus becomes an opportunity to investigate the very nature of linguistic mediation and the relationship between thought, language, and knowledge. Spinoza's biblical exegesis therefore does not constitute a separate chapter of his philosophical reflection, but rather the place where a new method of interpretation takes shape, one founded on the historical and linguistic analysis of the text. This transformation gives rise to decisive consequences not only for the hermeneutics of Scripture, but also for the redefinition of the relationships between philosophy, theology, and politics.

12 The *Compendium grammatices linguae Hebraeae* continues Spinoza's critique of the equivocations produced by names, already developed in the TTP: if one assumes the customary meaning of words without analyzing their linguistic genesis, one risks attributing to texts meanings that derive from our own prejudices. For Spinoza, grammar therefore performs a critical function, since it prevents linguistic signs from being confused with the reality that they are only meant to express. In this sense, Spinoza claims a modern conception of grammar: Hebrew must be studied as a historical language and not simply as the sacred code of Scripture. His polemic thus also constitutes a critique of the idea that the meaning of words can be fixed once and for all through their theological use.

4 Divine Language and Prophetic Imagination

4.1 The Historicization of the Language of Revelation

One of the most innovative aspects of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* consists in the radical historicization of the language of revelation. From the very first chapter, Spinoza rejects the idea, widely disseminated within the Jewish and Christian traditions, that Hebrew constitutes a sacred, original, or directly divine language. Hebrew is neither the immutable language of God nor the idiom preserved from the Adamic age, but rather the historical language of a people, formed through use and transmitted within a specific cultural community.[13] Consequently, Scripture does not represent the immediate manifestation of a divine language, but rather the result of a complex historical, linguistic, and editorial mediation.

4.2 Style as a Form of Historical Mediation

A decisive consequence follows from this premise. If there is no divine language, there can be no style of God either. The linguistic form of revelation does not in fact belong to God, but to the prophets and authors who transmit it. The stylistic differences found in the biblical books do not reflect different modes of divine speech, but rather testify to the plurality of personalities, linguistic abilities, imaginative dispositions, and historical contexts within which revelation was communicated. The notion of the 'style of Scripture' thus becomes a fundamental hermeneutical tool. It does not allow one to arrive at the nature of God, but rather at the history of the composition of the biblical text and at the human modes of its transmission.

Divine communication is instead mediated through prophetic imagination, which translates ethical and political contents into forms accessible within specific historical and cultural conditions. From this perspective, there is no such thing as a style of God: it is the prophet who imparts his own style to revelation. Style thus becomes a property of the human author and not of the divine message.

This yields a strict distinction between philosophical truth (rational, universal) and scriptural meaning (historical, imaginative, context-dependent). Scripture therefore functions not as a theoretical

13 Contemporary criticism has also emphasized Spinoza's conception of Hebrew as a living language; see, for example, Yvon 1681, who observes: "Il a esté très-versé dans tout ce qui regarde le peuple Juif" (211).

system but as a practical discourse oriented toward ethical and political instruction.

4.3 From Style to Hermeneutics

In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, these principles are developed with great philological rigor on the basis of the very texts of Scripture. The knowledge of Hebrew, of the history of the people who spoke that language,[14] of rhetoric, oratory, and, more generally, of the style of the different authors thus becomes an essential instrument of exegetical inquiry. If there is no style proper to God, these elements depend exclusively on prophetic mediation. If the prophet possessed good taste, he perceived and conveyed God's thought in an elegant style (*stylo eleganti*); if, on the contrary, he was confused, he perceived it confusedly (*Dei mentem percipiebat* […] *confuse*).[15] If language varies and styles vary with the prophets, and if the images through which revelation is expressed also change with them, then the Bible must be studied like any other historical document.

A proof of this fundamental methodological consequence is provided by the absolute difference between the style proper to prophetic revelation and the style of the apostles. The prose of the apostles reflects the culture and habits of a people who lived in a completely different historical period and were shaped by subsequent political events and circumstances. The use of rational arguments and the articulated deductions (*deductiones et argumentationes*) that characterize the style of the New Testament give the text a discursive structure opposed to that adopted by the prophets and marked by the peremptory enunciation of dogmas (*dogmata*) and decrees (*decreta*):

> If we're willing to attend to the Apostles' style, we'll find it most unlike that of Prophecy. The most common practice of the Prophets was to testify everywhere that they were speaking according to God's edict: thus says God, the God of hosts says, God's edict etc. And this seems to have held good not only when the Prophets spoke in public assemblies, but also in the Letters containing revelations. This is evident from the Letter Elijah wrote to Jehoram (see 2 Chronicles 21:12), which also begins כה אמר יהוה, thus says God. In

14 On the necessity of knowing the properties of the language, see TTP VII (G III,99-102; 104-6). For an assessment of Spinoza's linguistic views, cf.: Zac 1979, 60-1; Levy 1989, especially the ch. "The problem of normativity in Spinoza's Hebrew Grammar", published in a revised form in "*Studia Spinozana*", III (1987), 351-90; Moreau 1994, especially 307-38; Cassuto 1999; Amoroso 2004, 39-62; Vinciguerra 2012, to which the reader is referred for further bibliography.

15 Cf. TTP II; G III,32; Curley II,97.

> the Letters of the Apostles, on the other hand, we read nothing like this. On the contrary, in 1 Corinthians 7:40 Paul speaks according to his own opinion.[16]

The historical-philological analysis of Scripture teaches that the variety of styles found in the Bible effectively demonstrates that style depends on the diversity of the authors of the true books and that it corresponds to the different temperament (*Prophetae itaque pro vario corporis temperamento magis ad has, quam ad illas revelationes erant apti*), to eloquence (*Stylus deinde prophetiae pro eloquentia cujusque Prophetae variabat*), to the habits, and to the culture of each of them (*magnam reperiet in stylo discrepantiam*).[17] It follows that

16 "Verum si ad earum [of the Letters of the Apostles] stylum attendere volumus, eum a stylo Prophetiae alienissimum inveniemus. Nam Prophetis usitatissimum erat, ubique testari, se ex Dei edicto loqui; nempe sic dicit Deus, ait Deus exercituum, edictum Dei etc., atque hoc non tantum videtur locum habuisse in publicis Prophetarum concionibus, sed etiam in Epistolis, quae revelationes continebant, ut ex illa Eliae Jehoramo scripta patet (vide libr. 2. Paral. cap. 21. vers. 12.), quae etiam incipit sic dicit Deus. At in Epistolis Apostolorum nihil simile legimus, sed contra in I. ad Corinth. cap. 7. vers. 40. Paulus secundum suam sententiam loquitur" (TTP XI; G III,151; Curley II,240). Spinoza does not merely contrast two literary styles here, but establishes an epistemological distinction: the prophet communicates a revelation received through the imagination and grounded in divine authority; for this reason, prophetic discourse takes the form of decrees and commands, rather than demonstrations. The apostle, by contrast, presents evangelical doctrine through arguments (*ratiocinari*), that is, through reasonings addressed to the intellect. For Spinoza, this difference helps explain why Scripture should not be read as a philosophical treatise: its effectiveness does not lie in rational demonstration, but in the moral and imaginative force of its teaching. "Praeterea si ad modum etiam attendamus, quo in his Epistolis Apostoli doctrinam Evangelicam tradunt, eum etiam a modo Prophetarum valde discedere videbimus. Apostoli namque ubique ratiocinantur, ita ut non prophetare, sed disputare videantur. Prophetiae vero contra mera tantum dogmata et decreta continent, quia in iis Deus quasi loquens introducitur, qui non ratiocinatur, sed ex absoluto suae naturae imperio decernit, et etiam quia Prophetae authoritas ratiocinari non patitur […] Et denique quia Prophetae res revelatas non ex virtute luminis naturalis, hoc est, non ratiocinando percipiebant, ut in Cap. I. ostendimus. Et quamvis in quinque libris etiam quaedam per illationem concludi videantur, si quis tamen ad ea attenderit, eadem nullo modo tanquam peremtoria argumenta sumi posse videbit" (TTP XI,298; G III,152; Curley II,238-9).

17 "Pro ratione enim temperamenti variabat hoc modo, nempe, si Propheta erat hilaris, ei revelabantur victoriae, pax, et quae porro homines ad laetitiam movent; tales enim similia saepius imaginari solent; si contra tristis erat, bella, supplicia, et omnia mala ei revelabantur; et sic prout Propheta erat misericors, blandus, iracundus, severus etc., eatenus magis aptus erat ad has, quam ad illas revelationes. Pro dispositione imaginationis autem sic etiam variabat, nempe, si Propheta erat elegans, stylo etiam eleganti Dei mentem percipiebat, sin autem confusus, confuse; et sic porro circa revelationes, quae per imagines repraesentabantur, nempe, si Propheta erat rusticus, boves, et vaccae etc., si vero miles, duces, exercitus; si denique aulicus, solium regium, et similia ipsi repraesentabantur. Denique variabat Prophetia pro diversitate opinionum Prophetarum" (TTP II; G III,30; Curley II,94).

> If you weigh all these things rightly, you will easily see that God has no distinctive style of speaking, but that he is refined, succinct, and severe, unsophisticated, wordy, and obscure, according to the learning and capacity of the Prophet.[18]

This statement marks a decisive moment in the redefinition of the concept of 'style of God'. Even more importantly, it shows that style constitutes the sign of the human mediation of revelation. God has no style, since Scripture is a human, historical, and, in this sense, natural work. The real issue raised by Spinoza here is therefore not simply the demolition of the belief in a style of Scripture. All the examples cited by Spinoza demonstrate that he transfers into history everything that tradition had directly attributed to God. Everything in Scripture that appears to be directly attributable to God is revealed to be the result of the editorial history of the individual books. And editorial history is nothing other than natural history.

If there is a style of Scripture, it consists in the absolute simplicity and clarity of its teachings.[19] Miracles also conform to this principle. The narration of miracles performs an eminently rhetorical function: to move the soul of the people and induce them to obedience:

> In Ch. 2 of this Treatise we showed that the Prophets had only a special power to imagine things, not a special power to understand them, that God didn't reveal to them any secrets of Philosophy, but only the simplest matters, and that he accommodated himself to their preconceived opinions. Next, in Ch. 5 we showed that Scripture imparts and teaches things in the way which enables each person to most easily perceive them. It does not deduce them from axioms and definitions and connect them with one another. It just speaks simply. To create trust it confirms what it says only by experience – that is, by miracles and historical narratives, relating these matters in a style and with expressions most apt to move

18 "Et sic de caeteris: quae si omnia recte perpendantur, facile ostendent, Deum nullum habere stylum peculiarem dicendi, sed tantum pro eruditione, et capacitate Prophetae eatenus esse elegantem, compendiosum, severum, rudem, prolixum, et obscurum" (TTP II; G III,34; Curley II,99).

19 "…res tantum simplicissimas, quae vel a quovis tardissimo possunt percipi" (TTP XIII; G III,167; Curley II,257). The comparison between the style of the prophets and that of the apostles shows that those who act according to reason can transmit teachings that are just as fundamental as those transmitted by those who follow faith. Prophetic revelation is recognizable through its style; the apostles' letters do not possess the style of prophecy, since the apostles write as teachers who argue, rather than as mere instruments of the divine voice. Their authority, therefore, does not derive from the fact that each of their statements constitutes an immediate revelation, but from the moral content and effectiveness of their teaching. To understand a sacred text, it is therefore necessary to consider its literary genre, style, historical context, and the modes of production of discourse, regardless of its supernatural origin.

> ordinary people's hearts. […] Finally, in Ch. 7 we showed that the difficulty of understanding Scripture lies only in its language, not in the loftiness of its theme.[20]

Even particular linguistic expressions must be analyzed through the tools of philology and rhetoric and cannot be understood literally, since they belong to human language. In this regard, Spinoza cites, for example, the Hebrew linguistic custom of referring every event that stands out for its exceptional nature and force to God, as in the passages of the Bible where one finds references to the "wind of God", "spirit of God", "trees of God".[21] Similarly, in *Psalm* 147:18 quoted in the same contexts, the natural action of the wind and of heat, "by which frost and snow are melted", is called the "word of God", and in verse 15 the wind and the cold are called the "decree" and the "word of God", just as the wind and fire are defined in *Psalm* 104:4 as "messengers" and "ministers of God".

Spinoza also devotes particular attention to metaphor. The use of expressing moral teachings through material images constitutes a characteristic feature of ancient Hebrew culture (*omnia spiritualia corporaliter expresserint*). It appears in the language of the prophets when, *parabolice et enigmatice*, they speak of doves, tongues of fire, and great light. Likewise, the expressions "mount of God", "tents", and "dwelling", contained in Psalms 15 and 24, must be interpreted according to a symbolic-metaphorical reading and not in a cultic or metaphysical sense.[22] These and other similar expressions, which are found in abundance in the Bible, indicate that

> the decree, order, dictate and word of God are nothing but the very action and order of nature. So there is no doubt that everything

20 "In Cap. II. hujus Tractatus ostendimus, Prophetas singularem tantum potentiam imaginandi, sed non intelligendi habuisse, Deumque nulla Philosophiae arcana, sed res simplicissimas tantum iisdem revelavisse, seseque eorum praeconceptis opinionibus accommodavisse. Ostendimus deinde in Cap. V. Scripturam res eo modo tradere, et docere, quo facillime ab unoquoque percipi possunt; quae scilicet non ex axiomatibus, et definitionibus res deducit, et concatenat, sed tantum simpliciter dicit, et ad fidem faciendam, sola experientia, miraculis scilicet, et historiis dicta confirmat, quaeque etiam tali stylo, et phrasibus narrantur, quibus maxime plebis animus commoveri potest" (TTP XIII; G III,167; Curley II,257).

21 TTP I; G III,24; Curley II,88. For the expressions quoted in the following lines, see note 29. In Biblical Hebrew, the expression "of God" (*Dei*) often functions as an idiomatic superlative and does not indicate divine possession or causality. In the same ch. I of the TTP, Spinoza also emphasizes the affinity with other linguistic traditions that share with the ancient Hebrews the use of the expression "of God": "Quin etiam apud Latinos nihil frequentius; nam quae affabre facta sunt, dicunt ea divina manu fuisse fabricata, quod si quis Hebraice transferre vellet, deberet dicere, *manu Dei fabricata*, ut Hebraizantibus notum" (G III,24).

22 TTP V; G III,78; Curley II,143.

> related in Scripture happened naturally, and yet is referred to God, because, as we've already shown, the purpose of Scripture is not to teach things through their natural causes, but only to relate those things which fill the imagination, and to do this by that Method and style which serves best to increase wonder at things, and consequently to impress devotion in the hearts of the common people.[23]

All the difficulties encountered in Scripture therefore depend solely on the correct understanding of the language of the ancient Hebrews and of the true purposes of the sacred text. Its sacred character, in fact, does not consist in the theoretical superiority and philosophical excellence of its contents: "From all this it follows – concludes Spinoza –, that the doctrine of Scripture does not contain lofty speculations [*sublimes speculations*], or philosophical matters [*res philosophicas*], but only the simplest things, which anyone, no matter how slow, can perceive".[24] The idiomatic expressions found in the texts are not sacred because they were written *digito Dei*, but because they are bearers of a teaching of wisdom and love. Words, Spinoza writes, acquire meaning only on the basis of their use (*verba ex solo usu certam habent significationem*) and therefore, if they are 'arranged' in such a way as to move the soul of the reader to devotion, then those words and the book in which they are written are sacred. On the contrary, if their use becomes corrupted or is lost to the point that those words no longer have any meaning (*ut verba nulla habeant significationem*), then both the words and the book will lose all sacredness, and nothing will remain of them but paper and ink.[25]

23 "Dei decretum, jussum, dictum, et verbum nihil aliud esse, quam ipsam naturae actionem, et ordinem…" (TTP VI; G III,89; Curley II,162).

24 TTP XIII; G III,167; Curley II,257. In one of the most explicit passages against esoteric hermeneutics, Spinoza rejects the idea that Scripture contains secret meanings accessible only to a few initiates. The meaning of the text does not depend on the graphic or symbolic details of letters, nor does revelation constitute a repository of metaphysical mysteries: "idem […] contendunt, imo in ipsis apicibus literarum magna arcana contineri" (TTP IX; G III,135; Curley II,216); "varias autem lectiones signa profundissimorum mysteriorum esse dicunt" (TTP IX; G III,136; Curley II,217). The variants of reading (*variae lectiones*) derive from the history of manuscript transmission, from scribal errors, or from circumstances proper to the textual tradition. They do not imply any divine intention to conceal arcane meanings.

25 "Hac itaque ratione Scriptura etiam tamdiu sacra est, et ejus orationes divinae, quamdiu homines ad devotionem erga Deum movet: sed si ab iisdem prorsus negligatur […] nihil est praeter chartam, et atramentum, et ab iisdem absolute profanatur, et corruptioni obnoxia relinquitur" (TTP XII; G III,161; Curley II,268). A proposito dell'esegesi spinoziana di questi passi, si sono espressi in studi recenti: Nadler 2018; Verbeek 2003; James 2012; Curley 2021; Arbib 2021. The present article focuses specifically on the theory of *style*.

In conclusion, all the events narrated in Scripture occurred naturally, and the phenomena described therein are nothing other than representations adapted to the opinions of those who transmitted them to us, just as they were represented to them, namely as actual realities.[26] The naturalization of religious language thus becomes the principle that makes Spinoza's entire biblical exegesis possible.[27]

5 Miracle, Language, and Historical Mediation

The concept of style is not merely a descriptive feature of Scripture but the methodological device through which Spinoza historicizes revelation itself. Spinoza does not use the concept of style in a literary sense, but rather as an epistemological category.

In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, he does not merely propose a historical-philological reading of the Bible. The category of 'style', as it is defined in the work, constitutes in fact the theoretical device through which Spinoza transforms the language of revelation into a historical phenomenon. Style does not simply indicate a form of writing, but rather a mode of mediation. In this sense, 'style' serves precisely to explain the way in which revelation is historically mediated.

The critique of the concept of miracle, developed in chapter 6 of the *Tractatus*, shows that miracles belong to the same linguistic regime. If style constitutes the sign of the human mediation of revelation, the miracle too assumes an analogous function. Just as

26 Cf. TTP VII; G III,99; Curley II,171. Scripture thus describes events as they appeared to the witnesses, not necessarily as they occurred within the natural order. This thesis is central to Spinoza's critique of the supernatural conception of miracles.

27 In this context, Spinoza also addresses the problem of translations of texts from other languages. This is a particularly delicate issue, upon which centuries of interpretations and different configurations of religious sects and traditions have been based. In ch. X of the TTP, for example, he does not discuss the theological content of the Book of Job, but rather its origin, composition, literary genre, and authorship, referring to Abraham Ibn Ezra, according to whom the book had been translated from another language ("ex alia lingua in Hebraeam fuisse translatum") (G III,144; Curley II,230). The possibility that the Bible contains translations from other languages allows one to affirm that the Gentiles too possessed sacred books ("we could infer that the gentiles too had sacred books") and that the Bible "seems to aspire to the poetic art of the Gentiles" (G III,144; Curley II,230). Here Spinoza advances, in an extraordinarily innovative way, not only the necessity of separating the original biblical language from later grammatical and theological interpretations, but also the idea that religious revelation does not constitute a monopoly of Israel. Ultimately, the question posed in ch. X of the TTP is no longer "who inspired that particular book?", but rather "who wrote it? When? For what purpose? Within which literary tradition?". In this sense, ch. X reinforces the method systematically formulated in ch. VII: Scripture must be interpreted like any other historical document, reconstructing its language, author, context, and literary genre. Curley observes that "Spinoza's comment on the style of Job echoes Hobbes' observation in *Leviathan* XXXII,12" (Curley II,230).

the terms *decretum*, *jussum*, *dictum*, and *verbum* indicate nothing other (*nihil aliud esse*) than natural manifestations, so too the events narrated in Scripture belong to the ordinary order of nature.[28] The biblical narratives show that God has always accommodated himself entirely to nature and that he has never acted above or against it. The error consists, in fact, in failing to pay sufficient attention to the "idiomatic expressions and rhetorical figures proper to the Hebrews" and in neglecting the way in which the events considered miraculous actually occurred, as well as the thought of the sacred authors themselves.[29]

Even the apparently inexplicable events (*quorum causas reddere nescimus*) narrated in Sacred Scripture, and which seem to have occurred contrary to the order of nature (*quae praeter, imo contra ordinem naturae videntur contigisse*), in fact occur according to natural laws and follow the common order of nature (*id, quod revera contigit, naturaliter contigisse*). If Scripture often omits the circumstances accompanying such events, this depends on the poetic style through which they are described. These very circumstances

28 "Ventus et ignis vocantur in Psalmo 104. vs. 4. legati, et ministri Dei, et alia ad hunc modum plura in Scriptura reperiuntur, quae clarissime indicant, Dei decretum, jussum, dictum, et verbum nihil aliud esse, quam ipsam naturae actionem, et ordinem. Quare] non dubium est, quin omnia, quae in Scriptura narrantur, naturaliter contigerint, et tamen ad Deum referuntur, quia Scripturae, ut jam ostendimus, non est, res per causas naturales docere, sed tantum eas res narrare, quae imaginationem late occupant, idque ea Methodo, et stylo, qui melius inservit ad res magis admirandum, et consequenter ad devotionem in animis vulgi imprimendum" (TTP VI; G III,89; Curley II,161-2).

29 "Refert denique ad miracula, ut realiter contigerint, intelligendum Hebraeorum phrases et tropos scire; qui enim ad ipsos non satis attenderit, multa Scripturae affinget miracula, quae ejus scriptores nunquam enarrare cogitaverunt, adeoque non tantum res et miracula, prout revera contigerint, sed mentem etiam authorum sacrorum codicum plane ignorabit" (TTP VI; G III,93; Curley II,166). It should be noted here that Spinoza attributes great importance to an exact knowledge of the language of Scripture, which is necessary not only for understanding how the events narrated actually took place, but also for knowing the *mens* of the biblical authors. Spinoza therefore maintains that miracles are not immediate and neutral data, but events narrated through a human perspective that depends on the narrator's mentality. In this sense, prophetic revelation is doubly mediated: God communicates through the prophet's imagination, and the concrete form of revelation depends on the prophet's culture, opinions, and imaginative disposition. Ch. VII likewise states that: "At historiae miracula potissimum continent, hoc est (ut in superiore capite ostendimus) narrationes rerum insolitarum naturae, opinionibus et judiciis historicorum, qui eas scripserunt, accommodatas; revelationes autem opinionibus etiam prophetarum accommodatae sunt" (G III,98-9; Curley II,171). Scripture and the history of miracles must therefore be interpreted by considering the human mediation of religious experience: not only what is narrated, but also the way in which it is imagined and transmitted.

show, on the contrary, that the miracle can always be reduced to natural causes.[30]

But Spinoza's argument extends beyond the naturalization of miracles. The decisive point is that miraculous narratives obey the same linguistic logic as prophetic discourse. Style does not serve to describe events scientifically *per causas*, but to produce images capable of directing the imagination. In this sense, Spinoza connects the miracle to his own conception of prophetic imagination and, therefore, to language and style, within a single theoretical framework. The biblical writers employed the figurative forms of language, namely the rhetorical instruments of imagination, not for properly stylistic purposes, but for the purposes of devotion. For this reason, Spinoza observes that "it seems that Scripture narrates nothing but miracles even when it speaks of entirely natural events".[31]

The emphasis on the *phrases* and *tropoi Hebraeorum* as a recurring element in the *Tractatus* is certainly not an exclusive peculiarity of Spinoza. The tradition of grammatical studies offers numerous examples of reflection on the particular locutions of biblical language, regularly collected and classified.[32] However, Spinoza proceeds from a conception of the Hebrew language that is profoundly different from that adopted by many other authors. Unlike the numerous Christian Hebraists who engaged in sacred philology, he excludes apologetic aims and esoteric implications, directing instead the linguistic analysis of the Old and New Testaments toward the definition of the true nature (*vera divinitas*) of Scripture.[33]

30 A miracle does not constitute an exception to the laws of nature, but a natural event narrated according to the categories of religious imagination. "Si igitur quaedam in Sacris Literis reperiuntur, quorum causas reddere nescimus, et quae praeter, imo contra ordinem naturae videntur contigisse, ea moram nobis injicere non debent, sed omnino credendum, id, quod revera contigit, naturaliter contigisse; quod etiam ex hoc confirmatur, quod in miraculis plures circumstantiae reperiebantur, quamvis tamen non semper narrentur, praecipue cum stilo Poëtico canantur; circumstantiae, inquam, miraculorum clare ostendunt, ipsa causas naturales requirere" (TTP VI; G III,90; Curley II,162).

31 G III,94; C II,167. "Et ad hunc modum perplurima in Sacris Literis occurrunt, quae tantum modi loquendi inter Judaeos fuerunt, nec opus est omnia hic singulatim recensere; sed tantum hoc in genere notari velim, Hebraeos his phrasibus non tantum consuevisse ornate, sed etiam et quidem maxime, devote loqui" (TTP, VI; G III,94. See also TTP VII; G III,104; Curley II,178).

32 Sante Pagnini, for example, also describes the phenomenon in his *Institutionum Hebraicarum libri quattuor* (1549) in the following terms: "Quibus primum dicendum est, hanc linguam (ut & caeteras) propria habere idiomata, proprios habere tropos, & peculiares loquendi modos, quos aliena exprimere lingua ita significanter, aut impossibile, aut certe perdifficile fit". The quotation is in Kessler Mesguisch 2013, 26.

33 "Indeed, if we want to testify, without prejudice, to the divinity of Scripture, we must establish from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrines. For only from this can its divinity be demonstrated" (Curley II,171).

The critique of miracles thus confirms the general principle of Spinoza's hermeneutics: what tradition had interpreted as a sign of God's immediate intervention is instead revealed to be the product of the linguistic forms through which human beings have narrated their own experience of the divine. Style is therefore not an aesthetic category but an epistemological one. It identifies the point at which revelation becomes historically mediated and therefore historically intelligible.

6 Language, Method, and the Separation of Philosophy from Theology

The historicization of the language of Scripture produces the most radical theoretical consequence of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*: the methodological separation between philosophy and theology. Once it is recognized that the language of revelation belongs to history and to human mediation, its meaning can no longer be sought through metaphysical categories, but only through the historical-philological analysis of the text.

Traditionally, the language of Scripture was considered divine; consequently, style was also attributed to God, and miracles were interpreted as demonstrations of the truth of revelation. For Spinoza, by contrast, language is a historical construction, style belongs to individual prophets, and each prophet shapes his own narrative according to his own imagination and that of his recipients. Style, understood as the sign of the human mediation of revelation, thus constitutes the methodological principle that makes it possible to distinguish the historical meaning of Scripture from the demonstrative truth of philosophy. It represents the theoretical mechanism that makes possible the historicization of the Bible, the naturalization of miracles, the distinction between philosophy and theology, and, finally, a decisive step toward modern biblical criticism.

The particular *constitutio* and *natura* of the Hebrew language[34] have, for the most part, prevented a genuine understanding of the texts collected and transmitted over the course of many centuries. Some interpreters have mistaken for profound mysteries and conceptual obscurities features that belonged instead exclusively to the linguistic structure of the texts. It is therefore as *peritus Scripturae*[35] that Spinoza addresses non-Jewish readers in order

34 TTP VII; G III,106. "In addition tot he fact that we cannot have a complete history of the Hebrew language, there is the very nature and constitution of this language. So many ambiguities arise from this…" (Curley II,180).

35 TTP, *Adnotatio* XVI; G III,257; Curley II,213.

to show that the very concept of election did not consist in the superiority of the Jews with regard to knowledge or piety, but rather in the particular constitution of the Mosaic state.[36] Nature, in fact – this is Spinoza's conclusion against ancient prejudices – does not create nations but individuals. Individuals are then distinguished into nations primarily by the diversity of language, as well as by traditional laws and customs.[37] With regard, instead, to intellect and virtue, no nation can be considered superior to another, and there is no essential difference between Jews and Gentiles. This common heritage constitutes, in fact, the only universal teaching present in Scripture and coincides with that "eternal covenant of the knowledge and love of God" repeatedly recalled in the text.[38] The other traditions transmitted together with Scripture, as well as the various chronological reconstructions, derive instead from interpretations that are not based on the literal meaning of the biblical narratives and must therefore be rejected.[39]

A new concept of truth is thus defined on the basis of the distinction between the true meaning of the language of Scripture and the truth proper to philosophy. The true meaning of a text (*verus*

36 Once the premises for the destruction of the *Respublica Hebraeorum* had been established through the institution of the monarchy, this election concerns all human beings, since all are equally destined for true life and sublime speculations: "these gifts are not peculiar to any nation, but have always been common to the whole human race" ("haec dona nulli nationi peculiaria, sed toti humano generi communia semper fuisse") (TTP III; G III,46-7; Curley II,114).

37 "Haec [la natura] sane nationes non creat, sed individua, quae quidem in nationes non distinguuntur nisi ex diversitate linguae, legum et morum receptorum, et ex his duobus, legibus scilicet et moribus, tantum oriri potest, quod unaquaeque natio singulare habeat ingenium, singularem conditionem et denique singularia praejudicia" (TTP XVII; G III,217; Curley II,317). The passage defines the relationship between language and collective identity. For Spinoza, language performs an eminently historical and hermeneutical function, whereas the political character of a people depends above all on its institutions and customs.

38 "Quia haec electio veram virtutem spectat, non putandum est, quod piis Judaeorum tantum, caeteris exclusis, promissa fuerit, sed plane credendum gentiles veros prophetas, quos omnes nationes habuisse ostendimus, eandem etiam fidelibus suarum nationum promisisse eosque eadem solatos fuisse. Quare hoc aeternum foedus Dei cognitionis et amoris universale est, ut etiam ex Tsephoniae cap. 3. v. 12. 13. evidentissime constat, adeoque hac in re nulla est admittenda differentia inter Judaeos et gentes, neque igitur etiam alia electio iis peculiaris praeter illam, quam jam ostendimus" (TTP III; G III,56; Curley II,123).

39 Spinoza repeatedly emphasizes the unreliability and tendentiousness of certain rabbinical interpretations ("Rabini namque plane delirant. Commentatores autem, quos legi, somniant, fingunt et linguam denique ipsam plane corrumpunt […] Et ad hunc modum plura alia fingunt, quae si vera essent, absolute dicerem antiquos Hebraeos et linguam suam et narrandi ordinem plane ignoravisse", TTP IX; G III,134; Curley II,216), and he does so as a philosopher and as an expert in the Hebrew language and in Scripture: "Quin addo me nihil hic scribere, quod dudum et diu meditatum non habuerim, et quanquam a pueritia opinionibus de Scriptura communibus imbutus fuerim, non tamen potui tandem haec non admittere" (TTP IX; G III,135; Curley II,217).

sensus), Spinoza explains, must not be confused with the *veritas rerum*, which is founded on the principles of natural knowledge. The distinction between *verus sensus* and *veritas rerum* does not simply separate two modes of interpretation, but rather two criteria of truth belonging to two different epistemic regimes: Scripture belongs to the order of history and language, whereas philosophy belongs to the order of rational demonstration. Philosophy, in fact, responds to rational paradigms and is articulated according to logical-deductive categories. By contrast, the meaning of Scripture is established on the basis of linguistic custom alone (*ex solo linguae usu*), since "it's not permissible for us to twist the meaning of Scripture according to the dictates of our reason and according to our preconceived opinions".[40] The knowledge of the Bible must therefore derive exclusively from its reading and from history, distinguishing the plane of eternity from that of temporality and moral teachings (*documenta moralia* or *aeterna*) from transient laws, established in a specific period and for a specific people.[41]

Spinoza therefore insists on the necessity of adhering to the 'letter' of the text in order to identify those universal elements that alone confer upon it its true meaning. The core of truth (*quod universalissimum*), the basis and foundation of the whole of Scripture (*totius Scripturae basis et fundamentum*), are entirely distinct from philosophical concepts concerning the nature of God. Their essential principles instead consist in the fact that "a unique and omnipotent God exists, who alone is to be worshipped, who cares for all, and who loves above all those who worship him and who love their neighbor as themselves, etc."[42]

Linguistic analysis and the appeal to the literal meaning of Scripture ultimately show the necessity of distinguishing philosophy from theology. Theological interpretations are, in fact, constructions that can be traced back to *auctoritates* and are subject to different motivations. The meaning of the words of a language, by contrast, preserves its own stability and is extremely difficult to modify or corrupt (*depravare*) once it has been acquired. Language, in fact, belongs to an entire people, to the common people as well as to the learned (*vulgus linguam cum doctis servat*). For this reason, while learned individuals can intervene in the *sensus orationis* in order

40 "nobis non licet ad dictamina nostrae rationis et ad nostras praeconceptas opiniones mentem Scripturae torquere" (TTP VII; G III,101; Curley II,174-5).

41 "Deinde, ne documenta aeterna cum iis, quae ad tempus tantum vel paucis solummodo ex usu poterant esse, confundamus, refert etiam scire, qua occasione, quo tempore et cui nationi aut saeculo omnia documenta scripta fuerunt" (TTP VII; G III,102; Curley II,175).

42 TTP VII; G III,102; Curley II,176.

to direct or distort (*mutare vel corrumpere*) its interpretation, they have very limited power to modify or corrupt the meaning of words.[43]

On the basis of this conviction, Spinoza defines his own method of interpretation as the "*unica et vera methodus*", the only method capable of guaranteeing a correct knowledge of Scripture. This method requires, above all, a perfect knowledge of the language, although the Hebrew nation (*Hebraea natio*) no longer possesses either a dictionary, a grammar, or a book of rhetoric due to its particular history.[44] However, much of the *ambiguitates* and *obscuritates* present in biblical discourses[45] derive from the confusion between letters of the alphabet that are very similar to one another. As Spinoza will clarify in the *Compendium*, the Hebrews divide all the letters of the alphabet into five classes according to the five parts of the mouth responsible for pronunciation, namely the lips, the tongue, the teeth, the palate, and the throat. Consequently, the different articulations of speech are often rendered ambiguous or transformed almost into meaningless words. To this must be added the fact that, over the course of time, many uses and meanings of words have been lost,[46] and that conjunctions and adverbs have acquired different meanings. Verb conjugation also presents numerous peculiarities, since it lacks "the indicative mood, the present, imperfect, pluperfect, future perfect tenses, and other tenses widely used in other languages […] and this not without serious ambiguities in discourse".[47] A further source of ambiguity derives from the absence of vowels, punctuation marks, and indications of intonation. In turn, however,

43 "Ex his itaque et aliis rationibus facile nobis persuademus nemini in mentem venire potuisse linguam aliquam corrumpere, at quidem saepe mentem alicujus scriptoris, ejus orationes mutando vel easdem perperam interpretando" (TTP VII; G III,106; Curley II,180). This explains the meaning of Spinoza's strongest methodological remarks concerning the interpretation of Scripture: "solo sensu orationum, non autem de earum veritate laboramus" e "ad solam verborum significationem attendimus" (TTP VII; G III,100; Curley II,173).

44 TTP VII; G III,106; Curley II,180. The history of the language (*historia linguae Hebraeae*) is therefore a preliminary part of biblical exegesis and, consequently, the interpreter must reconstruct the language through the internal comparison of the surviving texts.

45 "Nobis scilicet, qui huic linguae non assuevimus, et ejusdem phraseologiam desideramus" (TTP, *Adnotatio* VII; G III,253; Curley II,180).

46 "Nam non dubium est, quin in lingua Hebraea, sicuti in reliquis, multa obsoleta et antiquata posterior usus fecerit" (TTP IX; G III,138; Curley II,221).

47 TTP VII; G III,107; Curley II,181. The whole of ch. VII is devoted to the foundations and doctrine of the Hebrew language, its deficiencies, the causes of ambiguities, and the loss of the most ancient manuals of the *Hebraea natio*.

the subsequent introduction of vowel points and accents introduced further difficulties in the understanding of texts.[48]

Precisely because of the many linguistic difficulties and the numerous revisions the texts have undergone over time, one must be wary of established customs and place one's trust not in the aforementioned "decrees" and "traditions", but in the practice of life (*usum vitae*), which alone possesses universal validity. The moral teachings contained in Scripture, in fact, present no ambiguity regarding their meaning, and the simple and common terms through which they are transmitted are comprehensible to everyone. They show that true salvation and true blessedness (*vera salus et beatitudo*) consist in true acquiescence of the soul (*in vera animi acquiescentia*), a condition that even the *vulgus* can understand with complete clarity and evidence, without the need for demonstration.[49] Anyone can, in fact, easily perceive what is necessary for salvation, in every age and in any language. It is precisely in this perception, and not in the testimony of interpreters, that the common people find their own certainty. The aspiration to individual and collective salvation is thus accompanied, in Spinoza, by the affirmation of freedom of thought and expression, understood as inalienable rights of nature and confirmed by the natural light.[50]

The *Tractatus theologico-politicus* therefore defines politics as the application of the principles attested in Scripture. The books that "teach and narrate elevated things", whatever the language in which they are written and the nation from which they originate,

48 "Antiqui autem sine punctis (hoc est sine vocalibus et accentibus) scripserunt (ut ex multis testimoniis constat). Posteri vero, prout iis Biblia interpretari visum est, haec duo addiderunt; quare accentus et puncta, quae jam habemus, merae hodiernorum interpretationes sunt, nec plus fidei neque authoritatis merentur quam reliquae authorum explicationes" (TTP VII; G III,108; Curley II,181).

49 "Verae enim pietatis documenta verbis usitatissimis exprimuntur, quandoquidem admodum communia, nec minus simplicia, et intellectu facilia sunt; et quia vera salus et beatitudo in vera animi acquiescentia consistit, et nos in iis tantum vere acquiescimus, quae clarissime intelligimus, hinc evidentissime sequitur nos mentem Scripturae circa res salutares et ad beatitudinem necessarias certo posse assequi; quare non est, cur de reliquis simus adeo solliciti; reliqua enim, quandoquidem ea ut plurimum ratione et intellectu complecti non possumus, plus curiositatis quam utilitatis habent" (TTP VII; G III,111-12; Curley II,185-6). And again, Spinoza states: "credo tamen eas levioris esse momenti, iis saltem, qui Scripturas liberiore judicio legunt, et hoc certo affirmare possum me nullam animadvertisse mendam nec lectionum varietatem circa moralia documenta, quae ipsa obscura aut dubia reddere possent" (TTP IX; G III,135; Curley II,217).

50 "Nam cum maxima authoritas Scripturam interpretandi apud unumquemque sit, interpretandi ergo norma nihil debet esse praeter lumen naturale omnibus commune, non ullum supra naturam lumen, neque ulla externa authoritas; non etiam debet esse adeo difficilis, ut non nisi ab acutissimis philosophis dirigi possit, sed naturali et communi hominum ingenio et capacitati accommodata, ut nostram esse ostendimus" (TTP VII; G III,117; Curley II,191).

are all "equally sacred".[51] Human reason is truly sacred because, together with the narratives of the prophets and the discourses of the apostles, it affirms that the eternal word of God, the covenant, and true religion are divinely inscribed in the hearts of human beings, that is, in their minds.[52] All human beings, "both Jews and Gentiles", have always been equal.

The theme of *style*, understood as the methodological category through which Spinoza dissolves the very idea of a divine language, thus also represents the necessary theoretical premise for his conclusions in the ethical and political fields.

7 Style as Historical Index and the Emergence of Critical Interpretation

In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, the notion of the 'style of Scripture' constitutes the point of convergence of Spinoza's entire theory of language, revelation, and biblical interpretation. Style does not designate an aesthetic quality of the text nor an attribute of the divine word; rather, it represents the methodological criterion through which revelation is traced back to the historical conditions of its own linguistic mediation. It is precisely in this redefinition of style that the possibility of a historical reading of Scripture takes shape.

Biblical language is characterized, in fact, by its simplicity, determined not by an ideal of formal perfection, but by the practical

51 In ch. XII of the TTP, Spinoza clarifies what should properly be understood by *Sacra Scriptura* and *Verbum Dei* and states that works teaching elevated truths (*res sublimes*) are all equally sacred. The same applies to the passage in TTP X, where Spinoza criticizes the conception according to which the sacredness of Scripture would reside in its words and letters (*literae et verba*), rather than in its content and teachings ("et interea, dum scilicet literas et verba Scripturae adorant, nihil aliud faciunt, ut jam supra monuimus quam Bibliorum scriptores contemtui exponere, adeo ut viderentur nescivisse loqui, neque res dicendas ordinare", G III,147-8; Curley II,235). Spinoza polemicizes against scriptural literalism and argues that those who defend the absolute perfection of the Bible's verbal form paradoxically end up attributing a lack of expressive ability to the biblical authors: if every repetition, stylistic irregularity, or narrative disorder must be defended as perfect, then the writers of the Bible would appear to lack knowledge both of the language and of the art of composition.

52 Spinoza distinguishes the eternal Word of God from Scripture understood as a material text: "Nam tam ipsa ratio, quam prophetarum et apostolorum sententiae aperte clamant Dei aeternum verbum et pactum veramque religionem hominum cordibus, hoc est, humanae menti divinitus inscriptam esse, eamque verum esse Dei syngraphum, quod ipse suo sigillo, nempe sui idea, tanquam imagine suae divinitatis consignavit" (TTP XII; G III,158; Curley II,248). Cf. anche TTP XVIII; G III,221; Curley II,322: "At Deus contra per apostolos revelavit Dei pactum non amplius atramento nec in tabulis lapideis, sed Dei spiritu in corde scribi". In ch. XII Spinoza discusses the nature of the sacred and the Word of God, whereas in ch. XVIII the same Pauline motif (2 Cor 3:3) is taken up again in relation to the transformation of the Jewish political-religious covenant.

function that it is called upon to perform. As Spinoza states in the second chapter of the *Tractatus*, the prophets conveyed their message through images, metaphors, and narrative forms accessible to all. Scripture does not aim to communicate speculative truths or to teach philosophical doctrines, but rather to arouse obedience, justice, and piety. The simplicity of its language thus reflects the ethical and political function of the text, not its supernatural origin.[53]

From this premise derives the fundamental principle of Spinoza's hermeneutics: Scripture must be interpreted through Scripture itself, reconstructing its meaning through the analysis of language, history, and the circumstances of its composition. The differences of style, vocabulary, narrative structure, and conceptual framework thus cease to be traced back to the unity of a divine author and become instead indications of the plurality of authors, the variety of historical contexts, and the complex redactional history of the various books. The Bible therefore appears not as a perfectly coherent doctrinal system, but as a collection of historically layered texts, whose unity does not precede the work of the interpreter, but must instead be critically reconstructed.

The eminently epistemological significance of the notion of style identifies the point at which revelation manifests itself as human mediation and becomes, precisely for this reason, historically knowable. If God coincides with the necessary order of Nature (*Deus sive Natura*) and does not constitute a subject endowed with communicative intentions, it is no longer possible to attribute to Him a language or a style of His own. The stylistic variety of Scripture therefore does not testify to different modes of divine speech, but rather makes visible the plurality of human mediations through which revelation has been transmitted.

In this sense, what tradition interpreted as the immediate expression of the word of God is instead revealed to be the result of a linguistic, redactional, and cultural history. On this basis, Spinoza can challenge the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, initiate a critique of sources, and establish a historical-philological method destined to profoundly transform modern biblical interpretation. The theoretical scope of this operation, however, extends beyond the field of biblical

53 To summarize: in ch. VII Spinoza argues that the teachings of true piety necessary for salvation do not require an elevated philosophical language, but are expressed through common and accessible words ("Verae enim pietatis documenta verbis usitatissimis exprimuntur, quandoquidem admodum communia, nec minus simplicia, et intellectu facilia sunt…", G III,111; Curley II,185). In ch. XIV Scripture teaches nothing other than obedience to God through the practice of justice and charity and contains no philosophical teachings ("Philosophiae enim scopus nihil est, praeter veritatem: Fidei autem, ut abunde ostendimus, nihil praeter obedientiam, et pietatem", G II,179; Curley II,271).

exegesis. The historicization of Scripture, in fact, presupposes a more radical historicization of language. Precisely because the language of revelation is recognized as a form of historical mediation, the Bible can be interpreted according to the same criteria applied to any other document of the past. Style thus ceases to be an exclusively rhetorical or literary category and becomes the methodological principle that makes possible the historical critique of revelation.

In this perspective, Spinoza's philosophy of language does not merely provide the foundation of biblical hermeneutics; it redefines the epistemic framework within which Scripture can be interpreted.

8 The Style of Scripture between Divine Accommodation and Historical Mediation: Boyle and Spinoza

The comparison with Boyle makes it possible to clarify, by contrast, the theoretical specificity of Spinoza's notion of style. The question of the style of Scripture does not, in fact, concern only the way in which the biblical text should be interpreted, but rather involves the more radical problem of the relationship between human language and divine truth.[54]

8.1 Boyle: Divine Accommodation and the Preservation of Scriptural Unity

"The Honorable Robert Boyle", as he is presented on the title page of some of his works, is best remembered today for his contribution to natural science. In addition to his interests in pneumatics and chemistry, Boyle also devoted himself to the study of colour, hydrostatics, heat, and respiration. He was an active member of the Royal Society and an enthusiastic supporter of its activities. What is less well known today is that Boyle was also a devout Christian and that his scientific research was deeply oriented and informed by

54 It seems to me that there is no study devoted exclusively to the relationship between Boyle and Spinoza concerning the "style of Scripture". More generally, broader studies on seventeenth-century biblical criticism, Dutch and English hermeneutics, and the relationship between Scripture and natural philosophy tend today to argue that Spinoza inaugurates the historical-critical turn (the Bible as a historical-linguistic text), whereas Boyle represents an alternative form of modernity founded on the principles of *accommodation* and the harmony between reason and revelation. The issue would therefore not be one of direct influence, but rather of two competing models of biblical interpretation within the context of the Scientific Revolution.

religious faith.[55] Within the framework of his conception of natural science as a support for natural theology,[56] the "devout and pious" Boyle published the treatise *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures*.[57] In this work, he argues that the language of Scripture is the true language of God and that God speaks through it. Boyle defends biblical language against accusations of stylistic crudeness[58] and argues that the simplicity of Scripture does not constitute a defect, but rather a positive and intentional quality.[59] In particular, Boyle argues that God chose to make use of a style

55 All these details are mentioned in Pyle 2000, I, V. In his will, Boyle provided money for a series of lectures to defend the Christian religion against those he considered "notorious infidels, namely atheists, deists, pagans, Jews and Muslims", with the provision that controversies between Christians were not to be mentioned.

56 On the relationship between scientific research and theology in Boyle, and on the subordination of the former to the latter, see: Wojcik 1997. For a general study of England in this period, which remains useful today, see: Westfall 1958; see also Brooke 1991; Ricciardo 2009-10, 317-90; Wojcik 2000 (this article focuses on Robert Boyle's views on the style and interpretation of the Bible).

57 Boyle's *Some Considerations* are commonly dated to their first publication in 1661 or 1663. The copy I consulted online is dated 1663 (`https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=rYDdt6ONsjsC&pg=GBS.PP1&hl=it`); a copy dated 1661 is also available online. In 1664 a new edition was published in Oxford with the following title-page wording: "A Second Edition [since the first Published June 1663]".

58 Boyle's "style of scripture", articulated in his *Considerations* views the Bible as a sophisticated, diverse work designed for both spiritual enlightenment and moral transformation. He argues its beauty lies not in ornate human rhetoric, but in a purposeful, divine eloquence that is sometimes intentionally obscure to challenge readers, rather than just provide easy information. He countered accusations that the Bible was disorganized (immethodical) or contradictory, arguing that its style uses vivid, often emotional language to engage the heart, not just the head. Boyle believed scripture is a harmonious blend of divine inspiration and human expression. Boyle famously bridged faith and reason, holding that both the "Book of Nature" and the "Book of Scripture" were written by the same author and therefore could not ultimately conflict.

59 This defense of linguistic simplicity fits coherently within the ideal of the *plain style*, also promoted by the Royal Society. This ideal privileges a clear, sober, and unadorned language, in sharp opposition to traditional rhetoric. However, in Boyle this modern orientation is still combined with a traditional theological perspective: the simplicity of the biblical text is interpreted as the result of a divine choice perfectly suited to the salvific purpose of revelation. Recent scholarship has emphasized that early modern biblical interpretation cannot be reduced to a linear transition from theological to historical modes of reading. Rather, it consists of multiple coexisting strategies for managing the relation between linguistic form and authority. Within this broader field, Spinoza's account of scriptural language would represent one particularly radical articulation, rather than an isolated rupture or endpoint of development. For the different interpretations, see: Force-Popkin 1994; more directly, for the history of exegesis, Grafton 1991; Israel 2001; Melamed 2021, where several essays reassess the idea of Spinoza as a "founder" of critical modernity (see also Arbib's essay, pp. 559-73). For the view that Boyle is not simply a "biblical traditionalist" opposed to Spinoza, see: Hunter 2000; Hunter 2009. For the overcoming of the "conflict" between science and religion, see Brooke 1991. These perspectives present a more nuanced understanding of Spinoza's position as part of a broader early modern reconfiguration of interpretive practices, in which questions of language, cognition, and authority are continuously renegotiated.

"accessibile, rather suited to the capacity of the vulgar than to the gust of the learned".[60] The renunciation of rhetorical ornament does not therefore imply expressive poverty, but responds to a precise communicative purpose. In this way, the Bible fulfills its universal function, which consists in instructing and guiding all of humanity. As Boyle states, the purpose of Scripture is "not to please by elegance of words", "but to instruct by the efficacy of things".[61]

On this point, there might appear to be a convergence between Spinoza and Boyle; however, the theoretical premises and the aims of their analyses are profoundly different. First of all, Boyle affirms "the Heavenly Origination of the Scripture".[62] "I study", he writes, "God's Will most in that Book",[63] and even in the less ornate parts of Scripture truth manifests itself as "a direct Emanation from the Essential and Supreme Truth".[64] The simplicity of the Bible does not constitute a limitation of the text, but rather a form of "divine condescension". Even when biblical style appears simple or "human", it preserves the signs of its own divine origin. The Bible is effective not because of any particular apparent rhetorical elegance, but because it derives directly from God and presents a divinely ordered

60 *Considerations*, nn.

61 *Considerations*, 21-2: "several Books of the Bible were written chiefly and primarily to those to whom they were first addressed, and the their contemporaries, and that yet the Bible yet the Bible not being written for one Age or People onely, but for the whole people of God, consisting of persons of all Ages; Nations, Sexes, Complexions and Conditions, it was fit it should be written in such a way as that none of all these might be quite excluded from the advantages designed them in it. Therefore were these Sacred Books so wisely as well as graciously tempered, that their Variety so comprehends the several abilities and dispositions of men".

62 *Considerations*, 29. See also, 104: "Now as it is past Question that there are no Speculative Truths of so Noble and Elevated a Nature as those that have God him self for their Object, so there is no Book from whence there is so much to be Learned, as there is from the Bible, of the Nature, and even the Thoughts of God, and of those deep Mysteries in to which, as I formerly noted from St. Peter, the Angels themselves are greedy of Prying. Nay, there is no other Book whatoever that Teaches any thing at all, concerning divers of these sublime subjects, that may be safely Releved on, save in what it is be holden to the Scripture for".

63 *Considerations*, 127.

64 *Considerations*, 153. Like Spinoza, Boyle argues for the necessity of knowledge of Hebrew also for a better understanding of the New Testament; however, Hebrew is considered "the Holy Tongue", "that which God himself made choice of, to Dignifie with his Expressions" (156). Boyle interprets every political event and every earthly occurrence as an expression of the divine: "The Revolution of Monarchies, the Fates of Princes, and Destinies of Nations, are but Illustrious Instances and Proclamation of his Providence" (216). The historical part of the Bible itself, "being endited by an Omniscient and Unerring Spirit layes cleerly open the True and Genuine Causes of the Establishment, Flourishing, and Vicissitudes of the Princes and Commonwealths it Relates the Story off" (219).

adaptation to human capacities.[65] Boyle explains indeed stylistic variation through the doctrine of accommodation, according to which God adapts revelation to human cognitive capacities through ordinary and figurative language. On this account, linguistic variability preserves rather than undermines scriptural unity, insofar as it reflects a divinely regulated asymmetry between truth and human understanding. The decisive question, however, concerns the subject of this linguistic mediation. For Boyle, mediation belongs to God himself: stylistic diversity results from God's intentional accommodation of revelation to human cognitive capacities. It is precisely this assumption that Spinoza will radically reverse.

The historical reception of *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures* testifies to the strong impact exerted by Boyle not only in the scientific debate, but also in the theological debates of seventeenth-century Europe. His defense of the theory of "condescension" or divine accommodation – namely, the idea that God communicates through the simple language of appearances and of human beings – influenced subsequent debates on biblical hermeneutics. In particular, the work was favorably received by members of the nascent Royal Society and by moderate theologians, since it offered a solution to the epistemological conflict between the new experimental science and religious faith.[66]

8.2 Hobbes as the Political Background of Boyle's Intervention

The crisis of the cognitive value of language, conveyed through the analysis of the style of Scripture, was also emphasized by Hobbes. In the *Leviathan*, he shows how language constitutes a constant

65 "Certainly then, if we Consider God as Creator of our Souls, and so likeliest to Know, the Frame, and Springs, and Nature of his own Workmanship we shall make but little Difficulty to Believe that in the Book written For, and Addressed To Men, he hath Employed very Powerfull and Appropriated Means to Work upon them" (*Considerations*, 241).

66 Boyle demonstrated that a scientist could apply the same critical acumen both to the study of nature (the "Book of Nature") and to the study of sacred texts (the "Book of Scripture"). On the relationship between the Books of Nature and Scripture, see Force-Popkin 1994: the text explicitly connects Spinoza and the English tradition (Boyle, Newton), analyzes the relationship between the "Book of Nature" and the "Book of Scripture", and shows the plurality of responses to the crisis of biblical authority.

source of errors and confusion[67] and strongly criticizes the literal interpretation of the poetic images found in the Bible. According to Hobbes, a large part of superstition arises from linguistic errors, and religious conflicts themselves derive from the improper use and abuse of words. Scripture, therefore, cannot be interpreted autonomously: in the third part of the *Leviathan* ("*Of a Christian Commonwealth*"), Hobbes argues that ultimate authority over public interpretation belongs to the civil sovereign. Religious language is thus conventional, politically regulable, and semantically unstable. The fundamental problem is therefore not theological, but political: it concerns the possibility of guaranteeing civil order through the control of the public meaning of words.

The question of the 'style of God' thus assumes a strongly political turn. The decisive question is no longer simply "what does God truly say?", but rather "who possesses the right to establish the meaning of Scripture?" In this sense, the problem of the language of revelation becomes a problem of political authority.

The naturalistic or minimalist reinterpretation of miracles, prophecy, spirits, and demonology elaborated by Hobbes deeply concerned Boyle. In his *Considerations*, Boyle defends the simplicity, metaphoricity, and apparent irregularity of biblical language against the reduction of natural religion and against the subordination of the Bible's moral authority to civil power. For Boyle, the Bible employs common language because God adapts Himself to human capacities. According to the theory of 'accommodation', religious language is analogical, adapted, and limited by the cognitive conditions of human beings, but not arbitrary. The central problem is not political, but theological: how can divine revelation communicate itself to finite human beings?

67 In *Leviathan* I.4 on *Abuses of Speech* Hobbes writes: "The first abuse, is when men register their thoughts wrong, by the inconstancy of the signification of their words…"; "the second, when they use words metaphorically; that is, in other sense than that they are ordained for…". In *Leviathan*, III.34 "Of the Signification of Spirit, Angels, and Inspiration" Hobbes directly addresses the problem of the figurative language of Scripture. He argues that many biblical terms should not be understood literally, because Scripture uses images and metaphors adapted to human capacities: "When we say an Attribute is attributed to God, we are not to understand the Name of the Attribute, as it is in Creatures, but as it is in God": see Hobbes 1996, especially chs. IV, V, XII, XXXIV, and XLV. Here Hobbes does not simply deny the authority of Scripture; rather, he argues that it must be interpreted according to the rules of language and that many theological controversies arise from taking biblical metaphors and images as literal descriptions of reality. Spinoza will radicalize this position in the TTP, especially in chs. VII, IX, and XIII. For language, rhetoric, and the use of metaphors in Hobbes, see Skinner 1996. For the relationship between biblical language and Hobbes's theology, see Martinich 1992; Springborg 2007.

8.3 Boyle and Spinoza: The Subject of Linguistic Mediation

Hobbes's treatment of the language of Scripture represents, for Boyle, a threat different from that posed by Spinoza.[68] While Spinoza radicalizes the historical-philological critique of the biblical text, Hobbes instead tends to subordinate the interpretation of Scripture to civil power, reducing religious content to a political-linguistic problem and treating biblical language according to a strongly materialistic and nominalist perspective.

Boyle responds to this situation by developing a position that is philologically open, but theologically orthodox. His experimental theology is in fact based on the principle of "linguistic voluntarism": biblical language depends on the divine free choice to accommodate itself to human capacities. Metaphor assumes here a decisive role. While for Hobbes it represents a possible source of error, for Boyle it constitutes an instrument of divine pedagogy inscribed in revelation.[69] For Hobbes, the sovereign represents the only legitimate interpreter of Scripture; for Boyle, by contrast, reason and faith remain harmoniously coordinated, and the variety of biblical language confirms the adaptive action of God.

It is at this point that the true significance of the comparison with Spinoza emerges. The divergence between Boyle and Spinoza does not primarily concern the value of the simplicity of Scripture nor the function of metaphor. The decisive point concerns the subject of the linguistic mediation of revelation. Both authors recognize that the divine word reaches human beings through linguistic mediation; they differ, however, radically in identifying the subject of this mediation. For Boyle, mediation belongs to God, who intentionally adapts His own language to the cognitive capacities of humanity. For Spinoza, by contrast, mediation belongs entirely to the prophets and authors of Scripture, whose historical, linguistic, and imaginative conditions determine the very form of revelation.

Paradoxically, the different interlocutors share some elements that are typically modern: attention to language, the critique of scholasticism, distrust of metaphysical systems, and the centrality of experience. Boyle and Spinoza also share a critique of the stylistic ornaments of the humanist rhetorical model and an interest in the communicative capacity of the text. However, they respond in radically different ways

68 On Hobbes and Scripture, the sections of Martinich 1992 devoted to chs. III-IV and XXXII-XLIII of the *Leviathan* are particularly relevant. See also Collins 2005. This book shows that Hobbes's position on religion does not simply consist in reducing Scripture to a political instrument: Collins emphasizes that Hobbes develops a coherent theory of religious authority subordinated to civil sovereignty, in opposition to the claims of ecclesiastical authorities.

69 On Boyle against Hobbes, see: Hunter 2009; Shapin-Schaffer 1985. The latter work shows how the scientific dispute between Boyle and Hobbes also involved epistemological and linguistic implications.

to the crisis of language. Boyle preserves divine transcendence and constructs a Christian experimental modernity that offers an alternative both to Hobbes and to Spinoza:[70] God retains ultimate control over the linguistic form of revelation. Spinoza, by contrast, responds to the same crisis by fully historicizing language. He does not simply reject the explanatory structure of accommodation; rather, he changes its subject: in Boyle, it is God who adapts Himself to human beings; in Spinoza, it is human beings, through their imagination and their historical language, who determine the concrete form of revelation.

The comparison between Boyle and Spinoza shows that the question of the "style of Scripture" does not simply oppose a theological conception to a historical conception of the Bible. The true point of divergence concerns the subject of the linguistic mediation of revelation. For Boyle, mediation is the work of God, who intentionally adapts His own language to human capacities without compromising the unity of Scripture. For Spinoza, by contrast, mediation belongs entirely to human authors: the linguistic variety of the Bible does not refer to God's accommodating action, but to the historical plurality of prophets and editors.[71] The divergence between the two authors

70 Boyle's anti-Hobbesianism and anti-Spinozism would become especially evident in the *Boyle Lectures* and in his defense of natural religion. Although less radical than Spinoza, Hobbes nevertheless raises problems concerning the historicity of the sacred text, initiating a process of the desacralization of language and the politicization of hermeneutics.

71 The TTP thus reverses Boyle's apologetic approach. Spinoza too refuses to judge Scripture according to classical rhetorical criteria, but he draws opposite conclusions from this rejection. Both defend the simplicity of biblical language and reject the aristocratic-humanist model of "eloquence"; however, Boyle defends the Bible as a divinely inspired text, adopts a religious apologetic position, and holds that simplicity is intended by God and serves the universal dissemination of the message. Spinoza, by contrast, begins from a philological-rational critique and analyzes the Bible as a historical human text: the simplicity of language is not a sign of divine perfection but a historical condition of communication. Spinoza's account of scriptural style constitutes a decisive reconfiguration of early modern hermeneutics. By treating stylistic variation as historical evidence rather than theological design, he shifts the interpretation of Scripture from a doctrinal to a historical-philological framework. From the aforementioned studies of Popkin, which interpreted the seventeenth century as an age of skeptical crisis in religious authority, to Israel's readings distinguishing between Radical and Moderate Enlightenment, the comparison between Boyle and Spinoza has progressively been incorporated into a narrative of modernity as a process of internal differentiation. More recently, studies by other scholars have emphasized the continuity between Renaissance philological practices and the innovations of seventeenth-century thought, thereby reducing the idea of a sharp break introduced by Spinoza. These studies ultimately converge toward a pluralistic understanding of modernity. Boyle and Spinoza respond to the same problem – the linguistic and interpretive nature of Scripture – through divergent solutions: theological accommodation in Boyle's case and critical historicization in Spinoza's. From this perspective, the 'style of Scripture' does not simply mark the transition from a theological to a historical paradigm, but rather the encounter between learned traditions, natural philosophy, and reflection on language. The result is a picture in which the emergence of modern biblical criticism cannot be identified with a single isolated historical turning point, although Spinoza's transformation of the concept of language constitutes one of its decisive theoretical foundations.

therefore does not consist simply in a different assessment of the simplicity of scriptural language, but in two opposing conceptions of the relationship between language, truth, and revelation. Boyle interprets style as the sign of God's pedagogical presence in history; Spinoza, by contrast, understands it as the historical index of the human mediation of Scripture.[72]

In this sense, the decisive innovation of Spinoza does not consist in rejecting linguistic mediation, but in relocating its subject from God to human historical agents.

It is this shift in the subject of mediation that makes possible the transformation of style into an epistemological category and, at the same time, the emergence of the historical method. Indeed, the transformation of style and the emergence of the historical method are themselves consequences of the principle according to which the 'style of Scripture' is the theoretical locus in which the mediation of revelation changes its subject: from God to the prophets.

9 Language, Authority, and Revelation. Two Early Modern Theories of Scriptural Style

The controversy surrounding the 'style of Scripture' reveals two competing early modern strategies for determining the epistemic status of religious language. Robert Boyle's reflections on biblical style belong to a broader project aimed at reconciling scientific inquiry and Christian theology. His defense of scriptural simplicity is therefore inseparable from his conviction that the study of nature ultimately

72 The comparison with Boyle shows that this transformation does not yield a single trajectory of modernity. Instead, it reveals the coexistence of divergent interpretive models: one grounded in accommodation and theological continuity, the other in historical reconstruction and textual plurality. Boyle and Spinoza represent two different responses to the same crisis: the former preserves the transcendence of the divine word through accommodation, while the latter makes Scripture intelligible through history. The reflection on style constitutes, in particular, the point of convergence of Spinoza's entire exegetical project. It shows that the language of Scripture does not belong to a separate and purely divine order, but rather to the history of the languages, institutions, and human communities that produced and transmitted it. The transformation of the idea of a divine language makes possible a new conception of biblical interpretation, founded on historical-philological analysis rather than on the authority of tradition. From this perspective, the distinction between philosophy and theology represents not merely a disciplinary separation, but the result of a deeper redefinition of the epistemological status of language. The 'style of Scripture' thus becomes the methodological category through which Spinoza brings revelation back within the historical conditions of its production and, at the same time, opens the theoretical space for the freedom of philosophical inquiry and for a new conception of civil and political life. 'Style of Scripture' thus emerges as a central site for understanding competing genealogies of early modern biblical interpretation, its secularization, and the emergence of a modern conception of history as a decisive moment in the formation of modernity.

confirms divine wisdom and providential order. In *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures* and later in *The Christian Virtuoso*, Boyle presents linguistic accommodation as the principle that explains how an infinite God communicates with finite human beings.

Spinoza's position is fundamentally different. Where Boyle interprets stylistic variation as the expression of divine pedagogy, Spinoza transforms the question of style into a problem of historical interpretation and understands it as the historical trace of human mediation. Boyle preserves the unity of Scripture by grounding linguistic diversity in divine intention; Spinoza reconstructs the plurality of biblical forms by analyzing the historical conditions of their production.

The decisive disagreement between Boyle and Spinoza concerns the subject of linguistic mediation. Both acknowledge that revelation reaches human beings only through linguistic mediation; they differ radically, however, in identifying the agent of that mediation. For Boyle, mediation remains an intentional act of God, who accommodates revelation to finite human capacities. For Spinoza, mediation belongs entirely to the historical activity of prophetic authors, whose language, imagination, and circumstances determine the textual form of revelation.

The comparison between Boyle and Spinoza therefore illuminates two competing early modern conceptions of scriptural language rather than simply two different methods of biblical interpretation. Both acknowledge that revelation reaches human beings through language, yet they assign radically different epistemic functions to that mediation. Boyle explains linguistic diversity by appealing to the unity of divine intention, whereas Spinoza treats diversity itself as historical evidence requiring critical reconstruction.

From this perspective, the debate over the 'style of Scripture' becomes a revealing episode in the emergence of modern philosophy of language. What is ultimately at stake is not merely the interpretation of biblical texts but the conditions under which language can function as a vehicle of truth and authority. In Boyle these conditions remain grounded in theology; in Spinoza they become objects of historical and philological inquiry. The transition from one model to the other therefore consists not simply in the replacement of a theological by a historical interpretation of Scripture, but in a relocation of the subject of linguistic mediation from God to history.

10 Conclusion

This article has argued that the problem of the 'style of Scripture' deserves to occupy a more central place in the intellectual history of the seventeenth century than it has usually received. Far from being a merely rhetorical question, scriptural style became a point at which

broader debates concerning language, authority, and revelation converged.

By reconstructing Boyle's doctrine of accommodation alongside Spinoza's historical theory of biblical language, this study has shown that the two authors offer competing accounts of linguistic mediation. Their disagreement concerns not only how Scripture should be interpreted but also what kind of relation language can establish between human understanding and religious truth.

Spinoza's originality lies not simply in relocating the mediation of revelation from theology to history, but in relocating the subject of linguistic mediation itself. Once mediation is no longer attributed to divine accommodation but to the historical activity of prophetic authors, stylistic diversity becomes historical evidence rather than a sign of divine accommodation.

Seen in this light, the debate over the 'style of God' marks one of the decisive moments in the early modern transformation of the philosophy of language. What changes is not merely the interpretation of Scripture but the very location of linguistic authority. The 'style of God' thus becomes, paradoxically, the point at which God ceases to function as the subject of scriptural style and the subject of linguistic mediation shifts from God to the prophetic authors as historical mediators of revelation, making revelation historically intelligible and opening the way to modern historical criticism.

Abbreviations

AT = Descartes, R. (1902). *Œuvres de Descartes*. Ch. Adam et P. Tannery (eds), 11 vols., Paris: Léopold Cerf (reprint J. Vrin/CNRS 1985).
CSM = Descartes, R. (1985). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Curley = Spinoza (1985). *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. E. Curley (ed.), 2 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press.
G = Spinoza (1925). *Opera*. Im Auftrag der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften herausgegeben von C. Gebhardt, 4 vols., Heidelberg: Carl Winter, reprint 1972.
Considerations = Boyle, R. (1663). *Some considerations touching the style of the holy scriptures,* London, Printed for H. Herringman (per l'edizione moderna si veda R. Boyle, *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Scriptures*, in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, M. Hunter and E.B. Davis (eds.), vol. II, London, Pickering & Chatto, 1999-2000, 379-490).
E = *Ethica*.
TTP = *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

For the individual parts:
app = *Appendix.*
d = *Demonstratio*.
p = *Propositio*.
s = *Scholium*.

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