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## Intuitive Science, Poetic Thought

Jack Stetter

Loyola University New Orleans

### ABSTRACT

The paper argues that Spinoza may have deepened his conception of poetry as not only a resource for the understanding but as the highest peak of the understanding. I begin by reviewing selected literature on Spinoza's views on language and show how Spinoza's presentation of his philosophy builds on a conception of what language can do. I then make a succinct case for a reading of *Ethics* Part 5 Proposition 24, where we find an attempt at a poetic expression of thought, as Spinoza explores what he considers the highest form of knowledge: intuitive science.

**KEYWORDS** intuitive science; poetry; language

In her lead article, 'Spinoza and the poetic imagination,' Susan James [2023] shows how Spinoza's philosophy makes its own conception of poetry as a resource for the understanding. This exposition of Spinoza's perspective on the value of poetry highlights a significant concern animating his views in the *Ethics* on how we can make lasting intellectual and ethical progress. The fact is that reason must harness the imagination and its products or suffer the consequences for failing to take seriously the powers of the imagination. The imagination claims primacy in everyday life, being the spontaneous and inadequate mode of thinking of corporeal beings, that manner by which our bodily affections represent external bodies as present to us. By contrast, reason, the second kind of knowledge, lacks the immediate rawness characteristic of the imagination. Yet when guided by reason, we still remain corporeal beings and continue to conceive ideas on the basis of our bodily affections. Reason is not some kind of magical, supernatural power of the mind that gets us outside the body. It is a name for the mind's activity when it adequately conceives bodily affections as involving properties common to the body and external bodies. As Spinoza emphasizes in the second half of Part 4 of the *Ethics*, this empowers us to discern under what conditions external bodies can genuinely agree with our body and how they aid our natural striving to flourish.

To recall the title of James's recent book [James 2020], reason is gradually acquired and learned. However, the struggle to live under reason's guidance is never definitively behind us. It requires that we continually muster all available resources at our disposal, as James insists [2023: XXX]. We never become exclusively rational beings, and we remain susceptible to passions and to the ways that inadequate thinking, if unchecked,



can confound and undermine our best efforts.<sup>1</sup> To the extent that reason and the imagination are both functions of our embodied nature, their products will coexist, sometimes peacefully, sometimes not.

James's effort to illuminate how a device like poetry can put the imagination and reason into a cooperative relationship is evidently important. A poem can bring ideas to life as images, endowing them with motivational and inspirational force; it has the force of 'translating abstract rules into productive action' [James 2023: XXX]. Poetry thus proves its instrumental value in the philosophical endeavour to develop a more empowering way of life by cultivating the right kind of 'images, presentness, and the imitative dispositions in which our conatus is expressed' [James 2023: XXX]. A case in point is the way Spinoza's portrayal of the 'free man' in *Ethics* Part 4 tends in the direction of a 'poetic fable' [James 2023: XXX]; it is meant to inspire the reader, and motivate them, through the introduction of representations of what a free life looks like, to embody a higher form of life in turn. The extraordinary elegance and clarity of James's exposition of Spinoza also bears witness to the value of literary resources for philosophical inquiries.

Far from being an impediment to the exercise of the intellect, poetry can sustain it. Yet I cannot help but wonder: Why restrict poetry to playing by the imagination's rules? Must it remain of instrumental use as a platform to support the work of a higher form of knowledge? In what follows, I begin to show how Spinoza may have deepened his conception of poetry as not only a resource for the understanding but as the highest peak of the understanding. Specifically, I submit that this is one way we may want to think about what is happening at *Ethics* Part 5 Proposition 24. I begin by reviewing selected literature on Spinoza's language in the *Ethics* and some ways that readers have salvaged the merits of the literary form of the text. My aim is to establish a precedent for my undertaking and show how Spinoza's presentation of his philosophy builds on a conception of what language can do. I then make a succinct case for a reading of *Ethics* Part 5 Proposition 24 where I think we find an attempt at a poetic expression of thought, as Spinoza explores what he considers the highest form of knowledge: intuitive science.

## Part 1. Spinoza's Language

It might seem odd to claim that Spinoza harnesses the power of poetry not only as an auxiliary device of the imagination and for its capacity to craft effective models, but in fact in order to reproduce one of his most daring insights into the constitution of reality. This apparent oddity partly stems from the fact that the *Ethics* is written *more geometrico*.

One might reasonably maintain that poetry should not read like an intimidating geometry textbook. But that is precisely the experience of many first-time readers of the *Ethics*. They might see themselves in Bergson's evocation of its 'crushing power':

These enormous things that are called Substance, Attribute, Mode, the formidable outfit of the-orems with the tangle of definitions, corollaries, and scholia, this complication of machinery

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<sup>1</sup> A point emphasized by Nadler [2020: 58]: 'Even the person in whom the adequate ideas of reason are of a maximum affective potency, and thus whose *conatus* is at the peak of its powers, will eventually succumb to the influence of passive affects.'

and this crushing power that strike the novice in the presence of the *Ethics* with admiration and terror as if they stood before a Dreadnought class battleship' [Bergson 1938: 124]

Indeed, Bergson is not the only reader to note the 'repulsive' quality of the deductive form (Matthew Arnold), the 'mathematical dryness that makes its reading impracticable' (Henri de Boulainvilliers).<sup>2</sup>

If the *Ethics* is terrifying, repulsive, or dry, this may be because it lacks some distinctively literary, perhaps aesthetic quality  $x$ —where  $x$  is that which would distinguish it as literature from a measly instruction manual. There is a virtue in aspiring to mathematical standards of rigour, but there is a cost as well; Spinoza himself concedes that his geometrical method is 'cumbersome' (*prolixius*) (E4p18s). Noting the difficulty of the *Ethics* (it is 'not written in fluid prose'), Beth Lord [2010: 10] observes that, thanks to its clarity and efficiency, 'many students, once they get used to it, actually prefer Spinoza's geometrical method to the florid prose of Hume or the awkward textual constructions of Kant'. This is a sensible point familiar to any teacher of Spinoza. However, less conventional responses to the challenge of the text's geometrical cumbersomeness and its un-literary aspect should also be considered.

For instance, the theory of multiple *Ethics* espoused by Gilles Deleuze in his essay 'Spinoza and the three "Ethics"' questions the assumption that Spinoza's *Ethics* is uniformly cumbersome. 'On a first reading,' Deleuze writes, 'the *Ethics* can appear to be a long, continuous movement that goes in an almost straight line [...] like a river [...] always maintaining its radical unity'; however, 'this book, one of the greatest in the world, is not what it seems at first glance: it is not homogeneous, rectilinear, continuous, serene, navigable, a pure language without style' [Deleuze 1998: 138]. Rather, there are three distinct 'Ethics' contained in the *Ethics*: the *Ethics* of the demonstrative chain of reasoning, 'the discourse of the concept' [Deleuze 1998: 145]; the *Ethics* of the scholia, 'ostensive and polemical' which 'like a language of fire that is distinguishable from the language of waters [...] carries on the combat between servitudes and liberations' [Deleuze 1998: 146]; and, last, the *Ethics* incarnated in Part 5 that involves the third element in Spinoza's logic: 'no longer signs or affects, nor concepts, but Essences or Singularities, Percepts' [Deleuze 1998: 148]. Deleuze thus helps alleviate the *Ethics* of the charge that it is altogether without the kind of verve and textual dynamics we might expect of literature.

Henri Meschonnic offers another intriguing view. He maintains that discursive intensifications are tied to the various modulations in rhythm of the text. Several aspects of the text stand out on his reading, especially in Part 5, such as a marked use of '*igitur*' and of two sorts of passive voice: one indicating an action that has been undergone (such as '*tollitur*', '*destruuntur*'), and another indicating a relation (such as '*definitur*', '*refertur*') [Meschonnic 2002: 284–5]. Meschonnic notes several further 'markers of semantic intensity' and 'prosodic counter-accents' (such as '*plures res referetur*'), 'syllabic parities' (such as '*mentis essentia*', '*hoc est potentia*'), along with figures of inclusion, paronomasia, and puns [Meschonnic 2002: 290–1]. Meschonnic's insights are instructive and remind the reader that Spinoza's utterances are noteworthy because of their form and not despite it. If the general frame of the text

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Meschonnic [2002: 276]. See also Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*: '[...] the hocus-pocus of a mathematical form with which Spinoza clad his philosophy [...] in mail and mask, to strike terror at the very outset into the heart of any assailant who should dare to glance at that invincible maiden and Pallas Athena' [Nietzsche 1966: 13].

is geometrical, and the building blocks are concepts, still rhythmic sentences put things in their place.

Finally, Spinoza's view on the ability of language to communicate adequate knowledge is relevant in this respect. Mogens Lærke has persuasively rejected the idea that Spinoza took language to be constitutively incapable of communicating philosophical truth. Spinoza 'denied the existence of non-arbitrary foundations of linguistic signification,' but also held that 'the arbitrariness and mind-relativity of linguistic signification are not obstacles, but rather necessary conditions for the constitution of philosophical truth' [Lærke 2014: 535]. It is possible to uproot the inadequate associations present in common usage by means of twisting terms, and other acts of 'semantic violence' [Lærke 2014: 542]. For Lærke, Spinoza's movement away from the common philosophical idiom culminates in the geometrical form of the text, with its strictures and its 'instruments of torture' [Lærke 2014: 542]. A broader consequence of Lærke's argument, however, is that Spinoza accepts that some languages do a better job of communicating philosophical truth than others. This does not rule out the possibility that Spinoza is open to modulating his geometrical exposition at the more local, sentential level. Indeed, some philosophical truths might invite the additional complexity of linguistic signification.

## Part 2. The Case for E5p24

Part 5 enjoys a special status when it comes to thinking about Spinoza's philosophical language. Spinoza is up to something unprecedented and pushing at the boundaries of what he can say and think. For my purposes, I will focus on Part 5 Proposition 24 and its demonstration:

PROP.: The more we understand singular things, the more we understand God.

DEM.: This is evident from 1p25cor.

The first interesting point to note about this text is how Spinoza articulates the practice of intuitive science, or the third kind of knowledge, in terms distinct from those used earlier in the text. Nominally, the deduction of the essence of things (the act of conceiving them under the third kind of knowledge) descends from knowledge of the essence of the attributes (E2p40s2). That intuitive practice is framed anew, with an emphasis on the immediate connection singular things provide to their ultimate ground in God.

The case for understanding this proposition as concerning the third kind of knowledge is especially clear when we read the text in context. The proposition is put forward following the scholium to Proposition 23, where Spinoza introduces the claim that there is an eternal part of the mind that does not perish with the body:

There is, as we have said, this idea, which expresses the essence of the body under a species of eternity, a certain mode of thinking, which pertains to the essence of the mind, and which is necessarily eternal.

It comes before the first explicit mention of the third kind of knowledge in Part 5 at Proposition 25, said to be the mind's greatest striving and virtue. Spinoza wants to draw a tight connection between three things: forming the idea or the 'mode of thinking' that expresses the essence of the body under a species of eternity; the culmination

of virtue and our striving presented by the third kind of knowledge; and the understanding of singular things. The third element here, understanding singular things, can be reasonably inferred to represent the concrete practice of the third kind of knowledge, which in turn, for the finite human mind, consists in rising to that 'mode of thinking' in which we adequately conceive the body's singular essence under an aspect of eternity.

Another formal trait stands out when examining the context of Part 5 Proposition 24: the density of Spinoza's exposition following Part 5 Proposition 23 Scholium and leading up to Proposition 38. Proposition 24 makes this general tendency particularly salient. Spinoza maximizes philosophical content in a minimal utterance: '*Quo magis res singulares intelligimus, eo magis Deum intelligimus.*' Latin poetry in the seventeenth century observed classical rules concerning meter and recitation. While Spinoza does not follow these rules, it is not unreasonable to imagine that he may have been familiar with them from reading Plautus and Terence,<sup>3</sup> or from his time at the school of Franciscus van den Enden. Nonetheless, the text is poetic in another sense, having to do neither with the use of meter (even if, arguably, the proposition can be read as having a rising meter, with an emphasis on *-res* and *-mus / -um*), nor with its use of metaphors, symbols, or other rhetorical devices, but with regard to the way it involves a sudden startling contraction of expression and reduces the argument to a single inference.

The result of this extremely compact style is to generate a kind of hypnosis and heightened state of consciousness in the reader. But this is not a by-product of our inadequate way of thinking about things. It is a requirement placed on language by the highest mode of thinking, where what is most fundamental, God, is promptly, with minimal mediation ('intuitively'), connected to what is present in experience: a singular thing—or a singular utterance. To recall Proposition 23's scholium, we are meant to sense ('*sentimus*') and to feel ('*experimurque*') our eternal being.

In conclusion, I suggest that this procedure captures a fundamental point Spinoza makes in the latter part of Part 5. The intuitive science taps into something about the way singular things affect us,<sup>4</sup> and in this, it echoes the vivacity of our imaginary mode of thinking. But the practice of the intuitive science yields a cognitive shift. We experience singular things in a transformed way, and in particular, we experience our singular body in a transformed way. It is grasped as an affection of that self-causing substance that only the eternal part of the mind adequately cognizes. This is what would make experimentation or modulation in the form of exposition attractive to Spinoza, as a way of marking off, in language approaching poetry, the new way of intellectual sensing and feeling that characterizes intuitive science.

The poetic endeavour to say the unsayable and the philosophical endeavour to arrive at the adequate concept of a singular thing are equally ambitious, if not equally paradoxical. Whether Spinoza's endeavour is successful is another matter

<sup>3</sup> See the inventory of Spinoza's library [Spinoza 2022: 1349–68].

<sup>4</sup> See Part 5 Proposition 36 Scholium: 'I thought this worth the trouble of noting here, in order to show by this example how much the knowledge of singular things I have called intuitive, or knowledge of the third kind [...], can accomplish, and how much more powerful it is than the universal knowledge I have called knowledge of the second kind. For although I have shown generally in Part 1 that all things (and consequently the human mind also) depend on God both for their essence and their existence, nevertheless, that demonstration, though legitimate and put beyond all chance of doubt, still does not affect our mind as much as when this is inferred from the very essence of any singular thing which we say depends on God.'

entirely. To judge by the reaction of his readership, it hasn't always been. Yet prominent poets among his readership have been sympathetic to the third kind of knowledge in particular.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps they best understood the nature of Spinoza's attempt.

## Disclosure Statement

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<sup>5</sup> Goethe comes to mind. On Goethe's appropriation of Spinoza's third kind of cognition, see Förster [2012: 89–99] and Yonover [2018: 8–16].