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*Philosophizing Historically/  
Historicizing Philosophy:  
Some Spinozistic Reflections*

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*Pro captu lectoris, habent sua fata libelli*

TERENTIANUS MAURUS, *DE SYLLABIS*

*I. Introduction*

BOOKS HAVE THEIR fortunes, notes Spinoza in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (hereafter *TTP*),<sup>1</sup> drawing our attention to issues of compilation, canonization, and transmission and simultaneously alluding to the realities of censorship and destruction. So, too, do books have fates in the hand of readers; even the Bible, according to Spinoza, is not holy, but merely ink on paper, until it is read with an eye to sustaining peace.<sup>2</sup> Spinoza's readers are numerous and diverse, and their interpretations of his work follow suit. Looking at the current scene, a reasonably comprehensive list would include the Cartesian Spinoza, the Hobbesian Spinoza, the Judaeo-Islamic Spinoza,

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1. On *fortuna libri*, see the *TTP*, VII 7, sect. 5 [101]: “*Deinde uniuscujusque libri fortunam*” as well the discussion of Euclid’s *Elements* at VII, sect. 17 [111] and IX, sect. 12 [135], which speaks of the “*fortuna librorum*.” Texts from the *TTP* come from Spinoza (1999). I follow Akkerman’s numbering of the paragraphs in each chapter of the *TTP*, which I cite by chapter and section number. Page numbers in square brackets refer to the pagination in vol. III of Spinoza (1925). Texts from the *Ethics* (hereafter *E*) come from Spinoza (1925) and Spinoza (1985). References to the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (hereafter *TIE*) are given according to Bruder’s division into paragraphs, also used by Curley in Spinoza (1986). The *Cogitata metaphysica* (*CM*) and the *Tractatus Politicus* (*TP*) are quoted from Spinoza (1925). I have modified translations of the Letters by Curley in Spinoza (1985) and Samuel Shirley in Spinoza (1995).

2. *TTP* XII, sect. 3 [159–60].

the Protestant Spinoza, the atheist and pantheist Spinoza, the neoplatonist or idealist Spinoza, the liberal-democratic Spinoza, the Marxist (both orthodox and poststructuralist) Spinoza, the analytic Spinoza (both Anglo-American and Freudian), the ecological Spinoza, the neuropsychological Spinoza, the feminist Spinoza, and, not least of all, the Spinoza of Market Street. The list is all but guaranteed to increase as readers examine prevailing views, find new inspirations, and read Spinoza in yet new circumstances. What is the reader to do with the multiple and multiplying Spinozas? More specifically, what is the reader committed to the history of philosophy as a philosophical subject-matter to do? Unlike Dr. Fischelson, and not simply because the life of wisdom (or at least the *recta ratio vivendi* designed to lead us there) involves tenacity (*animositas*) and nobility (*generositas*) rather than scorn or anger, we cannot simply bark, “Idiots, asses, upstarts.”<sup>3</sup> “Minds,” Spinoza instructs us, “are conquered not by arms, but by Love (*Amor*) and Nobility.”<sup>4</sup>

If Terentianus Maurus’s maxim has become a cliché of the history of books, Spinoza invites us to stress the often-neglected qualification: *pro captu lectoris*, “according to the capacity of the reader.” The Bible, Spinoza argues, speaks *ad captum humanum*, with various prophets and teachers adapting the central message of justice and charity to the capacities and needs of audiences in antiquity.<sup>5</sup> The ancient Israelites’ ignorance and slave mentality account for the depiction of God as a king and legislator; in the Greco-Roman world, ethical teaching took its place alongside the rhetoric of monarchical rule. The question of the reader’s capacity comes up, as well, in Spinoza’s early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, which notes the need to speak *ad captum vulgi*, “according to the capacity of ordinary people.” Yielding to the capacity of the audience without abandoning what needs to be said is the way to induce a “friendly hearing of the truth (*amicas aures ad veritatem audiendam*).”<sup>6</sup> Listening without friendship leaves the truth unheard. Thus the speaker must seek a way to engage the audience.

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3. Singer (1961), 11. On these affects, see Spinoza (*E3* Definitions of the Affects XXII and XXXVI). On the *recta ratio vivendi, seu certa vitae dogmata*, see *E5p10s* and the *dictamina rationis* of *E5p4s*.

4. *E4* App XI.

5. This principle is axiomatic in rabbinic exegesis; Christians call it accommodationism. See *TTP* II, sect. 19, [42–43], *TTP* IV, sect. 7–12, [62–68]; *TTP* XIV, *passim*, as well as Letter 19, in Spinoza (1925), III, 92.

6. *TIE*, § 17. This text echoes Descartes’s *Discourse on the Method*, Parts 3 and 6; cf. Maimonides’s pedagogical caution in the Introduction to the First Part of *Guide of the Perplexed* (1963), I, 15–20.

*Captus* refers simultaneously to the reader's intellectual ability, which is partly native talent and partly a mind-set (the Latin *ingenium* captures both), to the reader's disposition or what we might call *ethos*, and also to the reader's historical moment.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on the question of capacity, that is, the ability of readers to take in, comprehend, and sustain the ideas found in books, we may ask, then, according to the capacity of the *vulgus* or according to the capacity of the philosopher, according to the capacity of the average reader or according to the brilliant interpreter? The *TTP* presents Moses, Jesus, and Solomon and their respective audiences as exemplars of different *captus*, and we have Spinoza's correspondents as well. What sort of readers are we, ourselves, and the species of readers catalogued previously? What is the extent of our *amicitia*, and what is the role of the scholarly interpreter? Faced with the list of Spinozas, most of us exclaim, "Not anything goes!" We then enumerate our scholarly methods, criteria, and standards. Interpretation without the tools of scholarship, we worry, is indistinguishable from distortion or entertaining figments of our imagination. We remind ourselves of the maxim, attributed to Terence, and quoted by Spinoza: "Nothing can be so rightly said as to be incapable of distortion or misinterpretation."<sup>8</sup> We will recall that Spinoza calls some readers perverse in the *TTP* Preface; he wishes that un- or anti-philosophical readers would ignore the book "rather than make a nuisance of themselves by interpreting it perversely (*perverse*)."<sup>9</sup> If the great theme of Spinoza's philosophy is freedom, whether as the *libertas philosophandi* found in the subtitle of the *TTP*, the affective freedom proposed in the *Ethics*, or the *libera respublica* of the *Political Treatise*, we know that freedom of interpretation, what Spinoza terms *libertas interpretandi ex suo ingenio*,<sup>10</sup> is inviolable, but not every interpretation makes sense. There must be some criteria according to which readings are legitimate or abusive, seriously engaged or merely glancing, philosophically compelling or not worth our time.

To address the central question of what it means to read the history of philosophy philosophically, or, in other words, to philosophize historically, I shall in this essay consider three interrelated questions prompted by the proliferation of Spinozas and reflect on them with Spinoza.

First, what is involved in philosophical reading? Given the proliferating Spinozas, competing methodologies of interpretation, and meta-hermeneutical

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7. Curley (1986), 45–46, makes a similar point.

8. *TTP* XII, sect. 3 [159].

9. *TTP* Preface [12].

10. *TTP* Preface [11]. On *libertas philosophandi dicendique*, see also Letter 30 to Henry Oldenburg.

debates, we need to say something about the character of philosophical reading. In sections 1 and 2, I describe philosophical reading as an amalgam of technical skill, intellectual acumen, and desire; it involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. Nietzsche evokes this combination in his mini-essay on reading in the Preface to *Dawn*. He calls his own style of reading “philology”: “Philology itself is never so easily over and done with anything whatsoever; it teaches to read *well*, which means to read slowly, deeply, backward and forward with care and respect, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate fingers and eyes.”<sup>11</sup> In Adorno’s felicitous expression, philosophical thinking requires patience: “neither zealous bustling about nor stubborn obsession but rather the long and uncoercive gaze.”<sup>12</sup> Section 1 addresses these images via Spinoza’s insistence on naturalism and rejection of *praejudicia* (literally: pre-judgments) in correspondence with Willem Van Blyenbergh and ends by considering his debate with Alfred Burgh over the “true” and the “best” philosophy.

Second, how does one become a philosophical reader? In section 2, I argue that Spinoza’s texts are essentially pedagogical. Rather than presuming the existence of philosophical readers, they are designed to generate philosophical readers. Spinoza writes for potential philosophers, namely, readers who can take in his critique of received views and follow his alternative path. Van Blyenbergh and Burgh exhibit the power of negative affects to obstruct thought. The case example of Spinoza’s talented but troublesome student Casarius allows us to consider in more positive terms the relationship of cognition and affect in the cultivation of philosophers.

Third, what are the limits of a text? How far can we go before we pass from interpretation to original composition or arbitrary appropriation, and what is the relationship of our thinking to Spinoza’s thinking? Are there, in other words, limits on interpretation? As a historian of philosophy, I strive to give an account of Spinoza’s thoughts that, as much or insofar as I am able—*quatenus* is a pivotal word for Spinoza—treats him in his own terms and also engages with the relevance of his work today. Philosophical interpretation involves trying to hear what the text says, yet no one approaches the text without presuppositions. There are, in addition, the ways in which thinking inevitably exceeds what Adorno called “subordinate reflection on and adjustment to pre-given data.”<sup>13</sup> Once we pass from enumerating factual matters

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11. Nietzsche (2011), v. 5, 7. Nietzsche famously wrote to Franz Overbeck on July 30, 1881, to record his joy upon discovering Spinoza.

12. Adorno (2005b), 130.

13. Adorno (2005a), 9.

such as the compositional and publication history of a text and from summarizing what the text says in its own language to discussing what it means, we are engaged in interpretation; even the selection of seemingly neutral factual matters often involves judgments of relevance, and assessments of context can be tricky. After all, how far does context extend?<sup>14</sup> As we seek to let another philosopher's work take shape in our minds, much philosophical work on our part transpires: determining what is central and what is marginal, what is assumed and what lies outside the horizon of the work, how the arguments actually work (or don't work), the balance of borrowings, reappropriations, and innovations, and so on. We often re-read the text, discuss it with other interpreters, and revise our views. As an activity, philosophical reading, and more generally, philosophical thinking, is both receptive and productive. To use idioms from the *Ethics*, our intellectual work is affected by and affects its object, and these relations can be described in terms of fluid communication and exchange. How do we take account of this complex relation?

## 2. *Philosophical Readers*

Composed and transmitted in the ancient languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and transmitted in Latin and various languages that post-date antiquity, Scripture is unique in its variety of styles, complex history, and, strikingly, sometimes violently, divided interpreters. Most books we philosophers read are neither so obscurely sourced nor so culturally overdetermined. Nor are they so politically potent. Still, Spinoza's basic rule of interpretation, stated in *TTP* VII in the context of scientific method itself, pertains to all texts: treat them as natural phenomena.<sup>15</sup> Spinoza was not the first to propose methods adapted from the study of history and nature for interpreting the Bible. Luther proclaimed the freedom of the Christian to interpret the Bible rationally according to its literal sense; Calvin's hermeneutics is steeped the Renaissance humanists' emphasis on history, philology, and textual criticism; Spinoza's preferred rabbinic exegete, Abraham ibn Ezra, reasoned that Moses could not have written all of Deuteronomy.<sup>16</sup> Spinoza pursues the naturalistic paradigm surely, swiftly, and without any reservations, carrying it to its logical conclusion: there is nothing supra- or extra-natural about Scripture, such that there is no need for non-scientific methods. God's

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14. This is the central question in Garber (2005).

15. See Savan (1986).

16. Spinoza calls Ibn Ezra a "*liberioris ingenii vir et non mediocris eruditionis*" (*TTP* VIII, sect. 3 [104]).

eternal word, Spinoza contends, is available in rational inquiry and true perception. Spinoza holds that Scripture teaches practical values of universal justice and charity and contains virtually no theoretical content.<sup>17</sup>

Examined closely, Spinozan *interpretatio* extends widely: “I say that the method for interpreting Scripture does not differ from the method for interpreting nature but agrees with it entirely.”<sup>18</sup> Like interpreters of nature, interpreters of the Bible must develop a natural history of the text and in turn generate definitions, inferences, and conclusions. Interpretive work is both historical, in the sense of reconstructive or evidentiary, and analytical-deductive, in the sense of “regarding a number of things at once, to understand their agreements, differences and oppositions”<sup>19</sup> and their implications. We must construct a lexicon, grammar, and concordance; collect historical data and records; survey events; and look for patterns. Above all, just as we must seek knowledge of nature from nature itself (what other source could we have?), so too must we read the Bible on its own terms, attending to its language, circumstances of composition, canonization, and transmission history, and steadfastly resist the imposition of such extrinsic criteria as theological doctrine or philosophical scruple. *TTP* VII, sect. 22, is blunt: the “norm [of interpreting Scripture] must be nothing other than the natural light common to all, not some light above nature or any external authority.”<sup>20</sup> Spinoza argues that extrinsic criteria distort the text, undermining any sense of evidence and whatever integrity may be discovered. Not only, then, is Scripture amenable to scientific study. Failure to engage in properly scientific study amounts to the greatest disrespect and, worse, engenders political conflict.

To interpret Scripture naturalistically is to strive as far as we can to approach it without the distorting forces of *praejudicia*, prejudgments or prejudices. The critique of Maimonides in *TTP* VII and XV and the related critique of Judah Alfakhar in *TTP* XV are typical of Spinoza’s continuous analysis of prejudice as distorting, intellectually disabling, and productive of conflict.<sup>21</sup> Maimonides’s desire to reconcile the Bible with the principles of reason and Alfakhar’s rejection of reason in favor of miracles reflect the interpreters’

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17. *TTP* XIII, sect. 3 [168].

18. *TTP* VII, sect. 2 [98].

19. *E2p29s*.

20. *TTP* VII, sect. 22 [117].

21. Spinoza’s criticism should not obscure his affinities for and borrowings from Maimonides. Recent studies of this relationship include Harvey (1981), 151–72; Dobbs-Weinstein (1994); and Fraenkel (2006).

respective prejudgments of Scripture's true meaning. The former embraced allegorical reading in order to accommodate Scripture to reason, undermining the obviousness and reasonableness of Scripture's essential ethical teaching and thereby creating a class of elite interpreters; the latter desired to accommodate reason to Scripture, that is, insisted on a non-rational relationship to nature and an anti-intellectual posture. Maimonides erred in one direction, and Alfakhar erred in the opposite direction. Even before Maimonides's death in 1204, his philosophical works occasioned passionate debate, and the controversies continued into the fourteenth century. Maimonides's legal works were widely respected, but critics saw the *Guide of the Perplexed* as undermining traditional beliefs about creation, miracles, prophecy, and eschatology. Maimonides's embrace of allegorical reading and his openness to Greek and Arabic philosophy, particularly Aristotle, were the issue. Maimonideans and their sympathizers were often accused of failures of character and religious observance in addition to their excesses in scriptural interpretation.

Spinoza's reference to Alfakhar evokes a tragic phase of the controversies in the 1230s. In 1232, Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham of Montpellier and his followers persuaded influential rabbis in northern France to ban the study of philosophy *tout court*. That the northern rabbis were, for various reasons, largely unfamiliar with Aristotelian philosophy was no obstacle; authorities in Castile also approved the ban. Rabbis in Provence and Aragon issued a counter-ban defending philosophy. Both sides produced sermons, letters, treatises, and legal rulings as the dispute grew. The parties' intensity now seems clearly to have arisen not only from issues of doctrinal substance and religious practice, but from the way the fact of conflicting rabbinic rulings raised questions about the nature of communal authority. Alfakhar, a physician and courtier in Toledo, was a bitter anti-Maimonidean polemicist in the 1230s but otherwise not very important in the history of Sephardic Jewry. The exchange of letters between Alfakhar and his Maimonidean opponent David Kimchi is preserved in the aptly named *Iggerot Kena'ot*, "Letters of Zealotry."<sup>22</sup> Most unfortunately, this phase of the controversy took place against two important actions in the ruling Christian community. First, Christians had their own controversies about Aristotelian philosophy, which had been banned in Paris in 1210. Pope Gregory IX banned it again in 1231. Second, the Albigenian or Cathar Crusade, carried out in southern France

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22. See Adler's annotated translation (1996). Adler notes that Spinoza could have read the letters in Hebrew or in Johannes Buxtorf the elder's Latin translation. Christian Hebraists and Protestant Bible commentators admired Kimhi.

in this period, established a permanent Inquisition under the direction of the Dominicans. As Dobbs-Weinstein emphasizes, what Spinoza does not report in the *TTP* but must have, given his remarkable political sensitivity, considered is how the Jewish communities' internal divisions made them more vulnerable to attacks by outside authorities. The church burned Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and *Book of Knowledge*, most likely in Montpellier, in the early 1230s and burned the Talmud, probably in Paris, in 1232.<sup>23</sup>

In early modern Europe, reigning authorities and warring parties banned books, imprisoned and executed heretics, and produced sectarian bloodshed on a mass scale. The alliance, in other words, of church polemics with state power produced widespread suffering and destruction; religious motives and polemics were joined with long-standing political rivalries, economic competition, and other similarly non-religious reasons to devastate European populations. The European Wars of Religion, fought in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were, in other words, quintessentially theologico-political, multiply determined by political allegiance, nationality, and confession. Spinoza remarks bitterly in the Preface to the *TTP* that the "highest secret of monarchical government and utterly essential to it" may be "to keep men deceived, and to disguise the fear that sways them with the specious name of religion, so that they will fight for their servitude ... and will not think it humiliating but supremely glorious to spill their blood and sacrifice their lives for the glory of a single man."<sup>24</sup> The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, roughly twenty years before the *TTP*, settled the Thirty Years' War in the heart of Europe and the Eighty Years' War in the Low Countries. Spinoza comments bluntly on the barely cooled passions of the early modern European Wars of Religion in the Preface to the *TTP*, professing amazement that the adherents of Christianity, "that is, [adherents of] love, joy, peace, moderation, and good will to all men, [oppose] each other with extraordinary animosity and [give] daily expression to the bitterest mutual hatred."<sup>25</sup> Spinoza calls "theological hatred" the most violent of all hatreds.<sup>26</sup>

While the *TTP* focuses on the political consequences of empowering pre-judgments and the ease of fomenting fear and hatred amid ignorance, Spinoza's correspondence provides us with less dramatic but nevertheless interesting case studies in the power of *praejudicia*. Looking across Spinoza's texts, we can

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23. Extant sources leave the exact dates unclear. For an overview, see Ben-Sasson (2007). Dobbs-Weinstein (2004) provides philosophical perspective.

24. *TTP* Preface, sect. 7, [7].

25. *TTP* Preface, sect. 9, [8].

26. *TTP* XVII, sect. 17 [212].



develop a clearer picture of the operations of prejudice. As Spinoza's correspondence shows, the Dutch theologian Willem Van Blyenbergh read the sole text Spinoza published in his own name during his lifetime, *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* (1663). This work contained a critical exposition of Descartes's would-be textbook, the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), and, as an Appendix, Spinoza's critical lexicon of Cartesianism and Scholasticism, the *Cogitata Metaphysica*. Letter 18, from December 1664, reveals that Van Blyenbergh found much to admire and "some things which I found difficult to digest."<sup>27</sup> Much as he claimed to be "impelled only by desire for pure truth,"<sup>28</sup> Van Blyenbergh apparently wrote because he accurately perceived Spinoza's own heterodox views (which are easily found in the early works) and therefore desired not only "pure truth" but reassurance that Spinoza's views were only apparently destructive of orthodox theology. (An alternative reading would be that Van Blyenbergh wrapped his contentiousness in the rhetoric of sincere inquiry, but the difference does not much matter here.) Van Blyenbergh's queries concern classic Christian theological-metaphysical problems, including creation, evil, human freedom, and predestination. Spinoza welcomed the correspondence on a note of friendship, and, appealing to a shared devotion to truth, and replied at length to Van Blyenbergh. Spinoza's response is best described as an effort to dissolve the problems by disentangling and refuting their presuppositions; roughly put, Spinoza replies that correctly (re)conceptualizing God eliminates the very theologico-metaphysical problems Van Blyenbergh finds compelling and insoluble. The same strategy would, in principle, eliminate Van Blyenbergh's objections to Spinoza's views. The correspondence unfolds quickly, and the intellectual distance between the two men is immense. Succeeding letters show Van Blyenbergh's deep frustration with, and resistance to, Spinoza's explanations and Spinoza's sense of the futility of the whole exchange.

In Letter 20, written in January 1665, Van Blyenbergh rejected both Spinoza's specific analyses and, crucially, his unconditional reliance on the intellect. Here are Van Blyenbergh's rules of philosophizing:

There are two general rules which always govern my endeavors to philosophize. One is the clear and distinct conception of my intellect, the other is the Word, or will, of God. . . . Whenever it happens that after long consideration my natural knowledge seems either to be at variance with this Word or not very easily reconcilable with it, *this Word has so much*

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27. Letter 18.

28. Letter 18.

*authority with me that I prefer to cast doubt on the conceptions I imagine to be clear rather than to set these above and in opposition to the truth which I believe I find prescribed for me in that book* [Emphasis added].<sup>29</sup>

Spinoza's reply is sharp and direct:

I see that we disagree not only in the conclusions to be drawn by a chain of reasoning from first principles, but in those very first principles. So that I hardly believe that our correspondence can be for our mutual instruction. For I see that no proof, however firmly established according to the rules of logic, has any validity with you unless it agrees with the explanation which you, or other theologians of your acquaintance, assign (*tribuunt*) to Holy Scripture.<sup>30</sup>

Where Spinoza unreservedly affirms the "light of the natural understanding," Van Blyenbergh specifically submits intellectual apprehension to the test of dogmatic authority. Having at some length shown the contradiction generated by taking theological doctrines as premises, Spinoza says with some irony that for someone who believes that "God speaks more clearly and effectually through Holy Scripture than through the light of the natural understanding which he has also granted us," Van Blyenbergh's procedure would be correct. Spinoza instead depicts Van Blyenbergh as a servant of imagination and, consequently, of external authorities:

As for myself, I confess, clearly and without circumlocution, that I do not understand Holy Scripture [*me S. Scripturam non intelligere*]... And I am well aware that, when I have found a solid demonstration, I cannot fall into such thoughts that I can ever doubt it. So I acquiesce in what my intellect shows me [*quod mihi intellectus monstrat*] without any suspicion that I have been deceived or that Holy Scripture can contradict it (even though I do not investigate it). For truth does not contradict truth, as I have already indicated in my Appendix.<sup>31</sup>

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29. Letter 20.

30. Letter 21.

31. See *CMII*, sect. 8: "Truth does not contradict truth, nor can Scripture teach such nonsense as is commonly supposed. . . . Let us not think for a moment that anything could be found in Holy Scripture that would contradict the natural light." Spinoza's principle of the singularity of truth derives from Averroes, whose views Spinoza probably knew through the works of Elijah Delmedigo.

Whether out of graciousness, a sense of irony, or a desire to avoid more open conflict, Spinoza does not directly inform Van Blyenbergh that since Scripture contains virtually no discussion of matters of truth and falsity, there is no danger of a conflict with reason. Indiscreet as it seems to announce, “I do not understand Holy Scripture,” surely it would be more dramatic to assert that “Holy Scripture is unintelligible.” Rather than framing the discussion explicitly in terms of the nature of Scripture, Spinoza writes about his own inability to understand it.

For us, this contentious exchange raises the question of whether Spinoza’s affirmation of the intellect is different in kind from Van Blyenbergh’s deference to biblical prescriptions or merely an alternative prejudice. How might we explain or justify accepting one set of principles rather than another? Van Blyenbergh’s answers turn on the authoritative status of religious principles. Spinoza’s answer in Letter 21 turns on an account of affective life:

If even once I found that the fruits which I have already gathered from the natural intellect were false, they would still make me happy, since I enjoy them and seek to pass my life, not in sorrow and sighing, but in peace [*tranquillitate*], joy [*laetitiâ*], and cheerfulness [*hilaritate*]. By so doing, I climb a step higher. Meanwhile I recognize something which gives me the greatest satisfaction and peace of mind [*summam satisfactionem & mentis tranquillitatem*]: that all things happen as they do by the power of a supremely perfect Being and by his immutable decree.<sup>32</sup>

The life of reason, which generates the idea of nature’s necessity, leads to a life of contentment; intellection in particular leads to the greatest satisfaction and tranquility.<sup>33</sup> This appeal to the texture or quality of experience grounds Spinoza’s preference for naturally derived principles: they produce joy and satisfaction. Van Blyenbergh’s commitment to revealed principles and theological authority generates, by contrast, the discomforts of classically insoluble problems (e.g., predestination and freedom) and, judging from the letters, the misery of existential fear and constant moral anxiety.

These issues reappear in Spinoza’s 1675 correspondence with Alfred Burgh. Burgh, who had studied with Spinoza, later converted to Roman

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32. Letter 21.

33. E.g., *TIE* §§ 9–13; *TTP* IV, sect. 4 [59–60]; *E5p27* (which substitutes *acquiescentia* for *satisfactio*), and *E5p42*. Spinoza instructs Van Blyenbergh that “our highest blessedness consists in love toward God,” which “flows necessarily from knowledge of God” (Letter 21).

Catholicism, read the *TTP*, and implored Spinoza to follow him. In Letter 67, Burgh addresses Spinoza as a man of most subtle and acute *ingenium*, a lover of truth, and a miserable dupe of the devil. “What does all of your philosophy amount to,” Burgh demanded, “except sheer illusion and chimera?”<sup>34</sup> Spinoza, he charged, could not even refute competing philosophies, let alone find grounds for refusing the church’s instruction on matters of ultimate importance such as salvation. In reply, Spinoza goes beyond his answer to Van Blyenbergh and distinguishes claims about truth from claims about goodness. Spinoza’s reply exhibits a mixture of incredulity and contempt, plus a final effort to teach Burgh. Spinoza easily undermines Burgh’s stated arguments for the superiority of Roman Catholicism, and he mocks the proudly anti-philosophical Burgh’s willingness to appeal to reason. If, after all, Burgh counsels the rejection or ultimate subjection of reason, why appeal to it to motivate action? Spinoza writes:

*You appear to be willing to use reason [ratione tamen velle uti videris] and ask me “how I know that my philosophy is the best of all of those that have ever been taught in this world, are now being taught, or will ever be taught in the future.” But surely I have far better right to put that question to you. For I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy, but I know I understand is the true philosophy [Nam ego non praesumo, me optimam Philosophiam; sed veram me intelligere scio]. If you ask me how I know this, I reply that I know it in the same way that you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. That this suffices no one will deny who has a sound brain and does not dream of unclean spirits who inspire us with false ideas as if they were true. For truth is the index of itself and the false.*<sup>35</sup>

In claiming only truth, not optimality, for his philosophy, Spinoza differentiates what Burgh had conflated. Truths, he observes, are known “in the same way” irrespective of religious views. Only sickness or fantasy—“dreaming with open eyes” is the anti-Cartesian formula Spinoza uses in *TIE* § 66—could introduce doubts about true perception, such that the theist and the atheist or heretic concur about geometry.

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34. Letter 67.

35. Letter 76 (emphasis added). On truth and falsity, see Spinoza *TIE* § 46 and *E2p43s*. Spinoza’s rejoinder to Burgh evokes his critique of the Cartesians.

Taking up his right to turn the question of optimality on Burgh, Spinoza contrasts intellectual assent to mathematics with judgments about religious excellence. The former is *scientia*, the latter *credulitas* or *fides*:

But you, who presume that you have at last found the best religion [*optimam Religionem*], or rather, the best men to whom you have pledged your credulity [*credulitatem tuam addixisti*], how do you know that they are the best of all those who have taught other religions, are teaching them now, or will teach them in the future? Have you examined all those religions, both ancient and modern, which are taught here and in India, and throughout the whole world? And even if you have duly examined them, how do you know that you have chosen the best? *For you can give no reason for your faith [quandoquidem tuae fidei rationem nullam dare potes]*. You will say that you are satisfied [*acquiescere*] with the inward testimony of the Spirit of God, whereas others are ensnared and deceived by the Prince of wicked spirits. But all who are outside the Roman church claim with the same right for their church what you claim for yours.<sup>36</sup>

Spinoza all but says outright that Burgh's religious views are wide-eyed dreams. He thus avoids the question of whether there might be rational, but not demonstratively established, beliefs in addition to imaginative fantasies. He does argue, nonetheless, that adherents of all religions are equally entitled to claim their beliefs as the best, as there is, properly speaking, no knowledge that could justify anyone's exclusive claim to the truth, only *credulitas* and *acquiescentia*. Reason itself thus cannot differentiate the claims of one group of believers from another; all have an equal claim, and, given their premises, can begin to argue. In the words of *TTP* XV, sect. 7, "since we are unable to demonstrate by reason whether the basis of theology (*theologiae fundamentum*)—that men are saved by obedience alone—is true or false, can one therefore ask of us, as an objection, why do we believe it?" Answering his own question with deepest sarcasm, Spinoza writes: "I hold absolutely that the fundamental dogma of theology [*theologiae fundamentale dogma*] cannot be discovered by the natural light, or at least that no one has yet done it, and that is why revelation was most necessary."<sup>37</sup> We require, Spinoza argues in the *TTP*, someone to lay down the law and thereby to form the social imaginary

36. Letter 76 (emphasis added).

37. *TTP* XV, sect. 7 [185].

and social bonds. When left to prophets, the premises for such formations are imaginary. This is one reason that conflicts over religious dogma are not only inevitable but potentially intractable; competing imaginative ideas cannot be eliminated by demonstrations but only by more persuasive, or more authoritatively propagated, imaginative ideas.<sup>38</sup> Toward the end of Letter 76, Spinoza asks Burgh, “Suppose all the arguments [*rationes*] that you offer tell in favor only of the Roman Church. Do you think that you demonstrate mathematically [*mathematicè demonstrare*] by them the authority of that church?”<sup>39</sup>

If religious disputation is characterized by arguments from revealed, i.e., imaginative, premises, are there arguments for the best, or even merely the good, from rational or intellectually apprehended premises? The question is tricky, but essential, for it bears on how we read Spinoza and more generally on how we evaluate interpretations. The correspondence with Van Blyenbergh and Burgh shows that reason can dismiss some arguments and validate others, and Spinoza clearly thinks that seeing how arguments fail should cause readers to question the principles from which they are derived; his letters trace the path of unwanted implications and contradictions. If Van Blyenbergh is hopeless on this account, Spinoza does try to persuade Burgh through rational means. Throughout his works, Spinoza subjects numerous principles he regards as destructive of, and even inimical to, human flourishing to rational critique (and, when rational critique is insufficient, to withering satire). Teleology and volitional freedom are prominent examples in the *Ethics*; in the *TTP*, the doctrine of election, the idea of divine authorship of the Bible, and the reality of miracles are major examples. In each case, Spinoza argues vigorously that a fully rationalized, i.e., thorough and systematic, application of the principles leads to absurdities, individual misery, and sociopolitical suffering. Thus the negative role of reason, namely, its critical role, is quite clear.

Does reason also have a positive role? In Letter 19, to Van Blyenbergh, Spinoza explicates God’s prohibitions to Adam in the Garden of Eden by reducing them to a scientific discourse. Moral and legal language, he explains, are prophetic “parables,” that is, imaginative representations of nature for an unsophisticated audience. Educated readers, as Spinoza’s predecessor Maimonides famously suggested, can discern an implicit rational content in the parable. If it is “bad” or “forbidden” to eat the fruit of a certain tree, the reason is simply that the fruit is toxic: “God revealed to Adam that eating of

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38. *TTP* XVI, sect. 2–3 [189–90], shows that the right in question, possessed by all individuals, does not derive from reason; the fool, the lunatic, and the philosopher possess it equally.

39. Letter 76.

that tree caused death, just as he also reveals to us through the natural intellect that poison is deadly to us.”<sup>40</sup> The rhetorical features of the story are images of causal relationships, such that what appears to be a story about withholding knowledge is a communication of knowledge by other means; the message is medical, not moral. Spinoza’s analysis suggests that if our knowledge of nature were complete, the need for moral language and the related mythological images of law, prohibition, and threats would be obviated; to live well, we could simply follow the guidance of reason. *E4p68* confirms the promise of reason: “If men were born free, they would form no concept of good and evil so long as they remained free.”<sup>41</sup> Yet the scholium to *E4p68* announces immediately, indeed, emphatically that the hypothesis is counterfactual: “It is evident . . . that the hypothesis is false.” Spinoza reminds us of *E4p4*: “It is *impossible* that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.”<sup>42</sup> If we had “only adequate ideas”<sup>43</sup> we would be free, but adequate ideas are difficult to achieve and inevitably partial: “all things excellent [*praeclara*; literally ‘preeminently clear’] are as difficult as they are rare.”<sup>44</sup> Thus discourses of ethics and law will be with us in perpetuity; mythology, or in contemporary language, ideology, is ineradicable in the practical domain.

Letter 19 suggests that reason’s dispositions concerning our natural situation can provide us with guidance about ethical models and forms of government that more fully accord with our natural situation.<sup>45</sup> Nature, it is clear, imposes some limits; no one can survive deadly poison, and no one can flourish in conditions of civil strife and war. Reasoning, as distinct from imagining, can clarify these limits by studying patterns and causal networks. Spinoza defines persevering in existing as a natural necessity—and thus as neither good nor evil—but achieving self-preservation involves action as well as knowledge, and action is determined by appetite or desire as well as cognitive content. Why, for example, is adapting ourselves to nature, rather than attempting to transcend nature, the desirable approach? Spinoza’s argument that the paradigms

40. Letter 19. See also *TTP* II, sect. 14 [37] and IV, sect. 9 [63].

41. Compare *TTP* V, sect. 8 [73–74], and chap. XVI, sect. 4–5 [190–91].

42. Emphasis added. See also *E1* Appendix, *E4p37s2*, Letter 32, and *TTP* V, sect. 8 [73–74]. Adequacy is the same in actions and ideas.

43. *E4p68dem*.

44. *E5p42s*.

45. See *E3* Preface, *TTP* XVI, *passim*, and *TP* I, chap. 2.

of free will, creation and providence, and theologico-political governance make us miserable presumes not only a description of how nature works but also a certain model of human flourishing: one that minimizes temporal strife and fear and maximizes satisfaction and joy, one that prefers free thought to obedience, one that prefers freedom now to the promise of salvation later, and so on. His argument is that these forms of life produce more satisfaction and peace. In the *TTP* Preface, Spinoza criticizes human monarchies, themselves modeled on divine monarchy, for causing men to confuse servitude for well-being (*salus*) and shame for great honor;<sup>46</sup> subsequent chapters analyze the nature and production of the confusion, elaborate the implications, and propose alternative sociopolitical organizations. Spinoza appeals to his readers to explore a different path. In this sense, reason reflects on, but neither provides nor demonstrates, the first principles of the good. Spinoza's analysis of the affects and the political consequences associated with accepting certain premises must carry the weight of persuading the reader to relinquish her established views in favor of a different form of experience. The texts ask us, in effect, about which way(s) of life we desire. If, as Spinoza tells his correspondents, the philosophical life is one of joy, the philosopher is persuaded precisely by the joy that accompanies knowing.<sup>47</sup>

Facing the multiple (and multiplying) Spinozas in the literature, it is clear that interpreters operate according to diverse, even opposing, convictions and judgments about good readings. To be sure, as interpreters we find that reason provides procedures for interpretation; we have standards of evidence, modes of argumentation, and other articulable conventions. At the same time, we have certain desires and values in play when we read. Many of us prefer, for example, careful fidelity to the text to more drastic and dramatic interventions; inspired as such interventions may be, we demand a certain groundedness and deride departures from this norm as abusive. Our desire is to preserve the texts we inherit. Many of us have chosen contextualism rather than "presentism" or rational reconstruction. Most of us prefer systematic interpretations, though the idea of system in philosophy is actually rather recent, and we do resist readings that seem to force a text into a pre-given or alien system. The image of reason as paradigmatically deductive and systematic in the sense of complete has its own history (and a history of its demise as well).<sup>48</sup> When we laud systematic

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46. *TTP* Preface, sect. 7, [7]

47. Only an affect can influence an affect Spinoza (*E4p7*). Cf. *CM I*, sect. 1: "Love cannot be called true or false, but only good or bad."

48. See Leo Catana's chapter in this volume.



reading, whether on a deductive model or according to a structuralist program, we express a scholarly and aesthetic preference. To the adjectives “intellectual” and “aesthetic,” moreover, we must add “institutional,” for the current organization of the university and our professional outlets is reflected in scholarly activities; the institutional is the sociopolitical sphere of academia. Since I follow Spinoza in thinking that the affects and politics will always be with us, I address the implications of these issues of preference and sensibility in section 3.

### 3. *Reason and Affect, Again*

The exchange with Van Blyenbergh anticipates, and the exchange with Burgh reflects, Spinoza’s remarks in the *TTP* Preface about undesirable, perverse readers. Spinoza observes, “I know how stubbornly those prejudices inhere in the mind that the soul has embraced [*amplexus*] as a form of piety; and it is impossible to detach the *vulgus* from superstition as much as fear.” For this reason, he continues, “I do not invite the *vulgus* and those who suffer the same passions as the *vulgus* to read these pages.” Such readers do “no good to themselves” and “harm others who would philosophize more freely were they able to surmount the obstacle of believing that reason should be subordinate to theology”<sup>49</sup> In *TTP* VIII, Spinoza expresses concern about being too late to remove the theological prejudices that impede a proper study of Scripture:

men will not allow themselves to be corrected on these [theological] questions but rather obstinately defend whatever they have embraced under the aspect of religion [*quod sub specie religionis amplexi sunt, pertinaciter defendant*]; hardly any place is left for reason, except perhaps among a very few (if they are compared with the rest), so extensively have these prejudices occupied their minds [*adeo late haec prejudicia hominum mentes occupaverunt*].<sup>50</sup>

49. For all these quotations, see *TTP* Preface, sect. 15 [12]. Cf. Maimonides on undesirable readers: “How then could he [the author] put down in writing [an exhaustive interpretation of a parable] without becoming a butt for every ignoramus who, thinking that he has the necessary knowledge, would let fly at him the shafts of his ignorance?” (Maimonides (1963), vol. I, 6). Descartes’s Preface to the *Meditations* is equally adamant: “I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions. Such readers, I know are few and far between. Those who do not bother to grasp the proper order of my arguments and the connection between them, but merely try to carp at individual sentences, as is the fashion, will not get much benefit from reading this book” (Descartes (1984–1991), II, 8).

50. *TTP* VIII, sect. 1 [188]. See also *E4p44s*, which describes individuals “in whom one affect is stubbornly fixed [*affectus pertinaciter adhaereat*].”

The verb *amplector* says that individuals passionately, affectively embrace theological prejudices. When prejudices constitute an extensive portion of the mind, they crowd out rational ideas. Eschewing “complete despair,” Spinoza perseveres in his efforts to educate those whose embrace of theological dogma is less fervent; perhaps not all critique is so belated as to be ineffective.

Spinoza’s clearest statement of the power of prejudice is found in the early *TIE*. *TIE* § 47 assigns prejudice the same status as natural limitation: “there are men whose minds are completely blinded, either from birth or from prejudice, i.e., because of some external chance.” Given Spinoza’s view, articulated in *Ethics* 2, that all knowing originates in images, that is, in bodily impressions of external things and ideas of them, imaginative ideas are acquired prior to rational ideas. When imaginative ideas are endorsed by authorities, they become deeply entrenched and constitute a mind that is receptive to some ideas and closed to others. The affects associated with imaginative ideas are similarly constitutive, such that one set of ideas and its associated emotions excludes, or makes incomprehensible and repellent, another set. Not simply “pictures on a panel,” Spinoza ideas are active forces,<sup>51</sup> which manifest themselves in cognition, affect, and action. The hostile audience is hostile not independently of or in addition to accepting the cognitive content of imaginative prejudgments; because all ideas are simultaneously cognitive and affective, the structure of prejudices is *eo ipso* the structure of resistance and hostility to alternative ideas. As *Ethics* 1 reminds us, it is often easier “to remain in the state of ignorance ... than to destroy the whole construction and think up a new one”; rejecting rational alternatives to teleological interpretation as impiety or rational critique of theological claims as heresy exemplifies this pattern.<sup>52</sup> At *TTP* VII, sect. 1, Spinoza observes ruefully that “This is how human beings are made: that which they conceive by means of pure intellect, they defend by intellect and reason alone; and, on the contrary, the opinions that come from affects of their souls, they defend by these same affects.”<sup>53</sup> What, then, is the power of critique? The *Ethics* is perhaps more sanguine (though hardly robustly confident) than the *TTP* in stressing that the powerful affects concurrent with reason can reshape those of imagination. Becoming more rational, if only one can engage in the process, reconfigures not merely the content of ideas but also and at the same time the mind’s affective constitution.

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51. *E2p49s*.

52. *E1* Appendix.

53. *TTP* VII, sect. 1 [98].

In *E2p36*, Spinoza argues that imaginative ideas have their own force; one inadequate idea produces other inadequate ideas, and so on. “Inadequate and confused ideas,” he writes, “follow with the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct ideas.” The point, as the demonstration emphasizes, is that inadequate or confused ideas exist only as they are related to this or that singular mind. In contrast, since all ideas are in God (or Nature), all ideas are adequate when they are related to God. Inadequacy reflects a knower’s inability to perceive them in an orderly and rationally connected way; inadequacy is, in a word, an imaginative way of thinking about nature, and, as such, subject to emendation. Considered as a pedagogy, the *Ethics* cultivates the reader’s ability to attend to reasons and thus to reconsider imaginative accounts, prejudgments, and “conclusions without premises.”<sup>54</sup> This working through is simultaneously, in affective terms, a movement from impatience, resistance, and similar states to a willingness to hear and to follow causal connections with care and attention. In the most general terms, it is a movement from passivity, sadness, and vacillation to more stable joy. In this regard, it is essential to emphasize that the *Ethics* is an ethics, not merely a treatise on metaphysics and epistemology with some attached remarks on the emotions, sociality, and politics, and a perplexing (or embarrassing) fifth part, which has something to do with immortality.<sup>55</sup> The *Ethics*, like the *TTP*, is concerned with knowledge, affects, and politics: the *asylum ignorantiae* protects ignorance, fear, and tyranny, endlessly replicating them in a vicious circle.

In contrast to Van Blyenbergh and Burgh, who would censure philosophical truth in the name of theological or dogmatic truth and so show themselves to be not only non- but actually anti-philosophical (or, if you wish, pseudo-philosophers or sophists), the student Casearius appears in Spinoza’s correspondence as a proto-philosopher. We first learn of Casearius in a letter from Simon De Vries to Spinoza of February 24, 1663. De Vries and his friends envy Spinoza’s “companion Casearius, who lives under the same roof with you, and can talk to about the most important matters at breakfast, at dinner and on your walks.”<sup>56</sup> Spinoza dismisses the envy, noting of Casearius that “no one is more troublesome to me, and there is no with whom I have to be more on my guard.” Spinoza depicts him as intellectually promising, but “boyish and unstable” and “eager for novelty rather than truth.” He concludes, “I hope that in a few years these

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54. *E2p28dem*.

55. On this theme, Nadler (2005) does for Spinoza what Curley (1986) did for Descartes.

56. De Vries quoted from Letter 8.

youthful faults will be emended (*emendaturum*). Indeed, as far as I can judge from his native ability (*ingenium*), I am almost certain that they will. So his nature induces me to like him.”<sup>57</sup> Caserius’s promise is clear, but the philosophical outcome is uncertain; he requires careful direction, for the development of his intellectual *captus* will be profoundly determined by his temperament and desire.

The letter thus alludes to an ethical and cognitive training regimen for becoming philosophical; Caserius, like Cartesians and other readers, requires *emendatio*. Letter 8 shows that De Vries and the circle, who are reading an early version of the first part of the *Ethics*, understand mathematics to be part of the training. Spinoza himself emphasizes the pivotal role of mathematics in the Appendix to *E1*: “the truth would have been hidden from the human race to eternity, if Mathematics, which is concerned not with ends, but only with the essences and properties of figures, had not shown men another standard of truth.”<sup>58</sup> Ironically, however, Letters 8 and 10 ultimately suggest that, despite their recognition of mathematics as propaedeutic to philosophy, De Vries and friends actually cannot actually make use of it. Faced with Spinoza’s use of the *mos geometricus*, they are full of questions about definitions and proof, and they invoke the mathematician Borelli in order to resolve their confusion. In so doing, they show an inclination to appeal to authorities and a tendency to repeat the authorities’ pronouncements uncritically. In other words, De Vries and friends lack the very intellectual *captus* Spinoza identifies in Caserius. In Letter 9, Spinoza instructs De Vries that Borelli, “whose view you are too inclined to embrace, confuses all things completely,” and he reworks one of Borelli’s defective examples as an illustration.<sup>59</sup> Letter 10 thus solidifies the suspicion that De Vries, despite his desire to know, could not understand Spinoza’s views.

Lest we conclude with relief that we are not beholden to religious authorities or that Van Blyenbergh, like De Vries, was just not smart enough to appreciate Spinoza’s arguments (but we are), the *E1* Appendix reminds us that all human beings are inclined to affirm teleology, the root prejudice, and later parts of the *Ethics*, particularly the Preface to *E4*, remind us of the need for models and maxims of life to resist life’s vicissitudes. If to read naturalistically and scientifically is to attempt to read, insofar as or as much as we can, without

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57. Letter 9.

58. *E1* Appendix.

59. See Letter 9. My discussion of Letter 9 has benefited from conversations with Eric Schliesser and Idit Dobbs-Weinstein.

the active forces of prejudice, and with attention to careful demonstration, Spinoza gives notice that such reading is “as difficult as it is rare.”<sup>60</sup> The *TTP* devotes chapter upon chapter to disabusing the reader of conventional interpretations and assumptions. The *Ethics* repeatedly revisits Spinoza’s critique of ideas of free will and divine monarchy precisely because these views were so pervasive and deeply held. *E2p11s* openly acknowledges the difficulty in abandoning entrenched Cartesian views of the human mind and body: “Here, no doubt, my readers will come to a halt (*haerebunt*), and think of many things which will give them pause (*quae moram injiciant*). For this reason I ask them to continue on with me slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read them through.”<sup>61</sup> The question at these moments of the text is how a reader can open her thinking to Spinoza’s ideas, both by relinquishing previous attachments and by attending to the flowing and following of unfamiliar ideas. A slightly different way of understanding *haerebunt* here would be in terms of getting stuck; the verb *injiciant* might also be understood in the sense of imposing, not merely giving, a pause. If our preconceived views leave us “stuck” and “impose a pause,” the question is how to restore flexibility and movement in thinking.

While it is possible, as Spinoza suggests in *TIE* § 44 that someone could be so constituted by nature that “everything would flow to him of its own accord,” it is far more often the case that we need *emendatio*, intellectual purification and healing, and affective change in order to cultivate the habits of reason and true judgment. Like citizens, nations, and governments, readers and philosophers are made or cultivated rather than born. By nature, all human beings think and feel, but different ways of thought and different affective regimes emerge in conjunction with natural history and cultivation. As Spinoza writes in his unfinished *Political Treatise*, part I, chapter 5, citizens are “not born, but made [*non nascuntur, sed fiunt.*]”<sup>62</sup> In other words, just as the *TIE* emends the Cartesian philosopher’s ideas in order to produce someone one ready for philosophy, so too the *TTP* is designed to produce the desirable and desiring *lector philosophe* identified in its Preface. The manifest aims of the *TTP* are primarily political, but portions of the *TTP* sketch other aspects of Spinoza’s thought. *TTP* III, sect. 3, for example, offers readers who can think

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60. *E5p40s*.

61. Other examples of this kind of request are found in *E1p7s2*, *E1p15s1*, *E3p2s*, and the *E5* Preface.

62. *TP* I, chap. V. Machiavelli and Hobbes hold this view. For Spinoza’s distinctive use of it, see *TTP* III, sect. 6 [47] and XVII, sect. 26 [217].

“without subordinating reason to theology”<sup>63</sup> a mini-*Ethics* in the midst of Spinoza’s methodical revision of traditional doctrines. The *Ethics*, too, is a pedagogical text, designed to produce philosophers; it starts in the prevailing discourse of its time and moves attentive readers to another place. The starting point for producing philosophers is, of necessity, with the readers’ actual ideas and their concomitant forms of affective experience. Inasmuch as the Spinozan mind just is its ideas, there can be no Spinozan *epochē*, only a process of working through the philosophical language and horizon we have inherited in order to dissolve obstacles and bring our thinking to greater clarity. As we saw earlier, the *TIE* emphasizes that the philosophical pedagogue must meet the students where they are in order to prepare, step by step, for a favorable hearing of unfamiliar ideas.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4. Contemporary Readers and Historical Texts

Thus far, I have focused on the issue of readers’ intellectual and affective receptivity to philosophical texts. What, though, of the question of history and the historical specificity of texts and readers? As historians of philosophy, we tend to read the works of our predecessors with an eye to discovering styles of thinking, conceptual models and ways of posing questions (for to know the question is to know a lot about what will count as an answer), genealogies and lineages, and the like. At the same time, as philosophers who work historically, we remain open to the experiences of insight and reflection, to what Pierre Macherey calls, speaking of Spinoza, his actuality, that is, his philosophical liveliness for us now.<sup>65</sup> Where most of our predecessors thought in terms of solving problems, many of us take the interpretation of texts, at least as much as the pursuit of philosophical problems, as a principal task. We cannot, after all, engage the ideas without attending to the material history of the text: its language, its audience, its context. To the extent that we are committed historians and philologists, we, like Nietzsche, are

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63. *TTP* Preface, sect. 15 [12].

64. See Alexandre Matheron’s remark that reading Spinoza requires us “to rid ourselves of the bad habit of asking, ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’, as if nothingness were more intelligible than being. The question that should be asked is: ‘Why are there only certain things rather than everything?’” (Matheron, (1991), 29).

65. See Macherey (1998), 125–35. Heidegger regarded Spinoza as a minor figure who wrote in a non-philosophical language; Adorno barely recognized his kinship with Spinoza; and Foucault, to my knowledge, refers to Spinoza only a few times. Jacques Derrida noted that Spinoza’s philosophy destabilizes Heideggerian *Geschichte*. See Derrida (1995), 265.

Spinoza's descendants and philosophical friends. For us, most philosophical texts, to borrow Spinoza's example, are not like Euclid's *Elements*, readily comprehended by even a relatively unsophisticated reader.<sup>66</sup> When I say that I think that Spinoza's political ideas are potent now, or that I see his philosophy as productive for thinking about singularity, the logic of affect, or thought and extension, my way to these philosophical ideas is thoroughly material; only careful scholarship will bring me closer to Spinoza's terminology and concerns, and only diligent efforts to differentiate my own views from Spinoza's (and, a fortiori, from what I might wish Spinoza's views to be) can bring Spinoza's ideas into focus. We cannot, moreover, read Spinoza as if no interpretations or new thoughts intervened between his time and ours; no amount of historical philology or cultural reconstruction can return us to Amsterdam and the Spinoza circle, and no amount of philosophical self-scrutiny will utterly remove the post-Spinozan scales from our eyes. Can we now, for example, read without the intellectual legacy of Kant, embodied as a certain adoption of that legacy is in our training, our institutions, our very ideas of what counts as philosophical questions? Can we now think about ancient or early modern mathematics and science without our knowledge of later discoveries and interpretations of nature?

To my mind, the answer to these questions is negative. We do not—in fact we cannot—meet texts empty-handed. There is no reading without prior commitments, tacit or explicit, and the force or torsion they involve, yet what we bring to the text can be articulated and worked through. It may, moreover, change in the course of our work, for reading is a dialogical act. No one takes up philosophical texts, with the hope of remaining entirely unprovoked and unaffected by them, and no serious reader thinks that a single reading discloses the full meaning of a genuinely philosophical text. Each reader comes to the text with a singular inner library of references, habits of mind, and philosophical affinities that reflect her history and time. Spinoza captures the way experience structures the mind when he calls ideas “narratives, or mental histories of nature.”<sup>67</sup> To the extent that each of us is historically constituted, reading is always already intertextual or, to put this point another way, inter-mental. Texts are partially constituted by readers and communities of readers. Reciprocally, minds are partially constituted in relation to texts. Until the reader takes it up, the text is merely “ink on paper”; at the same time, the ideas presented in a text shape and reshape

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66. *TTP* VII, sect. 17 [111].

67. *CM* I, sect. 6.

minds. Spinoza observes in note p to *TIE* § 41, “To interact with other things is to produce, or to be produced by, other things.” Viewed this way, the written text is a kind of natural limit for readers in the sense that we cannot simply ignore or override what is written, yet neither texts nor human minds are fully self-subsistent, stable, and discrete. In the language of the physics of *Ethics* 2, they are, rather, somewhat determinate and somewhat fluid, constituted by singular ratios and communicating and exchanging with others. To use the modern language of textuality, texts and minds are interwoven; the generativity of the reader’s ideas encounters the generativity of the ideas available in the text.

The claim that our thinking is historically situated and shaped need not drive us to the most skeptical outcomes of historicism or to the idea that all that is left for us is anachronism. A negative answer must increase our sense of care, particularly with respect to considering changes in philosophical language, the relationship of philosophy to other sciences (especially in the case of thinkers who pre-date our own vision of the disciplines) and the wider culture in which it is set, and changes in the self-understanding of philosophers about their own activity. All of our historical-philological and reconstructive tools find their use in the hope that we are attending to what is written and what the author is thinking about. A negative answer, moreover, obligates us to give an account of our interpretive commitments, such that the same tools we use with historical texts must be used to clarify our own position as readers. To be sure, giving such an account is not without difficulties, whether we articulate them in terms of the hermeneutic circle or in terms of genealogy. Making our relation to the most canonical, “major” authors explicit is difficult precisely because their ways of thinking are constitutive of our own and, as constitutive, occlude other paths. Reading so-called minor or seemingly marginal authors is difficult because our tacit, unreflective commitments can make these authors seem incomprehensible, unphilosophical, or simply unworthy of our attention (and so unsuitable for tenure, promotion, and other professional credentials). To the extent that texts and ideas do not fit into prevailing master-narratives, canons, or the current preoccupations of our field, they are threatened with assimilation and invisibility. What is most obviously unsatisfying about the various “grand schemes” of interpretation and the “X [fill in a school or –ism] and Philosopher So-and-So” genre, is the way they impose an agenda on texts, pressing them into service and threatening to reduce thinking to acts of assimilation. No doubt thinking of this danger, Gilles Deleuze observed, “It is easy to credit Spinoza with the place of honor in the Cartesian succession;



except that he bulges out of that place in all directions, there is no living corpse who raises the lid of his coffin so powerfully, crying so loudly, 'I am not one of yours.'<sup>68</sup> Committed as so many of us are to details of language and context, as interested as we may be in counter-histories or even heretical ideas, our impositions may be more subtle, but they nonetheless require the sort of careful scrutiny we extend to texts. We require, in a word, what Adorno called critique.

### 5. *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have explored philosophical reading, philosophical pedagogy and resistance to philosophy, and the mutually constitutive relation of readers and texts. In so doing, I have focused on the forms of thinking and their concomitant desires and on the significance of historical and institutional structures. Philosophical readers bring themselves in an attitude of open reflection on the situation and activities of reading.

Spinoza himself wrote frequently of the joy of knowing, and so I shall end this essay on a note of pleasure. The *Ethics* famously ends by conjoining our highest joy and blessedness (*beatitudo*) or health (*salus*) with a reminder about the work required to achieve it: "All things excellent [or: most pre-eminently clear] are as difficult as they are rare" (*E5p42s*). Everyone in the academy knows that intellectual work can be difficult, even trying, and that its pleasures are profound. No discussion, I think, of philosophical reading, can do without an affirmation of pleasure. If sometimes we side with Dr. Fischelson, at least we can delight in understanding.

### *Acknowledgments*

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68. Deleuze and Parnet (1987), 15.