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THE IMAGINATION IN SPINOZA:

THE MORAL GOOD BETWEEN PROPHECY AND THE
AMOR DEI INTELLECTUALIS

Introduction

Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is a book in which the author's mature ideas about the epistemological capacities of the human being are used to propose a configuration of political roles, religious power, and general human relationships.¹ Spinoza is a republican: he believes that a secular democratic government is the best way for people to converge towards a (rational) union of intentions and improve their condition. He believes that a good state is fundamental for the happiness of its citizens, and a good state is one without religious interference.

Thus, examining how Spinoza formulates the relationship between human intellectual capacities, their social role, and religion is relevant for understanding his position on political and moral matters in general. What I will try to do in this work is to show that Spinoza's position regarding this theme in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* presupposes a fundamental role of the body. His critique to religion is founded on the assumption that the human imagination – our corporeal, epistemic faculty – is not sufficient for truly knowing God. At the same time, he shows that without this faculty and without the well-being of our body, which is intrinsically related to a social well-being, our mind would not be able to know God. That is, our true happiness: the highest good.

This piece of the Spinozian theory of knowledge and its application in the political and moral scope considers a much-desired secular society not because spirituality must be condemned, but because religion must be a private matter. What is important is the relationship the individual builds with a God that is accessible to everyone, a God that is material and coincides with the reality that surrounds us (and involves us). In this transition from an exclusive relationship between the prophet and God, which is a public matter, to a

¹ Spinoza, Benedictus. *Spinoza. Tutte le opere* (Italian Edition). Milano: Bompiani, 2014. Hereafter the following works are cited: The following works were cited: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* [1670]; *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*. In *Opera Posthuma* [1677]; *Ethica*. In *Opera Posthuma* [1677]; *Epistolae*. In *Opera Posthuma* [1677].

private path of the intellectual love of God, the body plays an ambiguous but important role through the imagination.²

Section 1 introduces the Spinozian critique to prophecy inside the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and describes the role that the imagination, and thus, the body plays in the definition of who a prophet is. Through a comparison with the description of prophecy in Maimonides' *The Guide for the Perplexed* it will be shown that the status of the prophet as a well-learned individual has important social and political consequences. Section 2 gives an account of the imagination as a corporeal and representative epistemic faculty through an analysis in *Ethica*. Section 3 returns to the practical dimension of religion. Given the precedent set in the analysis, the imagination is traced an alternative configuration of religion no longer related to truth but important for the practical regulation of shared life. Finally, Section 4 questions the relationship between this form of morality related to the body and the highest good. What I wish to convey is that according to Spinoza it is not possible to articulate a path towards the love or knowledge of God without considering the fundamental role of the body. The Conclusion summarizes the sequential argument made throughout the sections.

The Prophecy in Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus

When Spinoza starts writing the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter TTP) in 1665, he explicitly states (Epistola XXXI) that the targets of his critique are the prejudices inspired by religious authority. The theologians and *Predikanten* in Amsterdam exert political power and influence on the population, which is undesirable for Spinoza and his republican friends.³ In order to avoid persecution, in the TTP Spinoza mostly limits the scope of his critique on theology to an audience of Jewish thinkers. He often criticizes Cristian thinkers indirectly through references to Jewish personalities cited by them.⁴ Consequently, Spinoza's critique of Jewish prophecy must be understood as a general critique to all religions based on revelation. His aim is to demonstrate that religion cannot be taken as a source of speculative truth (TTP II, 1). Given this, intellectual research is and must remain completely autonomous from strictly theological discourse, as

² The concrete elaboration of this theme was developed due to important feedbacks received during the presentation of this papers' general idea at the conference about *The Body and the Sacred* on 28-9th September 2022, organized conjointly by the University of Vienna and the University of Denver.

³ Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 22

⁴ Furthermore, Spinoza is a Jewish thinker: he is inserted within the tradition of the medieval Jewish philosophy, and it is hard to understand many of his arguments, if the references, cryptically or more rarely, explicitly done by him to the Jewish thought, are not understood. Regarding this idea of a hidden author in Spinoza's works, see also Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent*

Process of His Reasoning (Cambridge, MA and London.: Harvard University Press, 2013), vii.

shown in TTP XV. These are the premises used by Spinoza in the last five chapters of the TTP in order to formulate an argument in favour of a secular democratic government, which would allow complete freedom of thought by being predominantly political regarding religious institutions.

But how does Spinoza undermine the authority of prophecy regarding speculative matters? He engages in this argumentation in the first two Chapters of the TTP through an analysis of the prophecy as a way of getting to know God. Spinoza follows in the steps of earlier Islamic and Jewish philosophers (one and for all Maimonides in *The Guide of the Perplexed*) but the crucial part in his argument is the characterization of prophets as peculiar individuals whose greatest epistemic ability is the imagination. As he writes, “Prophetas, non nisi ope imaginationis, Dei revelata percepisse, hoc est, mediantibus verbis, vel imaginibus, iisque veris, aut imaginariis.” (TTP I, 27)⁵: the only way through which the prophet can access the knowledge of God is his *imaginatio*, i.e., he does not use his intellect. While that which we understand *clare et distincte* via the *intellectus* is obtained without the help of words, the *imaginatio* can only know things by using images or words. Moreover, not only do the prophets acquire knowledge in an imaginative way, but they can also express their knowledge solely by imaginative means. Hence, regarding the teachings of the prophets, there cannot be any certainty produced by an intellectual understanding of the truth. Rather, one can only have faith in what they report because they narrate instead of teaching (TTP I, 3, Adnotatio II).

It follows that neither when the prophecy is experienced in first person, nor when someone hears or reads the revelation, the knowledge they gain makes one more learned (TTP II, 2-3). The fact is that the prophets do nothing more than repeat already held opinions to express something about God. This is the reason why different prophets have described God in a great variety of manners: the *imaginatio* alone cannot bring the person to recognize rational common features shared by the structures of nature and therefore to recognize the univocal true nature of God. Here, Spinoza introduces the expression “ad captum [alicuius]” (TTP II, 13): the prophecy is constructed, and it is consequently expressed according to the intellectual capabilities of the person to whom it is addressed. The prophecy cannot create new knowledge because its intrinsic nature is to accommodate itself to the opinions already held by the individual. Hence, when Joshua said that God could stop the sun revolving around the Earth, he did so because the knowledge expressed in his prophecy relied only on the opinions of his time and of his education (specifically, the earth stands still, and the sun moves). Having access only

⁵ “The prophets perceived things revealed by God by way of their imagination, that is via words or visions which may have been either real or imaginary” (Israel and Silverthorne, 2007, trans.)

to an imaginative way of knowing, Joshua had no way to conceive of God other than through what he already held as a previous belief (TTP II, 13).

This idea of the excellence of the imagination among the prophet's virtues can be traced back to Islamic and Jewish medieval philosophy. Inspired by the Neo-platonic concept of emanation and the Aristotelian structure of the intellect⁶, philosophers of these traditions conceived the process of acquiring knowledge as an emanation from the First Intellect to the human faculties.

In *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides describes three different categories of human beings depending on whether the imagination, the intellect or both faculties are involved in the emanation process. Knowledge from God can arrive on different faculties, and depending on which ones, that knowledge generates different kinds of individual knowledge.⁷ The first class is that of politicians. They can express their knowledge through images in an effective and persuasive manner although without the understanding of what they have received, i.e., what God decides to communicate to them. In this case only the imagination is affected. The intellect is not involved at all. Politicians are capable of ruling because using symbols and impressive metaphors is sufficient to govern the masses even without an intellectual grasp of the truth. Secondly, there are the philosophers. They have only a speculative knowledge of God because they receive the emanation exclusively through the intellect. Finally, the prophets receive the emanation first at the level of the intellect, where it then passes to the imagination. They not only understand God on a speculative level but are also able to express this knowledge via images to the ignorant common folk (*vulgus*). They rationally comprehend *and* persuade.

The persuasive character of the imagination is crucial to explain the role of the prophets not only in the Maimonidean system but also in the Spinozian. According to both philosophers, imagination is essentially a bodily faculty that is fitting to keep, organize and imitate (re-create) sensory perception. What is interesting here is this particular of productivity: it is possible to create specific images although they do not actually exist. Even if the sensory apparatus is not affected by the objects the images represent, it is possible to generate those images. So, as Ravven explains, according to Maimonides, the prophet has the gift of conveying abstract

⁶ Essentially, they borrow from Aristotle's *De Anima* the idea of an agent's intellect, which is the efficient cause of the passage from potential knowledge to actual knowledge in the human intellect. However, they inscribe this scheme in a neo-platonically inspired cosmological hierarchy of several intellects, among which the highest is, naturally, God.

⁷ Moses Maimonides, *La Guida dei Perplexi* (Novara: UTET), 117.

speculative truths via simple, concrete, and accessible images.⁸ Indeed, Maimonides often insists on the allegorical character of the Bible in that it contains only true statements that are hidden under a metaphorical meaning. The Bible is the culmination of the prophetic art of asserting a difficult concept in an ambiguous and trivial manner.

This means that the Bible has two different audiences: on the one hand, there are those who can understand the hidden truth. They comprehend the esoteric meaning of the prophecies. These are the philosophers. On the other hand, there is the *vulgus* which perceives only the exoteric meaning and blindly trust the beliefs constructed to hide the reality. It is necessary to hide the true philosophical meaning of the Bible's assertion because, from Maimonides' perspective, a true assertion can be dangerous if it is not properly understood. The *vulgus* needs to be given some false yet benign lies which lead it toward the well-being and stability of the state. In other words, these metaphors have a moral and political goal, in addition to being capable of actively bringing on speculative knowledge if correctly interpreted.

Here lies the central difference between Maimonides and Spinoza: the latter, although clearly influenced by the Maimonidean idea of imagination as a source of effective narrative means to inspire ethical behaviours in the masses, completely rejects the understanding of the Bible as an esoteric book.⁹ According to Spinoza, the revealed text does not contain any hidden speculative wisdom because its authors were not particularly erudite people. It might be fair to say that in Spinoza's mind, the prophet plays the role of the Maimonidean politician: prophets possess only a passionate imaginative faculty as well as great eloquence, both of which are useful in guiding those who are not able to access the highest intellectual good. They must therefore at least be led towards the good of the body, i.e., towards a prosperous state (TTP III, 1-6). In Spinoza's view, there is no reason to struggle in search of a key to interpret the Bible allegorically in order to show that it has some speculative knowledge inside, since it contains only imaginative and persuasive statements (TTP II, 1).

The Representative Character of the Imagination

In *Ethica*, the *imaginatio* is described simply as the faculty of having images about the external bodies as present to us (*Ethica* II Prop 17 Scholium). It is impossible to have an imaginative idea of a body if this has never affected the human body, however after the human body has been affected

⁸ Heidi Ravven, "Some Thoughts on What Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination: Part 1", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001):198.

⁹ Heidi Ravven, "Some Thoughts on What Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination: Part 2", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001):386.

by the object for the first time, it is possible for that same affect and for its corresponding image to return even in the effective absence of the object (*Ethica* II Prop 17 *Corollarium*). The affection that any external body produces on our bodies, even though it involves the nature of both, informs us far more about our own body than about the external one (*Ethica* II Prop 16 *Corollarium* II). Spinoza is a son of the scientific revolution. He is aware that the mental entities derived from the perception of real objects are not an exact mould of their physical characteristics. Rather, they are a qualitative result of the interaction of bodies' features with the anatomical structure of our senses. They are merely an appearance of reality, albeit a necessary appearance, determined by the very structure of the human body. However, thanks to the necessity of their appearance, they can be interpreted to recognize within them the objectiveness of their nature.

Hence, the imaginative ideas do not constitute adequate knowledge neither of our body nor of external ones (*Ethica* II Prop 25, 27). Indeed, both objects are not known according to the natural order of things, but rather according to the necessarily contingent order dependent on the variable disposition of our body. Moreover, the images always imply the consideration of the external body as actually existing, even if the cause of the affect is not an existing external body, but a movement inside the human body such as in the case of the hallucination. It seems that the images we possess are not a reliable source of knowledge, yet the argument is even more complex: these images intrinsically evade the categories of true and false because they are the products of our experiences of the world. The elusive character of our images is necessarily derived from our mind's constitution. No amount of adequate knowledge can prevent the imaginative experience. However, every time we apply our intellect in *interpreting* these images, we judge them according to our previous knowledge, be it adequate or inadequate, about what they are showing us. We then formulate a true or false idea.¹⁰

This semiotic aspect of the images is crucial. The *involvere* proper to them constitutes their representational character. As Mignini explains, the dimming of the images precedes and anticipates the further determination (the *exprimere*) of existing within the concepts and the ideas of the intellect.¹¹ Additionally, the more a body is suitable to create a great variety of images, the more it becomes possible to compare these representations and to recognize in them the common features which pertain to the knowledge of the *ratio*. At first sight, this proportional link seems in open contradiction with what it is said at the beginning of TTP II: "Nam qui maxime imaginatione pollent, minus apti sunt ad res pure intelligendum, & contra, qui intellectu magis pollent, eumque

¹⁰ Martial Guerolt, *Spinoza II. L'ame, Ethique*, II (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1974).

¹¹ Filippo Mignini, *Ars Imaginandi* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1981), 175-179, 194-195.

maxime colunt, potentiam imaginandi magis temperatam, magisque sub potestatem habent, & quasi freno tenent, ne cum intellectu confundatur" (TTP II, 1)¹². However, as Gueroult (1974, 221) shows, in the TTP the *potentia* denotes the dominance of the imagination on the intellect, not its productive capacity. If the *intellectus* does not take over from the *imaginatio* to gain adequate knowledge of the entities, the possibility of a *clare et distincte* understanding is spoiled.

This reasoning shows that the imaginative activity is not wrong per se. The problem lies in the lack of adequate ideas. Such ideas would allow correct interpretation of the images that we have by virtue of the affects produced from external bodies. From this we should be able to interpret our sensory inputs. These inputs follow the order of our body according to the natural order of things –specifically the rational and true order – i.e., we should perceive them *sub specie aeternitatis*. On the contrary, the failure of the application of true ideas gives rise to permanence in an obscured and confused judgement. In an opinionative and unreliable knowledge, the images are signs which are interpreted through other signs and images in a contingent order given by our body, rather than being contextualized in a frame of necessary relations derived by our adequate knowledge. Hence, it is impossible to have a necessary certainty about them.¹³ Since the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, Spinoza assigns this knowledge by hearsay or by means of another *arbitrary* sign at the lowest rung of our epistemological capabilities because of its contingent character. Joshua's ignorance of the phenomenon's true cause leads him to interpret the lengthening of the day's light according to the non-certain, i.e., non-demonstrable belief that it is the **sun** which moves around the Earth and not the other way around. From the non-demonstrable belief follows the contingent opinion that the **sun** must have been miraculously halted by God. This same scheme repeats for all the other biblical prophecies, leading Spinoza to claim that these are characterized by an exclusively moral and non-necessary certainty.

Indeed, it is usually easier to grasp an example than to really understand a demonstration. The reception of the first is more immediate and effortless while the understanding of the second, especially if it is particularly complex, is difficult, time-consuming, and not always accessible through our previous knowledge. However, we can never be perfectly sure about what any given example is referring to. There is always a margin of error to any interpretation we can give of images. On the contrary, when with difficulty we have understood a demonstration, we can be sure to have grasped the truth that

¹² "Those who are most powerful in imagination are less good at merely understanding things; those who have trained and powerful intellects have a more modest power of imagination and have it under better control, reining it in, so to speak, and not confusing it with understanding.

¹³ Mignini, op. cit. 197.

the demonstration is conveying. If that were not the case, we would not accept it.

Thus, the reason is clear why the imagination plays a powerful role in shaping the way in which we communicate with each other in practical situations: the persuasive character of the images is motivated by their immediacy. It is also clear why Spinoza cannot accept this kind of knowledge as the basis of authentic intellectual research: having images of external bodies is necessary to all knowledge. But these signs alone are not only useless, they are also dangerous if not interpreted correctly through adequate ideas of the intellect.

The morality of the Bible

Spinoza thus describes two different kinds of representative cognition. On the one hand a *cognitio ex signis* always remains inside the limits of the *imaginatio* without ever reaching a mathematical certainty. On the other hand, a *cognitio ex signis* is instead guided by the principles of the intellect.¹⁴ Both utilize signs. In the first case, while expressing a reference to things, it reproduces in memory (part of the *imaginatio*) the order proper to the human body. In the other case, the order belongs to nature. Given the existing diversity between human bodies, the first order is different for every person. Indeed, while the object of the intellect, ie., the truth, is univocal, the imaginative ideas are conceived by each person in a different way. Thus, it is hard to find consensus. At the same time, however, the imaginative ideas are more easily reached. They are the most spontaneous form of knowledge and are accessible by everyone.

As already mentioned, the prophet speaks by virtue of a merely moral *certitudo* and not by virtue of a mathematical *certitudo*. In fact, the previous paragraph has shown that for an individual who is using only his imagination, it is impossible to obtain the kind of knowledge which belongs only to rigorous intellectual research. Given the definition explained in the preface of *Ethica* IV of good (evil) as that which does (does not) conform to any given human end, we can safely claim that morality, understood in this way, is merely an imaginative way of thinking. Indeed, different individuals can have divergent goals only when they are reasoning according to the order of their variously disposed bodies. Otherwise, they would recognize the fact that Nature or God has no ends but is a series of necessities. Again, the idea of contingency is involved only on an imaginative level. It does not pertain to the actual order of Nature.

Hence, the prophet speaks thanks to a moral *certitudo* because his words aim at a specific end. Specifically, Spinoza asserts that the Pentateuch is written to inspire *iustitia et caritas*, the virtues required for the construction of a stable state of which is the necessary condition for the well-being of

¹⁴ Op. cit., 204-205.

bodies. The aim of the prophets' teachings is intimately related to the contingent order of our bodies. Their morality is a morality of bodies in so far as it is realized through the bodily faculty of the imagination and as it aims at the welfare of the bodies. In TTP III, Spinoza clearly shows how Jewish laws, especially the ones traditionally attributed to Moses, were excellent in that upon them was constructed a state very resistant against natural accidents and protective towards its citizens. Spinoza asserts that there are three ways in which people can reach happiness: having an adequate knowledge of God, having power over their passions, and living a safe life. While the first two are dependent only on the person's own characteristics, the third is explicitly related to how the state in which the person lives is governed (TTP III, 5).

Knowing God is nothing else but the *Amor Dei Intellectualis*, which is fundamentally a private matter and involves only a relationship between the person and God (or Nature). This relationship should not imply the intercession of any other person, especially not of religious authorities. Similarly, the ability to dominate one's own passions is strictly founded on the freedom of the individual to cultivate one's own personal growth without external impositions. On the contrary, if human beings do not work together and learn to live peacefully in a well-governed state, it is impossible for them to have a safe life. That is, it is impossible for them to defend themselves against the dangers of nature and to employ its potential to satisfy all people's needs. The state performs its function in the best possible way only if equipped with a good legislation. In his analysis, Spinoza is ambiguous on what was the true cause of the Jewish state's fortune. On the one hand, it seems that the Mosaic laws were rationally advantageous. On the other, it seems that the Jewish state was able to last for such a long time only thanks to external conditions rather than by virtue of its legislative structure. Regardless, in both cases the main aim of the state remains to provide the best conditions for the individual's safety and the well-being of the body.

It is for this reason that *iustitia et caritas* are fundamental virtues: if people are not animated by these intrinsically social qualities, they are not disposed towards caring for the well-being and safety of others. Again, it is only in a social situation that we can achieve and maintain the well-being of our body: without other people, it is harder to preserve our bodies both because our power in harnessing natural resources and defending ourselves against external perils is augmented by the union with others and because the others, if not bound by society's rules, may become a source of harm for the individual.

The capacity of the prophet to inspire *iustitia et caritas* in people is not secondary. If the prophet can make people behave correctly through the images he constructs then he is the indirect cause of a safer state. The truth of these

imaginative tales is not important because their aim is not to achieve any speculative truth about the nature of things. Rather, seeing as their aim is to inspire specific moral virtues in the most amount of people, they must be intuitively convincing and immediately understandable to everybody. As Spinoza claims in TTP V, the Bible is nothing more than a collection of tales but it can be successful in achieving its goal. That is, it can make people care for each other in order to establish over their correct behaviour a strong and just political state not by providing them with rational and adequate knowledge of things, but through suggestions evocative of a rhetorical use of words and signs.

In contrast with the Maimonidean conception of the Bible as a book filled with hidden speculative truths accessible only to the few elected people who are capable of overcoming surface contradictions and ambiguities, Spinoza strongly asserts that it is not the role of religion in the sense of any institutional faith, to explain or better dictate what is true and what is false. On the contrary, the activity of properly discovering the truth belongs only to the individual mind, which enables everyone to autonomously embark in this research (TTP I, 2-3). According to Spinoza, the signs employed in the Bible are related to the kind of *cognitio ex signis*, which remain only inside the boundaries of the imagination without having been verified by the adequate ideas of the intellect. Its knowledge is exclusively based on opinion instead of on mathematical *certitudo*; that is, the repetition of already-held beliefs which cannot be interpreted through the reconstruction of rational links between one sign and the other as the process of the *ratio* requires. If the biblical signs are spoken through a moral *certitudo*, their interpretation must be structured taking this into account. Thus, they should necessarily be interpreted through an arbitrary sign. This link is only motivated by a practical end because this kind of *cognition ex signis* is one that remains inside the boundaries of the imagination. Essentially these signs must be used and interpreted according to the realization of the moral goal.

The Bible according to Spinoza is perfectly adequate for its original moral end: inspiring virtues without conveying any truth. However, as previously mentioned, there remains a problem related to the diversity of imaginative representations between different people. Given the contingent and imaginative structure of moral reasoning and given that different bodies are structured differently, it follows that there is no unique meaning which is unmistakably recognizable by everyone and attached to any given sign. In other words, given the contingent order of my body, it is possible for me to grasp the meaning behind an example in a very different way than someone else would if the example does not follow the strict necessary reasoning which belongs to the *ratio* (in which case it would be a demonstration and not

a rhetorical example). However, given the nature of morality, it is necessarily related to this imaginative way of thinking.

This is the reason behind the digression in TTP XII about the use of biblical text. While Spinoza is demonstrating that what is important about the Bible are not the exact words used but their implicit goals, he writes: “Verba ex solo usu certam habent significationem, & si secundum hunc eorum usum ita dissonantur, ut homines eadem legentes ad devotionem moveant, tum illa verba sacra erunt, & etiam liber tali verborum dispositione scriptus” (TTP XII, 5)¹⁵. The signs in a merely imaginative scope do not have a necessary link to their meaning.¹⁶ It is on the interpreter to reconstruct the context in which those words are said to understand their original meaning¹⁷ or (and this is the significance of the latter part of the quotation) to use these words to inspire in himself or in others *iustitia et caritas*.

The Corporeal Good and the Amor Dei Intellectualis

It seems that Spinoza distinguishes between two different kinds of good: a moral good that is involved in an imaginative knowledge of the reality, and the highest good that consists of the adequate knowledge of God or Nature. This latter is an intellectual end. What is required is a mind apt to conceive the true nature of God, while as was shown, the moral, imaginative good is essentially related to the body.

According to Spinoza, reaching the highest good is a form of love towards God (TTP IV, 12), the *Amor Dei Intellectualis*, and it is deeply related with being happy. Since the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, the intellectual path designated is a path towards our true happiness. We should be taking care of our intellect in such a way that this faculty is not driven by passions but uses passions to recognize the union between the mind and the rest of nature (TIE, 11-12). The highest good consists in recognizing that we are participating in an eternal, necessary sequence of events, i.e., participating in an awareness of the eternal nature of God and thus maximally satisfying our *cupiditas sese conservandi*: the force which moves us to preserve ourselves. In this force, we use all our intended power as the possibility to act.

However, the way in which this path is articulated changes through the Spinozian work. If in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* the mind is autonomous and self-sufficient in this

¹⁵ “Words acquire a particular meaning simply from their usage. Words deployed in accordance with this usage in such a way that, on reading them, people are moved to devotion will be sacred words, and any book written with words so used will also be sacred.” (Israel and Silverthorne, 2007, trans.)

¹⁶ Mignini, op. cit., 207.

¹⁷ This is why in the exposition of his historical-critical method for interpreting the Bible, Spinoza gives great importance to the context. Given that in the biblical text the signs are not part of a speculative argument, their meaning is not easily deducted from the text itself; rather, their meaning must be understood according to the author, i.e. not abstractly but according to what the signs represent for him and how they relate to his end and.

research, it may be argued that Spinoza later modifies this conception and considers the material and social conditions in which the individual finds herself. This is not only a possible support for reaching the highest good but also a decisive factor of success in this intellectual goal.

If this is the case, the two distinct goods are neither exclusive nor opposed. If a bodily morality is principally constructed on the will of preserving peoples' safeness and freedom through a regulation of interpersonal relationships, then it is the pre-condition for having the possibility of access to the highest good. The prophetic activity, although deprived of every authority regarding the truth, can be a means by which the truth is accessible. The mature Spinoza seems to be more concerned about how the surroundings in which the mind operates are structured: *iustitia et caritas* aim not only at the material welfare of people but through this they aim at the flourishing of individual minds, and so at their highest good.

I adopt here the instrumentalist view of prophecy by Sangiacomo.¹⁸ According to him, Spinoza considers the Bible as «conducive to establishing a practice that is consistent with reason and leads to the creation of material conditions for the flourishing of the mind's power of thinking» (ibid, 86). This consistency cannot be on a rational basis. It was already said that Spinoza excludes completely whatever rational certainty is derivable from prophetic words. However, «the agreement between the moral teachings found in Scripture (conveyed by prophetic law) and the dictates of reason (expressed by natural divine law) do not consist in an agreement concerning their content but rather concerning their effects. Prophetic divine law agrees with reason not because it commends what reason commends. It is because prophetic divine law is capable of creating appropriate conditions for the flourishing of reason and thus for the achievement of the Supreme Good commended by natural divine law» (ibid, 88).

It was shown in Section 2 that the *potentia* of the imagination is a prerequisite to develop the adequate ideas of the intellect. But the *potentia* of the imagination relies on the disposition of our bodies. Some bodies are more favoured than others in producing a great variety of images for comparison, but in any case, having control on what affects in a positive or negative manner the disposition of the body can have an important impact on our capacity of reaching an adequate idea of God. The Bible may be used to exert this control on the external condition though it cannot directly help the intellect in reaching adequate ideas.

It is important to stress that these external conditions are also eminently social. If the mind in the production of the adequate ideas is in a fundamentally private dimension, the external situation which can foster this research relies on a social harmony. At the beginning of the *Tractatus de Intellectus*

¹⁸ Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Emendatione, Spinoza describes the highest good as first taking care of our own intellect and only then helping as many people as possible to take care of their own, i.e., structuring the society to allow the flourishing of minds. This includes developing not only a strong moral, ethical theory but also a medical science. On the contrary, in the TTP it seems that this latter aspect is not an accessory and successive part of the highest good, but that this social concern stands between us and our happiness.

Conclusion

According to Spinoza, religion is exclusively based on a moral goal and is characterized by particularity and contingency. The necessary and the universal are features only of an intellectual cognition of God. Religion, in fact, derives from the imagination only. It has an essentially corporeal and practical core.

The idea of a moral use of the Bible thanks to its imaginative character already exists when Spinoza writes the TTP. However, the implicit theoretical structure at the basis of his argument changes the perspective about what prophecy really means. After having explained the exclusion of speculative learning from revelation and having described the articulation of its representative knowledge, it was shown that the semiotic knowledge conveyed through biblical text is strongly dependent on the intention, or better yet, on the singular structure and personal experience of the reader. A text like this could be said to be good or evil only according to its use by someone.

However, it has also been shown that reaching the highest good, a private matter, is based on the possibilities offered by the body and relies on a social and political stability. It is not possible to do justice to the complex goal that the highest good is, without recognizing the role that the body, through the social and material conditions in which it is situated, plays in favouring the access of the mind to a true cognition of God or Nature.

In this cognition, this perceiving *sub specie aeternitatis*, the individual recognizes herself an expression of the univocal substance which reality consists of: God. The awareness of being the cause of herself, not as a mode but as the substance, is the reason of the beatitude of the individual. In the moment thinking *sub specie aeternitatis*, the individual as subject and object, i.e., as an active agent and a passive one, coincides while being perfectly satisfied in *her cupiditas sese conservandi*. Her body ceases to be just a source of power or a source of passions. It is also understood as a movement inside an absolute immanence.¹⁹ Then the rejection by Spinoza of the

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, "Absolute Immanence." In *Introduction to the Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 1999), , 151-169.

speciality of the prophet returns: every person can potentially reach this state of beatitude because there is no transcendent being which intervenes in making people more or less sapient or blessed. The path which the individual engages with shows that the sacred is not something that must be looked for outside nature but is the immanent cause of everything.