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Spinoza and the Genesis of the Aesthetic

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Abstract: This paper identifies an aesthetics implicit in Spinoza's philosophy through the concept of a genesis of the aesthetic. A *genesis* of the aesthetic indicates that a philosophy of art is not yet fully formed in his work, but can emerge as a consequence or effect of his thought. This aesthetic theory would evaluate the work of art primarily in its relationship to *truth*. Following the architectonics of Spinoza's own thought, this paper constructs a progression – moving from the imagination, to reason, to intuition – toward a concept of aesthetic practices that aligns itself ever more closely with the freedom, perfection, and affirmation of infinite substance itself. The specific forms of aesthetic reception and production flowing from Spinoza's ideal of wisdom unite two seemingly disparate paradigms: the aesthetic as essentially affirmative, as a joy in the individual power of every individuated thing, on the one hand; and the cultivation of a critical, ethically informed aesthetics of liberation, one capable of occupying different positions (obedience, autonomy, resistance) with respect to state or sovereign power, on the other hand.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE GENESIS OF THE AESTHETIC

After years of assuming that Spinoza has nothing, or very little, to add to the study of aesthetics, philosophers and intellectual historians are now turning to Spinoza's aesthetics with renewed vigour.[1] If there is an innovative aesthetics to be found in Spinoza, one of its most significant features would consist in a refusal to think the aesthetic as a triangulation of the beautiful, the good, and the true, as was the case when the concept of aesthetics

emerged in the eighteenth century, the blueprint for which is to be found in Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750-58). An aesthetic theory derived from Spinoza's thought would evaluate the work of art primarily in its relationship to *truth*; it would thus demand the construction of a *veridical* aesthetics rather than an axiological one, a philosophy of art no longer organised around beauty, a substantive notion of the good, and the pursuit of sensuous pleasure. Truth, in turn, would refer to Spinoza's concept of metaphysical truth, along with its ethical and political implications, some key doctrines of which can be cursorily and simplistically described as follows: there is only one substance, God or nature; finite things are *modes* of this infinite substance and individual entities have no independent existence outside God or nature; knowledge is to be evaluated according to adequation, where adequation is judged according to the intellection of how all things express the causally determined order of infinite substance; imagination, or how human beings typically know the world through their senses, produces inadequate knowledge, whereas reason, which is generated by following deductions from definitions and axioms, produces adequate knowledge; as all individuated entities are expressions of substance, they strive 'to persevere' in their being (the definition of the *conatus* in E3P6), the ideal of which consists in an increase of the individual's power of action; infinite substance alone has the highest perfection and degree of reality, as it is determining but itself undetermined, always active and generative, wholly necessary but at the same time wholly free; the human being is thus more perfect the more it intellectually cognises the activity, autonomy, and necessity characteristic of substance itself.[2] Ultimately Spinoza supplants the dyad good/evil as a primary normative interface with the world with that of joy/sadness, where joy signals an increase (E4Appen XXX) and sadness a decrease in power (E3P11S).

Given this epistemology and metaphysics, the aesthetic, here broadly construed as a discursive space for theoretically informed reflection referring to or derivative of artistic practices, seems to belong more to the world of finite individuals rather than to that of infinite substance, to the imagination rather than reason, to inadequate rather than adequate ideas. Such a conception of the aesthetic would be regressive for those invested in the truth-generating potential of art. The hostility towards art is all too familiar in the history of philosophy: does not Plato claim the eternal truth of ideas only to ascribe to the work of art a second-order mimetic status – an imitation of an imitation – and hence, marginalise art as epistemically flawed and politically dangerous? And would not Spinoza associate aesthetic objects primarily with the imagination – an inadequate form of knowledge in which 'singular things… have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order,' or a form of knowledge mediated through equivocal 'signs' (E2P40S2)?

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines the imagination as a kind of knowledge (the lowest kind) that emerges when the mind looks at bodies as images, as 'af-

fections of the human Body whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us' (E2P17S). The imagination describes the default quotidian form of perception and knowledge acquisition for human beings; when individuals perceive the world as populated by objects external to them that affect their bodies in different ways, they are relying on the imagination as the primary source for their understanding of the world. Inasmuch as aesthetic practices generally invoke this everyday manner of orienting oneself in the world, they belong primarily to the imagination. The aesthetic would thereby seem excluded from the purview of rational 'common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things' (E2P40S2). At best, the work of art would have a *heuristic* value for Spinoza: a source of imaginative knowledge that could be propitious given the affective constitution of the finite human being and its manner of striving to persevere in its being (*conatus*), ultimately deficient in its manner of expressing truth.

While the idea of a heuristic value of the aesthetic represents one way Spinoza himself approaches artistic practices and products, it does not exhaust the implications for rethinking the aesthetic that result from speculative engagement with Spinoza's works. Spinoza's own work provides clues as to how an alternative veridical aesthetics could be conceptualised. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes two further kinds of knowledge after the first type of knowledge (imagination): reason and intuition (*scientia intuitiva*).[3] Each kind of knowledge can be correlated with its own attendant concept of aesthetic activity. Following the architectonics of Spinoza's own thought, I will construct a progression (with some digressions)—moving from the imagination, to reason, to intuition—toward a concept of aesthetic practices that aligns itself ever more closely with the freedom, perfection, and affirmation of infinite substance itself.

This progression is organised around the figure of a genesis of the aesthetic. A genesis of the aesthetic of the sort that Spinoza stimulates entails two forms of interrogation in the face of aesthetic practices: what are the material (physical, cultural, semiotic, technological) conditions of the emergence of the aesthetic, or in what way is the aesthetic part of the necessary order of individuated beings? And what does the aesthetic in turn produce or generate, how does it manifest nature as an expansive, flourishing proliferation of entities? These two forms of genesis respectively approach the agency of the aesthetic from a double perspective: insofar as the aesthetic refers to finite entities (*natura naturata*) with their own specific histories and conditions; and insofar as aesthetic practices and objects disclose metaphysical truth, nature as infinite, active substance, as *natura naturans*. Finally, the idea of a genesis of the aesthetic indicates and hopefully mitigates the anachronism of attributing aesthetic thought to Spinoza: the aesthetic is not yet fully formed as a discourse in his work, but can emerge as a consequence or effect of his thought.

II. SPINOZA'S FEINT AND THE VIGILANCE OF THE AESTHETIC

Spinoza's texts ultimately intend to produce a transformative effect on their readership, to induct readers into a form of intellection that will change how reality appears to them. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza refers to this form of intellection as the third kind of knowledge, intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*), which entails a paradigmatic shift in one's manner of viewing things. With the attainment of this form of knowledge, individual things appear 'under the species of eternity' (*sub specie aeternitatis*), namely, 'insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature' (E5P29S). The production of this way of looking at the world results in an intellectual love of God as perpetually generative nature, hence in sheer affirmation without resentment or guilt, in activity rather than passivity, and in the recognition that the activity of one's own mind is nothing other than an expression of the 'infinite love by which God loves himself' (E5P36).

The first intellectual operation stimulated by intuitive knowledge consists in a dissolution of the aesthetic field and a denial of the reality of imaginative forms; intuition loosens human beings from their dependence on anthropocentric fictions, ideologically encoded narratives, and the authority of dogmatic religions and mythologies operating through signs. Whereas imaginative fictions of this sort make the human being into something passive, intuitive knowledge seeks to disentangle human beings from the pull of these imaginations and thereby activate the mind. When human beings look at the world under the aspect of eternity, 'what we have shown to perish is the imagination, through which alone we are said to be acted upon' (E5P40C). What follows is a dramatic defamiliarisation and delegitimisation of socially encrusted normative distinctions (good/bad, beautiful/ugly) pervading signifying forms. If the imagination perishes, so too does its aura, the means whereby it secures assent from those subjected to it. Spinoza's ontology thereby becomes a source for aesthetic ideological critique operating in tandem with the bliss and joy of intellectual affirmation, with an increased power of action.

Spinoza nevertheless draws upon forms of signification otherwise associated with the imagination in the attainment of his intellectual goals; at key moments in the *Ethics*, for example, Spinoza invokes processes of sensibility, fictions, hypotheticals, and heuristics as an indispensable part of the genesis of the ideal form of knowledge, of reality as it appears under the aspect of eternity. Such is the case in the following passage, which can be found towards the end of the *Ethics*:

> But here it should be noted that although we are already certain that the Mind is eternal, insofar as it conceives things under a species of eternity, nevertheless, for an easier explanation and better understanding of the things we wish to show, we shall consider it as if it were now beginning to be, and were now beginning

> to understand things under a species of eternity, as we have done up to this point. We may do this without danger of error, provided we are careful to draw our conclusions only from evident premises. (E5P31S)

Spinoza invokes the hypothetical as a heuristic: he represents the eternity of the mind as if it had a genesis, as if knowledge itself were coming to be and the human being would be transformed in the light of this knowledge. In a later passage of the *Ethics*, Spinoza designates the precise epistemic and rhetorical strategy in the above scholium as an authorial *feint*: 'we have feigned' (*finximus*) is the term used by Spinoza to describe this thought experiment in which eternity emerges from duration.[4] Spinoza thereby hints at a form of feigning (invention, fictionality) that is commensurate with the emergence of epistemic insight.

While drawing attention to the fact that imaginative forms – words, narratives, fictions – can, and most often do, lead to error, he thus allows for the possibility that they will not always do so. The proper attitude with which Spinoza approaches the imagination is one of *vigilance*. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza writes:

> since words are part of the imagination, i.e., since we feign many concepts, in accordance with the random composition of words in the memory from some disposition of the body, it is not to be doubted that words, as much as the imagination, can be the cause of many and great errors, unless we are very wary of them.[5]

In the final qualifying clause of the above passage, Spinoza suggests that a form of vigilance – being 'wary' of words and the products of the imagination – can prohibit a fall into error. Spinoza adopts this same attitude of vigilance in the *feint* (discussed above in the analysis of E5P31S) designed to bring readers into a view of the world under the species of eternity, that is, to elicit a genesis of intellection.

In Spinoza's feint – which mediates between duration and eternity, and hence imagination and intellect – one can isolate two different epistemic stances to the imagination: one that remains caught in *mere* imagination, in illusion, in fiction, in signs; and another that has progressed into rationality and regards the imagination with a different sense of its value and power in the order of nature. Spinoza's most urgent initial task consists in detaching his readership from the immediate hold of the imagination, in alienating readers from everyday practices of intelligibility and stimulating processes of defamiliarisation. After this initial defamiliarisation, following the extraction of the human being from the immediate pull of the imagination, the imagination can then be repurposed. And it is in this repurposing of the imagination, in a manner informed by reason, that Spinoza gestures toward the possible

utility of aesthetic practices for the figure of the *wise person*, the particular shape of the life that the *Ethics* posits as maximally informed by adequate ideas.

Before this activating power of the aesthetic becomes possible, Spinoza demands an *anaesthetising* function as an essential part of looking at the world through the intellect: ontological value must be extracted from its relation to human sensation. Any aesthetic affirmation requires first an *anaesthetics*; Spinoza writes: 'things are not more or less perfect because they please or offend men's senses, or because they are of use to, or are incompatible with, human nature' (E1App). While Spinoza cultivates what many would call a posthuman perspective by advocating for a non-anthropocentric manner of grasping the multiplicity of beings, he nevertheless attends to the specificity of the human being, its particular manner of persevering in its being (its *conatus*). And it is here that the *aesthetic* – both in the sense of an affirmation of sensuous knowledge as well as the affirmative role of an imaginative ideal – is to be found, namely by attending to the needs of the human being as a particular being:

> It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another. For the human Body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole Body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the Mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things. (E4P45S)

Spinoza naturalises aesthetic-imaginative practices by drawing attention to a feedback loop between physiological processes and artefacts focalising sensuous pleasure: the body's multiple parts (organs) require exercise in order to prevent atrophy and stimulate growth; to exercise the body *is* to exercise the mind, since body and mind are parallel attributes of substance (E2P7); from which it follows that aesthetic practices can increase degrees of intellection and produce a heightened power of action.[6] Spinoza in this instance makes his absolute ontology of substance compatible with a focalising form of anthropocentrism, or the affirmation of what is proper to the human being *qua* individual composed of multiple other individual parts. The aesthetic is proper to the human, just as the *anaesthetic* (abstracting ontological value from contexts of human sensibility) is proper to the truth of substance. Spinoza makes these two seemingly incompatible ideas compatible, uniting a non-humanistic (non-anthropocentric) monist ontology with the humanism of an embodied aesthetics.[7]

The idea of a physiological aesthetics in relation to the exercise of sensibility – aesthetics as the stimulation of the human organism in such a way that increases its power of intellection – finds its analog in a political aesthetics in relation to historical narrative forms. Just as the aesthetic exercise of pleasure is physiologically useful for the body and thus for the mind, so is the practice of narrative in the form of histories (*historiae*) useful for the health of civic bodies and collective forms. According to Susan James, Spinoza views narrative as a 'means to freedom' since 'the way of life endorsed by reason needs to be brought within imaginative reach if it is to model our desires and actions'.[8] Spinoza writes the following about historical narratives – which belong to imaginative forms of signification – in the *Theological-Political Treatise*:

> . . . though faith in historical narratives cannot give us the knowledge and love of God, we do not deny that reading them is very useful in relation to civil life. For the more we have observed and the better we know the customs and character of men – which can best be known from their actions – the more cautiously we will be able to live among them and the better we will be able to accommodate our actions and lives to their mentality, as much as reason allows.

Histories cannot produce 'knowledge and love of God'; only philosophy and science can produce knowledge of this sort. However, historical narratives do produce a particular knowledge of human beings and collectives ('the customs and character of men'). One who already has knowledge of nature can more adequately grasp the power of these histories, namely, as sources of anthropological information capable of enabling a fit between a cultural and political regime and the disposition of the philosopher. The philosopher – one who loves God and knows nature – can thus elevate histories from mere works of the imagination to sources of more adequate knowledge by granting them an epistemic, political, and ethical value, by drawing upon them to increase an individual's or a collective's power of action.

III. A NON-IMAGINATIVE AESTHETICS

Thus far, the aesthetic has played the role of a liminal or mediating form: for example, in Spinoza's thought experiments that temporarily make the operations of the intellect into a genetic, and hence imaginative process (his *heuristics*, or aids to the understanding); in artistic practices more narrowly conceived, as a power of action specific to the individuality of the human as a sensuous being albeit grounded in an ontology that refuses to privilege human sensation; and in textual products functioning as points of contact between the wisdom of the philosopher and lived cultural and political practices.

The preceding instances of aesthetic possibility are intertwined with the imagination, and more specifically, with the integration of the imagination into physiologically and politically expansive ways of being. But can there

be an aesthetics of the pure intellect, a *non-imaginative* aesthetics? If so, it would be an aesthetics of the pure intellectual joy, a power of action abstracted from sensation. Domenica Romagni writes of the possibility of this form of aesthetics, one in which the 'contemplation and understanding of God generates a special kind of satisfaction that is distinguished from mere sensory pleasure'.[9] The satisfaction accompanying the contemplation of God would also be present in the contemplation of all individual entities in the world insofar as they are in God, or insofar as the intellect can trace those entities back to the necessity of substance. The aesthetic here indicates an *aesthetic stance* more than an aesthetics properly conceived; it is thus detached from the narrower contexts of significance generally associated with aesthetic practices, for example, works of art. This view of aesthetic activity has the peculiarity (perhaps the advantage) of not making the criteria for the aesthetic depend on a type of object – whether music, painting, perfume, the beauty of plants, theater, or other objects of 'taste' – but on an intellection *of* the object. This ideal is not foreign to aesthetic practices even more narrowly conceived; John Cage's work, for example, shows how silence or noise can become music when listened to *as* music. Looking at the aesthetic in this way opens the possibility of a radical aestheticism in Spinoza's thought, one in which *all things* can become a source of intellectual joy.

Precisely such a possibility makes this account of Spinoza's aesthetics simultaneously traditional – linking up with the nexus established between contemplation and satisfaction traceable back to Aristotle and Augustine – and modern, inasmuch as the pleasure associated with contemplation would be nominalistic, no longer dependent on *the Good* or *the True* or *the Beautiful*, but a way of viewing distinct and concrete individuals: Baudelaire's rotting corpse, Duchamps' ready-mades, indeed, any individual whatever. The implication of such an aesthetics lies in the radicality of its power of affirmation. This aesthetic stance would necessarily deny the reality of the grotesque, as it would fold the affective-impulsive reaction to grotesque things into a higher-order intellectual affirmation. It would also expand the purview of the aesthetic to all individual things capable of being contemplated. Those wishing to limit the scope of the aesthetic to specific cultural techniques and practices would object to this expansive operation, which would make the aesthetic as infinite as substance itself.

This conception of the aesthetic would become operative in Spinoza's third kind of knowledge, the ideal of intuition (*scientia intuitiva*), or knowledge of individuals inasmuch they follow from the nature of God. Thus far, then, any speculative aesthetics traceable back to Spinoza would seem to lie either in an enhanced awareness of the power of the imagination (Spinoza's first kind of knowledge) or in the joy accompanying intuition (Spinoza's third kind of knowledge). Is there, however, a possible aesthetics of reason itself, of the second kind of knowledge as exemplified by the geometrical style of Spinoza's *Ethics*, which results from 'common notions' (E2P40S2) and thus belongs

decisively to the domain of philosophy? While the definition and function of 'common notions' are disputed among scholars of Spinoza – they refer variously to innate ideas that are always true (i.e. axiomatic and a priori geometrical knowledge), general physical properties (motion and rest), and properties shared by individual things[10] – there is nevertheless a manner in which common notions form a condition for textual practices and reading technologies, indeed, a decisive condition for the very form through which reason enters into concrete – finite and durational – practices.

First, the *sign* itself – not in terms of what it means or how it is interpreted, but its basal materiality, the fact that there *is* something like an immanent semiotic structure of the real to be decoded and traced – arguably belongs to the form of knowledge produced by common notions. This ontology or materiality of the sign (sign *qua* common notion) is to be differentiated from its interpretation (sign qua imagination). According to Lorenzo Vinciguerra, the concept of the trace, the vestigium, lies at the foundation of a semiotic *habitus* that pervades Spinoza's thought: '*vestigium* is built out of the common notions that are used to characterise extension (*motus, individuum*), in such a way that the *vestigia* can be considered a secondary common notion.'[11] While the interpretation of the sign belongs to the imagination, the sign as general ontological condition of knowledge belongs to reason.

If all is potentially sign for Spinoza, a problem nevertheless emerges concerning the specific form of knowledge, how knowledge can be represented in such a way that it is not subsumed under mere interpretation, mere signification. The form of Spinoza's *Ethics* presents readers with this precise problem of representation, as the communication of reason – via the geometric style of the *Ethics* itself – cannot, according to its own assignation of the sign to imagination, take place in a semiotically encoded medium. One solution is to differentiate concepts of encoding according to their degrees of epistemological adequation; Deleuze, in his interpretation of Spinoza, distinguishes essentially between a *sign* and an *expression*, where a sign is inadequate and 'grounds our obedience' and an expression 'expresses an essence... makes it known to us'.[12] According to this distinction, the *Ethics* does not signify, but expresses.

But expression, then, nevertheless adopts a textual and generic form, that specific form taken by philosophy. The genre of philosophy is to be strictly differentiated from stories and histories (*historiae*); in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the works of the prophets and the fabulists (i.e., Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*) are products of the imagination, are therefore signs requiring interpretation and contextualisation. Knowledge of imaginative texts, from fables to sacred texts (the Bible), has to be reconstructed from the history, language, customs of its people and the personalities of its authors. The epistemic value of imaginative textual forms such as those found in the Bible is to be unlocked by immanent reading technologies that do not abstract textual meaning from historical context: 'all knowledge of Scripture must be sought only from Scrip-

ture itself', but 'Scripture itself' includes its history, the proximate chain of causes that condition its production as an individuated work.[13]

However, as is evident from Spinoza's own *Ethics*, not all textual artefacts fall into this generic category. Philosophical textuality (the *Ethics*) and religious textuality (Scripture) are so epistemically different that the notion of 'text' cannot function as an overarching generic operator, as a concept that would equally apply to both textual artefacts. One is left with the striking conclusion that certain symbolic products function as *non-imaginative* sources of knowledge; they manifest textual forms that *can* be read as signs but can also be read without reference to their specific sign character, and thus subject to a non-hermeneutic process of intellection. Spinoza provides an example of such a non-hermeneutic symbolic form, a medium for 'common notions' that bypasses imaginative operations: Euclid's *Elements* (*Stoichea*). He describes this type of writing as follows:

> Euclid wrote only about things quite simple and most intelligible. Anyone can easily explain his work in any language. To grasp his intention and be certain of his true meaning we don't need a complete knowledge of the language he wrote in, but only a quite ordinary – almost childish! – knowledge. Nor do we need to know about his life, concerns and customs, or in what language, to whom and when he wrote, or the fate of his book, or its various readings, or how and by whose deliberation it was accepted.[14]

Texts that communicate 'common notions' (geometrical knowledge belongs to such common notions) demand self-consciously non-contextual reading technologies. Spinoza's *Ethics* – even though it is notoriously not straightforward or childish – would also presumably represent such a text, one that would ideally not require any form of philological-contextual reconstruction in order to grasp its veridical status. The textual form of the *Ethics*, its *more geometrico*, is that precise form designed to demonstrate the adequation of its conclusions as belonging to 'common notions'. The result is that the exegetical tradition surrounding the *Ethics* – when subjecting Spinoza's text itself to contextualisation, disambiguation, attentiveness to philological or historical detail – implicitly approaches the text as a work of the imagination rather than the intellect. Strictly speaking, then, there can be no faithful interpretation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, as interpretation would signal an infidelity to the epistemic status claimed by the text itself, a testimony to its irreducible sign-character.

In this betrayal, however, there lies a higher-order fidelity, namely, to the power of the book itself as an individuated entity that seeks to persevere in its being, as endowed with a *conatus*. To the extent that one *can* read the text genetically and interpretively – *semiotically* – one treats the book as an image capable of flourishing. Spinoza's book is a special book; it perseveres in its being (its *conatus*) and flourishes according to its own individual essence

inasmuch as it desires the flourishing of all things. Spinoza writes, 'The more an image is joined with other images, the more often it flourishes' (E5P13). The book provides an intellectual blueprint for the conjoining of images by leading readers to an intellection of the idea of nature. The idea of nature expresses this maximal binding of images, an absolute flourishing: 'The Mind can bring it about that all the Body's affections, or images of things, are related to the idea of God' (E5P14). The textual form of reason – the generation of knowledge through 'common notions', if the *Ethics* is emblematic of this operation – thus harbours an absolute imaginative imperative. Because of its deduction of the power of the intellect as that which binds all images – and an ontology in which perfection is equated with this maximal power of binding – there has perhaps been no more ambitious textual dedication to the infinite flourishing of images than the one produced by the 'common notions' of the *Ethics*.

IV. THE REDEMPTION OF THE AESTHETIC

There remains another dimension of the aesthetic to explore in the speculative reconstruction of Spinoza's aesthetics. Spinoza's ontology and epistemology culminate in an ethical *askesis*, in the production of a human type: the philosopher who knows nature and loves God in as adequate a manner as is possible given human finitude. To what extent is art as a socially productive practice compatible with the character of the wise person who embodies the ideals associated with philosophical truth? What happens when the philosopher becomes an artist?

As Moira Gatens notes, the closest figure to the artist in Spinoza's works is that of the prophet. The prophet communicates in stories, is endowed with a vivid imagination, and is capable of generating, in the best of cases, true moral insight – or in the worst of cases, blind obedience and corruption – through these stories.[15] The prophet, however, whose domain is faith and revelation, is not a philosopher, whose domain is truth. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza argues for an irreducible gap between philosophy and faith: 'the foundations of Philosophy are common notions, and [its truth] must be sought only from nature. But the foundations of Faith are histories and language, and [those foundations] must be sought only from Scripture and revelation'.[16] While philosophy and theology as discursive forms are thus rigidly differentiated and seemingly mutually exclusive, each posit distinctive representatives who embody their ideal types as respective generators of expressive and semiotic forms: the philosopher and the prophet. Each has their domain of effective power, but the two shall never coincide.

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* nevertheless entertains the possibility of an individual who unites philosophical ideals and aesthetic practices, a figure who connects intuition (*scientia intuitiva*) with the production of signs as obscure imaginative forms demanding interpretation: Christ,

who taught 'revelations. . . obscurely, and quite frequently through parables'.[17] Spinoza's Christ is a philosophical thought experiment, at one and the same time an ideal of truth and a problematic exceptional figure. It is difficult, for example, to reconcile Spinoza's claim that Christ had a direct, mind-to-mind access to moral truths of reason – which 'were revealed [to him] immediately – without words or visions' – with the rigorous naturalism of Spinoza's thought. Unlike other human beings, Christ represents an ideal of knowledge that does not seem to have emerged *from* the imagination.[18] Spinoza's Christ is nonetheless intended to be fully immanent in and of nature: Spinoza believes he was human, was never resurrected, and never performed miracles that would contravene the necessary natural order.

Spinoza's Christ nevertheless appears to embody a highly improbable epistemological ideal.[19] Rather than regard the idealisation of Christ as a form of strategic outreach to radical Christian communities potentially more amenable to Spinoza's heterodox ideas,[20] Spinoza's Christ is perhaps better grasped as a significant philosophical thought experiment: the positing of a philosophical type who simultaneously embodies adequate truth (the universal validity of basic moral insights compatible with reason), the aesthetic (obscure imaginative production), and a form of political and cultural power transcending state sovereignty (Christ 'was sent, not to preserve the state and institute laws, but to teach the one universal law').[21]

While the doctrines of the philosopher-teacher (Christ) can have the effect of preserving the state and its laws, the legitimacy of these doctrines bypasses the power of the state and acts of legislation. However, it is not just that the validity of Christ's moral insights is *extra-legal*. More radically, the manner in which Christ's universal moral maxims (loving one's neighbour and God, for example) enter the horizon of cultural validity – through congregations of private individuals – happens to coincide with a suspension of state power; the apostles preach their religion by virtue of the power of Christ 'against the will of those who had sovereignty'.[22] Christ thus models a form of political power, namely, a practice of reason and religion *external to sovereignty* (outside the state's laws and norms), as a reserve of insight that can feed back into political formations via obscure forms of speech.

As a thought experiment, Christ thus conjoins philosophical, aesthetic, and political operations. This thought experiment provides the most significant source in Spinoza's philosophy for a *genesis of the aesthetic*, namely, in the emergence of obscure symbolic forms *from* absolutely rational understanding. While Christ represents an epistemological and an ethical ideal, he thus simultaneously gestures at the possibility of an aesthetic ideal: a philosopher-poet of reason who seeks the proper imaginative (discursive) form in which to convey extra-imaginative (non-discursive) truth. It is this precise problem that occupies German poets and philosophers around 1800; indeed, Spinoza's Christ models a signifying practice for what could be called a *mythology of reason* in the words of the *Oldest System Program* of Hegel, Hölderlin and

Schelling. According to Spinoza's account, Christ's knowledge emerges without medium, neither through imagination nor through common notions, as a form of knowledge stemming from direct intuition rather than discursive form; as one who transmits this knowledge, however, he *becomes medium*. Christ thus still functions for Spinoza as a mediator of the divine (God or nature), in the human form of a knowledge that transcends the human: 'And in this sense we can also say that God's Wisdom, that is, a Wisdom surpassing human wisdom, assumed a human nature in Christ, and that Christ was the way to salvation.'[23] This embodied wisdom, indeed, the idea of salvation itself, contains as a necessary moment the externalisation of knowledge into forms that can best be absorbed by the multitude.

Seen from this vantage point, Christ, as philosophical thought experiment, represents an ideal that inverts the genetic sequence of philosophical knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*. Where the epistemic thrust of Spinoza's *Ethics* moves from the imagination to reason and finally to intuition, Christ models the inverse movement, namely from intuition back into products of the imagination.

While Christ thus represents a distinctive form of imaginative practice that could be considered aesthetic – insofar as it manifests itself in narrative form, in the form of parables – this practice distinguishes itself from the aesthetics of prophecy in important ways. First, Christ is not a prophet, but a philosopher: 'Christ was not so much a prophet as the Mouth of God'.[24] Being the 'Mouth of God' entails speaking *immanently in nature* on behalf *of nature*. Unlike the prophets, Christ 'perceived things truly and adequately'.[25] Second, as mentioned previously, the source of Christ's knowledge does not pass through the imagination: 'if Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man usually does with a companion (i.e., by means of their two bodies), Christ, indeed, communicated with God mind to mind'.[26] *Mind to mind* knowledge of God – which is another way of saying adequate knowledge, as the 'mind' of God expresses adequate ideas of nature – alludes to Spinoza's third kind of knowledge, *scientia intuitiva*, inasmuch as it bypasses images and signs.[27] Third, although Christ embodies an ideal of knowledge located purely in the mind, this intuitive knowledge manifests itself in embodied agency; the embodiment of intuitive knowledge follows from Spinoza's notion that the mind is an 'idea of the body' (what philosophers call Spinoza's parallelism, E2P13). When the mind thinks, something happens in the body that parallels this thought. Fourth, the embodied action operating in parallel with intuitive knowledge expresses itself in imaginative-aesthetic practices commensurate with political agency: in the demonstration of ethical knowledge autonomous from the state and conveyed in an aesthetic form (the *parable*) fitting the constitution of the multitude and at the same time respecting the autonomy of the multitude.

The possibility of a *philosophical aesthetics* in the *Theological-Political Treatise* – an aesthetic productivity that results from a properly philosophical

form of cognition – is thus entangled with problems of cultural and political power. Christ, and by extension, the particular form of imaginative productivity he signifies, exhibits a tense relation to sovereign power, or the state *qua* sovereign: Christ's doctrines must simultaneously be commensurate with a form of obedience *to the state* (proclaiming the overriding right of sovereign authority with respect to its power); signal an independent form of discourse outside the state (*autonomous* with respect to the state by virtue of Christ's own power); and performatively enact a transgressive form of action operating in contravention of the state (against the state by virtue of a form of collective organisation drawing upon Christ's power).

At the first level, that of obedience, Spinoza writes: 'we are bound by God's command to cherish everyone, without exception, in accordance with piety',[28] and following this decree, 'no one can practice piety rightly, nor obey God, unless he obeys all the decrees of the supreme 'power'.[29] Christ, insofar as he is the 'Mouth of God', must teach a form of piety in accordance with obedience to sovereign power.

At the second level, that of autonomy, however, Christ practices a form of speech that transcends the institutions of a particular state, teaching the validity of doctrines *external to relations of sovereignty*: Christ 'did not institute laws as a lawgiver; instead as a teacher he taught lessons, because... he did not want to correct external actions so much as the heart'.[30] The parables of Christ represent a signifying form through which this emendation of the heart (a transformation of the subject) can be effected – a transformation that does not conflict with the state, but operates relatively autonomously *from* the state by articulating truths irreducible to the particularity of a nation, a polity, or specific cultural norms.

At the third level, that of disobedience or resistance, Spinoza notes that the followers of Christ taught religion as 'private men who were accustomed for a long time – against the will of those who had sovereignty and whose subjects they were – ... to manage everything by themselves, and to make decrees without any concern of the sovereign'.[31] The legitimacy of this contravention of state power is grounded 'by right of the 'power [*potestas*] they'd received from Christ over impure spirits (see Matthew 10.1)'.[32] Christ's power of action justifies disobedience in this particular instance, thereby seeming to directly contradict Spinoza's demand that everyone acting in accordance with reason is bound to obey sovereign power. However, Spinoza conveys Christ's suspension of sovereign power as an exception, the implications of which he immediately seeks to mitigate:

> I explicitly warned that everyone is bound to keep faith even with a Tyrant, except someone to whom God, by a certain revelation, had promised special aid against the Tyrant. So no one is allowed to take this as an example, unless he also has the 'power [*potestas*] to perform miracles.[33]

Spinoza, as is well known, denies the possibility of supernatural miracles as violations of the necessary order of nature. When he draws attention to the suspension of sovereign power as something justified by 'the power to perform miracles', this conception of a miracle must indicate an action revelatory of the necessary order of nature rather than an exception to the order of nature. The miracle of Christ in this instance could refer to 'the separate revelation' of intuitive knowledge itself – the source from which all his doctrines and actions flow. Spinoza, against the explicit directives of his own thought, assigns a revolutionary function to Christ's specific manifestation of intuitive knowledge. In so doing, he simultaneously politicises the aesthetic potential of the obscure speech of the Christian parable, which coheres variously with different paradigms of political agency: art as obedience to sovereign power; as autonomy from sovereign power; and as disruption of sovereign power. The thought experiment exemplified by Christ not only makes aesthetic productivity flow from intuitive knowledge, but makes this form of aesthetic production oscillate among different attitudes to political power.

Two different forms of political agency manifest themselves in Christ's obscure speech, or aesthetic action flowing from intuition. First, the aesthetic can take a stand against sovereign power by virtue of the power of its own intellection. Second, the aesthetic can express itself in forms irreducible to relations of domination. To be sure, Christ's expression of philosophical truth manifests itself not only in parables, but in doctrines (' *a man who strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also* [Matthew 5:39ff.]').[34] Such pronouncements take the form of injunctions, and thereby seem to exercise dominion. However, Spinoza claims that these utterances are not real commands or injunctions, but the words of a teacher, words seeking to correct the heart and the mind. The decree resembling that of a law emerges from a strategic concern, namely, to speak 'to oppressed men, who were living in a corrupt republic, where justice was completely neglected'.[35] Christ's parables are political acts of liberation that attend to their strategic rhetorical forms in the attempt to bypass dominion through their power of affirmation; only in seeming injunctions or in obscure forms of speech can truth be communicated to those whose mentality has been deformed by the corruption of their republics, to those exhibiting a diminished power of action (passivity) stemming from a prior indoctrination. The form taken by speech proclaiming truth – aesthetic form, in this instance, via the obscurity of the parable – appears as the appropriate response to the diminished power of the multitude:

> Christ, therefore, perceived the things revealed truly and adequately. If he ever prescribed them as laws, he did this because of the people's ignorance and stubbornness. So in this respect he acted in place of God, because he accommodated himself to the mentality of the people. That's why, although he spoke somewhat more clearly than the other Prophets, he still taught these revela-

> tions obscurely, and quite frequently through parables, especially when he was speaking to those to whom it was not yet given to understand the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 13:10 etc.). But doubtless when he was speaking to those to whom it was given to know the mysteries of the heavens, he taught things as eternal truths and did not prescribe them as laws. In this way he freed them from bondage to the law. Nevertheless, he [didn't abolish the law for them, but] confirmed and established it more firmly, and wrote it thoroughly in their hearts.[36]

The imaginative or signifying form taken by *scientia intuitiva* (knowing things 'truly and adequately') is channeled into a mode of communication that best activates the community of the oppressed. Aesthetic form flowing from the truth of intuition thus exhibits three tendencies: it provides a mediation of moral truths informed by adequate knowledge that is otherwise inaccessible to the multitude, and is thus politically conditioned, strategic speech (*sign* rather than *expression*); it nevertheless seeks to activate the heart and the mind rather than declaring laws and injunctions, and thus seeks to bypass forms of dominion associated with sovereign power; and finally, it has a destabilising effect on all other mythologising forms, namely those based on convention, ceremony, or authority.

The aim of obscure speech flowing from adequate knowledge and of philosophical discourse has the same goal, a goal that Spinoza attributes to Christ: to 'free all equally from bondage to the law, so that they would no longer act well because of the Law's commandment, but because of a constant decision of the heart'.[37] This constant 'decision of the heart' is nothing other than the higher-order bondage to the laws of nature. The model of aesthetic truth coming to light here culminates in an un-conditioning of the multitude from the law of convention and authority in order to bind them to the law of that which is itself unconditioned and without limit. As the necessity of nature itself is free, autonomous, self-determined and self-determining, the bondage of the mind (the heart) to nature generated in philosophical discourse and in the imaginative works of Christ represents an absolute emancipatory ideal.

CONCLUSION

This particular genesis of the aesthetic – the aesthetic as a form of obscurity itself produced by and required by rationality, as light that must beget its own form of darkness in order to increase its luminosity – unites Spinoza's affirmative philosophy of individuation with a critical potential. While Spinoza's philosophy suggests multiple possible directions for a speculative aesthetics, many of which have been explored in this paper, one of the most significant achievements of a speculative reconstruction of Spinoza's aesthetics consists in uniting an infinitely affirmative and generative appreciation for individuated forms with a sense of emancipatory urgency for those living in times

of darkness. The thought experiment of the emancipatory philosopher-poet (Christ) explores a paradigm of affirmative aesthetic productivity invested with an ethical and a political task: to make salvation – living in accordance with epistemically adequate ideals of wisdom that maximise joy and one's power of action – available to all. There is no prescribed aesthetic form that would correspond to this task, neither the epic, nor the tragedy, nor the novel, as the criterion for such aesthetic form would not be dictated in advance, but emergent according to the transformative capacity that such aesthetic forms might effect within a population.

The crux of this aesthetic philosophy lies in the *ascetic* dimensions of a veridical aesthetics, i.e., in the capacity of imaginative works, common notions, or embodiments of intuition to function as exercises in accessing and activating truth, whether in the obscure parables of Christ or in the geometrical style of the *Ethics*. While Spinoza differentiates himself from Christ in the degree of adequation of his knowledge – Spinoza notes, at the end of the *Treatise*, that he is human and thus can err – the philosopher, like Christ, still undertakes a quest for the expressive and imaginative forms through which the infinity of the totality of nature can enter into the fabric of the social world and thereby reconfigure the relation of subjects to one another. If the task of the philosopher is to see the world 'under the aspect of eternity', this very view can re-enter the temporal world – flowing from eternity back into duration – through the cultivation of a veridical aesthetics. Such a re-entry into the world would orient itself around ideals of emancipation simultaneously intellectual and political, and it is here that the particularity of Spinoza's aesthetics is to be found: a critical aesthetics in the service of a politics of joy, devoid of resentment and hatred, open to all. If there is a genesis of the aesthetic in Spinoza's philosophical writings, such is the picture of the world that it would seek to bring into being.

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NOTES

[1]See Gatens 2015; Gatens and Uhlmann 2020; Montag 2020; Sparrow 2010; Sparrow 2011; and Romagni 2021.

[2]Parenthetical citations of Spinoza's *Ethics* will refer as necessary to parts, postulates, definitions, appendices, and scholia in Curley's edition of Spinoza's *Collected Works* (Spinoza 1985).

[3]Spinoza describes the different kinds of knowledge in E2P40S2.

[4]Spinoza 1925, 301.

[5]Spinoza 1985, 38.

[6]See Gatens 2015.

[7]See Sparrow 2010 and 2011.

[8]James 2010, 267.

[9]Romagni 2021, 471. Special thanks to Jason Yonover for drawing my attention to Romagni's contribution.

[10]See Tóth 2017, who argues that the second kind of knowledge extends to dietetics (and by extension to physiological aesthetics) and facilitates the capacity to hold 'numerous adequate ideas simultane-

ously' (54).

[11]Lorenzo Vinciguerra 2021, 477.

[12]Deleuze 1992, 57.

[13]Spinoza 2016, 172.

[14]Spinoza 2016, 185.

[15]Gatens 2015.

[16]Spinoza 2016, 271.

[17]Spinoza 2016, 134.

[18]Spinoza 2016, 84.

[19]For some of the problems that plague Spinoza's picture of Christ – some of which result from problems concerning Spinoza's epistemology in general (i.e. is it possible for finite minds to acquire adequate ideas if this knowledge is generated by something external to it?), and some of which are specific to Christ of the TTP (why does Spinoza believe the Bible's claim that Christ communicates with God mind-to-mind?), see Della Rocca 2008, 246-491.

[20]See Israel 2016, 122.

[21]Spinoza 2016, 140.

[22]Spinoza 2016, 338.

[23]Spinoza 2016, 84.

[24]Spinoza 2016, 133.

[25]Spinoza 2016, 133.

[26]Spinoza 2016, 85.

[27]See James 2012, 109.

[28]Spinoza 2016, 337.

[29]Spinoza 2016, 337. Supreme 'power refers to a form of power conferring legitimacy via institutions, *potestas* rather than *potentia*. ('*power* with the apostrophe preceding it is used to indicate *potestas* rather than *potentia* in Curley's translation).

[30]Spinoza 2016, 177.

[31]Spinoza 2016, 342.

[32]Spinoza 2016, 338.

[33]Spinoza 2016, 338.

[34]Spinoza 2016, 177.

[35]Spinoza 2016, 177.

[36]Spinoza 2016, 133-4.

[37]Spinoza 2016, 121-2.

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