The *Ingenium* of a People, Common Language and Imagination in the Philosophical-Political Thought of Baruch Spinoza

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Abstract

This article reviews some central philosophical theses on the philosophical-political thought of Baruch Spinoza in relation to language, imagination and the *ingenium* of a collectivity, in order to establish how common imaginary makes possible the existence of a political community. We will focus on Spinozist considerations on prophecy, the prophet and the *Holy Scriptures* to analyze the political and moral purpose of the *Holy Scriptures*, and the role of the prophet in the communal configuration of the Hebrew people. Finally, we propose, following Spinozist thought and other theorists on sociability, a way of understanding the constitution of communal bodies (or community).

Keywords: Ingenium; Language; Imagination; Community; Affective Theory; Spinoza

Abbreviations: TT-P: Tractatus Theologico-Politicus; Eth: *Ethica; TP:* Tractatus Politicus; G: Gebhatrdt.

Introduction

Signs and Language

Language is linked to everything that is not rational: words (which are bodily movements), memory and images. Language is inserted in the field of the body, in the images and signs of the body. The Signs are not constant or fixed, as they are characterized by *variability*, *associativity* and *equivocity*. Spinoza recognizes the *variability* of the sign when he affirms that in order to interpret the *Holy Scriptures* correctly, it is necessary to know life, customs, perceptions and *ingenium* of their authors (*TT-P*, Ch. VII; *G*, III, p. 102).[1] The signs used

by the prophets to communicate God's word to Hebrew people vary according to the context of the prophet and his temperament. If, as Deleuze affirms: "everyone claims a sign" [1], the prophet in uttering the signs does not reveal the divine nature, but the relation between the sign and his own nature, what it means prophecy is an adaptation of the sign to the *ingenium* of the prophet.

This variability is due to the chains of association (images, words, affects) where sign is found and depending on the nature of the chain, the sign varies. According to this, Spinoza, referring to the miracle, states that in order to interpretate the "miraculous stories" it is necessary to know the opinions of both: the first men who told them and those who transmitted them afterwards in writing. A distinction must be made between opinions and things as they were presented to the senses (*TT-P*, Ch. VI; *G*, III, p. 92).

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1 To cite Spinoza's work, use the *Opera* (Gebhatrdt, abbreviated: *G*), specifying the volume and page. The following is the abbreviation we will use for the works of Spinoza worked on in this paper: *Tractatus Theologico-*

*Politicu*s (*TT-P*); *Ethica (Eth.); Tractatus Politicus* (*TP*)

Language is the associative chain in which signs are found, and cannot be thought of except at the level of relations between words that refer to relations between things. These associative chains are, as Spinoza points out in the scholium of proposition XVIII of *Ethica* II referring to memory, a *certain concatenation* of ideas *involving* the nature of external things. Now, this concatenation is not produced by the nature of things themselves, but according to the concatenation of the affections that occur in human bodies. Spinoza's emphasis here is important: he does not speak of the concatenation of ideas that explain the nature of things, but only how concatenation *implies them*. Therefore, language is a product of the concatenation of ideas according to affections, not according to understanding.

Associativity as a characteristic of the sign helps to explain, not the nature of a thing, but, for example, why "horse" means something to a peasant and something else to a soldier. The cause of this variation in the meaning of the word ("horse") is that the associative affective chains are different in the two men.

The equivocity of the sign unveils diverse meanings or senses of the signs. According to Deleuze, this equivocity appears in a determinant way in theology, which explains the central problem in the interpretation of the *Scriptures*. The signs have two dimensions: on the one hand, the everyday dimension that reflects the relationship of the sign with things; and on the other hand, the extreme dimension that reveals the relationship with God (within this dimension are the signs of prophets, preachers and theologians).

Signs, in turn, are constituted by three types: signs-perceptions (or indicatives) that designate the affection of an external body on a body. These signs of affections say more about the nature of the affected body and not as much from the body that causes affection (*Eth*., II, prop. XVI, coroll. 2; *G*, II, 104). In this case, the thing is presented as separate from its efficient cause: this is the case of the example of the sun given by Spinoza (*Eth*., II, prop. XXXV, school; *G*, II, 117). In addition, there are imperative-signs that arise from finalistic prejudices and are found in all morals that employ devices of rewards and punishments. Finally, the interpretative-signs that use memory to revive things, that is to say, they use the sign of one thing for the consideration of another. This is the case of the soldier who seeing the tracks of a horse on the path, conceives the horse to conceive afterward the rider, and from this interpretation can conceive war (*Eth*., II, prop. XVIII, school; *G*, II, 107).

Prophetic Power and Language

What is the relationship between prophetic power and language? Prophecy or revelation, according to Spinoza, is a certainty knowledge of a thing that was revealed by God to men by means of words or figures (real or imaginary) (*TT-P*, Ch. I; *G*, III, 19). According to Pierre-François Moreau, the difference between the prophets (and therefore between their words and their figures) is due to the temperament or character of the prophets, i.e. the difference does not involve a historical element, only a difference in the singular *ingenium* [2]. However, although there are differences among the prophets, it is also true that there are characteristics they share: their imagination is at the service of charity and justice (*TT-P*, Ch. II; *G*, III, 99). In this case, there would be a valuation of the prophet in the ethical sphere, but a devaluation in the rational sphere, since the certainty of the prophets is not mathematical, but only moral (*TT-P*, Ch. II; *G*, III, 32). As Moreau points out, after chapter XVII of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, piety and justice are no longer qualities peculiar to the prophet, but are characters of the Scriptures themselves; in turn, in chapter XVIII, using the example of the Hebrew people, piety and justice are put into practice by the State [2]. Following the argumentative scheme above, piety and justice as indicative of the prophet change to a virtue of the State. There is an exploration of the ethical realm on the field of history and politics. The relationship between prophet and language is given by the affective association of both: the prophet (his temperament, the constitution of the body and even his office[2]) and the complexion of the community to which the prophet speaks. It is no longer the prophet who calls for justice and charity, it is the State itself that does so.

Revelation only exists where a community believes in divine justice and, therefore, the need arises for the existence of explicit norms understood for all its members. In this case, there are two ways in which God addresses men: on the one hand, God speaks to men's hearts. The norms enunciated here are of a universal character and are not mediated by the transmission of the prophet, but by the common notions that men have and make them sensitive to justice and charity. This does not automatically make men just or charitable, but the representation of the just and charitable that allows them to recognize just and charitable actions (even if they do not practice them). On the other hand, God can reveal himself in a particular way at a particular time, and it is here that the intermediation of the prophet is necessary [2]. This revelation has a particular validity, since it is given to a people at a specific historical moment.

What is the function of revelation? If the prophet is

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2   Spinoza makes it clear that office plays a fundamental role in prophecy when he speaks of the story of Joshua, for Joshua and whoever wrote the story of the stopping of the sun, believed that the sun revolved around the earth. Joshua, being a soldier and not an astronomer, ignored the true cause of the prolongation of the day (*TT-P*, Ch. II; *G*, III, 36).

not a man of understanding, but he is a man with strong imagination, the purpose of the prophetic discourse is to strengthen certain affections by means of figures and words. He seeks to configure a certain praxis within the community, and it can only be configured where the prophetic word is seen as an authority (in short, in a community that believes that God speaks to certain men). Hence, one of the aspects of the Spinozist method for the study of the biblical text is related with the analysis not only of the person who writes the text, but also of the audience to whom it is addressed (*TT-P*, Ch. VII; *G*, III, 101).

Now, if in Spinoza happiness is related to true knowledge, which is intellectual and not imaginary, it must be said that the biblical text has a political function rather than an ethical function. In the sense, this is what provides authority to the prophets and to those who administer the law given by God: the text guarantees the practice of justice and charity through obedience to the Law. The sacralization of the biblical text, which is produced by multiple categories deployed within it, is a political simulacrum which, does not allow to see the historical origin of the text, and therefore of the revelation and the theology that can be derived from the historical text. This guarantees an exercise of power by those intermediaries between God and men (prophet, theologian or priest) (Chaui, 2012, p. 53). This assures the exercise of power when laws that call for charity and justice cease to be political-religious norms and become universal ethical norms (based on abstract values) that guarantee their survival beyond the context in which they were constructed [2].[3]

With respect to sacralization, Spinoza points out that for the study of the Scriptures it is necessary to reconstruct the history of the books that compose them, and this reconstruction takes into account the recognition of their sacred character first by a few people, and then by the whole community (*TT-P*, Ch. VII; *G*, III, 101). There is a historical, but also a theological-political context of sacralization. This is revealed by Spinoza when he alludes to three similar stories: Enraged Orlando, Perseus and Elias; the first is considered a humorous story, the second a political story and the last a sacred story (*TT-P*, Ch. VII; *G*, III, 110).

The prophet is for Spinoza a man of imagination, this is a man who transmits the word of God through words or figures. One could be said that the double analysis, at the beginning of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicu*s, on prophecy and the prophet is due not only to the interest in studying

the instruments by which God manifested himself to men, as Moreau points out [2], but also to show that the effects of the imagination, in this case of language, arise from the particular constitution of the body (singular and political) and of the spirit.[4] In this perspective, Antonio Negri affirms that the first six books of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicu*s attempt to identify the level of reality that is constituted by the imagination (or constitution of modal reality) [3]. The imagination of a community has a political power that constitutes the reality that is expressed through laws and institutions. Thus, it could be said that the imagination that occurs in the prophetic discourse is a function of the production and maintenance of a particular social order that is a guarantee of the institution and duration of the community.

Biblical Hermeneutics and Political Analysis of the Community

The *Holy Scriptures* are the expression of the imagination of the Hebrew people at a given time, which is instituted as a community only when the covenant with God is given, since no community is the work of nature because nature only produces individuals (*TT-P*. Ch. XVII; *G*, III, 217). In this case it is the law that institutes the community. Hence, the philological, hermeneutical and historical analysis of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicu*s allows us to interpret, in the stories that the Hebrews themselves make of themselves, the meanings or senses that have constituted them as a community. The community would be the field of production (a composite and productive body) of meaning. Hence, the importance of a historical reading in order to understand this field of production that made it possible to conceive and write the biblical text. It is important to note here that in chapter VII of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicu*s, where Spinoza explains the method he will use for his analysis of the Scriptures, he states clearly that what matters to him is to investigate the meanings (and not the truth) of each sentence, taking into account the habitual way of speaking of the Hebrew people (hence the importance of a philological and not a philosophical analysis).

Et quia omnes tam Veteris, quam Novi Testamenti scriptores Hebraei fuerunt, certum est, Historiam linguae Hebraicae prae ómnibus necessariam esse, non tantum ad intelligentiam librorum Veteris Testamenti, qui hac lingua scripti sunt, sed etiam Novi. (*TT-P*, Ch. VII; *G*, III, 100)

On this aspect, Spinoza affirms that if a word cannot be interpreted in its literal sense, or given a different meaning by the use of language, judgment must be suspended (*TT-P*, Ch.

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3   On the sacralization of the text, Spinoza affirms in chapter VII of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicu*s that the divinity of Scripture is given by the exclusive content that is given in it. It is the moral teachings given in Scripture that make it divine (*TT-P*, Ch. VII; *G,* III, 99).

4   Confront Spinoza's letter XVII (*G*, IV, 77).

VII; *G*, III, 101). This way of proceeding is different from that of the dogmatic philosophers, such as Moses Maimonides, who read the Scriptures under the shadow of philosophy.

Spinoza adopts the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* (*TT-P*, Ch. VII; *G*, III, 99), since the categories that operate within the *Scriptures* (revelation, prophecy, prophet, for example) "[...] create the field of intelligibility of the discourse therein" (Chaui, 2012, p. 31). Thus, through the study and understanding of the biblical text it is possible to know the singular essence of a community (the Hebrew, for example) and the revealed religion, and this understanding supposes a study and understanding of the images elaborated by the community itself (Chaui, 2012, p. 39).

Language, seen as a chain of images, will show its communitarian dimension, since these images, as it was seen above, are produced in a community that has particular affections. For example, on this aspect Pierre-François Moreau warns that words are formed according to the *multitudo*: the use of positive and negative words will mark this particularity, because according to everyday language finite beings are more thinkable than infinite beings, although the former have less reality than the latter, and therefore the latter do not entail any real negation. Why is this so? It is because positive names are given to the realities that are observed on a daily basis, and as opposed to the imperishable realities, negative names are given to them. In this perspective, the language of the *multitudo* is arbitrary and contrasts with the rational order [4].

Habit and memory (which are within the sphere of everyday life) produce the sphere of language: the chain of associativity that is produced *in* and *by* the affective chains that occur according to one's own nature or to an external order that is imposed by means of images. This would be the case of the order of signs that are presented in a story and that is intended to influence the actions of individuals. It is the case of prophetic or religious discourse. Now, habits are necessary for the constitution of language, since there is no similarity between the things it relates, there is no similarity between "horse" and "war"; nor is there similarity between the sound or calligraphy "*pomum*" and the apple found on a tree. It is the biography of a person or a people, and the constant union between two (or more) elements that allows such association [4]. Now, in the case of the Roman citizen who associates "*pomum*" with the apple he observes on a tree, this association is of a collective nature, since the association already existed before the individual has made numerous observations. This is of the utmost importance: how can subsist an arbitrary connection, i.e. particular and affective, and not logical, between two (or more) things? The subsistence of the connection is given thanks to the stability generated by the "collective use" of an associative

chain [4]. Although language is not conform to rational or logical principles, it does conform to the "use of life", that is, words or signs do not only refer to images, but to systems of oppositions, derivations and vital marks that are the same associative chains we have spoken of before [4]. Hence, in the analysis carried out in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicu*s, the ordinary use of a word makes it possible to know the meaning of a word used in the biblical text.

Ingenium, Common Affection and Community Life

What makes this associative chain possible? The *ingenium* of a community (*ingenium gentis*) can be translated as the determinations of the community, which make it a singular thing, and it is differentiated from another community. Therefore, a necessary element when it comes to understanding its laws, its ways of life and its texts (they have the characteristic of non-universality). In this perspective, Spinoza's criticism in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicu*s is directed towards those who want to use the Hebrew Theocratic State as a political model to legitimize monarchical power.

The *ingenium* of a community is caused by "tendencies" that are reinforced by certain historical events, laws and institutions. Let us recall that by *ingenuim* Spinoza means a configuration of images, ideas and affections that depend on an individual's own constitution, and that would determine the latter's judgment with respect to the good, for example. These tendencies can be found in potential, since the institution of the community and historical circumstances intensify them or turn them into a common character. This is the case, for example, of the violent *ingenium* of the Romans who owe the foundation of the city to a violent act (the murder of Remus at the hands of Romulus) [4]. Hence, to know the *ingenium* we do not only have to to know the natural tendencies of individuals or the community, but to know its institution, its origin. We are not speaking here of a mythical-foundational moment, but of a tendency that transits and is reproduced in the constitutive moment of a community.

If the imagination of a man and of a community is an affective production, in order to speak of "common imagination" one must speak of "common affection". It can be said that the "common affection" is the efficient cause or operator of the community, since it is this that makes a community have its own consistency, besides being part of its *ingenium* [5].

The idea of community has been inscribed in a reflection on the identity that presupposes all types of political organization; this idea postulates an already given order

as the foundation of sociability. For example, the idea of "national community" presupposes the "State" as an expression of a territory, a population and sovereign power: there is no community (nation) without a State. The concord among the individuals who constitute the community only occurs where there is State coercive power. This idea is in detriment of any communitarian constitution that is thought beyond the State [6].

On the other hand, there are political theories that find the foundation of the community in free association, that is, the will of men to associate themselves. This is the case of Ferdinand Tönnies' theory of community in which the will is seen as a rational faculty for understanding with others, since it is the will that is the cause of all human behavior. Tönnies' theory states that human wills interact in various ways and tend toward mental and physical well-being [7].

These ways of conceiving the community point to a process of sociability that comes from "above", the coercive power of the State, or from "below", the power of the will of individuals. Exogenous action, on the one hand, and endogenous action on the other. Is it possible to think of a different communal flow? Spinoza would answer yes: it is neither the coercive power of the state nor the will of individuals that shapes the community, for on the one hand power does not come only from above, but the community must be thought of as the power of the *multitudo*. The community exceeds the concept of society, since the latter would be either a name for a group of individuals or an advanced organism in which individuals are conglomerates, and whose growth entails an extension of its complexity and structure (Spencer, 2004). And on the other hand, what is composed is not a society or conglomerate of individuals, but the common affections of a *multitudo*, that is to say, what is produced with the constitution of a community are not the selfish and calculated relations between individuals who decided to live together or receive the external determination Sstate coercion) to remain in society respecting an initial pact. In this sense, Spinoza, speaking of the monarchy, affirms:

Deinde notandum, quod in jaciendis fundamentis maxime humanos affectus observare necesse est, nec ostendisse sufficit quid oporteat fieri, sed apprime qui fieri possit, ut homines, sive affectu sive ratione ducantur, jura tamen rata fixaque habe ant. Nam si imperii jura, sive libertas publica, solo invalido legume auxilio nitatur, non tantum nulla ejus obtinendae erit civibus securitas, ut art. 3 cap. praec. ostendimus, sed etiam exitio erit. (*TP*, VII, § 2; G, III, 308)

This common affection that is composed and constituted by community has as mechanism the emulation of which Spinoza speaks in Article XXXIII of the Definition of the

Affections (*G,* II, 200). Emulation is born from the imagination of considering the affection of a thing which it is considered similar, this sort of imagination makes one feel a similar affection (*simili affectu*) (*Eth*., III, prop. XXVII; *G*, III, 159). The consideration of the similarity of a thing to one's own nature is at the basis of the "sympathy" and "antipathy" that are the cause of loving or hating certain things: things similar to others that produce joy will arouse the sympathy of men; on the contrary, those that resemble those that produce sadness will arouse hatred (*Eth*., III, prop. XV, schol; *Eth*., III, prop. XVI, demonstration; *G*, II, 151-153). The common affection is that which is shared by the human beings of a community and configures the ideas of "good," "evil," "beauty," "ugliness," among others; it also constitutes what is desirable, what is useful, what is bad, what is indigestible, what destroys a community. However, Alexandre Matheron points out that this similarity does not necessarily lead to harmony, since in many cases it is counterproductive: if two men, because of affective imitation, desire the same thing, and these things are not divisible (power, land, etc.), rivalries and seditions will be generated [8].

This common element is studied by Frédéric Lordon [5] through the notion of *Imperium*. For Lordon the common is the right and power of the *multitudo*, and this right is expressed in the production of affects and the capacity of self-affecting, that is, the *multitudo* is self-affecting by deploying its own power. The *multitudo*, as a thing without a pre-established form, produces a common affection by self-affecting and it is in this action ceases to be something "without a definite form" to become something determined under a common affection. The imperium or State is produced in the self-affective exercise of the *multitudo*. The State, thus, is seen as the product of a phase transition.

Why do individuals adapt to certain customs, why do they respect certain authorities and not others, why do they follow the implicit or explicit indications of institutions? Because all institutional forms produce something for them, they affect them. And because this power to affect on a large scale has a place only on the basis of this deposit of power on a large scale, the one offered by the multitude itself; a deposit to which, taking Durkheim as a basis, another name can be given: the social [9].

According to this, all authority (State or institutional) is produced in the strength of the *multitudo*: political power is the power of the *multitudo* that can be held by one man, some or all, according to a unanimous agreement.

Hoc jus, quod multitudinis potentia definitur, imperium appellari solet. Atque hoc is absolute tenet, qui curam reipublicae ex communi consensu habet, nempe jura statuendi, interpretandi et abolendi, urbes muniendi, de

bello et pace decernendi, etc. (*TP*, II, § 17; *G*, III, 282)

The common affection that gives consistency to the *multitudo*, and by which it becomes a community, produces a surplus in the parts (the individuals); this is why the community cannot properly be called "society", for it is not the union of individuals, but the whole that is larger than its parts, that is to say, it involves more than mere individuals. In this sense, Lordon is explicit when states that the community only exist when this surplus is produced [5]. This vision of the community is contrary to the whole conception of sociability which places as its central axis the sovereign individual who decides autonomously on political, i.e. affective, relations. Lordon calls this surplus, which Durkheim calls "society", "immanent transcendence". Lordon is aware that the concept "transcendence" is rejected by Spinozist thought, since in the first instance it seems to contradict the other part of the concept, this is the term "immanence". We can affirm that there is a transcendental, but not transcendent component in Spinoza's philosophy: the plane of immanence where all the affective relations of the real are produced, that is God. But this is not the sense that Lordon gives to "transcendence", for it reflects a relation of verticality, since the community raises above all its members through diverse symbolic productions that all have contributed to produce [5].

Conclusion

Lordon's concept, as he himself makes it appear, is like *The Great Wave of Kanagawa* that emerges from below, but rises above the substratum that has given rise to it. The verticality presented in "the social" is composed of an ascending element (the immanent) and a descending element (transcendence) [5]. In order to avoid the paradoxes that can occur with the union of the two terms presented by Lordon, we prefer to speak of a surplus that is generated in immanence, since, as Lordon rightly points out, this surplus is what is "out of control" or "beyond the reach" of the sovereign individual. Common affections, as social constructions, order the potencies (whether increased or diminished) of the community, thus developing a network of symbolic representations that exercise social power. It is worth asking here: is it possible to reverse the domination or subjection that seems to occur with the production of common affects? Could there be a non-totalitarian totalization? Can we think beyond a "closed community"? If, for example, the fear of God becomes a common affection that makes men cede power to theologians or priests to guarantee their protection, there could be a change of common affection, for example,

when a new structuring of images and the passions that are socially organized through a different thought of what God is. This entails an "economy of passion" that subverts the flow of passion that diminishes the potency of thinking and acting, and the replacement of images that are in solidarity with this potency. This makes sense when we speak of a dynamic sociability that is based on the power of bodies, which are multiple and complex: recall that in postulate IV of *Ethica* II, Spinoza states that the human body, in order to preserve itself, needs other bodies to regenerate itself (*Eth.*, II, Lemma VII, schol; *G*, II, 102). Spinoza affirms, then, the need of the body to integrate other bodies, so we could not think of bodies "closed in themselves" but of "porous bodies" [5,10]. The community or body politic could be considered a composite, open or porous body.

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Ayala Román AM. The Ingenium of a People, Common Language and Imagination in the Philosophical-Political Thought of Baruch Spinoza. Philos Int J 2021, 4(2): 000171.

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