Another Enlightenment:  
Spinoza on Myth and Imagination

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What would have Spinoza thought of the 1960s and now the Occupy Wall Street slogan, “all power to the imagination”? What would he have said of “Occupy Catholics” urging us to “reinvent everything in the image of God”? He would have been wary; perhaps he would have walked away laughing. “No need to give all power to the imagination, because it takes it by itself.” Very few people, for Spinoza, manage to live at the level of reason, which requires very great caution, acuteness and self-restraint – all qualities that are seldom found in human beings.¹ Most times, we are bound to remain at the level of imagination, the level of opinion and inadequate ideas, particularly when it comes to communicating to a whole nation or political community.

Admittedly, Spinoza also lived in very different times. In a Europe coming out of years of religious wars, being revolutionary, advocating radical and sudden political changes, often meant to be in company of those religious fanatics who wanted to install the reign of God on earth. Particularly in the context of the fragile institutions of the Dutch Republic, which may have become a republic more for the lack of a credible king than through a genuine rejection of monarchy, to be revolutionary meant to be on the side of those radical Calvinists who wanted to overthrow the republic and institute a theocracy.

Spinoza’s alleged skepticism towards revolutions goes however hand in hand with his critique of superstition and the political use of imagination more generally. This is particularly clear in the Theological-Political Treatise, where Spinoza explicitly says that revolutions are doomed to fail, because a people used to monarchy will inevitably follow the same pattern of imagination and institute another monarch.² This is what happened during the English Revolution: after spilling a great deal of blood, the revolutionaries succeeded merely in installing a new monarch, Cromwell, just with a different title.³ This warning about revolutions can be read as a message to those of his compatriots who were trying to restore the monarchical power in combination with the most reactionary strand of Calvinism and, thus, as an implicit defense of the fragile institutions of the Dutch Republic. But it also reflects a skepticism that follows from deeper philosophical reasons, and, in particular, from his theory of imagination.

A profound ambivalence pervades Spinoza’s treatment of the imagination as early as the preface to the Theological-Political Treatise. Within the same paragraph, Spinoza points to the Janus-faced nature of imagination by stating at the same time that “nothing governs the multitude as effectively as superstition” and that “it is easy for people to be captivated by a superstition, but difficult to ensure that they remain loyal to it.”⁴ But how can we govern the multitude through imagination if it is impossible to ensure that they remain loyal to it? How can we govern without some stability? Imagination thus appears from the very beginning as this beast that is at once the source of the problem (the instability of politics) and the only possible remedy to it.

My purpose here is to examine the deeper, philosophical roots of this tension. What is imagination for Spinoza and what role does it play in his philosophical project? Is Spinoza’s
critique of imagination simply an example of the Enlightenment rejection of myth and imagination, whatever one may mean by the Enlightenment itself? Is Spinoza’s critique of imagination doomed to crash land in the same dialectic of Enlightenment where, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the modern rejection of myth will necessarily end up?

In order to face these questions, I will begin by briefly sketching what, for the purposes of this paper, I mean when I talk about being “within” the dialectic of Enlightenment. I will then move on to show why Spinoza’s eccentric ontology leads him to avoid such a dialectic and thus to treat imagination in a much more ambivalent way than what we would normally associate with the philosophical category of Enlightenment. In sum, if is it true that Spinoza is one of the initiators of the Enlightenment, as Jonathan Israel recently argued, we must then add immediately that he is the initiator of “another Enlightenment.” This, I hope, will also cast some light on Spinoza’s ambivalent treatment of revolutions.

1. Within the Dialectic of the Enlightenment

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer put forward the thesis of a mutually constitutive dialectic of myth and Enlightenment. By rejecting myth as pure subjectivity and superstition, the Enlightenment constitutes itself, while simultaneously reinforcing the subject versus object dichotomy upon which it rests. In this way, the Enlightenment hides the fact that myth is already Enlightenment, *Aufklärung*, because it is already a form of explanation or *Erklärung*. Myths tell the origins of things, where they come from, and they are therefore already an attempt to “illuminate” or *erklären*.

But in this way, the Enlightenment generates a negative dialectic at the end of which its celebration of the purity of reason turns into a mythology of its own. Once pure reason has unified the whole world within its pure relationships, placing it under its complete dominion, what it finds there is no longer the world but its own totalitarian abstract categories. The result is that an Enlightenment that has rejected myth as subjective has itself turned into pure subjectivity, and thus into a myth.

How can we escape such a negative dialectic? What are the ontological and epistemological assumptions that lead into it? Kant notoriously defined the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) as the exit from a condition of “self-imposed immaturity.” “Immaturity” is the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance of another, and it is “self-imposed” because it derives not from a lack of understanding but from a lack of courage to use it. The motto of Kant’s Enlightenment is therefore “*sapere aude,*” to have the courage to use one’s own reason, or, otherwise said, to be autonomous – a motto to which we will return later.

This project leads Kant to an ambivalent attitude towards myths and imagination, the faculty that produces them. Kant’s treatment of imagination is perhaps the most conspicuous sign of the Enlightenment’s embarrassment with regard to myth. In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant emphasizes the central role played by imagination for the possibility of knowledge itself. He observes here that imagination, as the active capacity for the synthesis of the manifold, is the faculty that brings the plurality of intuitions into single images, and thus is also the transcendental condition of knowledge itself. He admits, therefore, a sort of primacy of imagination. Without such a transcendental faculty of synthesis, knowledge would be a mere chaotic assemblage of intuitions, of dispersed sense-data: a form, a color, etc, but not yet a table. Paradoxically, the autonomy of reason seems to depend upon imagination. Could Kant accept this?

In the second edition of his *Critique*, 6 years later, he retreats from this perspective and relegates imagination to a more subordinated and intermediary role between intellect and
intuition. The section where he had argued for the transcendental role of imagination as the a priori condition of knowledge (A95-A130) is replaced by a new one (B129-B169). Here it is no longer imagination, but the so-called “transcendental schematism” that plays the crucial role of synthesis. Kant distinguishes what he calls the figurative synthesis of imagination from its intellectual counterpart, the transcendental schematism, and claims that it is the latter that guarantees pure synthesis. Kant himself says that this schematism “is a hidden art,” that “we can lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty.” Yet, it is now this obscure “hidden art” that does the most important part of the job. The division is neat: on the one hand, we have images, produced by imagination, on the other, intellectual schemes, which are produced by the intellect alone, and which guarantee the a priori possibility of knowledge. Pureness of reason is guaranteed, no matter how.

Like many other theorists of the Enlightenment, Kant seems to have perceived in imagination a potential source of disturbance of the methodical work of reason, as such finding its proper place ultimately in the newly constituted field of aesthetics. Indeed, it is only in modern times that an autonomous field of aesthetics based on the notion of “beauty” was established; before, the category of beauty was dealt with in treatises on metaphysics. Kant himself contributed to the constitution of this field with his Critique of the Power of Judgment. There, he still recognizes an important role for imagination, but only for aesthetic judgments, that is, for judgments about beauty that do not contribute to the advancement of knowledge. In sum, Kant mitigates his previous claim concerning the cognitive role of imagination, and consequently rehearses a more conventional division between reason and imagination, science and art, and thus also between critique and creativity. In this way, critique collapses into cognitivism, and imagination is treated either mediately or aesthetically.

This attitude towards imagination stands in sharp contrast with previous traditions, in particular with the Aristotelian one. In contrast to Kant and other theorists of the Enlightenment, Aristotle recognized the crucial role that imagination plays for both knowledge and action. He defined imagination, phantasia, as “a movement (kinesis) produced by a sensation,” and argued that imagination contributes to the formation of a unitary image out of an otherwise unrelated set of data—a stance close to Kant’s initial approach to the issue. But together with the cognitive, Aristotle also recognized the ethical role of imagination by arguing that no action is possible without imagination (phantasia) because it lies at the basis of the appetites. The most conspicuous sign of the eclipse of this view in modern times is that by the eighteenth century, “fantasy,” the term directly derived from the transliteration of Greek phantasia, “was moved to the sphere of the unreal—where, it may be worth remembering, it still remains nowadays.

As I have tried to show elsewhere, this transformation is also linked to the emergence of an entirely different view of reality itself. Imagination and fantasy could be relegated to aesthetics and dismissed as “unreal” because a new conception of reality had in the meantime emerged. This is a fact that we tend to forget: the definition of what is “real” is not an a priori of human understanding (pace Kant), but something that has proved to be particularly variable in different contexts and epochs. The Greeks did not even have a word to designate what we would now call “reality,” while Scholastic philosophy conceived of realitas primarily in reference to the essentia of each res, so that realitas was used as a synonym for perfection. This explains why God could be said to be the most real being or ens realissimus.

This is a conception of reality that is hard to grasp for a modern mind. Yet, it is fundamental to stress this point, as this is the definition of reality that Spinoza also endorses. He explicitly says, “by reality and perfection I understand the same (per realitatem et perfectionem idem...
As we will see, this view allows him to endorse a different attitude towards imagination, which fully acknowledges its crucial cognitive, moral, and political role. I will now try to demonstrate this point through a detailed reading of Spinoza’s texts. Before embarking on this task, let me point out that, in contrast to this view, we sons and daughters of the modern revolution tend to conceive of the real as, to quote Kant once again, “that which is connected (zusammenhängt) with the material conditions of our experience.” Precisely because the real is defined in this way can the Enlightenment reject myth and imagination as imaginary and unreal. But in order to understand Spinoza, we have to try to step out of this view and out of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that it presupposes.

2. Spinoza’s Theory of Imagination: Ontological and Epistemological Aspects

I have suggested that the dialectic of Enlightenment rests on three constitutive elements: 1) the rejection of myth as subjective and unreal, 2) a separation between the subject and the object of knowledge, and 3) the “myth versus reason” dichotomy. The task of this reconstruction is to show how and why Spinoza’s philosophy does not generate any of them. But before entering a discussion of Spinoza’s works, let me say a few words about my method. Despite the fact that I will be focusing on the Theological-Political Treatise, Spinoza’s posthumous works, where he wrote free from the filter of censorship, are an unparalleled guide for learning to read between the lines. They evidence that Spinoza wrote is what Yirmiyahu Yovel defines as a “dual language.”

Like the Marranos, Jews living in Spain and Portugal who had to publicly show their adherence to Catholicism while believing in another religion, Spinoza conserves the exteriority of religious observance but deprives it of its substance. This is an ambivalence that pervades Spinoza’s philosophy.

The Ethics is a book that has been condemned as a manifesto of atheism, yet its only surviving written manuscript has paradoxically been conserved for centuries in the Vatican Library. The difficulties the book presents for contemporary readers parallels this paradox. On the one hand, the book is certainly a product of the Enlightenment. It is written in the geometrical method, proceeding through propositions, demonstrations and axioms – exactly like opening geometry determined to “illuminate things.” This reflects not only Spinoza’s sincere admiration for modern science, but also, as Deleuze reminds us, of Spinoza’s profession of lens cleaner.

In a way, what Spinoza did as an intellectual was a continuation of his professional life: cleaning the distortions deriving from the use of dirty lenses. Indeed, Spinoza’s Ethics is on the one hand a paradigmatic example of the Enlightenment, but, in some respects, it is still a book from the Middle Ages. It certainly must have appeared so to those who conserved it in the Vatican Library, while at the same time condemning Spinoza as an atheist. Case in point, it is full of references to Scholastic philosophy, beginning with the old theory of God as the cause of itself (causa sui) with which the Vatican manuscript begins.

How do we explain such an eccentric mixture of modernity and tradition? Is Spinoza one of the initiators of the Enlightenment or simply the last medieval thinker, as some have argued? I will try to show that he is both, and that he can be correctly seen as the architect of another, more radical Enlightenment, precisely because he maintains some elements of Scholastic philosophy that, originally interpreted, enabled him to distance himself from what will become more mainstream forms of Enlightenment. Precisely because of this eccentricity, because he is such a “savage anomaly” within modernity, he can suggest to us a path that avoids the negative dialectic other Enlightenment thinkers were destined to succumb to.
Let us therefore follow Spinoza’s geometric reasoning and start, with him, from God. God is said to be the only unique substance, the *causa sui*, because its essence involves existence. From the very beginning of the *Ethics*, we therefore encounter the old medieval conception of God as the most real being (*ens realissimus*). Since the idea of God is that of a perfect being, it must also necessarily exist, because it would otherwise lack one of its perfections, and this is self-contradictory. Spinoza uses the language of medieval philosophy, but what is this God he is talking about? As he shows in the appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*, this God has nothing to do with the idea of God as person of the three great monotheisms. The idea that God is a person, who interferes in human affairs, is just an anthropomorphism designed by human beings erroneously projecting onto God their own features (EI, appendix). But God, for Spinoza, is something else.

However one want to interpret Spinoza’s *deus sive natura*, God or nature, it can hardly be denied that such a God has only the name in common with the God-person of monotheism. This infinite substance that expresses itself through infinite attributes lies at the basis of Spinoza’s radical monism, which, as we will now see, has very important consequences for his conception of imagination. Within this radical monism, thought and extension are simply two different ways in which the same and unique substance is given, whereas reality becomes a question of degrees of perfection. Here then, we find the constitutive elements of Spinoza’s eccentric ontology: the unique substance, expressed through infinite attributes, of which two only are accessible to us: thinking and extension. As it clearly emerges from this brief description of his ontology, Spinoza’s materialism is of a rather peculiar kind: the monism of the unique substance mean not only that everything is extension, but also that everything is thinking. Otherwise stated, Spinoza’s extension is not the brute, inanimate matter that we tend to associate with the label of materialism, but rather a living and thinking matter. In sum, if it is true that for Spinoza everything is extension, we must also immediately add that everything is thinking and that both thinking and extension are only two of the infinite attributes of the unique substance.

Having this ontological framework in mind, we can now move to the definition of imagination. Imagination is for Spinoza a set of ideas produced on the basis of present or past bodily affections. In order to avoid misunderstandings, we should recall that an idea is not for Spinoza just a mental content. Imagination has a bodily grounding; the mind is just the body that is felt and thought. Furthermore, an idea is for Spinoza “a conception of the mind.” In contrast to Descartes, for whom an idea is a content that the mind *has*, Spinoza emphasizes that ideas imply an action of the mind.

We can perhaps best summarize Spinoza’s view of imagination by saying that it is a form of bodily awareness, an awareness of both our body and other bodies with which we enter in contact. This leads us again to Spinoza’s ontology and to the sort of compendium of his physics he put forward in Part II of the *Ethics*, where his eccentric materialism fully emerges. For Spinoza, human beings are complex individuals. They are formed by simple individuals that connect with other simple individuals and with more complex ones through movements of association and repulsion. Spinoza’s physics closely resembles that of Descartes, but, in contrast to him, Spinoza further emphasizes the role of activity and life. This is clear in the theory of *conatus*, or endeavor, that is, his idea that every being endeavors to persist in its being. The *conatus* is this “striving” or “endeavoring” to persist in our being, which Spinoza at times also calls *potentia*. While every individual, even a stone, is endowed with *conatus*, what is unique about human beings is their constitution through the movements of attraction, repulsion, and imitation generated by their affects.
We will come back to affects later on. Let me now spell out how this detour in the ontological presuppositions of Spinoza’s view of imagination can help us to understand why he does not fall into the dialectic of Enlightenment. As we have suggested, the trappings of Enlightenment ultimately rests on the separation of the knowing subject from the known object and the resulting dichotomy between imagination and reason. Since the body and the mind are nothing but two modes within two attributes of the unique substance, no radical separation between them exists. In fact, the very notion of a self-enclosed subject, of a Cartesian ego, does not make any sense within Spinoza’s ontology. As we have seen, human beings are complex individuals created through dynamics of affects. In other words, individuals are not given entities, but rather processes, webs of affective and imaginary relations, which are never given once and for all. This is, in my view, the sense in which Spinoza’s radical statement that desire is man’s very essence (*cupiditas est ipsa hominis essentia*) must be interpreted. Desire is not just a feature of human beings. It is, much more radically, what creates them.

In sum, there is neither a self-enclosed Cartesian subject, nor a separated “reality” that can possibly be given to it. If reality is not what is connected with the material conditions of experience, as it is in Kant, but a question of degrees of perfection, then the beings of imagination cannot simply be dismissed as unreal, at least not in the sense of lacking perfection. The assumptions of the Enlightenment are here shattered at their very foundations: there is no subject-object dualism, as much as there is no imagination versus reason dichotomy. Imagination is not a separate faculty for Spinoza, but a certain type of knowledge distinguished from other kinds of knowledge only by degree. There is thus no dichotomy, but a threefold scheme, where different types of knowledge are separated as different degrees of the same thing. Note also that this is a very broad understanding of imagination, in that it includes perception, memory, and induction—all processes we generally associate with reason. In Spinoza, we are far from the typically modern idea that imagination is operative in the sphere of the unreal, and thus a faculty that can be relegated to the realm of aesthetics. Also, after describing the three kinds of knowledge, Spinoza adds a crucial qualification: “knowledge of the first kind is the sole cause of falsity, whereas knowledge of the second and the third kind is necessarily true.”

The asymmetrical formulation of the proposition is interesting in itself. Spinoza does not simply say “imagination is false, whereas the other kinds of knowledge are true.” He says that it is the sole cause of falsity. Indeed, what is typical of this kind of knowledge is that it perceives things in a confused way (“confused” being the adjective that Spinoza counterpoises to the Cartesian couple “clear and distinct,” which was a technical pair that characterized superior forms of knowledge.) Spinoza begins the passage where he defines the three kinds of knowledge by saying that “we perceive many things and form universal notions.” This is close to the Kantian remark about the synthetic power of imagination: it is through “universal notions” that we reach a synthesis of the manifold character of experience. But there is a striking difference: for Spinoza images of things are not pictures in the mind, but “affections of the human body, whose ideas present external bodies as present to us.” There is therefore an emphasis on the bodily character, on the materiality of imagination, which, together with Spinoza’s monist ontology, makes it impossible to speak of anything “transcendental” concerning imagination.

This synthetic work of imagination that transforms our perceptions into “universal notions” takes place in two ways. The first is “from singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused, and without order for the intellect,” which results in “knowledge from a random experience” (ab experientia...
vaga). But, this can also occur from signs (ab signis), for example, from the fact that upon hearing or reading certain words, we recollect things and form certain ideas about them that are similar to those through which we imagine the things. The latter is linked to what Spinoza calls “memory,” defined as a “certain connection of ideas involving the nature of things which are outside the human body – a connection that is in the mind according to the order and connection of the affections of the human body.” As he puts it:

And in this way, each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one’s association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, etc. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, etc. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another.

In other words, our imagining tends to follow certain patterns of imagination, which are given both by our past experience and also by the social and natural environment we live in. Imagining is not only the result of the work of an individual faculty, but also something that we do collectively. Spinoza’s theory of imagination is neither a theory of imagination understood as an individual faculty, nor a theory of the imaginary understood as a social context that completely determines it. It is a theory of collective imaginings, which accounts for the fact that our act of imagining is the result of both individual and collective experiences. It is individual in that it is individual human beings who experience (a single soldier or a single farmer), but also collective because individuals are themselves the result of webs of imaginary and affective relations.

To summarize, when we “imagine” we form “universal notions” because we tend to follow certain patterns of association, but such universal notions, despite their name, contain only the universality of habits, of what we are simply accustomed to feign. As such, they are opposed to what Spinoza calls “common notions,” those properties that are really “common” to all things and can therefore be conceived adequately. When we reach a particular degree of clarity and distinctness about them, we reach the second kind of knowledge, reason.

Whereas reason and intuitive science always produce adequate ideas, imagination, as we have mentioned, is the sole cause of falsity. Yet, as Spinoza explicitly says, it is not necessarily false. The imaginations of the mind, regarded in themselves, contain no error. “For if the mind, while it imagined nonexistent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things do not really exist, it would, of course, attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its own nature and not to a vice – especially if this faculty of imagining depended on its own nature alone, i.e. (by ID7), if the mind’s faculty of imagining were free.”

Although imagination is the sole cause of falsity, it is not necessarily false because imagination errs only insofar as it considers as adequate ideas that in fact are not so. However, there is another reason, perhaps a deeper one, why imagination can never be completely false. To explain this, we have to go back to Spinoza’s monism. If we remember at this point that ideas are nothing but conceptions of the mind, we come to the striking conclusion that, properly speaking, the mind can never be completely false, because the connection between ideas is the same as the connection between things. Otherwise stated, even our confused ideas, our mutilated and inadequate imaginings, still express something about the connection between things because they tell us something about the relationship between bodies. They tell us something about the relationships between our bodies and external bodies (or the fact
that, as a consequence of habit, we follow certain patterns of associations), and also about
the relationships between the different bodies that compose our body.

To conclude on this point, there is a strict link between Spinoza’s definition of reality
and his idea of the three kinds of knowledge that differ by degrees. This is a point on which
commentators have not sufficiently insisted, in my view. Knowledge is a question of different
degrees of completeness, just as reality is a question of different degrees of perfection. There
is not for Spinoza a dichotomy of imagination versus reason precisely because there is no
space for the fundamental assumption of the dialectic of Enlightenment, for a separation
between the subject and an objective reality given to it. Knowledge is rather a question of
degrees of clarity that move within a threefold scale (imagination, reason, intuitive science),
as much as reality is a question of different degrees of perfection. The distance from the
presuppositions of the dialectic of Enlightenment could not be greater. Let us now examine
the consequence this has for the ethics and the politics of imagination.

3. From the Ethics to the Politics of Imagination

The first consequence of the above conclusion is that Spinoza does not relegate imagination
solely to the aesthetic sphere. As we have seen, this enables him to recognize its cognitive
value, but also, as I will now try to show, to emphasize its ethical and political function.
To deal with this aspect of Spinoza’s theory of imagination, we need to further explore his
theory of affects (affectus). Like Hobbes before him, Spinoza underlines the fundamental link
between imagination and passions.68 He explicitly says that passions depend on inadequate
ideas,69 which in turn derive from imagination alone.70

Spinoza defines affects (affectus) as “the affections of the body, by which the body’s
power of acting (potentia agendi) is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the
same time the idea of these affections.”71 The definition of affects leads us back to the above
mentioned theory of the potentia, the idea that every being is endowed with a conatus or
devour to persist in its own being. What is specific about the affects is that they can either
increase or diminish one’s potentia. It is only when they increase our potentia that they are
active, since “we are an adequate cause of them”72; on the contrary, when they diminish it,
they are, properly speaking, “passions.”

The distinction between active and passive is thus crucial. To be active means to do things
that can be understood solely through the agent’s nature, that is, to be free.73 In contrast
to Kant, Spinoza’s monism leads him to embrace a radical determinism: there are not two
worlds, the phenomenal, or world of necessity, and the noumenal, or world of freedom, but
only one and unique substance from which everything derives necessarily. If human beings
think that they are endowed with free will, it is only because they ignore the causes of their
desires.74 However, negating the freedom of the will does not mean for Spinoza a rejection
of the possibility of human freedom. It simply locates it on a different level. Freedom is
not freedom of the will, but fully accepting the necessity of things and transforming what
is passively given to us into action.75 The passage from the “servitude of affects” to human
freedom consists precisely in this: that activity takes the place of passivity or, otherwise
stated, that we become the adequate cause of our being.

According to Spinoza, it is knowledge that enables us to transform our passive affects
into active ones. He writes, “an affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as
we form a clear and distinct idea of it.”76 Spinoza believes that knowledge of our passions
enhances our power or potentia.77 He consequently defines virtue as the attempt to preserve
one’s being in accordance with the guidance of reason and on the basis of what is useful
to us.\textsuperscript{78} It is because we know our passions that we can transform them and therefore be virtuous. But what is the role of imagination in all this?

In different places, Spinoza suggests that we can imagine more or less distinctly and thus adequately. As Thomas Hippler observes, Spinoza points out in the Fifth Part of the \textit{Ethics} that there can be a minimal and maximal degree of imagination (\textit{simpliciter . . . imaginamur}),\textsuperscript{79} that we can imagine more or less distinctly and vividly (\textit{distinctius & magis vivide imaginamur}).\textsuperscript{80} It is relevant to stress that here Spinoza refers to imagination by using that distinction which traditionally denoted true knowledge (as in Descartes’ formula “\textit{clarum et distinctum}”) and that he does so in the Fifth Part of the \textit{Ethics}, which is devoted to the description of the human process of liberation.

But even before, in the context of a discussion of the nature of affects, Spinoza had already suggested that imagination is one of the instruments through which the mind can increase its \textit{potentia} and thus fight the passions even when it cannot reach the superior levels of knowledge. As he openly put it, “the mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things which increase or aid the body’s power of acting.”\textsuperscript{81} Note that he could have used the verb “to think,” but explicitly uses the formulation, “it strives to imagine” (\textit{imaginari conatur}). To be sure, imagination remains a fragile terrain and we should struggle as much as we can to achieve the superior levels of knowledge, but it can nevertheless be helpful precisely because imagination and reason are just different degree of the same thing.

At this point of the argument, it should come as no surprise that imagination plays an important role even in the culmination of Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics}, where he describes the process of human liberation as culminating in the love of God\textsuperscript{82} and God’s love for himself.\textsuperscript{83} The concepts of love for God and of God’s love for himself derive from the third kind of knowledge, but they are also clearly a being of imagination, inasmuch as God is not an object that can be loved or hated, and even less so a person that can love or hate. As Spinoza openly put it, “strictly speaking, God loves no one, and hates no one.”\textsuperscript{84} To speak of love for God or of God’s love for himself is nevertheless a helpful imaginary construction that aids us in understanding intellectual truths that would otherwise be difficult to grasp. Far from being dismissed, imagination here sustains the intellect in the process of human liberation.

Such imaginary constructions are also crucial to politics. Human beings are led by their passions to oppose each other and therefore enter into a condition similar to that described by Hobbes in his feral representation of the state of nature.\textsuperscript{85} Human beings are hostile, contrary (\textit{contrarii}) to each other, and inevitably enter into conflict. In this way, however, they endanger their own survival, which leads them to subject themselves to a common power.\textsuperscript{86} The structure of the argument is very similar to Hobbes’ justification of the sovereign state, but with a crucial difference: since desire, which is unstable, is the very essence of human beings, no subject could ever deprive herself of the right to do whatever is in her power, for this would amount to renouncing one’s own nature. Since right is nothing but \textit{potentia}, power itself, I am perfectly legitimated in pursuing my right to undertake a certain action at a certain moment in time and in doing its opposite later on, according to the fluctuations of my affects.\textsuperscript{87} Spinoza’s justification for democracy concerns the very constitution of society itself in that it does not contemplate the possibility of an alienation of natural right as it happens in Hobbes.\textsuperscript{88}

This affective nature of politics is also central to Spinoza’s notion of multitude, which, like human beings themselves, is nothing but a web of affective and imaginary relations. I do not dwell on this point since many commentators have already investigated it.\textsuperscript{89} Let me just emphasize that imaginations and affects are responsible for the capricious nature of
the multitude. Hence the need for certain patterns, which, as Spinoza fully explains in the course of his *Theological-Political Treatise*, can only be created by imagination itself. Since people do not tolerate pure coercion, but also do not submit to common power for rational reasons alone, myths, rituals, and other collective forms of discipline of imagination are an essential ingredient of politics. And hence the inevitable ambiguity of what we can call the “politics of imagination” – the fact, as mentioned at the beginning, that imagination is both the source of instability in politics and the means to overcome it. Reversely though, we can also say that imagination, precisely because of its capricious nature, can be the means for domination and for its subversion.

This point clearly emerges in Spinoza’s puzzling analysis of political obedience. No state could survive on the basis of mere coercion and fear because as soon as the occasion arises, the multitude will exercise its natural right, which consists in nothing but the power (*potentia*) to do whatever it deems necessary for its self-preservation. Obedience is less a question of an “external” than an “internal” action of the mind. “There are numerous reasons,” Spinoza observes, “why someone decides to carry out the commands of a sovereign power: fear of punishment, hope of reward, love of country, or the impulse of some other passion. Whatever their reason, they are still deciding of their own volition, and simultaneously acting at the bidding of the sovereign power . . . Hence he is the most under the dominion of another who resolves to obey every order of another wholeheartedly.”

Imagination is therefore the solution to Spinoza’s fundamental question: how can it be that people fight for their own servitude as if they were fighting for their own freedom? To put this in more contemporary terms: how can compliant subjects be created? Spinoza’s theory of imagination provides us with an answer, but also – and what is perhaps even more important – constantly leads us to raise the question. When commenting on the strong discipline of obedience that characterized the ancient Hebrews, Spinoza, in a passage that could have been written by Michel Foucault, observes:

> Every single thing they had to do according to a specific prescript of the Law. They could not plough as and when they pleased, but could only do so at certain times and in particular years, and with one kind of beast at a time; they could sow and reap only in a certain way and at a particular time; their lives without exception were a continual practice of obedience . . . To people wholly accustomed to this, it must have appeared to be freedom rather than slavery; surely no one could have desired what is forbidden, only what was prescribed.

We now have the key to the dilemma: people fight for their own servitude as if it were their own deliverance because their lives are a continual practice of obedience and they can only desire what is prescribed. Spinoza’s theory of myth and ritual, to which I turn now, explains how such a discipline of desire is possible.


According to Rosenthal, Spinoza chose the example of the ancient Hebrews in his analysis of prophecy because it allows him to criticize those radical Calvinists, who, like the ancient Hebrews, perceived themselves as chosen by God and thus wanted to install a theocracy. Remember that Spinoza felt this threat so strongly that he interrupted his *Ethics* to write the *Theological-Political Treatise* in order to put forward his argument in favor of tolerance. The *Theological-Political Treatise* is therefore primarily a political book, well before being a philosophical one.
As we read in the frontispiece, the aim of this work is to show that freedom of thought is compatible with both the religion (*pietas*) and the peace of the state. In order to do so, Spinoza discusses the interpretation of the Scriptures and of prophecy in a detailed way. Prophecies, according to Spinoza, do not derive, as Maimonides maintained, from a particular kind of knowledge. In order to have a prophecy, what one needs is a more vivid imagination, not a more perfect mind as Maimonides thought. Yet, as we have seen, imagination is not “imaginary” and unreal, but plays an extremely important role in the sphere of *praxis*. And it is indeed here that the stories of the Bible and prophecy find their proper place: teaching the right conduct.98

The example of the ancient nation of the Hebrews enables Spinoza to make a general point about the way in which an appeal to imaginative narrative examples can be used not only for moral purposes, but also to justify a particular set of institutions. When the prophets called the Hebrews “the chosen people,” they were performing a function essential to any society: they were using imagination to create a common standard of judgment that plays both a moral and a political role.99 By speaking about their election, they elaborated what I would call a “political myth,” that is, a common narrative that transcends the individual precisely because it can provide significance to the conditions and deeds of an entire social group.100

As Rosenthal observed, the concept that enables us to read Spinoza’s treatment of particular narratives in this way is that of the “*exemplar*” of human nature, which is developed in the fourth part of the *Ethics*.101 Here, Spinoza defines “good” and “bad” as “what we certainly know to be useful to us” and “what we certainly know prevents us from being masters of some good” respectively.102 The problem is how to determine this utility because what is useful for one person at any given place and time may not be so for another. So, if the terms “good” and “bad” are to mean something more than the mere subjective utility of an individual, Spinoza says, it is then necessary to find a basis for transcending particular judgments. This is the purpose of the *exemplars* of human nature. As he puts it, “by ‘good’ we mean what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model (*exemplar*) of human nature that we set before ourselves, whereas by ‘evil’ we mean what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model.”103 An exemplar is therefore a being of imagination that enables us to create a pattern of continuity and trans-individuality.

The *exemplars* of human nature are thus “universal notions.” As we have seen before, “universal notions” are opposed to “common notions,” the clear and distinct foundations of reason, because in contrast to them they tend to be inadequate, incomplete, and confused images of the world. With an approach reminiscent of Aristotle, Spinoza seems to say that stories such as that of the Jews’ election are myths because they are narratives displaying certain exemplars of human nature.104 They contain some kind of universality, but this is only the universality of the way in which we are accustomed to perceive such exemplars. As a consequence, myths are neither good nor bad *per se*. However, we can – and this is what he does in his analysis of the example of the Jewish prophecy – set the conditions for the legitimacy of recourse to them.

Spinoza explicitly presents his analysis of the history of the ancient Hebrews as a basis for a more general theory.105 In his view, after the exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel had fallen again into a pure state of nature. It is in this context, that Moses labeled the Hebrews the “chosen people” and employed the idea of the covenant with God to morally encourage his people to subject themselves to a lawful condition. Spinoza is very explicit on this point: “This is why Moses, with his virtue and by divine command, introduced religion...
into the commonwealth, so that people would do its duty more from devotion than from fear."

Spinoza’s analysis of Moses’ employment of religious narratives displays a peculiar view of political theology. While Carl Schmitt sustains that the most important (modern) political concepts are the result of a transposition of originally theological ideas into politics, Spinoza suggests exactly the opposite: concepts such as the omnipotent God as a person of monotheism are the religious transposition of peculiar political situations. It is because the Hebrews were just coming out of their Egyptian slavery that Moses had to present God as a supreme lawmaker in order to persuade them to subject themselves to the law. In the theological-political nexus it is therefore the political, and not the religious that comes first. In this sense, we can say that Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* is an attempt to bring political theology to an end because it is an attempt to bring transcendence back to the immanence of politics. In Spinoza’s account, Moses’ use of the theological-political complex is the result of the Hebrews’ acclimatization to slavery. Moses, in order to give them law, had to place their particular experience in a framework of a divine plan in which they played a special role. This is the pattern of imagination they were stuck in, and he could not have done otherwise.

This peculiar condition of the Hebrews also explains the particularly obsessive character of ceremonies. The belief in stories and narrative was indeed transmitted by a meticulous series of rituals. After observing that Moses introduced religion into the commonwealth “so that the people would do its duty more from devotion than from fear,” Spinoza adds:

And finally, in order that a people which could not run its own affairs should depend upon the words of its ruler, he did not permit them, accustomed as they were to slavery, to do anything at their own pleasure. They could do nothing without being obliged at the same time to bring to mind a law and follow commands that depended upon the will of the ruler alone. They were not permitted to plough or sow or reap as they pleased, nor could they eat or dress or shave their heads or beards as they pleased, but all in accordance with a fixed and specific ordinance of the law. [ . . . ] This was then the purpose of the ceremonies, that [the people] should do nothing at their own discretion and everything at the command of another, and should confess by their every action and thought that they did not exist in their own right, but were entirely subject to someone else.

Surely this obsessive character of rituals was justified by the peculiar condition of the Hebrews, but in the course of the same chapter Spinoza clearly points out that the recourse to myths and rituals is far from being a prerogative of the ancient Hebrews. Christian ceremonies, he observes, also “contain no sanctity at all in themselves,” but are only instituted for the sake of the political community within which they were established. Similarly, he points out that the Chinese zealously retain a kind of topknot on their heads, by which they distinguish themselves from other people. The character of such rituals may vary from one society to another, but all societies rely on them. Every society needs its own set of stories and narratives because, together with fear, society also needs some sort of social organization of hope to tame the antagonistic passions of the individuals. In other words, politics too needs some patterns of imagination.

There are two general reasons for this. The first is that people do not submit to common power on rational grounds alone because they are generally more apt to listen to those who appeal to their imagination than to those who aim to persuade them through rational arguments. As I have already mentioned persuasion through rational arguments requires qualities that are seldom found in human beings. But there is also another, deeper reason: as we have seen, the multitude is always unstable because it is governed by its passions.
and it is therefore necessary to create stable patterns of imagination. Myths and rituals are examples of the means through which such patterns can be created.

Put in more contemporary terms, Spinoza thinks that every society needs its own ideological state apparatuses because it needs stability. The use of the term “ideological state apparatuses” is not accidental. Althusser, who coined this concept, considers Spinoza to be the first important theorist of ideology. Furthermore, he explicitly says that it is by following Spinoza that he came to insist so strongly on the “material existence of ideology,” by which he meant something more than just its material social conditions, its connections with interests blinded by the imagination of a social group (something that one can find in a number of authors.) He also meant precisely the materiality of the very existence of ideology. Indeed, no other author before has so strongly emphasized the materiality of ideology – something that, as we have seen, derives from Spinoza’s idea that thought and extension are simply two attributes of the same substance.

In contrast to other theorists of ideology, Spinoza thinks that it is his duty as a philosopher to set up the legitimate conditions for the use of myths, rituals, and similar ideological apparatuses. The example of the ancient Hebrews is meant to provide an answer to this. After the death of Moses, Spinoza says, the Hebrews’ theocracy degenerated into superstition, and this finally led to its collapse. In his view, this is due to the fact that, while Moses never confused prophecy, which he used as a means of morally inciting his people, with the eternal laws of nature, the priests that followed him interpreted the message of prophecy as if it were a law of nature.

Independently of the correctness of Spinoza’s historical reconstruction, what is relevant for us is the more general point that he wants to make through this example. In contrast to other philosophers of the Enlightenment, Spinoza recognizes that the narrative of the Hebrews’ election played an important moral and political role, all the while emphasizing that this narrative must not be mistakenly understood as asserting the truth about nature itself. When the beings of imagination are taken as true laws of nature, they turn into superstition. In other words, political myths must be recognized for what they are: narratives that provide significance to the particular conditions and deeds of a given social group by putting particular exemplars of human nature on the stage. Yet, their universality is only the universality of habit and should not be mistaken for the universality of the laws of nature. Beings of imagination can be used to teach moral knowledge or even to ground a political community, but we should always be aware that they are – beings of imagination. Nothing more, but also nothing less.

The politics of imagination displays therefore a striking ambivalence that fully reverberates in Spinoza’s treatment of revolutions. On the one hand, the Theological-Political Treatise explicitly states that revolutions are doomed to fail, as a people used to monarchy will inevitably follow the same pattern of imagination and institute another monarch. Yet, this critique of the possibility of changing the social patterns of imagination stands in sharp contrast with what Spinoza says regarding the capricious mind of the multitude, which, as he openly recognizes, can never be fully overcome. Obedience can never be complete, and every sovereign has more to fear from its own citizens than from foreign enemies. Spinoza appears to be no friend of revolutions because he is no friend of the revolutions of his time. But he is a friend of the friends of revolutions. He seems to negate the possibility of revolutions but nevertheless provides his readers with all the means for thinking about them. Surely a careful reader will look between the lines of what he states explicitly and ponder the significance of even apparently insignificant details. For instance, the fact that the English revolutionaries had to change the name of the new sovereign was perhaps a sign that
a new pattern of imagination was being initiated. The multitude was perhaps not yet ready for a true revolution, but once a new pattern of imagination has emerged, the time for it will sooner or later arrive.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, Spinoza’s theory of myth and imagination suggests a path we might take to avoid the dialectic of Enlightenment and reject its fundamental premises. There is no “reason versus myth” dichotomy because there cannot be any radical separation between objective reality and a subject who faces it. It is this eccentric ontology that enables Spinoza to recognize that myth and imagination are already a form of Enlightenment and can therefore play an important cognitive, ethical, and political role. While the motto of the Kantian Enlightenment was “sapere aude,” have the courage to know, the motto of Spinoza’s Enlightenment is a more complex one: “sapere aude et ratione et imaginatione,” that is, have the courage to know both through reason and through imagination.

It is this “other Enlightenment” that lies, in my view, at the basis of what Israel identified as Spinoza’s radical challenge. There is indeed not just one, but many forms of Enlightenment. I am here mainly using the notion of Enlightenment as a philosophical category, but Israel’s historical reconstruction goes in the same direction. While Spinoza’s far-reaching critique of both religious and political institutions gave rise to a “radical Enlightenment,” other strands of European Enlightenment tried to find a compromise with existing authorities and established truths. In comparison to Spinoza, the whole tradition that goes from Malebranche to Kant represents indeed a rather moderate form of Enlightenment or even a reaction against the radical challenge of Spinozism.

It is too often forgotten that Kant’s motto “sapere aude” is followed by an important qualification: “but obey.” Have the courage to be autonomous, but obey. There are many “buts” in Kant’s Enlightenment: We can only know the world of phenomena, but we have to postulate a noumenal world where we will be free. We can ground morality on the autonomy of pure reason, but we must also make space for the immortality of the soul and the existence of God as person to guarantee the congruence between virtue and happiness. These postulates, upon which the established order and morality had been founded for centuries, are swept away in the first step of Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason, only to be fully re-endorsed in the second one.

In Spinoza’s ontology of the unique substance, there is no space for compromises. And this is the reason why he has been said to be at the origins of critical theory. No benevolent God or more or less postulated immortality of the soul will ever guarantee the congruence between virtue and happiness. The whole game is here and now. No deferral is possible. There is no noumenal world that can free us from the strictures of the world of phenomena, but only the possibility of critique within the immanence of the unique substance. We are always “within” and “against.” We are always within and against the discipline of imagination, within and against power, within and against capitalism.

NOTES

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1. Spinoza, TTP, V, 76.
2. Ibid., XVIII, 235.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., Preface, 5.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
15. Ibid., B 181.
16. Ibid.
19. Rundell, “Introduction” and “Creativity and Judgment.”
21. See, in particular, ibid., 428 b 18–30.
22. Ibid., 433b 29.
27. Spinoza, Ethics, II P6.
30. Spinoza himself was born a Jew, but most of the community around him consisted of former Marranos, who brought with them from Iberia the weight and richness of the Marrano experience (see ibid., 19).
33. Spruit and Totaro, The Vatican Manuscript.
34. For the former view, see Israel, Radical Enlightenment 2001; for the latter, Piero Di Vona, Studi sull’ontologia di Spinoza I (Firenze: Nuova Italia, 1960) and Studi sull’ontologia di Spinoza II (Firenze: Nuova Italia, 1969).


36. Spinoza, Ethics, I Def 1, P7.

37. Ibid., IV Preface, IV P4D.

38. Ibid., I D4, P11.

39. Ibid., I D4, II A5.

40. Ibid., II P26D, P40S2.

41. Ibid., II D3. I have here modified Curley’s translation, since “concept of the mind” would not so adequately convey the sense of activity that Spinoza has in mind.

42. This is a crucial point that we can further illustrate by saying that for Spinoza imagining is not simply having images. An image, according to Spinoza, is just an affection of the body (and not a picture in the mind) to which imagination adds an action of affirmation or negation. There is a close resemblance between this view and the Hobbesian view of imagination as “decaying sense,” but with an important difference: for Hobbes this is a purely passive process, whereas for Spinoza, as we have seen, to have an idea is an action of the mind. (See Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan [London: Penguin, 1985]).


44. Spinoza, Ethics, II P13–15.

45. Ibid., III P6.

46. Ibid., III P7D.

47. Ibid., III P14–16, P21–34, IV P6–19.

48. As Hippler observes, the individual is therefore not the given first matter of politics, but is conceived as a process that is coextensive with politics itself (Thomas Hippler, “The Politics of Imagination: Spinoza and the Origins of Critical Theory,” in The Politics of Imagination, eds. Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand [Birkbeck Law Press: Routledge, 2011], 55–72). It is the third part of the Ethics that emphasizes the affective mechanisms of association and transfer (III P14–16), in addition to mimesis and imitation (III P21–34) that form individuals.


50. Spinoza, Ethics, III, Definition of the Emotions, D1.

51. Note that desire is for Spinoza clearly distinguished from will. Will is the name that we give to man’s effort to preserve himself when, by a fiction, we think of the soul in isolation from the body, whereas desire is the same effort as it relates inseparably to the soul and the body (EIII P9, scholium). On the strict link between the two, see Etienne Balibar, Spinoza and Politics (London: Verso 1998), 105.

52. Spinoza, Ethics, II P40S2.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., II P41.

55. Ibid., II P40S2.


57. Spinoza, Ethics, II P17S.

58. Ibid., II P40S2.

59. Ibid., IV Preface, IV P4D.

60. Ibid., II P18S.

61. Ibid., II P18S

62. Notice here that the most important works on Spinoza’s theory of imagination are called “Collective Imaginings” (Gatens and Lloyd) and “Spinoza et l’imaginaire” (Bertrand).
64. Ibid., II P17S.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid. (Emphasis mine.)
67. Ibid., II P7.
68. Ibid., II Post 2, general definition of emotions.
69. Ibid., III P3.
70. Ibid., II P41.
71. Ibid., III D3. Notice here that as a consequence of Spinoza’s ontology and radical monism, affects are both bodily and mental at the same time.
72. Ibid., III D2.
73. Ibid., I D7.
74. See for instance the example of a stone in a famous letter, which concludes: “This is that human freedom [of the will] which all men boast of possessing, and which consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desires and unaware of the causes by which they are determined” (Spinoza, *Letters*, 58).
75. Ibid., I P7.
76. Ibid., V P3.
77. Ibid., IV P24D.
78. Ibid., IV P20, P22, P24.
79. Ibid., V P5.
82. Ibid., V P14, P15, P16, P33.
83. Ibid., V P35.
84. Ibid., V P17C.
86. The latter is therefore chosen as the lesser evil (ibid., XVI, 200).
87. Ibid., XVI, 199–200.
88. Ibid., XVI, p. 200.
90. Ibid., XVII, 210.
91. Ibid., XVII, 209.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid., XVII, 209.
94. Ibid., Preface, 6.
95. Ibid., XVII, 224.
97. As we know from a letter, Spinoza interrupted the writing of his *Ethics* 1665 in order to write the TTP (Letter 30). On the possible interpretation of such an interruption see Negri 1991: 86–119.
98. As he repeats in different places, the certitude stemming from biblical prophecy is moral and not “mathematical” – where “mathematical” means the certitude that stems from the perception of the thing perceived or seen (Spinoza, *TTP*, II).
103. Ibid., IV, Preface.
104. The reason why he does not use the word “fabula,” which is usually translated with “myth,” is probably that in a condition of censorship he could not explicitly say that the stories of the Bible are fables. By using the more ambivalent term “historiae,” which means both myth and true stories, he nevertheless makes his point between the lines.
105. See for instance the title of Chapter 18, where Spinoza explicitly refers to the “political principles inferred from the Hebrew state and its history” (Spinoza, TTP, XVIII, 230).

106. Ibid., V, 74.


110. Ibid., V, 75.

111. Ibid., III, 55.

112. Ibid., V, 72–4.

113. Ibid., V, 76.


116. For the sake of completeness, we should note that Althusser also adds Pascal, alongside Spinoza, to this short list of his influences upon the formation of this thought (ibid., 8).

117. Ibid.

118. Spinoza, TTP, XVIII, 230–32.


120. Ibid., XVIII, 235.

121. Ibid., XVII, 211.

122. Israel, Radical Enlightenment.

123. According to Hippler, for instance, there is a direct link between the moderate Kantian Enlightenment and the Habermasian attempt to retrieve it, on the one hand, and the tradition of a radical critique that goes from Spinoza to Althusser, Deleuze, Lacan, and Foucault on the other (Hippler, “Politics of Imagination,” 55–7).

124. Israel, Radical Enlightenment, 11–12.


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