

*Narrative as the means to freedom: Spinoza
on the uses of imagination*

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Throughout his philosophical career, Spinoza was concerned with the problem of how the members of societies can be motivated to sustain harmonious and empowering forms of communal life. Given that we need to live together in order to survive, and yet have divergent desires and interests, there is a seemingly ineradicable tension between the urge to cooperate with one another and our wish to go our own ways, both sides of which must be accommodated in any stable political system. If we are to avoid the frustrations and miseries engendered by conflict, we need to be able to reconcile our more individual aspirations with the demands of a shared way of life. But what forms of self-understanding are most effective in helping us to move towards this goal, and in what conditions can they be successfully cultivated?

In developing his response, Spinoza never loses sight of the fact that creating and maintaining a harmonious way of life is a fundamentally practical project, simultaneously made possible and constrained by circumstances. But he nevertheless takes account of the fact that the manner in which the members of a particular society handle the conditions in which they find themselves will partly be determined by their conception of the kind of understanding that is most relevant to resolving their differences. Hence the question, what sort of knowledge is most efficacious in enabling people to reconcile their individual desires with the requirements of their collective life?

Within the history of ethics we can broadly distinguish two lines of reply elicited by this question. According to a universalist approach, we are best served by a systematic and compelling grasp of universal moral principles

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that we can then apply to our own situations. By contrast, advocates of a particularist view argue that we need something more specific: an interpretation of ourselves and our circumstances that generates resources for dealing with them.

The opposition between these two stances is venerable and deeply entrenched; but universalism has recently been subjected to a renewed wave of particularist criticism from philosophers who contend that moral reasons are never completely general. One version of this position appeals to the holistic nature of reasons in order to argue that the answer to the question “What do I have best reason to do?” is always determined by features of the specific situation under consideration, and thus varies from one case to the next.¹ A further version contends that we give meaning and value to situations and actions by fitting them into narratives about our place in the world that, while they may express shared values, are less than universal. Only through narratives can we generate the thick descriptions in which moral meaning is conveyed, and provide accounts of what is going on that are sufficiently detailed and focused to explain and justify our actions. So much so that, without this resource, we could not hope to assess possible courses of action as conducive to, or destructive of, a cooperative way of life.²

The disagreement between defenders of this latter version of the particularist position and their universalist opponents underlies a range of current debates in ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophy of action. While aspects of the history of their disagreement are often invoked to illuminate one or other position, it is perhaps surprising that Spinoza’s distinctive contribution to the argument has not been much explored. Resisting the temptation to opt for one side at the expense of the other, he argues that our capacity to live cooperatively grows out of a situationist capacity for constructing narratives, which in turn explain and justify our actions. At the same time, we realize our highest good when we become capable of acting on the kind of principles that the universalist extols.

This inclusive stance both allows and constrains Spinoza to address the problem of how to reconcile universalism with particularism. How do the narratives that give moral meaning to our collective lives mesh with our commitment to general principles? What contribution can each approach make to our attempts to create the cooperative ways of life on which our ability to live as we wish depends? Rather than trying to keep the two views apart, Spinoza explores their mutual dependence, carefully mapping the

¹ Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*.

² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Hutto, *Narrative*.

borders at which they meet and tracing the paths that lead from one to the other. Traveling in one direction, we rely on narratives to become capable of being motivated to act on general principles; moving in the other, our principles are made liveable through the narratives that make our individual and collective lives intelligible. There is much to be said about each of these journeys, and about the points at which they intersect as we track from the situational to the universal and back again. Here, however, I shall focus on Spinoza's account of the ways in which we depend on narrative to become more capable of living by universal principles. As I shall try to show, the breadth and subtlety of his analysis opens up a set of possibilities and problems that are not only philosophically rich in themselves, but also add a fresh dimension to contemporary discussion of the kinds of understanding that promote social and political cooperation.

Spinoza aligns the approaches that I have described as universalist and particularist with two distinguishable ways of thinking. We take the universalist approach when we engage in the abstract form of thought that he calls reasoning or understanding, and aim to grasp the unchanging and exceptionless laws governing types of things such as human minds.³ As we use our reason to extend our knowledge of the laws of human nature, we come to recognize general features of the type of collective existence that is, as Spinoza puts it, most empowering for humankind. For example, so the *Ethics* tells us, everyone has good reason to promote their ability to reason;⁴ equally, "a man who is guided by reasoning . . . desires to maintain the principles of common life and common advantage. Consequently, he desires to live according to the common decision of the state."⁵ Furthermore, when reasoning operates as it should, it motivates us to act on our understanding, both by yielding incontrovertible grounds for doing some things rather than others, and by strengthening our desire to put our rationally grounded knowledge into practice.⁶

The true understanding of the world that reasoning provides is in Spinoza's view extremely powerful, but it is not easy to come by. Almost everyone has the capacity to cultivate the practice of reasoning, but few have the opportunity to do so, and still fewer appreciate its benefits.⁷ This latter insensitivity is mainly due to the fact that most of us are absorbed in the

³ E2p44c2. ⁴ E4p36, E4p37.

⁵ E4p73. All quotations from the *Ethics* are from the English translation by Edwin Curley. Quotations from the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* are from Curley's draft translation (sometimes slightly adapted for stylistic reasons).

⁶ E4p59. ⁷ E4p37s2; *TTP* Ch. 4; *G* III 61.

distinct and wide-ranging kind of thinking that Spinoza calls imagining. Imagining, in this technical sense of the term, encompasses the thinking and behavior that we base on our experience of particular things, situations, and processes.⁸ It includes our perceptions and expectations, our memories and fantasies, together with the passions that run through them. It also includes the kinds of informal reasoning that we employ to string these experiences together, such as the means–ends inference that makes me decide to go out for half an hour because the saxophonist next door rarely practices for longer than that, or the inductively based suspicion with which I delete an email offering me a million dollars. In short, imagining is our everyday and favored way of imposing meaning on our experience. “Because deducing a thing solely from intellectual notions often requires a long chain of perceptions, and in addition, supreme circumspection, perceptiveness of mind and self-control – all of which are rare – men would rather be taught by experience.”⁹

When an individual imagines, the meaning they ascribe to an event, and thus the way they fit it into their broader interpretation of the world, is determined by their own history.¹⁰ The pattern of our past experiences shapes the way we see and feel about new events and states of affairs, so that the story of what has happened to us in the past remains present, informing our grasp of what is going on and constituting an interpretive standpoint. Spinoza does not describe this process as the creation of a narrative (*narratio*) – a term he mainly reserves for a particular manifestation of imaginative thinking, namely the narratives contained in the Bible and in histories – but I think it is appropriate to see the entire activity of imagining in these terms.

As with any narrative, imaginative thinking expresses the point of view of a narrator and puts together a more or less coherent story about what is going on. And, as with any narrative, later stages of the story may prompt its narrators or audiences to reinterpret what went before, so that the past to which we relate our current imaginings is never fixed. When individuals or groups imagine, they do not construct narratives from scratch, because they are always already absorbed in existing meanings and points of view. To be sure, they may or may not be able to articulate them – for example, one might well be unable to recount the narrative underlying the sudden antipathy one feels for a woman one passes in the street. Nevertheless, when we make use of imagination to describe, explain, or justify, its narrative

⁸ E2p17, E2p40s2. ⁹ *TTP* Ch. 5; *G* III 77. ¹⁰ E3post2.

structure comes to the surface as we recount the past experience on which our current judgments are based, or explain how a situation strikes us. Furthermore – and here we come to the point at issue – such narratives, together with the affects they contain, ground our grasp of the things that matter to us, of the means to achieve them, and of the forms of cooperation that will help us to realize them. Amongst many other things, they give us our conceptions of cooperative ways of life, and shape our willingness (or lack of willingness) to live by them.

We therefore have two potential sources of insight into the project of creating ways of life that will accommodate both our desire to pursue individual goals and our dependence on other people. One of them – philosophical reasoning – is universalist. It focuses on unchanging properties of types of things and the atemporal laws that govern them. The other – imagining – is particularist, and charts our individual and collective interpretations of specific things and events. But what contribution does each of these kinds of thinking and acting make to our ability to live together in a harmonious fashion? Spinoza's answer is rooted in his doctrine of the *conatus* – his view that each of us strives to maintain ourselves as the individuals we are, and where possible to increase our power to maintain ourselves.¹¹ This striving is manifested in every aspect of our existence, including physical processes such as the homeostatic mechanisms governing the temperature of our bodies, and all our thinking. Both through imagining and reasoning, then, we try to get the kind of grip on ourselves and our circumstances that will empower us, by enabling us as far as possible to create a way of life in which we experience high and secure levels of physical and psychological satisfaction.

The role of philosophical reasoning in this process is in outline relatively straightforward. By giving us a true understanding of ourselves and the world, reasoning shows us what we can and cannot achieve, disabuses us of various pervasive errors about the nature of our capacities,¹² and reveals what types of action will and will not be empowering. If we were completely rational, we would follow the dictates of reason and agree on an optimal way of life.¹³ As things are, however, we are only somewhat rational. Alongside our efforts to empower ourselves through reasoning, we also strive to maintain ourselves by imagining, and this way of thinking exposes us to various systematic forms of misunderstanding that limit our ability to cooperate effectively.¹⁴

¹¹ E3p6. ¹² E1app. ¹³ E4p35c1. ¹⁴ E4p37s2.

It is important not to exaggerate the dysfunctional character of imagining, as Spinoza conceives it. Despite its deficiencies, it provides us with a largely efficacious grasp of the world and ourselves, and underpins many sensible habits and decisions about what to do and how to live. Indeed, unless this were the case we would not survive. Nevertheless, Spinoza is impressed by the extent to which imagining fails to track the truth as it is revealed by reason, and tends to blur the line between accurate perception and fantasy. We see this above all in a general human disposition to put an empowering interpretation on our experience, thereby making it satisfying and encouraging. As the *Ethics* explains, “the Mind strives to imagine only what affirms or posits its power of acting,”¹⁵ and “avoids imagining things that diminish its own power or that of the body.”¹⁶ In our efforts to persevere in our being, we blend realism and fantasy in varying degrees, sometimes taking refuge in projection or denial, and sometimes facing up to disempowering truths with courage or fascination. Contrary to an imaginatively fuelled assumption that we make about ourselves, straightforward observation is extremely difficult to achieve. “Indeed, when men see or hear something new, unless they take great precautions, they will for the most part be so preoccupied with their preconceived opinions that they will perceive something completely different from what has happened, particularly if the event surpasses the grasp of the narrator or audience, and especially if it makes a difference to the narrator’s affairs that the event should happen in a certain way.” Hence the commonplace observation that two historians or chroniclers may describe an event in such divergent terms that it is hard to believe that they are talking about the same thing.¹⁷

The central claim here is that, rather than simply recording our experiences, we are disposed to make them affirmative and to resist interpreting them in ways that are physically or psychologically debilitating. In this sense, there is an element of fantasy built into our everyday thinking. The mind strives to imagine what affirms its own power of acting. As interpreters, our narratives are selectively organized to achieve a certain effect, in which truth tracking is subsidiary to empowerment.

In order to appreciate the appositeness of Spinoza’s view, it is helpful to remember that the trait he is describing operates at a familiar level. In Joseph O’Neill’s novel, *Netherland*, the protagonist, Hans, is a Dutch banker working in New York. On a flight back from London he is given a chocolate bar, and although the bar is frozen he starts to eat it.

¹⁵ E3p54. ¹⁶ E3p13c. ¹⁷ *TTP* Ch. 6; *G* III 91–92.

When I took my first bite I felt a painless crunch and the presence of something foreign in my mouth. I spat into my napkin. In my hand, protruding from brown gunk, was a tooth – an incisor, or three quarters of one, dull and filthy.

Dazed, I called over an attendant.

“I found a tooth in my chocolate bar,” I said.

She looked at my napkin with open fascination. “Wow . . .”

Then she said carefully, “Are you sure it’s not yours?”

My tongue lodged itself in an unfamiliar space.

“Shit,” I said.

Hans’s striving to conceive of himself as someone with a full set of teeth is not an isolated event. In interpreting what is happening to him, he implicitly draws on a preexisting sense of himself as a competent man who would be ashamed if he thought he was falling apart. This self-evaluation is in turn embedded in a narrative that sustains his conception of the kind of person he is: he is physically attractive, extremely good at his job, a sportsman, and so forth. Here we can begin to see how the narrative that gives Hans a certain orientation to the world also manifests the striving of his *conatus*. It shapes his effort to persevere in his being and, in this particular incident, does so to the point where a wish becomes father to the thought that the tooth in the chocolate bar belongs to someone else. Like Spinoza’s historians, Hans and the flight attendant start out by describing their situation in radically different ways, and it is only through their exchange that they arrive at a common account of what has occurred. As it happens, their common account is true: unfortunately, it is Hans’s tooth that is broken. But this is not always so. Many of our ordinary beliefs are in Spinoza’s opinion profoundly mistaken, so that the scraps and stretches of narrative on which we converge are often only half-truths and are sometimes simply false. The urge to empower ourselves that drives us to interpret our experience in ways that are more or less fantastical will not necessarily be checked by other people; on the contrary, as we shall see, they may equally well corroborate or elaborate our fantasies. Moreover, as Spinoza sees the matter, there is nothing exceptional about this mixing of fantasy with fact. It is what imagining is like.

The fantastical element of imagining can therefore cut both ways. It may bind people together and, as we shall see, can be a potent unifying force. But it is also liable to undermine the effectiveness of the very efforts to cooperate that it engenders. A first and significant difficulty stems from

the porous boundary between fact and fantasy that we have just examined. If, for example, a community bases its efforts to cooperate on a narrative that significantly overestimates its capacities, it will run the risk of failure. In addition, however, Spinoza is convinced that imaginative thinking embodies an inherent tendency to generate division and conflict between agents, whether individual or collective.¹⁸ This problem stems from the fact that each of us has our own passions and desires, grounded on our own histories, and strives to persevere in our being in our own way.¹⁹ The narratives we create will consequently embody diverse conceptions of the ends that are worth pursuing and the ways of life that are tolerable, and as we strive to realize them, our aspirations are bound to clash. To make matters worse, some of the psychological laws that are integral to imagining set us at odds with one another. We are naturally disposed, for instance, to want other people to share our desires, and are liable to hate them for failing to do so.²⁰ But when they do love what we love, and we find ourselves competing with them for scarce goods, we are prone to envy them.²¹ Once again, our viewpoints are bound to diverge; and given that we have to live together, they are bound sometimes to give rise to personal and political conflict.

Because the laws governing our affects are an ineliminable part of imaginative thinking and are not easy to offset, the implications of Spinoza's analysis look dark. If imagining is inherently fantastical, it will be unable to correct its own tendency to produce narratives that are erroneous and potentially divisive. If it is inherently antagonistic, it is not obvious how it can make a constructive contribution to the project of creating a stable and cooperative way of life. If it is always prone to generate narratives that collide, surely it is bound to impede rather than promote cooperation. It seems, then, that the version of the particularist approach on which we have been focusing cannot yield the kind of insights that we need in order to build reliable, cooperative forms of existence, so that we would do better to turn to the universalist approach exemplified by philosophical reasoning.

Spinoza agrees that, if human beings were thoroughly rational, this would be the right conclusion to draw.²² As it is, however, the option is not available. Since the imaginative dimension of our thinking is inescapable, we simply have to reckon with it. However, this state of affairs is not as bad as one might fear because, despite the limitations we have discussed, there are ways in which imagining can enhance our ability to create harmonious and satisfying ways of life. Taking up first the fantastical impetus of imaginative

¹⁸ E4p32. ¹⁹ E3p57. ²⁰ E3p31c. ²¹ E3p35. ²² *TTP* Ch. 5; *G III* 73–74.

thinking, and then its sheer diversity, Spinoza argues that each of these features possesses a productive aspect.

Judging by the historical record, communities have from time to time been strikingly successful in uniting around a narrative that has enabled them to live cooperatively. Moses, for example, generated a remarkably cohesive community by persuading a group of newly released slaves with no experience of the benefits of citizenship to live in accordance with a comprehensive set of laws. He achieved this feat by representing the Jews as the subjects of a divine legislator who could be trusted to reward their obedience. By providing them with a narrative that answered to their beliefs and yearnings, he gave them a largely compelling reason to obey the law. The effectiveness of Moses' narrative was, however, completely independent of its truth since, according to Spinoza, there simply is no anthropomorphic God who imposes laws on individual nations or holds out the prospect of reward and punishment. "Moses imagined God as a ruler, a lawgiver, a king, as compassionate, just, etc., when all these things are attributes only of human nature."²³ In this case, at least, the fantastical element of imaginative thinking was not destructive. On the contrary, it empowered the Jews by enabling them to create a secure state.

If a narrative is to shape the behavior of a particular group of people, they must be motivated to act as it recommends, and this willingness in turn depends on a number of conditions. First, whether or not the narrative is true, the people concerned must believe it to be so. (In the *TTP*, this claim is grounded on the relatively uncontentious assumption that we are generally more strongly motivated to act on claims that we take to be true than on claims we hold to be fictional.²⁴) Secondly, Spinoza finds in the Old Testament a number of strategies for creating and sustaining a desire to live in accordance with the values that a narrative extols. One of the less successful ways in which Moses tries to persuade the Jews to conform to the law is to threaten anyone who disobeys with punishment. However, as the Bible indicates (and Spinoza agrees), "harmony born out of fear is without trust,"²⁵ so that individuals who only cooperate on this basis will "act most unwillingly. They're just trying to save their skins."²⁶ Since we experience fear as disempowering, our *conatus* ensures that we strive to resist situations that make us afraid, and in the case of the Jewish law this sometimes encouraged people to turn away from God, or to imagine that they were sufficiently powerful to avoid divine punishment.

²³ *TTP* Ch. 4; G III 64.

²⁴ *TTP* Ch. 14; G III 176.

²⁵ E4app16.

²⁶ *TTP* Ch. 5; G III 74.

Moreover, when they acted on these convictions they to some extent undermined the scheme of cooperation on which everyone's mutual benefits depended.

It is therefore more constructive to provide empowering grounds for obedience, and "this was why Moses . . . introduced religion into the body politic, so that people would do their duty not so much from fear as from devotion."²⁷ According to the *Ethics*, devotion is a kind of love that we feel for people whose capacities far outstrip our own, and who therefore excite our wonder or veneration.²⁸ To feel this affect for God is, in part, to love him; and because we experience love as empowering, a person who gains satisfaction from loving an infinitely powerful deity will normally seek to maintain this relationship by obeying the divine law. However, as Spinoza's analysis of the passions also allows us to infer, even this strategy is not completely stable, and is liable to be derailed by the element of veneration that devotion contains. In venerating God for capacities that far outstripped their own, the Jews were made aware of their comparative impotence, and were reminded of the extent to which they were dependent on a being who held them in the power of his hand. The sense of vulnerability that they experienced in turn made them anxious. (Can we really trust him? Are we not enslaved to his inexorable power?) As the Pentateuch testifies, a desire to escape this form of subordination intermittently eclipsed their veneration for the divine law, making way for narratives that embodied competing interpretations of their collective experience and recommended other courses of action.

Spinoza's attention to the obstacles that Moses encountered brings us to the second set of problems endemic to any form of cooperation grounded on narrative. Because the narratives to which a community appeals will invariably be diverse, the binding power of any single narrative will be inherently limited. Furthermore, since the balance of power between narratives shifts with the passions that motivate individuals to act on them, a successful narrative must continually adapt to changing times. We see Moses grappling with these only partly superable difficulties as he cajoles, threatens, and bargains, attempting to encourage and amaze the Jews into an enduring condition of steadfast obedience to the law. (It was because he aimed to break their stubborn heart, Spinoza remarks, "that he addressed them, not with arguments, but with the sound of trumpets, with thunder and with lightning."²⁹) The story of his attempt to inculcate a level of singleminded devotion that would guide the actions of virtually all his people

²⁷ *TTP* Ch. 5; *G* III 75. ²⁸ E3p52s. ²⁹ *TTP* Ch. 14; *G* III 179.

suggests that, at least in some circumstances, such a strategy can work remarkably well. But as we have also seen, it is bound to come up against the labile nature of human affect. Unless an approach to the creation of harmonious ways of life that is grounded on the narrative resources of imagination can accommodate the variety and changeability of our grounds for action, its success is bound to be limited.

Turning to this problem, Spinoza points out that imaginative diversity is not invariably an obstacle to cooperation. For example, communities commonly offer their members a number of disparate interpretations of the benefits of obeying the law, and accept that some individuals conform to it because they fear punishment, others because they hope for gain, still others because they love their country, and so on.³⁰ As long as most people have a motivating reason for obedience, the goal of cooperation is achieved, and there is no immediate need to achieve greater homogeneity. So although the narratives that constitute imaginative thinking provide an imperfect means of combating political conflict, they are sometimes strong enough to achieve this goal. The Spinozist version of particularism that we have been considering therefore yields an answer to our problem that can in practice be sufficient.

It is clear from Spinoza's outspoken defense of religious pluralism that he appreciates the force of this conclusion. Given that humans interpret their circumstances through many distinct religious narratives, a useful way to generate empowering ways of life is to exploit this very diversity in the name of social unity. Permit people to hold any religious beliefs that strengthen their ability to obey the law. Encourage individuals to interpret the core beliefs on which obedience depends in whatever way makes them easiest to accept. Refrain from inquiring too closely into the particular convictions on which obedience is grounded.³¹ Don't worry about the fact that many of these convictions will be false, but judge them solely on the basis of their practical consequences.³² In short, allow people to generate their own reasons for conforming to the divine law by constructing their own narratives.

This approach to the creation of religious harmony also informs Spinoza's analysis of its political counterpart. Because individuals and sects have different conceptions of what the divine law demands of us, a community needs an authority to pronounce on the matter. In principle, the Scriptures can fulfill this role, since any careful reader can identify their

³⁰ *TTP* Ch. 17; *G III* 202.

³¹ *TTP* Ch. 14; *G III* 179.

³² *TTP* Ch. 14; *G III* 178.

core doctrine;³³ but in practice we know that the biblical account of the law can be interpreted in many conflicting ways. If peace is to be maintained, someone must adjudicate between the claims of competing sects, and the only agent with the power to do so is the sovereign of the state. The interpretation and enforcement of divine law thus becomes a part of the civil law over which the sovereign exercises control. "The supreme power . . . which has the sole responsibility for preserving and protecting the rights of the state, has the supreme right to maintain whatever it judges concerning religion."³⁴ A sensible sovereign who takes to heart Spinoza's argument for the benefits of religious pluralism will therefore permit a profusion of religious narratives. However, there seems no reason why this strategy should be confined to religion. If it succeeds in generating obedience to the tenets of the divine law that the civil law incorporates, why should it not also generate obedience to other aspects of civil law? A sovereign should surely generalize from the religious case and look kindly on any interpretive narratives, whether historical, personal, political, or cultural, that motivate individuals or groups to cooperate.

While Spinoza recognizes that the promotion of ingenious versions of pluralism is often the most empowering strategy available to a community, he is still not convinced that this conclusion constitutes a satisfactory solution to our problem. His main reservation is the familiar one that, when states ground cooperation on a diversity of narratives, they remain vulnerable to the types of antagonism that the passions engender and will sometimes succumb to conflict or disintegration. Contemporary liberals are liable to regard this risk as a necessary cost of any tolerable political system; but Spinoza remains doubtful. Even where a relatively harmonious way of life exists, the divisiveness inherent in the passionate relationships underpinning it means that its destruction is always in the offing, and its multiple narratives are as likely to become a source of indecision and conflict as of unity. Observing this fact, one may simply resign oneself to living in a political community that falls significantly short of the ideal from which we began. Alternatively, one may decide to look again at the nature of imaginative thinking to see whether it contains further resources for building stronger forms of cooperative life.

Taking up the second of these options, Spinoza turns again to the Bible in order to reexamine the motivating force of different types of narrative. In general, people are more willing to act on a promise of empowerment

³³ *TTP* Ch. 12; *G III* 165. ³⁴ *TTP* Ch. 16; *G III* 199.

than on a threat of disempowerment, and the Jews were consequently more stably motivated to obey a God worthy of devotion than one who traded on fear of retribution.³⁵ In both cases, however, they were expected to conform to the commands of an external legislator with whom it was impossible to negotiate, and although they had reason to believe that God would look after them, their subjection to him was nevertheless complete. Since he alone determined the law that bound them together, they were unable to fix the terms of their own common life, and a form of cooperation that was empowering in some respects was consequently disempowering in others. As well as binding the Jews to the law, the structure of the Mosaic narrative set an absolute limit to their striving to empower themselves, and in doing so created grounds for anxiety and resistance. The protection offered by God in the form of the law could also be experienced as a form of subjection, waiting to be overcome.

There is, in Spinoza's view, no way of escaping from this tension within the type of narrative that Moses bequeathed. Its constraints can only be overcome as changing circumstances create new possibilities, intertwined with revisionary narratives. The discussion of the constitutional history of the Jewish state contained in Chapter 15 of the *TTP* charts a process in which control over the law shifts from one agent to another, thus creating a demand for narratives capable of legitimating and encouraging new forms of obedience. But it is in the New Testament that Spinoza locates what he presents as the most empowering outcome of this process. When the followers of Jesus Christ represent the law made by God as written on the fleshly tablets of the heart rather than on tablets of stone – that is to say, as a set of rules that anyone can understand and legislate for themselves – they draw on the resources of the Old Testament to construct a narrative that overcomes the limitations inherent in its predecessors. According to the outlook they offer, one need not submit to commands set by someone else in order to obey the law; rather, true obedience lies in obeying commands that one imposes on oneself. Instead of following the law because God requires it, one conforms to it because one appreciates that one has good reasons of one's own for doing so, and acts on this understanding. Needless to say, this conception of one's relationship to the law will only be compelling if one can be confident that one does in fact have good reason to obey it, and on Spinoza's reading the narratives contained in the Bible strive to make this view persuasive. Both testaments represent conformity to the divine law as the only means of achieving an unparalleled level of power that benefits

³⁵ *TTP* Ch. 5; *G III* 74.

us as individuals and as members of communities. According to the New Testament, moreover, the law is universal in the sense that it applies to everyone and takes each person's interests into equal account. "Before the coming of Christ, the prophets were accustomed to preach religion as the law of their own country . . . but after the coming of Christ the Apostles preached the same religion to everyone as a universal law."³⁶ The Apostles thus offer an image of a rule designed to uphold the common good that imposes the same, manageable demands on each of us, and which one can willingly obey in the confidence that one will receive one's fair share of benefits and not carry more than one's fair share of burdens.

What makes the Scriptures attractive, then, is their resolution of the tension between doing what we ourselves regard as best and doing what the law requires of us. Their doctrine, one might say, presents in the compelling guise of a religious narrative the republican view that the only way to gain political freedom is to legislate for oneself a law that upholds the common good. Spinoza represents the emergence of this strong imaginative basis of cooperation as a significant conceptual transition in the history of humanity. But at a psychological and a historical level the story is of course more complicated. Psychologically, a grasp of the universality of the law is not by itself enough to banish debilitating passions such as fear. The prospect of punishment or the threat of corruption may still cause citizens anxiety, and can be expected to qualify their confidence in any legal system under which they actually live. So the problems posed by conflicting passions and narratives will not be completely resolved, although one might expect the disempowering doubts associated with a narrative about a law that one obeys willingly to be less boundless and enervating than those excited by a narrative about a Mosaic God. The fear that comes with total submission to an unpredictable deity is not the same as the fear that a law upholding the common good may be corrupted or go awry. Although anxiety will remain, its quality will be modified by the narrative of which it is a part, and it will play a different role in individual patterns of motivation.

Historically, the task of creating communities that are capable of living up to the ideal held out by the Bible is, as Spinoza recognizes, immensely taxing. The existence of a narrative in which the ideal is represented does not in itself make it compelling, and in practice its effectiveness depends on a host of factors. For example, some agent must be capable of making the narrative credible to a community, and that community must in turn be capable of using it to strengthen its form of cooperative life. Spinoza seems

³⁶ *TTP* Ch. 12; *G III* 163.

to have thought that the Dutch state had made a certain amount of progress in this direction. The idea that one has good reason to obey the law when one legislates it for oneself on terms that apply equally to everyone had been made concrete in the republican constitution of the United Provinces and in the dogmas of some of its sects. However, despite their potential to empower, these institutionalized narratives remained fiercely contested. So much so that, when Spinoza was writing the *TTP*, it even seemed possible that the Dutch republican regime would not survive.

In such circumstances, a more pragmatically minded theorist might well have taken refuge in the thought that an adequate degree of political unity can sometimes be created out of imaginative diversity. But Spinoza is not yet ready to accept what he regards as a weak conclusion and, as before, the next phase of his argument grows almost dialectically out of the impasse he has reached. If the task of politics is to build ways of life in which cooperation is stably protected and upheld, the United Provinces, as Spinoza implicitly portrays it, has reached a significant point of transition. Pulling in one direction, the narrative that he locates in the Scriptures holds out an image of a strongly unifying form of cooperation, organized around an appreciation of the power that can be generated when the members of a community impose the law on themselves. However, like an oasis glimpsed from the desert, this ideal has so far only flickered into view. The circumstances in which it can be securely realized do not obtain, and recent attempts to establish it have met with limited success. Standing in its way, and pointing in other directions, are a number of competing narratives, offering different accounts of the nature and extent of the commitment to cooperation, and carrying with them the materials for religious and political conflicts that may do irreparable damage to the state.

From Spinoza's point of view, this situation is discouraging. But that very fact contributes to the danger the situation poses. Discouragement is potentially as damaging as the situation on which it feeds, because it is liable to reinforce a spirit of defeat in which the United Provinces may fall back on a less empowering way of life than the one it has already achieved, and resort to terror or devotion in order to enforce the law. Whatever the short-term benefits of such a strategy, it carries with it the likelihood of increased social and political conflict. During the 1660s and 1670s, Spinoza seems to have been convinced that the Dutch were at serious risk of curtailing their liberties by abandoning their republican constitution. In his political and philosophical writings he is trying to resist this outcome by providing a narrative that will inspire his compatriots to continue to struggle for stronger forms of cooperation. The narrative he now goes on

to offer is thus a political intervention designed to encourage the citizens of a polity to press forward towards a more stable way of life.

To move towards the ideal of a community in which the law is written on the fleshly tables of the heart, one must provide reasons for obedience that have a general appeal.³⁷ As Spinoza now goes on to claim, the kind of reasons that can best satisfy this demand are those derived from philosophical reasoning. Unlike imagining, which answers to particular and diverse experiences, reasoning yields truths that are universal, eternal, and guarantee their own certainty.³⁸ To rationally understand a law about what empowers human beings, for example, is to appreciate that it captures an incontrovertible feature of the human good, and that it applies to you as one human being among others. Like anyone else, you have a reason to recognize it and to give it weight when deciding what to do.³⁹ Philosophical understanding therefore provides us with a universalist approach to the problem of cooperation. It uncovers general principles such as “Be just,” or “Strive to bind yourself to others by love,”⁴⁰ and shows us why we have reason to act on them.

This conception of reason is familiar enough; but what concerns us here is its role in Spinoza’s argument. Spinoza does not claim that he or his contemporaries currently live in an environment where most people can in fact use philosophical reasoning to work out how they have good reason to live. Nor does he claim that even the most advanced philosophers of his time have enough understanding to give more than a fragmentary account of what these reasons are. And he certainly does not claim to know that his sketch of a rational community can be fully realized. He is not therefore appealing to philosophical reasoning as the basis for an immediate and accessible solution to the problem of creating stable and harmonious communities. Instead, he is offering an image of a way of life devoted to the pursuit of philosophical understanding, which, if we could achieve it, would enable us to contain the diversity of our imaginative outlooks and generate forms of cooperation far stronger than any we have so far managed to devise.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza defends the need for an exemplar or model of human nature that we can set before ourselves and try to imitate.⁴¹ Putting this approach to work, he offers us a model of a life organized around the pursuit of philosophical understanding, and invites us, his readers, to use

³⁷ This section of my argument is particularly indebted to a paper by Moira Gatens, “Spinoza’s Disturbing Thesis: Power Norms and Fiction in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,” *History of Political Thought*, 30.3 (2009), 455–468.

³⁸ *TTP* Ch. 4; *G III* 62–63. ³⁹ *TTP* Ch. 4; *G III* 60–61. ⁴⁰ E4p46. ⁴¹ E4pref.

it to give meaning and value to what we do. We are meant to internalize his ideal of systematic philosophical understanding and let it shape our lives. But in so far as we follow him, and live by a faith in the existence of reasons that we cannot actually grasp, we rely on our capacity for imagining. We are envisaging a way of life in which we have universalist reasons for cooperating from a particularist perspective in which our reasons for acting are for the most part shaped by the narratives through which we interpret our experience.

What will make the ideal of rationally grounded cooperation compelling to us? As we have seen, a first condition is that we should be able to hold it as true. But this is a tough requirement, particularly if we acknowledge that the claim that reason can ground an empowering form of unity may be as much a fantasy as Moses' conception of a legislating God. Although Spinoza is confident that this is not the case, he is also acutely aware that the philosophical arguments by means of which he demonstrates his conclusion are not within everyone's reach. How, then, is he to make his view persuasive? Presumably the most effective means of enabling people to appreciate the benefits that understanding brings is to teach them how to reason; but before he can take this route, Spinoza first faces the problem of convincing them that they should submit to being taught. Since they are not skilled in reasoning, there is no point in offering them a complex philosophical argument, and Spinoza therefore pursues the alternative course of appealing to their imagination. His first, comparatively basic appeal is to their experience, and thus to the narratives in which our grasp of our own capacities are embedded. We already understand ourselves as capable of reasoning and have some experience of the kinds of power to which it can give rise; so the suggestion that it might generate further effective conclusions should not strike us as outlandish. For this consideration to move us, however, we need to be convinced that the benefits of learning to reason will be worth the trouble, and here Spinoza makes a second and more interesting appeal.

As aspirant philosophers, he tells us, we are pursuing a kind of knowledge that will free us from the passionate conflicts of our everyday lives and increase our power. Among the rewards we shall gain from living in a community whose members recognize that they have good reasons to cooperate for their mutual benefit are the confidence and satisfaction that come from knowing that we shall be treated fairly, the ability to pursue our own ends within the limits of the law, and the support generated by enduring friendships. In addition, the project of understanding to which such a community is devoted will diminish our susceptibility to sadness

and bring us joy. Here, as elsewhere in his work, we find Spinoza employing the resources of imagination in the service of reasoning, gilding his portrait of a life devoted to understanding with a familiar and empowering passion. Part of what makes the image of a rational life desirable, and encourages us to struggle towards it, is its continuity with the familiar pleasures of forms of existence grounded on imaginative thinking. Our ability to identify with these pleasures can inspire us to promote the forms of cooperation from which we imagine them to spring. But what motivates us here is not so much a grasp of the rational basis of cooperation, which still lies ahead, as a narrative about what we might achieve and the satisfactions it would bring. Here, then, Spinoza gives the last word to the particularist approach.

The central conclusion of the argument I have traced is that the way of life endorsed by reason needs to be brought within imaginative reach if it is to mold our desires and actions. The general principles around which it is organized must be made liveable by being embedded in the narratives that give meaning to what we do and shape our aspirations. If we are unable to see how we could, or why we should, conform to the demands of what Spinoza describes as a rational life, an image of such a life will be no use to us. As he appreciates, it is only through more or less particular narratives that a commitment to cooperation can be brought alive. Universalism therefore cannot get along without the form of particularism that Spinoza defends.

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