

Spinoza: from Art to Philosophy

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Spinoza speaks very little of the creative arts. "Spinoza has fascinated practitioners in all art forms perhaps more than any other philosopher," as Mieke Bal and Dimitris Vardoulakis have observed; "Nevertheless, his philosophy seems oblivious to the arts."¹ His corpus appears to contain just seventeen² occurrences of the word "art" itself, most of which employ *ars* in the broader sense of craft, skill, or technique.³ In the *Short Treatise*, he once refers to rational knowledge as "the art of reasoning," and in the *Theological-Political Treatise* he lauds those "who love the virtues and the arts," but nothing more is made of either comment.⁴ Sculpture, painting, poetry, dance, and other arts are likewise conspicuously absent from his texts, appearing only occasionally and peripherally.⁵ With

- 1 Mieke Bal and Dimitris Vardoulakis, "An Inter-Action: Rembrandt and Spinoza," in *Spinoza Now*, ed. Dimitris Vardoulakis (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2011), 292. This essay take an approach much different than my own, focusing on the way in which art enacts a rupture between existence and essence.
- 2 Morrison counts eight; I will happily defer to his tally if I am anywhere mistaken. James C. Morrison, "Why Spinoza Had No Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47, no. 4 (1989): 360, <https://doi.org/10.2307/431135>.
- 3 Five of these occur in the phrase, "the sciences and the arts," and another eight in similar phrases (the art of money-making, of treacher, of statescraft, etc.). See Baruch Spinoza, *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley, First Edition (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 4, 241, 361, 438, 463, 525, 569, 680, 702, 717, 726, 741. Spinoza was himself, of course, a skilled craftsman. For the meaning of *ars* see Moira Gatens, "Mark Sacks Lecture 2013: Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty and the Prophet and the Artist," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (2015): 3.
- 4 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 63, 570. See also Spinoza, 127, 401.
- 5 He compares the idealizations and fantasies of the philosophers to those concerning the "golden age of the poets" and frequently points out that many biblical texts are written in poetic language; he twice quotes Ovid, referring to him as "the poet," and he gives as an example of someone who dies without thereby ceasing to exist "a certain Spanish poet who was seized with sickness" and could not remember his former life; he uses music as an example of the subjectivity of terms like "good" and "bad." In each of these cases, art appears not as the subject matter but as an example and illustration of the subject matter. See Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 443, 451, 452, 493, 680, 682; Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*, ed. Seymour Feldman, trans. Samuel Shirley, 2nd ed (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1992), Cor.Pr.31, III; Pref., IV; Sch.Pr.17, IV; Sch.Pr.39, IV.

the exception of three passages I will mention later, there are no other explicit discussions of art in Spinoza's collected works. We do not know to what degree the creative arts may have occupied Spinoza's attention during his life, but they certainly did not occupy his writing.

Predictably, there is a corresponding dearth of literature on the subject of Spinozistic aesthetics.⁶ Nevertheless, I believe that a careful reading of Spinoza's writings, especially the *Ethics*, reveals that art is a crucial element of human life and knowledge. Rather than approaching the philosopher in terms of a general theory of aesthetics, I understand the significance of art in Spinoza's philosophy to rest in its role in the transition from the life beholden to the vagaries of sense experience (the imagination) to that of adequate knowledge of the nature of things (reason). On my account, art makes reason possible by educating the imagination.

The first part of this paper explores recent scholarship concerning art and Spinoza, which tends to be concerned with the degree to which Spinozism accommodates a general theory of aesthetics and the political ramifications of that theory. In my view, this literature highlights the close relationship between art and the imagination while simultaneously leaving that relationship unaddressed. Thus, the second part of this paper offers an account of the imagination in Spinoza's *Ethics*, giving particular attention to the role the imagination plays in the development of reason. Finally, the third part of the

6 The most oft-cited examples of what literature exists are discussed in this essay. The most prominent exception is Mignini's *Ars Imaginandi* (1981, Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane), which is summarized in Moira Gatens, "Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief," *European Journal of Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012): 74–90.. See both Morrison and Gatens for brief surveys. See also Amy Cimini's discussion of music and Spinoza, given in an essay which develops an interpretation of Spinoza that is similar to mine but whose concerns take it in a different direction (see Amy Cimini, "The Secret History of Musical Spinozism," in *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, ed. Beth Lord (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 87–107.).

paper addresses art directly by situating it within this context.

§1 // Spinoza's Aesthetics

Remarking on the paucity of literature concerning Spinoza's aesthetics, James Morrison⁷ makes the strong suggestion that Spinoza offers no sustained discussion of art because his philosophy is hostile toward aesthetics. For Morrison, the question of art emerges precisely at the juncture between sense experience and reason. Works of art, in their color, shape, sound, etc., belong inextricably to the world of the senses. The position of art in Spinoza's thinking, then, will depend upon the status of sensuality in his philosophy. Unfortunately, Morrison interprets the philosopher to be equally hostile toward sensuality. In his view, Spinoza has little use for the senses, offering us the choice between two mutually exclusive worlds, that of the senses and that of the intellect.⁸ "If the goal is to free ourselves from bondage and misery," Morrison suggests, "we must turn away from art and beauty, which are inseparable from them."⁹ This is the basis for Spinoza's antagonism toward art. Thus, Morrison concludes, "once the good life is *identified* with the life of reason, and reason is *opposed* to emotion, imagination, and sense, art and beauty become suspect."¹⁰ Such a dilemma between sense experience and reason as Morrison articulates, however, is fundamentally foreign to Spinoza's project. Rather, one of the most prominent problems addressed in the *Ethics* is the question of how emotion, imagination, and sense *generate* reason, as I discuss in the second part of the present essay. The intuition according to which Morrison situates art at the juncture of sense and reason is sound, but

7 Morrison, "Why Spinoza Had No Aesthetics."

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 363.

Spinoza's text does not justify positing a hidden hostility toward art.

We find a rare clue to the role art might play in Spinoza's philosophical outlook in the third supplementary note to Spinoza's discussion of prophecy in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Just as "the prophets were endowed with an extraordinary virtue exceeding the normal," he says, "it is granted to few to be able to compose poetry extempore, but this is still a human gift."¹¹ Prophets are similar to poets, he argues, insofar as they are both recipients of a gift that intensifies or develops some aspect of what is given by nature to human beings in general. Moira Gatens picks up on this connection, developing an account of Spinoza's aesthetics oriented around the proximity between artistry and prophecy.¹² Whereas in the *Ethics*, Spinoza stresses the degree to which the theological imagination is capable of leading people astray (by imagining an anthropomorphic God acting toward ends, people are led into myriad errors and superstitions¹³), in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza offers a more nuanced account of the theological imagination that focuses on the particular powers of prophets and the role they serve within a community. According to Spinoza's retrospective account of ancient society, the prophets possessed "an extraordinary virtue" and "perceived the mind and thought of God." This knowledge was not different in kind than that which is called "natural knowledge," he claims, but it was given by nature only to certain people, not accessible to all. Since people did not know the causes of this knowledge, they called it divine. According to Spinoza, the prophets worked in the medium of the imagination,¹⁴

11 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 573–74.

12 Gatens, "Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty." Oddly, Gatens does not quote the previous passage in her discussion.

13 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Appendix, I.

14 For Spinoza, "imagination" refers most broadly to ideas which correspond to the affections aroused in or bodies by their interactions with others and thus includes all sense perception. I will have more to say

and this made it possible for prophetic perception to go "beyond the limits of intellect," for "many more ideas can be constructed from words and images than merely from the principles and axioms on which our entire natural knowledge is based." The prophets, he stresses, "were not endowed with a more perfect mind, but with a more vivid power of imagination."¹⁵ As Gatens notes, this description applies directly to the artist, who has been likewise gifted and whose media are the various forms taken by the imaginative: visual, tactile, acoustic, etc.¹⁶ Because art springs from a gifted imagination, it makes sense that works of art vary from artist to artist just as the communications of prophecy varied according to the temperament of each prophet: those of cheerful dispositions received revelations of joyful events compatible with this disposition, those who were cultured and intellectually astute received complex revelations in accordance with their capacities, those who fought in the army received revelations concerning battles, etc.¹⁷ This subjectivity, however, does not entail that art is arbitrary. Rather, as an expression of the artist's powers, "art is a natural expression of the *conatus*" and finds its ultimate cause in nature.¹⁸ The nature of prophecy is not to impart knowledge of things through their causes, but rather to relate events "that strike the imagination, employing such method and style as best serves to excite wonder, and consequently to instil piety in the minds of the masses."¹⁹ Likewise the artist, as a person endowed with extraordinary gifts, works in the medium of imagination to impart powerful affections to those around her.²⁰ For this reason,

about the imagination later.

15 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 403–4.

16 Gatens, "Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty," 3.

17 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 406–7.

18 Gatens, "Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty," 13.

19 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 451.

20 I should not fail to mention one striking difference between Spinoza's account of prophecy and what can be similarly said of creative artistry: prophecy is attended by certainty. Unlike philosophical reasoning, imagination does not carry certainty with it by the necessity of its own nature. In order to be

according to Gatens, the artist is able to make genuine contributions to the "complex art of living well."²¹

Lee C. Rice takes this subjective element to be the defining feature of Spinoza's aesthetics.²² Beginning from Leibniz's rejection of Spinozism on the basis of the objectivity of aesthetic categories, Rice affirms the relativistic character of Spinoza's aesthetic categories (*e.g.*, beauty).²³ Like Gatens, he is eager to ground this relativity in the nature of each individual person. Those things which are relative to the individual "in their psychological genesis," he warns, are not thereby subjective "in the sense that they are without specifiable content."²⁴ Rather, the relativity of aesthetic categories is tied to the specific affectivity pertaining to each individual. Aesthetic categories, on this reading, express the power of the imagination as an end in itself.²⁵ Because each individual sensibility is unique, however, this leads to the question of sociality: can aesthetic valuation be conceived as a force of social unification?²⁶

Emphasizing the subjectivity of art is therefore not enough. Why are prophecy and art necessary to begin with? Within the context of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the need for prophecy originates in the fact that most members of a political body do not possess rational understanding:

certain of what is imagined, something must be added, and this additive took a unique form in the case of the prophecy: the sign. Such signs included wonders, predictions of future events, etc., and the most important attendant sign was the goodness of the prophet herself. Thus, prophecy consists in (1) the activity of a highly vivid imagination that is made certain through the attendance of (2) a sign and (3) the moral goodness of the prophet. Nothing analogous appears to define the creative arts. See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pr. 41, II; Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 405–6; Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza, Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 105–7.

21 Gatens, "Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty," 13.

22 Lee C. Rice, "Spinoza's Relativistic Aesthetics," *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie* 58, no. 3 (1996): 476–89.

23 Rice, 477.

24 Rice, 482.

25 Rice, 483.

26 Rice, 485. Rice answers in the affirmative.

Scripture does not explain things through their proximate causes; in its narratives it merely employs such order and such language as is most effective in moving men—and particularly the common people—to devotion. That is why it speaks of God and events in terms far from correct, its aim being not to convince on rational grounds but to appeal to and engage men's fantasy and imagination. If Scripture were to describe the downfall of an empire in the style adopted by political historians, the common people would not be stirred, whereas they are deeply affected when all is described in poetical language.²⁷

According to this understanding, prophecy provides a way of communicating ideas concerning the mind of God that operate through the strength of the imagination and for this reason meet with greater receptivity amongst a people. In the introductory chapter to the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza criticizes philosophers who "have learnt how to shower extravagant praise on a human nature that nowhere exists and to revile that which exists in actuality," who "conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be."²⁸ Instead, philosophers must take seriously the actual conditions of people living together, in which they are, for the most part, subject to passive emotions that pull them in various directions and often cause them to be contrary to one another. For this reason, they are in need of stronger emotions that are capable of checking their centrifugal affective tendencies.²⁹ By exercising their vivid imagination, the prophets were able to cultivate a common field of affective relations within society which serves this function. For example, imagining God as a jealous partisan of a particular nation may serve to give a common shape to what would otherwise be individualized, divergent affective relations of jealous, loyalty, *etc.* As Gatens puts it, the prophet achieves a "transformation of individual affect

27 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 451–52.

28 Spinoza, 680.

29 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Sch.2 Pr.37, IV.

into social value."³⁰ Through the power of artistic vision and poetical language, prophets and artists are able to nurture a common imaginary within a social body.

Although in different ways, each of these scholars are led to anchor art to the status of the imagination. For Morrison, the imagination becomes mistakenly opposed to reason and art is denigrated. For Gatens and Rice, art socializes the imagination and thereby gives way to the political. In both cases, however, I believe something essential is missed. By posing the question of art in relation to prophecy or aesthetic relativism, we risk obscuring the importance of creative art in the transition from the knowledge of the senses to the knowledge of reason.

§2 // Imagination and Reason

In order to properly situate the importance of art in Spinoza's thought, we must give an account of the relation between the imagination and reason. In Spinoza's taxonomy of the understanding, imagination is the first kind of knowledge.³¹ When our body comes into contact with other bodies, they make various impressions upon us, and these impressions are called images. The ideas corresponding to these affections of our body are imaginations, which necessarily constitute an inadequate knowledge of things: they do not give knowledge of things directly, but rather of the ways our body is affected by things. To the extent a mind imagines, it has inadequate ideas, since such ideas do not follow from the mind alone, but from the idea both of that mind and of another thing external to that mind. For example, the idea of the warmth of the sun is an act of imagination which

³⁰ Gatens, "Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty," 5.

³¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, Sch.2.Pr.40, II. The explication in the following two paragraphs is indebted to Deleuze, *Spinoza*. esp. pp. 54-58 and 73-76.

corresponds to the way my skin is stirred by its rays; the ideas of a strange dream are acts of imagination which may correspond to the way my digestion is stirred by an unsettling meal. Most importantly, all knowledge related to sense perception—including, of course, prophecy and art—is of this first kind.³²

The second kind of knowledge is reason.³³ For Spinoza, a body is an activity of extension which consists in a characteristic relation of motion and rest between the bodies which compose it. These bodies, in turn, themselves consist in characteristic relations of motion and rest between the bodies which compose them, and so forth.³⁴ When our body has some component relation in common with another body, the idea of that relation which is had in common is adequate in our mind. For example, motion and rest is a relation common to all bodies. For this reason, the idea I have of motion and rest is perfectly adequate with respect to my own body, but also with respect to any other body composed of the same relation (in this case, every body), since it is literally the *same* relation. Spinoza calls these "common notions," and they are "the basis of our reasoning process."³⁵ Furthermore, whatever follows necessarily from an adequate idea is also known adequately. Since the common notions pertain to what is common between bodies, they form an abstract knowledge. Indeed, most of the *Ethics* is an exercise in this abstract knowledge: demonstrating what we can know adequately on the basis of common notions and those things which follow from them.³⁶

How does the second kind of knowledge come about? Spinoza is highly sensitive

32 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Sch.Pr.17, II; Cor.Pr.25, II; Cor.Pr.26, II; Sch.Pr.3, III.

33 In this essay, I have also referred to this as "philosophical knowledge" and "natural knowledge."

34 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Def.1, II; Lemma 1, II; Def. following Ax.2, II.

35 *Ibid.*, Cor.Pr.38, II; Pr.39, II; Pr.40, II; Sch.1.Pr.40, II.

36 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Sch.Pr.36, V.

to the limits of our human situations. For the most part, he thinks, we do not act according to reason. There are many reasons for this. First, careful reasoning—like artistry—is a skill that is not given in equal measure to all people.³⁷ Furthermore, much of our life is carried out in contexts that do not admit of the rigors of philosophical reflection. "A man would perish of hunger and thirst if he refused to eat and drink until he had obtained perfect proof that food and drink would be good for him," he writes to Boxel.³⁸ Even when we are capable of reason, the power of external causes is so great that we are often overwhelmed by the force of the imagination.³⁹ Most importantly, however, Spinoza recognizes that reason is *developmental*. "For not all men are naturally determined to act in accordance with the rules and laws of reason," he observes. "On the contrary, all men are born in a state of complete ignorance, and before they can learn the true way of life and acquire a virtuous disposition, even if they have been well brought up, a great part of their life has gone by."⁴⁰ In other words, we neither begin with the second type of knowledge nor simply receive it suddenly from some unknown source; rather, the second type of knowledge is *learned*. We must develop it.

The question concerning how this development takes place—how one moves from the first to the second kind of knowledge—appears as early as Sch.Pr.29, II of the *Ethics*:

The mind does not have adequate knowledge [...] whenever it is determined externally—namely, by the fortuitous run of circumstance—to regard this or that, and not when it is determined internally, through its regarding several things at the same time, to understand their agreement, their differences, and their opposition. For whenever it is conditioned internally in this or in another way, then it sees

37 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 63, 527.

38 Spinoza, Letter 56, 904.

39 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pr.3, IV; Cor.Pr.4, IV.

40 Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 527.

things clearly and distinctly, as I shall later show.

When the common notions are later introduced explicitly, the most universal common notions are first in the order of presentation.⁴¹ In the order of development, however, it is the other way around. Insofar as the mind is determined externally by circumstances, it acts according to imagination. The crucial transition from the first to the second kind of knowledge occurs when the mind becomes determined internally, and it does this by "regarding several things at the same time"—that is, considering what is common between certain bodies. Although Spinoza does not point it out until later, we know that one of these "several things" must be the human body (the body of which the mind is the idea).⁴² Thus, the central point is the agreement, difference, and opposition between the human body and other bodies for which the mind has regard.

Insofar as we know things according to imagination, we know them in terms of the affections of our bodies. These affections themselves are the relations of composition into which our body enters with other bodies, which either assist or check our power of acting.⁴³ If these relations check or diminish our power of acting—if they constitute sad/painful emotions—then, insofar as they do so, nothing more comes of it, for "no thing can be evil for us through what it possesses in common with our nature, but in so far as it is evil for us, it is contrary to us."⁴⁴ If, however, these relations increase our power of acting—if they constitute joyful/pleasurable emotions—then something different has already begun to happen. For the mind to have regard for a joyful affection is for the mind to

41 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pr.38, II; Pr.39, II.

42 Spinoza, Pr.39, II.

43 It is often both, for the bodies of which we are speaking are complex: a single body may affect mine in many different ways.

44 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pr.30, IV.

regard an affection of the body insofar as it is determined by its agreement with another body. In other words, to the extent that my body agrees with another body and my power of acting is therefore increased,⁴⁵ the mind is able to form the idea of some aspect of its own body that is at the same time the idea of that same aspect of another body, *viz.*, the common aspect which is in agreement. In this way, the joyful emotions are already the beginning of the passage into the second kind of knowledge.

Now, it is by virtue of what they have in common that several bodies can be said to agree, differ, oppose, *etc.* "No individual thing whose nature is quite different from ours can either assist or check our power to act," Spinoza says; "nothing whatsoever can be either good or evil for us unless it has something in common with us."⁴⁶ Unless two bodies have something in common, there is simply no relation. In other words, relations—even relations of disagreement—occur by virtue of and on the basis of commonality. "If someone says that stone and man agree only in this respect, that they are both finite, weak, or that they do not exist from the necessity of their own natures," Spinoza explains, "he is making the general assertion that stone and man agree in no respect. For things that agree only negatively, that is, in what they do not possess, in reality agree in nothing."⁴⁷ For Spinoza, agreement is *prior* to disagreement. For this reason he is able to maintain that "all bodies agree in certain respects."⁴⁸ Thus, even the sad emotions testify to something in common between bodies and, if they are understood in this way, can generate common notions.

If all affections of the body indicate a certain degree of agreement with other

45 See Spinoza, Sch.Pr.18, IV.

46 Spinoza, Pr.29, IV.

47 Spinoza, Sch.Pr.32, IV.

48 Spinoza, Lem.2 following Pr.13, II.

bodies, then Spinoza is justified in holding that "there is no affection of the body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct conception."⁴⁹ In the order of development, the second kind of knowledge emerges from joyful relations with other bodies and proceeds to the most universal relations (*e.g.*, motion-and-rest) which underlie and make possible even the antagonistic relations with other bodies. "As long as we are not assailed by emotions that are contrary to our nature," Spinoza concludes, "we have the power to arrange and associate affections of the body according to the order of the intellect."⁵⁰ For Spinoza, then, the importance of imagination in the process of reasoning cannot be overstated.⁵¹ While imagination is dangerous, for it threatens to overwhelm the mind with passive emotions,⁵² it is also the *origin* of reason.

§3 // Art and Reason

According to Spinoza's *Ethics*, the second kind of knowledge (reason, or philosophical knowledge) emerges from and remains in close proximity to the first kind of knowledge (imagination, or sense experience). For this reason, the organization of the imagination takes on a central importance for reasoning. This has three consequences which together illuminate the place and significance of the creative arts for Spinozistic thinking.

First, the importance of imagination implies a series of practices aimed at those affections which are present to the body. For example, "we should pay particular attention

49 Spinoza, Pr.4, V.

50 Spinoza, Pr.10, V.

51 Genevieve Lloyd puts the point provocatively: "Reason's direct engagement with the passions, replacing adequate for inadequate ideas, means that reason is itself in the realm of the emotions." Genevieve Lloyd, *Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 95. See pp. 93-104.

52 See Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pr.2 through 18, IV.

to getting to know each emotion," Spinoza says, "so that the mind may thus be determined from the emotion to think those things that it clearly and distinctly perceives, and in which it finds full contentment."⁵³ Through this process of attentive knowing, the mind comes to be determined by those bodily relations that are had in common with other bodies and adequate ideas thereby take shape. Likewise, he suggests adopting rules for living that we then memorize and apply to particular situations.⁵⁴ In this way, the mind will be increasingly determined by that aspect of any situation which agrees with the body's power of acting, rather than by the various circumstantial disagreements that arise.⁵⁵

Second, the importance of imagination implies a series of practices aimed at bringing about those affections that are conducive to the formation of the second kind of knowledge. One example is found in a dramatic passage in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*. Here, Spinoza clearly stresses that the notions of perfection, imperfection, goodness, and badness are amongst the "fictions" produced by the imagination. In nature, these concepts are out of place because there is no goal or end that would define a model against which nature could be measured. Nevertheless, he claims, "these terms ought to be retained," because it is useful to "form the idea of a man which we may look to as a model

53 Spinoza, Sch.Pr.4, V.

54 Spinoza, Sch.Pr.10, V.

55 To recount Spinoza's own example, we know that hatred should be conquered by love: in a given situation, hatred marks a disagreement between my body and another that decreases my power of acting, while love marks an agreement that increases my power of acting. The problem is that I am often overwhelmed by hatred and unable to love. Thus, I make a daily practice of visualizing the various situations in which I might experience hatred and train myself to perceive and act according to love (agreement). When a real situation arises, this training might produce the desired result: instead of being determined externally by the run of hateful circumstances, my mind will be determined internally by what it has in common with the other bodies affecting my own, which assists my power of activity and constitutes the beginning of adequate knowledge. For this and other examples, see Spinoza, Sch.Pr.10, V.

of human nature." We ought to take "good," for example, to refer to "that which we certainly know to be the means for our approaching nearer to the model of human nature" (and similarly with the other terms).⁵⁶ Note the significance of this gesture: Spinoza has prescribed, for proper development of rational knowledge (and the corresponding ethical life), the generation of an imaginative fiction. By entertaining such a fiction, we bring about affections that tend toward the common notions and generate within us the second kind of knowledge.⁵⁷

This helps to explain one of the most striking passages in which Spinoza speaks directly of art, an otherwise obscure passage from the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. If the reader of Spinoza lacks adequate philosophical knowledge, the method for attaining it that is most commonly exemplified throughout Spinoza's corpus is to work from adequate ideas (such as the idea of God) to "whatever ideas follow in the mind from ideas that are adequate in it."⁵⁸ The *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* are no different: beginning with the nature of God and following the geometrical method of demonstration, Spinoza explicates the nature of essence and existence. At the conclusion of the explication, however, he suggests that one could arrive at the same knowledge through art:

If any philosopher still doubts whether essence is distinguished from existence in created things, he need not toil away over definitions of essence and existence in order to remove that doubt. For if he merely approaches a sculptor or a woodcarver, they will show him how they

56 Spinoza, Preface, IV.

57 Moira Gatens discusses this passage briefly in Gatens, "Compelling Fictions," 77–78. She concludes, however, that the "model human" is significantly different from the prophetic fictions discussed in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in that the philosopher *knows* the model human to be fictitious. On my reading, this distinction, though interesting, is not relevant: since educative fictions operate by virtue of producing affections which are generative of common notions, it matters more that one become cognizant of the common notion than that one is aware of the fictional status of the image-idea which helps to bring it about.

58 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Pr.40, II.

conceive in set order a nonexistent statue and thereafter bring it into existence for him.⁵⁹

Instead of following the demonstration from common notions, Spinoza counsels the reader to turn to the imagination by seeking out certain experiences of sense perception. By beholding a sculpture or woodcarving in the process of its creation, the student of philosophy allows her body to be affected by works of art. Presumably, Spinoza thinks that the careful observer will undergo an impression of certain relations (between essence and existence in this particular case) that are common to both the body of the artwork and her own body, and by becoming aware of these relations will have arrived at an adequate idea.

The formation of a common notion depends upon having the kinds of affections in which the relation (of which the common notion is the idea) occurs both in the body and in a body which is affecting it. For this reason, although a philosopher can progress in knowledge by understanding those things which follow from a given common notion, nevertheless the ultimate and vital spring of reasoning is the imagination, from which the common notions themselves arise.

Third, the importance of imagination implies a series of practices aimed at the increase of the body's capacity for being affected by other bodies. "For as the body is more capable of being affected in many ways and of affecting external bodies in many ways, so the mind is more capable of thinking," Spinoza points out.⁶⁰ After all, a body which is more capable of entering into relations with other bodies is therefore capable of discovering a more diverse set of commonalities between it and others, and therefore of forming a more diverse set of common notions. "In proportion as the body is rendered

⁵⁹ Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 182.

⁶⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, No.27 in Append., IV.

more capable in these respects, so is the mind rendered more capable of apprehension."⁶¹

In other words, *the scope of our capacity for reason is coextensive with the scope of our capacity for imagination*. For this reason, a philosopher must pursue a wide variety of bodily affections, and it is here that art again makes a rare but crucial appearance in Spinoza's account:

It is, I repeat, the part of a wise man to refresh and invigorate himself in moderation with good food and drink, as also with perfumes, with the beauty of blossoming plants, with dress, music, sporting activities, theatres and the like, in which every man can indulge without harm to another. For the human body is composed of many parts of various kinds which are continually in need of fresh and varied nourishment so that the entire body may be equally capable of all the functions that follow from its own nature, and consequently that the mind may be equally capable of simultaneously understanding many things.⁶²

Note that there are two reasons given for these diverse indulgences: first, they invigorate, *i.e.*, bring to life the affective capacities of the body; second, they nourish, *i.e.*, maintain the capacities and ward off their atrophy. To the arts of music and drama mentioned here can be added the many others, each of which invigorates and nourishes the affective capacities of the bodies in various ways. Through musical arts we learn to hear; through plastic arts, we learn to see. It is through this process—in which art has a central, though not exclusive role—that the mind becomes capable of understanding many things, forming common notions, and thereby attaining adequate ideas.

As works of prophecy and art, through their imaginative power, produce in the members of the social body a common affective relation, so too artistic creations produce

61 Spinoza, Pr.38, IV.

62 Spinoza, Sch.Pr.45, IV.

affective relations in a human body which constitute the basis for the formation of common notions. Works of art work on us, composing us, inaugurating new joys and nourishing old ones. Despite the paucity of direct references, Spinoza's text nevertheless indicates the importance of creative artistry to the process of reasoned thought itself. By increasing a body's capacity for being affected by diverse bodies in diverse ways, art makes reason possible. When we say that art "moves" us, Spinoza understands this quite literally: this common movement, this co-animation according to a characteristic relation of movement and rest, is the gate through which reasoning enters human life.

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