

Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief

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Abstract: Spinoza took it to be an important psychological fact that belief cannot be compelled. At the same time, he was well aware of the compelling power that religious and political fictions can have on the formation of our beliefs. I argue that Spinoza allows that there are 'good' and 'bad' fictions. His complex account of the imagination and fiction, and their disabling or enabling roles in gaining knowledge of Nature, is a site of disagreement among commentators. The novels of George Eliot (who translated Spinoza's works) represent a significant development for those who aim to resolve such disagreement in favour of the epistemic value of the imagination and fiction. Although Eliot agreed with Spinoza that belief cannot be compelled, she nevertheless affirmed the potential of certain kinds of fiction to be not only compelling but also edifying. The parallel reading of Eliot and Spinoza offered here raises the question of whether his philosophy can accommodate a theory of art in which the artist is seen to be capable of attaining and imparting dependable knowledge.

1. Introduction

In 1849 George Eliot received a letter from her friend, Charles Bray, who asked her opinion about whether to publish an English translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*.¹ He also enquired whether she had completed her translation of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*). Eliot responded that if an English translation of the *Ethics* were to be published then she could bring her *TTP* translation to completion in a few months 'to keep it company'. But, she wrote,

I think you would do better to abstain from printing a translation. What is wanted in English is not a translation of Spinoza's works, but a true estimate of his life and system. After one has rendered his Latin faithfully into English, one feels that there is another yet more difficult process of translation for the reader to effect, and that the only mode of making Spinoza accessible to a larger number is to study his books, then shut them and give an analysis. (GEL I: 321)

In her 1978 monograph on Eliot and Spinoza, Dorothy Atkins relies on this letter to make the following claim: 'George Eliot's novels are her further attempt at translation, that is, her additional efforts to make Spinoza "accessible to a larger number"' (Atkins 1978: 8). Atkins was the first to attempt a book-length study of Spinoza's influence on Eliot's fiction. The main focus of her study is Eliot's first

novel, *Adam Bede*, and Atkins skillfully draws out the parallels between this novel and the philosophy of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Her approach shows the ways in which the intellectual and moral development of Eliot's characters exemplify Spinoza's views on the three kinds of knowledge, virtue and our place in Nature. Atkins' monograph made a path-breaking contribution to Spinoza scholarship. However, her overall approach tends to downplay Eliot's originality and the degree to which her fictional works go well beyond the re-presentation of Spinoza's philosophy in literary form.² I argue that Eliot's novels have a more profound and fertile relation to Spinoza than Atkins' approach would suggest. In particular, I will show that Eliot develops notions latent in Spinoza's philosophy that open new paths for conceiving of the relation between ethics and art.

Despite her response to Bray, Eliot did complete a translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* in 1856, although a misunderstanding with the publisher over terms prevented its publication.³ Had it been published, it would have been the first English language edition of the *Ethics*.⁴ Clearly then, Eliot was very familiar with the philosophy of Spinoza. However, Spinoza was only one influence on the development of her thought. Before becoming a novelist, Eliot worked as a translator, an essayist, and as an editor of the *Westminster Review*. In addition to Spinoza's *TTP* and *Ethics*, she translated David Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* in 1846 and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums* in 1854.⁵ All three philosophers were important figures for the nineteenth-century biblical criticism movement that sought to interpret Scripture and religion in mythological, metaphorical and anthropological terms.⁶ Although Eliot declared her loss of faith in a transcendent God when still young, as she matured she increasingly came to hold a deep respect for all religious traditions. She came to understand these traditions as organically and developmentally connected to present human life and values. The enduring presence of the past and the role of imagination and memory in forming and sustaining community are essential features of her social and moral philosophy. She accepted Spinoza's critique of religion along with his account of the crucial part religion plays in founding sociability but what she constructs from these elements of his philosophy is unique.

My argument is in three parts. First, I offer a critical exposition of Spinoza's views on belief and faith. Second, I consider the relationship between Eliot's account of the imagination and belief and Spinoza's philosophy. In the final section I contend that although Eliot's theory and practice of art incorporate some important elements of Spinoza's work, they also go well beyond his philosophy.

2. Spinoza on Belief and Faith

Chapters XIII and XIV of the *TTP* contain Spinoza's central arguments for the need for a strict separation of faith and theology from philosophy.⁷ In earlier chapters, he had demonstrated that the teachings of the prophets do not bear on philosophy. The prophets were not philosophers but rather men of extraordinary

imaginative power who made a strong impression on the minds of ordinary, uneducated people in order to persuade them to follow a common moral code. They did not seek to convince people of the truth of their revelations through argument and logic. Their powers of persuasion lay with their capacity to form awe-inspiring images and visions—winged seraphims, chariots of fire and the blare of heavenly trumpets (*TTP*: 164)—from which they constructed compelling narratives concerning God as creator, king, lawgiver, punisher and redeemer. The prophets' visions, recorded in Scripture, 'appeal to and engage men's fantasy and imagination' (*TTP*: 80) in order to instruct even 'the most sluggish mind' (*TTP*: 153). Scripture offers a code of conduct that the simplest people can obey because it directly appeals to their emotions and captures their imaginations. Scripture does not seek to make people more learned, nor does it condemn ignorance. It simply aims to make people comply with a moral code. There are natural limits to what one may command another to do. Nobody, for example, 'can be [made] wise by command' (*TTP*: 155), nobody can be 'forced to be blessed' (*TTP*: 103), nor forced to hold a particular belief (*TTP*: 208). However, all are capable of performing prescribed acts, and abstaining from proscribed acts, through promised rewards and threatened punishments. The single most important command of Scripture is to love one's neighbour and this is all that obedience to God demands: 'the entire Law consist in this alone, to love one's neighbour' (*TTP*: 159). Faith in God is shown by actions that comply with this law. This point is reinforced by Spinoza's claims that 'only by works can we judge anyone to be a believer or an unbeliever' and 'faith without works is dead' (*TTP*: 160).

Spinoza is concerned to minimize the harmful effects of beliefs that cause strife and disorder in the state, in particular, theological disputes. If the Bible were a philosophical treatise then disputation might lead to resolution, agreement or even truth. But as he takes great pains to show, the Bible is a historical narrative that has been composed by many hands, over many years, and has been forced to adapt its meaning to very different circumstances and peoples. If the state is to succeed in its task of providing peace and security then it must assume the power of settling theological conflicts. However, it must do so in a manner that does not show favour to one sect over another. To this end Spinoza devises seven dogmas of universal faith [*fidei universalis*]. These are: God exists; He is one; He is omnipresent; He has supreme right; worship of God consists only in love towards one's neighbour; only those who worship God are saved; and, finally, God forgives the repentant (*TTP*: 162). In a well-ordered state, all are bound to live by these principles. However, each person is free to interpret them in whichever way suits. Two people, accepting the same dogma, may nevertheless hold markedly different beliefs.⁸ From the point of view of faith, such disagreement does not matter.

The diversity of ways in which the seven principles may be interpreted acknowledges the power of the sovereign to dictate what shall count as permissible and impermissible action at the same time that it accommodates the different beliefs of citizens. Without a secure state and a stable moral code the development of human powers and knowledge is impossible. Spinoza's objec-

tion to religion, then, centres on ambitious theologians who mistakenly think that it is their business to be concerned with philosophy and truth when really their proper province is faith and morality; and faith and morality should be judged in terms of how people act, and not by what they say or believe. As he states in the Preface to the *Treatise*, it is only in despotic commonwealths that 'beliefs are put on trial and condemned as crimes' (*TTP*: 3). His insistence that faith is to be judged by actions not thoughts culminates in the pivotal claim that 'between faith and theology on one side and philosophy on the other there is no relation and no affinity' (*TTP*: 164). His point might be paraphrased by saying that whereas faith and theology are concerned with the human endeavour to preserve itself within wider Nature by following a basic code of conduct, the object of philosophy is the whole of Nature, in relation to which human life 'is but a particle' (*TTP*: 174).

The seven dogmas are a pragmatic response to what Spinoza took to be an important psychological fact: *belief cannot be compelled*. Differences between the more or less ignorant, and the more or less rational, should be understood to lie on a continuum rather than as an opposition. Every individual exists in a state of dynamic transitions: passing from lesser to greater, and greater to lesser, power. Even the simplest mind will have some adequate ideas and even the most excellent mind will have some inadequate ideas. This is evident when we consider that although the rational person rejects the fictions of the masses (e.g., God as lawgiver and judge), fictions, of a sort, can play a part in rational deliberation too. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*TdIE*) Spinoza distinguishes between false and fictitious ideas by way of the presence or absence of assent, respectively.⁹ There is no error involved, he says, in positing a candle 'burning in an imaginary space, or where there are no bodies' (*TdIE*: 26). Nor is there error in an architect's conception of a building that never has, and never will, exist (*TdIE*: 31).¹⁰ Even though the natural philosopher and the architect both deploy the imagination in their attempts to understand Nature, they nevertheless can be distinguished from the prophet and his imaginings. But on what does their difference depend? In what follows this question will be pursued through a consideration of the model (or *exemplar*) of human nature that Spinoza posits in Part IV of the *Ethics*.

In the Preface to Part IV Spinoza explains that notions of perfection and imperfection are imaginative modes of thought that human beings employ to indicate their approval, or disapproval, of the various things that they encounter in Nature. Nature itself, however, does not contain failure, or sin, or imperfection, because there is no end or goal at which Nature aims (*EI Appen*). Good and evil, likewise, are 'modes of thinking' that arise from the pursuit of human ends and aims and they do not have an existence in Nature independent of human nature. Nevertheless, Spinoza maintains, we must retain the terms 'perfection', 'imperfection', 'good', and 'evil' because, understood correctly, they are crucial to human flourishing. But he gives these terms significantly new meanings. Perfection is understood to be synonymous with reality, that is, an individual may be said to be more or less real (or perfect) when his power of action

understood in terms of his own nature is increased or diminished. 'Therefore', Spinoza writes, 'I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature [*naturae humanae exemplar*] that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model' (EIV Pref). Why does Spinoza posit a fictional ideal towards which the rational person should strive?

Human beings are by nature imaginative and imitative and our affects tend to be contagious: 'If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect' (EIII Prop XXVII). It is by way of the imitation of the affects that Spinoza explains a range of sociable emotions, including the desire to emulate others (EIII Prop XXVII Schol and Cor 1–3). The power of imitating those with whom we imaginatively identify might be considered 'good' and useful insofar as it encourages the emulation of wise and rational persons, that is, insofar as it brings us closer to realizing the *exemplar* of human nature. However, the disposition to imitate often fails to discriminate between worthy and unworthy models of conduct. Even the wise and rational may find it difficult to maintain their wisdom and reason when they are forced to live among those who 'do not agree at all with [their] nature' (EIV Appen VII). It is the inherent plasticity of human nature, consequent upon the predisposition to imagine and imitate, that necessitates the provision of an *exemplar* of human nature in the first place. It is posited as a guide to the human endeavour to reach its 'highest good'.

The philosophical *exemplar* of the wise and free person is offered as an ideal to emulate. But does the *philosophical* use of an *exemplar* alter the fact that it is nevertheless an idealized construction, in short, a fiction? More pertinently, how does the *exemplar* offered in the *Ethics* differ from the models of conduct supplied by the prophets, for example, the imitation of Christ?¹¹ I maintain that there is a crucial difference. The difference concerns the manner in which the powers of imagination and imitation are deployed in each case. In the case of the philosophical *exemplar* one is aware that the ideal is a fictional device—a mode of thought—that aims to aid the human endeavour to persevere in existence.¹² This awareness is absent in the case of the exemplars offered in Scripture and in theological claims about these exemplars. Whereas the philosopher uses the imagination as an aid to reason, in the case of religion it functions as a substitute for reason.

Spinoza's use of an imaginative model to guide human conduct highlights an important feature of his ethical stance, namely, that the use of the imagination and fiction are inescapable for any form of human life that gives itself a code of conduct. This is because nature does not, and cannot, provide us with such a code. Moral codes must always be invented or fabricated. This does not mean that they are therefore false. Here, it is worthwhile noting that in his translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, Edwin Curley explains: 'I use *to feign* and *fiction* for *fingere* and *fictio*, but it is important to realize that the English terms have connotations which may be misleading. A feigned or fictitious idea is not necessarily a false one . . . *To hypothesize* and *hypothesis* are closer to the meaning and might have

been used, if *hypothesis* were not wanted to represent *hypothesis*'.¹³ Holding this in mind, the fictions of Scripture and the fictions of the philosopher might be understood as less, or more, adequate hypotheses about Nature and the conditions necessary for human life to survive, even flourish, within Nature.¹⁴ This would lend to the imagination a necessary, permanent, and vital role in all fields of knowledge, including moral knowledge. The generation of human values cannot be understood without appreciating the vicissitudes of the affects and the imaginative life with which they invariably are coupled. This interpretation puts considerable pressure on Spinoza's ambivalent attitude towards the role of the imagination in belief and knowledge. It is this ambivalence that drives his critics into two distinct camps: those who view his account of the imagination in positive and productive terms,¹⁵ and those who argue that, for Spinoza, the imagination is 'an impediment to knowledge' or even 'an epistemic disease'.¹⁶

It is not only contemporary critics who part ways on the issue of Spinoza's notion of the imagination. The reception and influence of Spinoza's philosophy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be mapped along two divergent paths: first, the Romantics, many of whom put supreme value on imagination and feeling, and whose writings celebrate a deified Nature; and second, the Rationalists who stress the superiority of reason and who tend to denigrate imagination as the source of error and irrationality. Obviously, an account of this period in the history of ideas is far beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient for present purposes to note that some Romantics not only took up the notion of the imagination as productive but also conceived of it as an independent and creative faculty in its own right. I cannot find support in Spinoza's writings for this notion of the imagination. In his comprehensive study of the first kind of knowledge, Cornelius de Deugd has remarked that it is ironic that many of the Romantics 'claimed [Spinoza] as *the* philosopher and as a kind of spiritual ancestor' even though Spinoza's conception of the imagination 'is diametrically opposed to the Romantic theory of imagination' (de Deugd 1966: 83). Given that Spinoza asserts 'man's incapacity to bring forth by imaginative means anything that was not [in experience] to begin with', de Deugd concludes Spinoza thereby 'dismissed in the forehand all theories about man as an imaginative creator' (ibid.: 79, 81).

George Eliot was deeply influenced by German and British Romanticism. However, the realist genre in which she worked, and indeed that she helped to define, represents a departure from certain forms of Romanticism.¹⁷ Her literature is very deliberately populated with ordinary rather than heroic figures, and it is for everyday, mundane human experience that she seeks to elicit her reader's sympathetic fellow feeling. Her view of the imagination, and its relation to reason, is close to the view that Spinoza held.

3. Eliot on Imagination and Belief

By the early 1860s Eliot had become a successful novelist and an influential public figure whose opinions carried great authority with the reading public.

When a close friend cautioned her about the possible harmful effects of making known her views on religion, Eliot responded: 'I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with no faith, to have any negative propagandism in me. . . . I have lost all interest in mere antagonism to religious doctrines. I care only to know, if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine from the beginning until now' (GEL IV: 64–5). This exchange between friends reveals much about Eliot. It shows her deep compassion for those who have lost their faith and her commitment to the serious study of religion as a natural phenomenon. Although she could no longer believe in the literal truth of religion, she nevertheless retained a sense of its important role in sustaining cultural meaning, value and identity.

The influence of Spinoza on Eliot's understanding of the phenomenon of religion was significant. In one of her essays she wrote: 'he who believes, whatever else he may deny, that the true and the good are synonymous, bears in his soul the essential element of religion' (Eliot 1991: 281–2). Like Spinoza, she judged faith by works and deeds rather than by professed belief. Reward and punishment she considered as effects intrinsic to the deed. She conceived of the individual as an egoistic consciousness that imagines itself as the free centre of action rather than recognizing itself as a somewhat insignificant 'particle' connected to all else through complex webs of interconnected causes and effects.¹⁸ She was a determinist who nevertheless believed in freedom and the growth of knowledge through human striving. Perceptions and beliefs, she maintained, always are embodied and embedded in particular ways of life: her novels richly confirm Spinoza's insight that a farmer, seeing the impression of horses' hoofs in the sand, naturally will think of the plough and the field, whereas the soldier will think of horsemen and war (see *EII Prop XVIII Schol* and *TTP*: 24). Imagination and memory, mingled with affect, are the materials from which individual and community identities are built.

Notwithstanding these and other similarities, and as obvious as it seems, it must be stressed that Eliot's historical and cultural milieu sets her apart from Spinoza. A relatively high literacy rate coupled with the use of the vernacular in learned journals and books, and the rise of the novel, introduce a new set of relations between nineteenth-century authors and readers.¹⁹ Moreover, the crisis of faith that defined Victorian culture is in stark contrast with seventeenth-century forms of religious belief.²⁰ Eliot repeats Spinoza's call for the separation of faith and morality from philosophy (or at least natural philosophy, now called science), but for very different reasons. For her, it is not so much faith or religion that threaten the growth of knowledge but rather the tendency for a reductively conceived science to fill the gap left by the crisis of faith. She argued against the rising influence of the doctrine of fatalism that some understood to follow from scientific determinism. She wrote:

The consideration of molecular physics is not the direct ground of human love and moral action any more than it is the direct means of

composing a noble picture or of enjoying great music. . . . That every study has its bearing on every other is true; but pain and relief, love and sorrow, have their peculiar history, which make an experience and knowledge over and above the swing of atoms. (GEL VI: 98–9)

Contrary to the claim that Eliot's fiction writing can be seen as a translation of Spinoza's philosophy into literature, I propose that her literature attempts a secular re-interpretation of the meaning and significance of religion and that, although her interpretation is strongly influenced by certain aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, it pulls against other aspects. Of course, the proposal that Eliot's fiction can be read as a reprise of Scripture is hardly startling. One could say the same about much modern literature. If Western philosophy can be characterized as a series of footnotes to Plato then much Western literature can be seen as a series of footnotes to the Bible. What makes this proposal more interesting is the additional claim that what is distinctive about Eliot's novels is her declared aim to reveal, with the highest possible degree of accuracy, the complicated and interconnected individual, social and natural causal relations that constitute the fabric of human experience. The relation of her novels to Scripture, then, is self-consciously ameliorative and her works can be seen to involve an attempt to 'emend the intellect' of her readers. Although Eliot was conservative politically, she believed that the common people are able to be educated. Furthermore, she saw it as her moral duty to instruct, as well as to entertain, her readers. Her guiding principle is captured in her statement that '[I]f art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally' (GEL II: 86).

Recall that according to Spinoza religion and Scripture tend to invert the actual operation of causes and effects and to project onto God or Nature the fiction of final ends (*EI Appen*). 'Scripture', he writes, '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 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*' (*TTP*: 80, my emphasis). Although Eliot certainly endeavoured to move her readers and to engage their imaginations, she did so in a way that tried, at the same time, to disclose the proximate causes of given effects and the correct order of events. She hoped, in this way, to shift the object of the beliefs of her readers away from images of transcendent beings and superstitious forces and towards an understanding of our embodied relations with our fellow human beings. It is our fellow human beings, she tries to show, who are the proper objects of our faith and devotion. By Spinoza's lights, this means that Eliot is neither a prophet (insofar as she teaches the proper causal order of things) nor a philosopher (insofar as she deliberately appeals to her reader's emotional and imaginative powers).²¹ However, as I will argue below, she does not appear to fit his description of a storyteller either. Eliot's conception of the edifying potential of fiction appears to exceed the frame of Spinoza's philosophy. The pertinent point is that her carefully crafted fictions have more

in common with the fictions of philosophers than with the fictions of the prophets.

Eliot was very knowledgeable about the latest scientific concepts and theories of her own time. She had read Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* on its publication in 1859, and was a careful and appreciative reader of the philosophical works of her contemporaries, including J. S. Mill, Auguste Comte, and her friend Herbert Spencer. Yet, she always insisted on the unique capacity of art to evoke reverence for Nature and provide insight into the complex interconnectedness of the human species. Although each domain of knowledge (science, morality, art) enjoys its own methodology, knowledge in each case is gained through critical reflection on our beliefs and careful scrutiny of our experience. It is this account of knowledge that gives rise to Eliot's distinctive realism in art and ethics and her championing of the experimental method. She conceived of human history as a kind of laboratory from which we might learn, and in an essay stated that 'every mistake, every absurdity into which poor human nature has fallen, may be looked on as an experiment of which we may reap the benefit' (Eliot 1991: 271). In considering her fiction as 'simply a set of experiments in life' (GEL VI: 217) she presents a conception of the realist novel as itself being a carefully controlled laboratory in which various hypotheses might be subjected to testing.

Although Eliot acknowledged necessity, or what she called the 'inexorable law of consequences' and the 'undeviating law' of the world of science (Eliot 1991: 271) she nevertheless insisted that our primary resource in the endeavour to flourish and live peaceably is the sympathetic imagination. When it comes to moral knowledge, Eliot argued, 'agreement between intellects seems unattainable' and so we are obliged to 'turn to the *truth of feeling* as the only universal bond of union' (GEL I: 162). And this truth is accessible, on her view, only through the proper use of the imagination and its ability to connect us to others through sympathy. For her, the harmonious exercise of our imaginative, sympathetic and rational capacities is necessary to the attainment of moral knowledge. The assertion that fellow feeling is the only 'universal bond' is, for Eliot, as given as fundamental as Spinoza's assertion of 'the imitation of the affects'. She had faith in that bond to found and nourish human community. The affective bonds between people depend on their ways of life, their shared histories, and their shared pleasures and pains. The imaginative and emotional lives of people are thus the basis from which fellow feeling might grow. Although Spinoza does say in the *Ethics* that 'man is a god to man' (EIV Prop XXXV Schol), Eliot is likely to be drawing on Feuerbach's more elaborate account of this proposition in *The Essence of Christianity*. For example, Eliot's portrayal of the eponymous Romola (Eliot 1997) as an immanent Madonna resonates more with the critiques of religion offered by Feuerbach and Comte than it does with Spinoza's critique of religion. Likewise, the ironic comparison Eliot draws between Miss Dorothea Brooke and St. Teresa of Avila in *Middlemarch*, calls to mind Feuerbach's critique of the tendency to idealize human capacities and then project such idealizations onto transcendent figures.²² In each of her novels, she strives to achieve a richly embodied demonstration of the wholly immanent powers of human fellowship.

In order to understand human life and value, she argues, one must conduct careful observations, reflect on experience, and practice a sympathetic comparison between self and others. These are skills and qualities especially associated with the artist and they furnish 'our only method of knowing mankind' (Eliot 1994a: 105).

4. Art and the 'Not False Error'

Eliot's last publication, the enigmatic collection of essays entitled *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, includes 'How We Come to Give Ourselves False Testimonials, and Believe in Them'. This essay is a deliberation on the relationship between truth and belief. How much of what we believe about others, the self and the world, is based in habitual refrain rather than reflectively endorsed? How does self-deception differ from the assertion of a 'barefaced falsehood'? Our lack of self-knowledge, and the consequences of this all too human deficiency, is of central concern in this essay. For present purposes, its primary interest arises from the clarity of the account it offers of the relations between imagination, belief and error.²³

This mature work offers an important key to understanding Eliot's distinctive conception of art. Distinguishing between two types of imaginative capacity, Eliot contrasts 'powerful imagination' with 'the fictions of fancy and transient inclination'. The powerful imagination enjoys 'a breadth of ideal association which informs every material object, every incidental fact with far-reaching memories and stored residues of passion, bringing into new light the less obvious relations of human existence' (Eliot 1994a: 110). The ideal associations, characteristic of the artistic imagination, construct representations with the force to trigger recollection, engage emotion and provide fresh insight into the subtle interconnections between self, others and the world. The ideality of the vision does not concern the *idealization* of what is but rather the revelation of non-apparent but nevertheless real connections and actual relations in the world that escape casual observation. The difference between the two types of imaginative power stresses the superiority of the disciplined and selective imagination that creates new combinations from a store of patient and meticulous empirical observations that are imbued with affective force. Art, in this sense, invites us to look again at the familiar, but with attention and care. An artistic representation, for Eliot, is always a matter of re-visioning: attending to what is thought to be ordinary, uneventful, or mundane, in order to appreciate the extraordinary intricacy of human relationships, or the long chain of causes that link the past to the present.

Eliot turns to Dante's triple vision in Canto XV of the *Purgatorio* in order to clarify her understanding of these two types of imaginative power. Passing through the third circle of purgatory, Dante encounters those souls whose mortal sin was wrathfulness. He then has a series of visions. The potency of these visions renders him oblivious to his actual surroundings but after they cease he

writes, 'When my soul returned without to the things that are real outside of it, I recognized my not false errors'.²⁴ Reflecting on these lines, Eliot says,

he is the strongest seer who can support the stress of creative energy and yet keep that sanity of expectation which consists in distinguishing, as Dante does, between the *chose che son vere* [things that are real] outside the individual mind, and the *non falsi errori* [not false errors] which are the revelations of true imaginative power. (Eliot 1994a: 111)

The 'not false errors' of the artist differ from those of the prophet because, like the philosopher, the genuine artist does not confuse the powers of the imagination with the powers of reason. Those who enjoy superior imaginative power experience 'strong vision', but they do not mistake these visions for external reality, they do not confuse the revelations of the imagination with those of reason. The ability to discern the difference is the mark of a refined, disciplined imagination and this ability is crucial to Eliot's account of the essentially ethical dimension of art. The artist must have the capacity to bond his vision, or insight, to everyday life in a manner that provides trustworthy knowledge about the self, others and the world.

The phrase she selects from the *Purgatorio*—'the not false errors'—recalls Spinoza's contention that falsity arises when we fail to understand the limitations of the different ways of knowing, that is, when we (mis)'take the imagination for the intellect' (EI Appen). Neither Dante nor Eliot makes this mistake. For Eliot the imagination is crucial to the construction of moral knowledge because it is the principal means through which the self is affectively and cognitively connected to others and to the world. But imagination alone will not yield moral knowledge. As we have seen, the imagination can lead to fanciful beliefs and erroneous judgments and is often egocentric. Dependable knowledge requires the active participation of the intellect and the capacity to distinguish between the various ways in which we come to know the world: the imagination is a power, not a defect, but it is important to understand the limits of that power.

Given these similarities between Spinoza's and Eliot's theories of the imagination, the question still remains whether there is any reason to suppose that Spinoza can accommodate a theory of art in which the artist's vision is seen to contribute to the production of dependable knowledge. Some critics have responded firmly in the negative. For example, James Morrison has argued that 'one must look away from Spinozism if one wants to reflect philosophically about art and beauty' (Morrison 1989: 363). Spinoza's philosophy, he claims, 'is fundamentally alien to . . . art and beauty' (ibid.: 359). There is some textual evidence to support this view. Although Spinoza seems to have appreciated Classical literature, especially Ovid and Terence, it is nevertheless striking that he frequently uses these sources to illustrate the passions and the inferiority of the first kind of knowledge (see EIII and EIV).²⁵ Spinoza understands storytelling to involve the combination of images or ideas in the imagination that do not belong together. The image of the chimera, for example, is constructed by joining

together various parts of actually existing animals: a lion, a snake, and a goat. Such constructions tell us nothing about Nature and if the artist's fiction is persuasive enough to compel us to affirm its reality then art will lead to false belief, superstition and ignorance.

However, Spinoza does seem to allow that there are good and bad fictions. The fiction of the model of human nature he introduces in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics* is a case in point. This is a good fiction because its function is to guide human striving to live an ethical life and because those who deploy it know that it is a fiction. But art, for Spinoza, cannot have any essential connection to beauty, at least not beauty as it is understood in classical aesthetics, because beauty has no existence apart from human desires and experience. For Spinoza, beauty and ugliness, order and confusion are 'modes of imagining' that must be explained through the ways in which various objects affect the human body: 'if the motion the nerves receive from objects presented through the eyes is conducive to health, the objects by which it is caused are called beautiful; those which cause a contrary motion are called ugly' (EI Pref). These modes of imagining, he insists, 'do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination' (EI Pref). Nevertheless, what is conducive to health is good and will be desired for that reason. Morrison is surely right about this then: for Spinoza, there is no *essential* relation between art and beauty. But it does not follow from this that Spinoza's philosophy is therefore alien to art and beauty. Rather, it suggests that had Spinoza developed a theory of art—which, unfortunately, he did not—it would have been quite different from the classical view.

Based on a meticulous and scholarly engagement with Spinoza's work, Filippo Mignini presents a reconstruction of what a Spinozistic theory of art might look like.²⁶ *Ars Imaginandi* does not attempt to read Spinoza through a classicist lens or project onto him a 'theory of aesthetics' that postdates his philosophy.²⁷ Rather, Mignini posits a Spinozistic view of art as one where Nature itself must be the ultimate cause of art and where what art aims at can only be the preservation and enhancement of the human capacity to continue in its own existence. In Spinoza's terms, art must be a natural expression of *conatus*. Art, Mignini argues, 'manifests itself as a necessary and universal expression of nature, indispensable for the pursuit of human perfection' (Mignini 1981: 16).²⁸ In this way, the essential relationship that art sometimes is thought to have to beauty is here displaced onto the ethical. It is the *conatus* that links art and ethics because the striving to understand ourselves and our passions, our likes and dislikes, things which increase or deplete our power, all are elements in our ethical endeavour to persevere in our being.²⁹ Morrison may well be right that Spinoza's philosophy is incompatible with the classical view of aesthetics but Mignini demonstrates that this does not therefore mean that Spinozistic philosophy is incapable of yielding a theory of art.

Whereas Mignini meticulously pieces together from fragments of Spinoza's texts what may have been Spinoza's implicit view on art, Eliot draws on elements of Spinoza's philosophy (along with a raft of other influences) to construct a theory of art that presents striking parallels with Mignini's recon-

structive account. Although Eliot was in full agreement with Spinoza that belief cannot be compelled, she nevertheless recognized the potential of certain kinds of fiction to be not only compelling but also edifying.³⁰ If we strictly follow Spinoza's account of things, Eliot's novels are a form of writing that is neither prophecy-scripture nor philosophy-science. However, it is a form of writing that also is at odds with his conception of storytelling. Eliot brings together elements from each of these genres: she has what Spinoza called the robust imagination and the sincerity of heart of the genuine prophet, the patient and diligent observational skills of the philosopher-scientist, and the talent of the storyteller to capture the imagination of her audience. But in a way that goes beyond anything explicitly present in Spinoza's philosophy, Eliot conceived of her realist fiction as a vehicle for instruction, that is, as a potential causal agent in the *revision* of belief and in the promotion of more adequate understandings of the world within which we act and are acted upon. On her view: 'It is not enough simply to teach truth; that may be done, as we all know, to empty halls, and within the covers of unsaleable books; we want it to be so taught as to compel men's attention and sympathy' (Eliot 1991: 368).

Eliot's compelling fictions aim to instruct and edify her readers by deploying fictional constructs that challenge habitual beliefs, superstition and faith in transcendent deities. It is beyond doubt that she was deeply influenced by Spinoza's philosophy. Moreover, if Spinoza's philosophy were to be capable of developing a theory of art—along the lines suggested by Mignini—then there is every reason to suppose that it would be compatible with Eliot's ethical realism.

Spinoza's complex account of the imagination, and its role in gaining knowledge of Nature, remains a site of interpretative disagreement among his commentators. Eliot's work represents a significant development along the interpretative path that aims to resolve disagreement in favour of the epistemic value of a certain conception of the imagination. She considered the imagination and memory to provide crucial resources to critical thought and she saw the role of the artist as pivotal in gaining knowledge of Nature, especially human nature. Eliot's ambition was to write secular narratives capable of entertaining, instructing and guiding the ethical strivings of her readers. In so doing she helped to create a new conception of the relationship between ethics and art along with a new genre of writing: the philosophical novel.³¹

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NOTES

¹ The translator was an American, Samuel Hitchcock, who had made a private translation for his brother. See Haight's editorial note in *The George Eliot Letters*, Volume

I: 321, footnote 2. Hereafter this nine volume work (Haight 1954–78) will be abbreviated in the text as GEL followed by volume and page number.

² More recently, Miriam Henson 2009 has made a similar claim, namely, that *Middlemarch* is a translation of the *Ethics*. I am grateful to Margaret Harris for bringing this article to my attention and for many enlightening conversations about George Eliot.

³ In fact, the misunderstanding was between George Henry Lewes—Eliot's partner in life—and the publisher Henry Bohn, who had contracted Lewes to do the translation. An account of the breakdown of the agreement between the two men can be found in Haight 1968: 199–200.

⁴ Eliot's handwritten manuscript can be found in the Beineke Rare Books Library, Yale University. Her translation of the *Ethics* was finally published in 1981 (Spinoza 1981).

⁵ Eliot's translation of Strauss appeared in English as *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (London: Chapman Brothers, 1846) and of Feuerbach as *The Essence of Christianity* (London: Chapman, 1854).

⁶ An excellent introduction to the influence of German biblical criticism on Eliot is Ashton 1994, especially Chapter 4.

⁷ The translation of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* used here is Shirley, 2001 (Spinoza 2001). Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *TTP*, followed by page number.

⁸ Even the philosopher can endorse the dogmas provided allowance is made for freedom of interpretation. Examples provided by Spinoza include understanding God's omnipresence in terms of the 'potency' of Nature, and understanding reward and punishment as the 'natural' rather than 'supernatural' consequences of one's actions. See *TTP*: 163.

⁹ The translation of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* used here is Curley (Spinoza 1985: 40). Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *TdIE* with page number.

¹⁰ A similar view may be found in the *Ethics*: 'I should like you to note that the imaginations of the mind, considered in themselves contain no error, or that the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to it' (*EIII* Prop XVII, Schol). See also *EII*, Prop XXXV, Schol. The translation of the *Ethics* used here is Curley (Spinoza 1985). Hereafter abbreviated in the text as *E*, I–V for its five parts, Prop for Proposition, Schol for Scholium, Cor for Corollary, Pref for Preface, Appen for Appendix, D for definition.

¹¹ Spinoza explicitly rejects the idea that we can 'imitate God' (see *TTP*: 156). He is more sympathetic to seeing Christ as a kind of *exemplar* (see *TTP*: 54).

¹² Rosenthal explains the limitations of the *exemplar* as follows: 'as soon as those who use an exemplar violate its intrinsic epistemological and practical limitations—using it to explain nature itself, rather than simply as a guide to conduct—it tends to lose its ability to serve its original purpose' (Rosenthal 1997: 224).

¹³ Curley's comment appears in the Glossary-Index to *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, under the entry for 'fiction/fictio'. See Spinoza 1985: 637.

¹⁴ It is important to recall that Spinoza insists that human nature must not be understood as 'a dominion within a dominion' (*EIII* Pref). We are fully part of nature. However, our part in Nature is not large or central; in the scheme of things human nature is a mere 'participle' (*TTP*: 174).

¹⁵ For example, Piet Steenbakkers asserts, 'the imagination is an essential feature of the way to human freedom and salvation as envisioned by Spinoza' (Steenbakkers 2004: 176). See also Balibar 1998.

¹⁶ See Seymour Feldman's introduction to Shirley's translation of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, (Spinoza 2001: xx).

¹⁷ I do not wish to overstate this point. There are continuities with themes from the Romantic legacy in Eliot's work. K. M. Newton argues that in relation to Romanticism she had a twofold aim: 'to present a critique of the egotism, irony, and skepticism of the Byronic Romantic tradition without resorting to metaphysics and to justify the humanist vision of the positive Romantics in non-metaphysical terms' (Newton 2001: 354). Eliot was also greatly influenced by Goethe who stands in a similar relation to German Romanticism as Eliot does to British Romanticism. Azade Seyhan points out that recent scholarship views the relation between the early German Romantics and Weimar Classicism not so much in terms of opposition or antagonism but rather as 'an enriching juxtaposition' of views (Seyhan 2009: 8–9). Goethe's influence on Eliot is not surprising given that she spent three months in Weimar with George Henry Lewes who was researching his biography of Goethe. Eliot translated into English various passages from Goethe for this biography. There is an additional link between Goethe and Eliot: Spinoza. In her letters, Eliot twice quotes Goethe's comment on Spinoza: 'Ich immer vorzog, von dem Menschen zu erfahren *wie er dachte*, als von einem andern zu horen, *wie er hatte denken sollen*' (GEL IV: 207), and in English: 'I always preferred knowing what an author himself said, to knowing what others thought he ought to have said' (GEL V: 182).

¹⁸ In *Middlemarch* she writes: 'I know no speck so troublesome as self' (Eliot 1994b: 419).

¹⁹ Whereas Spinoza expressed his strong preference that the common people refrain from reading his *Treatise* (*TTP*: Pref), Eliot directly compared her role as author to 'the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind' (Eliot 1884: 358).

²⁰ For an account of the Victorian 'crisis of faith', see Helmstadter and Lightman 1990, Willey 1980, and Wright 1986.

²¹ See *TTP*: 9–10, including Spinoza's supplementary note 2.

²² I have discussed the influence of Spinoza and Feuerbach on Eliot's novels in more detail in Gatens 2009.

²³ Nancy Henry notes in her introduction to *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* that Eliot's original draft title for this essay was 'Imagination'. Henry's edition of *Impressions* provides a previously unpublished portion of the original draft essay in an Appendix. See Eliot 1994a: 167–8.

²⁴ Eliot quotes from the original text: 'Quando l'anima mia torno di fuori/ Alle cose che son fuor di lei vere,/ Io riconobbi I miei non falsi errori', and she provides her own English translation in a footnote. The translation I have used is from Eliot's footnote. An alternative translation of the *Purgatorio*, made by Dorothy Sayers (1969), reads: 'Now when at length my soul returned to view/Those facts which have their truth outside the soul,/I saw my error—error not untrue'. 'Vere' in Italian means both 'real' and 'true'. Dante is playing on this ambiguity and Sayers' translation brings this out more clearly than does Eliot's. I am grateful to my colleague, Tim Fitzpatrick, for help with the Italian original.

²⁵ In his discussion of fiction and falsity in the *TdIE*, already mentioned above, Spinoza offers the following reflection on the imaginings of storytellers: 'the less men know Nature, the more easily they can feign many things, such as, that trees speak, that men are changed in a moment into stones and into springs, that nothing becomes something, that even Gods are changed into beasts and into men' (*TdIE*: 27). Clearly, he is thinking of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

²⁶ Mignini is clear that Spinoza did not offer a formal definition of art and that it is possible that he did not hold a systematic view of art. Mignini is careful to insist that his book offers no more than a *hypothesis* concerning what Spinoza's conception of art might have been—a hypothesis that is built on the fragmentary comments and observations that Spinoza does make about art, the imagination and beauty. (See Mignini 1981: 13–14)

²⁷ Baumgarten is usually credited with introducing the contemporary use of the term 'aesthetics'. Paul Guyer, for example, states: 'The philosophical discipline of aesthetics did not receive its name until 1735, when the twenty-one year old Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten introduced it in his Halle master's thesis to mean *epistêmê aïsthetikê*, or the science of what is sensed and imagined' (Guyer 2008: 1).

²⁸ I am greatly indebted to Tim Fitzpatrick who patiently and diligently worked with me over several months translating Mignini's book.

²⁹ For Spinoza, virtue and power amount to the same thing: the capacity to understand and be active rather than passive in relation to the rest of Nature (see EIV D8).

³⁰ For Eliot there are good and bad fictions, good and bad art. Significantly, the distinction hangs on the kind of imagination deployed: the important contrast is that between the 'powerful imagination' of the artist and 'the fictions of fancy' of the amateur. See her 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' in Eliot 1991. See also, 'Leaves from a Notebook' where she refers to 'bad literature' as being like 'spiritual gin' (Eliot 1884: 359).

³¹ I would like to thank Susan James and Birkbeck College, London, for providing the occasion to present the first draft of this paper for the conference 'Thinking with Spinoza: Politics, Philosophy, and Religion' in May 2009. I am grateful to the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University and the Philosophy Department at the University of Amsterdam for lively discussions of later versions. Many people have heard or read various incarnations of this paper. My special thanks to Ned Curthoys, Susan James, Alison Ross and Paul Patton for astute comments, many conversations and welcome encouragement. I am grateful to Sarah Lucas for excellent research assistance. I also benefitted from the comments of an *European Journal of Philosophy* reviewer that helped to sharpen and improve the final version.

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