European Journal of Philosophy

DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2012.00523.x

Mark, Image, Sign: A Semiotic Approach to Spinoza

Lorenzo Vinciguerra

Abstract: Instead of reading Spinoza's account of the imagination in an anthropocentric way, as dependent on the traditional doctrine of human faculties, the author considers it as a consequence of his physics and cosmology. Knowledge by signs, as Spinoza calls imagination, has to be rooted in his theory of marks and images, and concerns all beings (human and non human) that are capable of marking and being marked by other bodies in the infinite *semiosis* of nature.

Talking about semiotics in Spinoza is unusual. The term 'semiotics' does not appear in his works and was introduced only a few years after his death by Locke. However, the sign had already become a subject of philosophical discussion during the seventeenth century. We find valuable observations on the topic in the Port-Royal Logic and the works of Hobbes, for instance, and subsequently in Locke, Berkeley, Condillac and Vico. For Spinoza, reflection on the sign is far from peripheral. Anyone familiar with the first chapters of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* will recognize that one of his major contributions to Western thought, namely the separation of philosophy from theology by way of the distinction between philosophy and prophetic revelation, depends on the sign. Moreover, the sign is in turn interwoven with the opposition between intellect and imagination that pervades all Spinoza's thought. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza describes *imaginatio* as *cognitio ex signis*; signs also play a central role in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (referring to the theory of truth and certainty); and they also occur in the *Korte Verhandeling* (referring to divine revelation). The importance of Spinoza's meditation on the nature of signs, on how they are actualized, and on the way they carry meaning, is generally acknowledged. Nevertheless, the internal logic of his discussion of the sign remains to be understood.

The problem of the sign in some ways recalls the origin of philosophy itself. Plato linked *sema* to *soma*, binding the fate of the sign to the philosophy of the body and of writing, thus creating a duality between body and soul and initiating a long history. Aristotelian logic provided an enduring systematization of the problem with the theory of the syllogism and the doctrine of substance and accidents, to which the Stoics opposed a logic of events built on inferences, themselves based on signs. The problems of meaning and of language, including the essence and destiny of human beings in their relationship to the gods and nature, are all enclosed in the ambiguity and versatility of the sign.

European Journal of Philosophy 20:1 ISSN 0966-8373 pp. 130–144

The so-called linguistic and semiotic turn of the second half of the twentieth century indicated that reflection on the sign never deserted Western thought. The history of this theme is perhaps that of a minor god when compared to the more noble history of metaphysics. Nevertheless it has questioned the essentialist and substantialist assumptions of the Western tradition, and largely remains to be written. For a long while, Spinoza was marginalized in both these histories, removed from the main stream of metaphysics, and almost forgotten in the history of semiotics. Perhaps, as Hegel thought, following, Bayle, he was too 'Oriental' to be assimilated without damage to a biblically-based theological tradition. Paradoxically, he was also too 'Cartesian', at least at first glance, to be seriously considered as making an original contribution to the history of representation.[1]

To echo an expression introduced by Toni Negri, Spinoza's absence from semiotic studies constitutes a kind of 'anomaly'. It serves as an invitation to question a body of thought that resists the established patterns of our tradition and allows the growth of a reasonable suspicion. On the face of things, it would seem unwise to assume that Spinoza's ontology, so unorthodox in the context of modern rationalism, left no mark on his theory of the imagination. Understanding the philosophy of Spinoza is partly a matter of reflecting on the way we have grown accustomed to reading him, and prompts us to ponder on our natural tendency to unconsciously project onto Spinoza's texts specific meanings and habits of thought that he intended to reform. It has often been emphasized that the vocabulary of *Ethics* is anything but original. Spinoza adopts the Scholastic and Cartesian terminology that was in use during his time. Nevertheless, the meanings of his terms deviate from tradition, sometimes quite radically.

Plato's theory of the faculties of the soul and its duality with the body, taken over by the Augustinian tradition and renewed by Descartes, has shaped much of our epistemology and anthropology. Spinoza criticized this view in order to reform it. However, the tradition continues to exercise a deep influence on the way we think, and remains an epistemological obstacle to a more accurate assessment of Spinozism. This problem is particularly acute in relation to our understanding of what Spinoza calls imagination or knowledge of the first kind. Here we find a kind of knowledge that resists being read as a variant of the doctrine of the tripartite soul, precisely because Platonic ontological principles have been subverted by Spinoza. In the *Ethics*, the theory of knowledge goes hand in hand with ontology. The absolute necessity of the unique substance rules out the existence of any other substances in the world. There are only attributes of the unique substance and its modes.

In the *Ethics*, as we know, the human being is only introduced in the second part of the work, with a theorem that was unheard of in Spinoza's time and largely misunderstood: the human being is not a substance. Thus, the reader is called to a radical change of perspective. One can say and repeat that the human being is not a substance, while continuing to think as if humans were substantial beings, as the Western tradition since Aristotle has taught us. For Spinoza, however, the human being is part of nature and has no power of self-

determination, whether mental or physical. The human body is not an independent individual. Like any other body in nature, it is not really separated from other individual bodies and constantly needs their support, as much as the human mind needs other minds to develop its own thinking. In other words, the human mind is not the origin of its own ideas. Being itself an idea, it is caused by other ideas. Thus, as a mental and a corporeal mode, the human being only exists as a being related to something else, which it affects and by which it is affected.

In one of the most important theorems of the first part of the *Ethics* (I p16), Spinoza announces that 'From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e. everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)'.[2] As he goes on to explain, the infinite and eternal modes of the attributes that follow from the divine nature are of two kinds: the infinite immediate eternal mode, following from the absolute nature of some attribute,[3] and the infinite mediate eternal mode, following from some attribute insofar as it undergoes a modification which, through that same attribute, exists both necessarily and as infinite.[4] Motion follows immediately from the attribute of extension as its infinite immediate mode, just as the infinite intellect of God follows from the attribute of thought. As for the infinite mediate modes, what Spinoza describes in a letter as the *facies totius universi* follows from the infinite modified mode of extension. And what is conceivable as the infinite mind of the universe—something to which Spinoza did not give a name—follows from the infinite modified mode of thought.

Under the doctrine of attributes, the demonstration of Proposition 16 also implies that, from thinking nature, infinite ideas must follow in infinite ways (that is, all the ideas which can fall under an infinite mind). The same can be said about the attribute of extension: from the nature of extension must follow infinite bodies in infinite ways (that is, all the bodies that can be distinguished by motion). Human bodies with all their peculiarities are only particular instances of such bodies. As I shall show, Spinoza's epistemology, as much as his anthropology, must be understood in its ontological and cosmological framework as explained in the first and second parts of the *Ethics*, and especially in the section of Part II devoted to physics.

If we take this perspective seriously, neither the intellect (which is the same in all human minds), nor the imagination (which is particular) can be considered exclusively as features of human minds and human bodies. What we understand, we do as minds, and as part of the infinite intellect of God: 'Therefore, when we say that human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but that God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of human mind, or, insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind, has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind, then we say that the human mind perceives the thing only partially or inadequately'.[5]

When a human mind perceives in this latter sense, it is said to be imagining. And there is in principle no reason (except perhaps a substantialistic and anthropocentric prejudice) not to apply this logical and cosmic perspective to other individuals, at least under certain conditions. All that people imagine follows the order and connections of their corporal affections as their bodies move, and are moved by, other bodies. In other words, they imagine in accordance with the general laws to which all bodies conform, and relate to one another as parts of the infinite individual that constitutes the universe.

Since a human being cannot be said to be the substantial *subjectum* of its thoughts, but is rather subject to thoughts or ideas that traverse it, it also cannot be regarded as the exclusive *auctor* of what it imagines. We should rather think of it as an *actor*, or, as Spinoza aptly puts it, an *interpreter*. We do not have thought in us, but are in thought as modes of thinking substance. Analogously, our bodies are modes of extension; within extension we move and are moved by other bodies, bodies that we modify and by which we are simultaneoulsy modified. The *res cogitans* thinks itself in us, through us, as the *res extensa* simultaneously modifies itself in our bodies. Generally speaking, this must be true for every mind and individual. But this means that, when we imagine, our thoughts come partly from 'outside'; and this is where language comes in. We become speaking bodies because we are affected by other speaking bodies, and Spinoza describes all these *affectiones*, which always refer to other bodies, as *images*, *figurae, signs*.

If human beings are by nature interpreters of signs, this is not by virtue of a supposed faculty of their souls, but by virtue of the fact that they express the essence of God through a body that has the power to affect and be affected, a power shared by all individuals. Imagination does not belong only to human individuals, but to all those individuals who, albeit in different proportions, are likely to engage in the power of affecting and being affected. Spinoza's insistence on the fundamental role of interpretation should not be misunderstood: there is here no hermeneutic subjectivism. Instead, he offers us a radical 'realism': meaning is a product of nature involving all minds, themselves considered as ideas. Spinoza's pantheism has frequently been recognized as a panpsychism, but we need to consider how his panpsychism implies a particular theory of meaning.

A Genetic Definition of Imagination

It is not an exaggeration to say that, from its opening paragraphs, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* places the reader in what may be termed the 'empire of the sign'. The famous *Preface* explains how superstition works through the concept of presage (*omen*). The presage is a sign, looked upon as a warning if it gives rise to fear, and regarded as favourable if it gives rise to hope. Spinoza had already discussed presages in a letter addressed to Peter Balling (*Letter* 17), and even in the *Ethics* (III p50). In this respect, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* owes much to

his other works. However, chapters I and II, dedicated to Prophecy and to the Prophet, can be seen as a deeper reflection on the nature and function of signs. The sign, it emerges, is crucial for distinguishing prophecy from natural knowledge, as well as for distinguishing the prophet from the philosopher (*propagator*). Hence, it serves to define a trait that distinguishes philosophy from religion or theology.

To clearly establish this separation, Spinoza makes use in the first chapter of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* of a passage from an earlier work, though without quoting it. The passage is from the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (Sections 35–36), where Spinoza claims that truth requires no sign, no external criterion, but guarantees itself: 'certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself, i.e., the mode by which we are aware of the formal essence is certainty itself'.[6] According to this account, *veritas se ipsam patefacit*: truth shows or reveals itself, and our awareness of truth depends on the very nature of an idea. Here the superiority of Philosophy to Religion is made quite clear. Whereas religion deals in signs that have to be interpreted, philosophy aspires to a truth that needs no sign.

It should, however, be borne in mind that knowledge derived from both prophecy and philosophy can properly be described as revealed. Philosophical revelation needs no sign in order to be known for certain, only the idea of God, and this is one way in which God can be said to reveal himself. By contrast, prophetic revelation does need a sign, because prophets receive it via imagination. As Spinoza argues, God reveals himself to prophets through images and/or words: *omnia quae Deus prophetis revelavit, iis revelata fuerunt vel verbis vel figuris utroque hoc modo, verbis et figuris*. However, Spinoza also says that, in order to be sure of a prophecy, a prophet has to ask for another sign confirming the first one. Only through a second sign can the prophet arrive at the moral certainty (*certitudo moralis*) that confers theological and political authority on both prophet and prophecy. As a result, some commentators speak of a 'double-sign-revelation'.[7]

Apart from the question of how signs are meant to work, it is worth asking what exactly Spinoza might have in mind when he refers to signs. Only a few commentators have asked this question. When they have, they have usually answered it by arguing rather hastily that the expression 'sign' refers to the words of a spoken or written language.[8] But perhaps such a reply, based on the fact that Spinoza often uses written or spoken words as examples of signs, is too quick.[9] Words may be good examples of signs, of course, but they are only examples and do not explain the nature of the sign itself. We all too often forget that Spinoza characterizes the first kind of knowledge (*opinio*, *memoria*, *imaginatio*) as knowledge constituted by signs: *cognitio ex signis*. This definition needs more consideration. According to *Ethics* II p17s, the mind imagines when it considers bodies through their images. But what are these *imagines rerum*? Spinoza tells us that they are 'the affections of the human body, whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us, even if they do not reproduce the figures of things'.[10]

Drawing on *Ethics* II p16c2, we find that the imagination indicates the constitution of the body that is affected rather than the nature of the external body doing the affecting. Indeed, Spinoza goes much further in his explanation of the nature of images. He provides tools for a genetic definition, giving a realistic theory of the production of universals. In order to do so, he uses an analysis taken from his physics, which explains the way *imagines communes* are formed in the body. Images are rooted in the marks (*vestigia*) of the body: 'When a fluid part of the human Body is determined by an external body so that it frequently thrusts against a soft part [of the Body], it changes its surface and, as it were, impresses on [the soft part] certain traces (*vestigia*) of the external body striking against [the fluid part]'.[11]

This claim—the fifth of a series of postulates referring to the human body that are included in Spinoza's physics—becomes clear if we take due account of two other key doctrines. First, *Ethics* II p13s: 'For the things that we have shown so far are completely general, and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate'.[12] Second, and above all, Spinoza's definition of *individuum*. 'When a number of bodies, whether of the same or different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motion to one another in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united to each other and that they all together compose one body or Individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies'.[13]

In these passages, no anthropocentric perspective is assumed. Instead, the definition of body has a cosmological sense, in which, to follow the inner logic of Spinoza's physics, we had better include all bodies that are able to affect and be affected by other bodies. To put the point differently, we had better include all bodies that are capable of impressing marks (*vestigia*) on other bodies and of being marked themselves.[14] Of course, the human body has a particular and exceptionally rich manner of tracing and being traced, and thence of imagining, a trait that Spinoza attributes to its comparative complexity. But this is not a sufficient reason to deny that other bodies possess the power of imagining. Common experience confirms that Spinoza's physical postulates (the fifth in particular) concern at least all the bodies we usually consider animate (although, it must be said, he fails to draw any distinction between the animate and inanimate). Therefore, as long as the physical conditions required by Postulate V are satisfied, the power to be marked by other bodies and the power to mark other bodies should be recognized as a power of all corporeal modes.

In addition, the power of signifying and making sense by following marks and signs outside and inside the body cannot be limited to the minds of human beings. The human power to make sense of things is not an empire within the empire of nature. We can allow, with Spinoza, that human nature tends to mistakenly project final causes onto things and events, thus generating a distorted understanding of the causal order. But this does not imply that things themselves have no meaning, as advocates of a modern and nihilistic vision tend

to claim. If our imagination needs marks or signs (that is to say, some affections coming from the outside world) in order to work, it follows that we are neither the origin nor the authors of the meanings that imagination generates. We are rather their interpreters.

We tend to refer Spinoza's theory of imagination exclusively to human beings because we usually consider it within the frame of a traditional theory of faculties of the mind. However, it is far from evident that Spinoza would have accepted this epistemological model. Against the western philosophical tradition, he refuses to see human beings as substances, and instead deduces a different conception of nature from his ontological, physical and cosmological premises. His three kinds of knowledge do not refer to three different human faculties; instead, they are the three ways in which God knows his own nature, modified as it is by infinite and finite modes, some of them human ones. So rather than being a distinctively human phenomenon, the knowledge that arises from imagination pertains in different degrees to all individuals, as long as they answer to the definitions of *individuum* and of *vestigia* given in Spinoza's physics.

To read Spinoza in the most interesting way, we therefore need to depart from an anthropocentric point of view and adopt a new perspective, in which human imagination is considered as a particular kind of interpretation of physical affections. Marks become signs as soon as they get interpreted. But this must also be true for other beings. It should not be shocking, then, to speak about the imagination of a sunflower, even if we assume that such an imagination is relatively undeveloped by comparison with a human one. Under these conditions, sunflowers, as well as men or other beings, can be considered as 'semiotic automata', moved and moving through the actions of marks.

Such an extensive capacity to mark and be marked gives a cosmological dimension to Spinoza's doctrine. It transforms its approach to imagination, considered as a knowledge we derive from signs. We are bodies that imagine because we, like bodies of other kinds, participate in the semiotic process of nature. In this way, the theory of imagination finds its physical foundation in the notion of *vestigia*. It is noteworthy that the notion of a *vestigium* is not specifically defined by Spinoza, but is rather built out of the common notions that he uses to characterize extension—*motus*, *individuum*, *mollitia* and *fluiditas*. So we could consider the *vestigia* of bodies as a secondary common notion of *res extensa*.

As this analysis allows us to appreciate, Spinoza's definition of an image lies in the physical essence of the mark caused by the movements of bodies. The marks, of course, and consequently the images, are properties of the body. They are corporeal affections, effects of motion. As such, they belong, as we have seen, to the attribute of extension. Thus, in order not to violate the principle of the so-called 'parallelism' between mind and body, it is important to note that the representations or meanings of things are made up of ideas of images *and not of the images themselves*. Strictly speaking, the power of imagining, as a power of *making sense*, is a virtue of the mind, even if this power is matched by the virtue of the body.

The Chain of Images and the End of Meaning

This point leads us to the consideration of another problem. How does the imagination work? What exactly does imagining entail? In *Ethics* II p17, Spinoza answers this question quite clearly. To imagine, he claims, is to produce chains of images that follow the order of the affections of the body. This order, summarized by the laws of Spinozist physics, does not differ from one individual to another; but the particular chain of images that occurs in any specific body will of course differ from the chains that occur in others. As Spinoza explains in *Ethics* II p18s, 'for example, from the thought of the word *pomum* a Roman will immediately pass to the thought of the fruit, which has no similarity to the articulate sound and nothing in common with it, except that the body of the same man has often been affected by these two, i.e. that the man often heard the word *pomum* while he saw the fruit. And in this way each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one's association (*consuetudo*) has ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces (*vestigia*) of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, *et cetera*. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, etc. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect (*jungere & concatenare*) the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another'.

There are several remarkable features of this passage. First it is surprising that no distinction is drawn between linguistic signs, and natural signs such as the marks left in the sand by a horse. For Spinoza, these two phenomena are clearly part of a single philosophical problem. Considered from the point of view of their meaning, a mark in the sand and the sound of the voice work in the same way. They all are *imaginings*, allowing for a very broad theory of meaning, potentially applicable to images of all kinds.

But this is not the most important aspect of II p18s. There is also the further point that, as Spinoza seems to indicate, the meaning of an image is not given with one isolated image, but only by a *concatenatio*, an interconnection or chain of images.[15] As a result, the *sonus articulatus* or the *pomum* is meaningless until it is connected to another image. To imagine is therefore to connect images, or—to put it differently—to mean things by connecting images. Moreover, since chains of images are always particular, so too will be the meanings of the imaginings. All chains are particular. The articulated sound *pomum* makes sense to a Roman who understands Latin; but for a Chinese it would arrest a chain of meaning and produce the form of surprise that Spinoza calls *admiratio*. *Admiratio* can thus be considered as a sudden interruption of a chain of images, so that it doesn't make sense anymore.[16]

It is, therefore, clear that there can be no imagination without an interpreter. *Pomum* means nothing if it is not interpreted by a Roman. In itself, a mark in the sand has no meaning as long as there is no interpreter on which it has some particular effect. In principle, this must be true not only of human

interpreters such as soldiers or farmers, but also of other individuals (animals, plants, minerals) capable of playing the role of interpreters (the philosophical problem is whether or not we can limit the chain of interpreters), as it might be the case of an ant climbing the track left in the sand by a horse. To the ant, the mark would mean something different, perhaps just the effort that it takes its body to overcome the obstacle. Thus, imagination is a cosmic interpretation of signs, and Spinozistic panpsychism tends to a very special kind of pansemioticism.[17]

Since chains of images are always specific to particular interpreters, the laws of their interconnection (*concatenatio*) must be found in the habit (*consuetudo*) of the interpreter. The complexion of an individual's habits is what Spinoza calls *constitutio*, *dispositio*, and sometimes *ingenium*. Every image, as soon as it makes sense, is the product of an interpretation that takes place in the body of the interpreter, that is, in his or her way of connecting images, the ideas of which represent external bodies as if they were present to him or her.

A third noteworthy feature of *Ethics* II p18s is the fact that Spinoza seems to leave the chain of images open. As he puts it, 'a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, *et cetera*'.

In a way, there is no end to a chain of images. Semiosis, as an expression of the nature of affected bodies, is infinite. As we saw, however, this does not imply that the connections between images are not law governed. Upon hearing the sound *pomum*, a Roman will think of a fruit, and will keep proceeding from one thought to another. If he is hungry, the fruit will mean something to eat; if he is a fruit seller, it will mean money; if he is a Christian it will mean sin, etc. Similar considerations apply to the soldier, the countryman, and so on for all individuals involved in semiosis. From this, we can conclude that the end for the sake of which the chain of meanings works is appetite itself, from the nature of which there necessarily follow those things that contribute to the preservation of the individual. To put the point as Spinoza does in *Ethics* IV d7 (*per finem, cujus causa aliquid facimus, appetitum intelligo*), we can say that the habit of the appetite is the pragmatic goal of meaning.

An image, then, works as a sign, whose final meaning is an action, a habit, a way of living.[18] Spinoza elaborates this line of thought in *Ethics* II p40s, where he develops his theory of the common or universal images of things that he calls *communes imagines*. Here again, Spinoza gives a genetic definition of what the philosophical tradition has called universals. 'So many images (e.g. of men) are formed at one time in the human body that they surpass the power of imagining—not entirely of course, but still to the point where the mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular men (such as the colour and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body. For the body has been affected most by [what is common], since each singular has affected it [by this property]. And the mind expresses this by the word *man*, and predicates it of infinitely many singulars'.

It should be noted that these 'common images' and the ideas that correspond to them are not formed by everyone in the same way. They vary from individual to individual, depending on the particular things that have affected a body, how often the body has been affected, and thus which things the mind imagines or recollects more easily. 'For example, those who have more often regarded with men's stature with wonder will understand by the name "man" an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men—e.g. that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal. And similarly concerning the others—each will form universal images of thing according to the disposition of his body'.

These universal images of things are signs, which indicate the existence of a law governing the way images are recollected. On the one hand, they remain particular because they are different for everyone; on the other hand, they serve as universals, extending all the way to transcendental terms. As before, however, these signs answer to the analysis we have constructed. A sign is made of images, images are made of traces, and traces presuppose what we could call a certain degree of 'traceability' for all bodies.

Traceability: A Hypothesis about the *Facies Totius Universi*

The body is not a substance, but a mode, an individual. As such, it includes all its kinetic modifications, constituted by all its ways of affecting and being affected by other bodies. This passivity/activity can be called its traceability. The traceability of the body, that is, all the ways it is able to trace and to be traced, must therefore correspond to its memory. It would not be inappropriate to speak of a kind of *scriptura*, and to view the body as a field of inscribing and writing practices made up of signs left by other bodies and their interpretations. The memory penetrates so deeply into the essence of the body that it becomes part of its individual identity. And if, as we said, the body is nothing more than the extension of its corporal practices, it now seems that these practices are the very exercise of memory.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that, in order to define the limits of individual identity, Spinoza takes the example of a certain Spanish poet who has forgotten his own *fabulas & tragedias*.[19] It is surely significant that Spinoza illustrates his conception of the living body with the practice of language and writing. By doing so, he is able to effectively demonstrate how the nature of an individual is not really different from its living practice, which serves to individualize its existence and define its particular essence. In this sense, memory can be understood as a genuine 'writing' of the body, a body that inscribes itself into the world, and in doing so is also written.

Since, as we have seen, it is not only human bodies that carry traces of their affections, traceability is a feature of all individuals in nature, under this precise condition: that they are constituted by a ratio of softness and fluidity,

which makes it possible for them to receive the marks of other bodies. For this reason, a theory of traceability in principle possesses a cosmological dimension. We would here suggest the following hypothesis. The infinite mediate mode of extension—what Spinoza calls, in an expression that he never really clarifies, *facies totius universi*—coincides with the infinite traceability that is necessary to individuate an infinity of bodies. The infinite mediate mode of the universe embraces the infinity of the modified modifications of any body, in such a way that 'we shall easily conceive that the whole of Nature is one individual, whose parts, i.e. all bodies, *vary in infinite ways* without any change of the whole individual' (emphasis added).[20] If this is right, the notion of traceability serves to clarify the cosmological aspect of Spinoza's ontology.

The inner traceability of the body on which its power of imagining rests, and the infinite traceability of the universe, constitute the two cornerstones of Spinoza's physics and cosmology, the alpha and the omega of the reality of affections. Traceability can be regarded as a 'natural scripture', a kind of cosmic writing freed from all the prejudices of theology, a writing that is totally natural, immanent in all things, and which has no end, no beginning, no author and no subject. The traditional paradigm of the two books—the book of Nature and the book of the Bible—that still exerted a strong influence on Galileo, thus reaches a point of fulfilment and comes to an end with Spinoza. After Spinoza, nature can no longer be conceived as a book or a text, since both of these assume an author external to nature. Instead, Spinoza's scripture is perfectly naturalized in its infinite traces, figures and signs. It has no other subject that the eternal world itself, understood as an infinite space of inscription. Indeed, the world is no longer the work of a great architect, nor the infinite manuscript of an author who is the sole owner of its meaning. What, then, has it become? The immanence of a cosmo-graphy, the natural principle of every sign and meaning.

To summarize the route taken so far, it is possible to complete Spinoza's ontology, and particularly his cosmology, to which less attention has been paid by his commentators and critics (see Table 1).

In the light of this analysis it is possible to return to the famous seventh proposition of the second part of the *Ethics*, and to its so-called and often

Table 1.

Attribute	**Thought**	**Extension**
Immediate infinite mode	Intellect	Motion
Infinite mediate mode	Mind of the Universe	*Facies totius universi*
		Infinite traceability of the Universe
Finite modes	Minds/Ideas	Bodies
Affections	Imagination	Traceability of bodies *vestigia, imagines, signa*

misunderstood 'parallelism' (a name that we owe to the imagination of Leibniz, not to Spinoza), in order to explore its infinite cosmological perspective more deeply, while attempting to maintain its original meaning. The order and connection of images is the same as the order and connection of ideas; and in addition, the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things. It is also possible to give a renewed meaning to the first theorem of the last part of the *Ethics*: 'In the same way that the thoughts and ideas of things are ordered and connected in the mind, so the affections of the body *or* images of things, are ordered and connected in the body'.[21] In fact, 'inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate or clear and distinct, ideas'.[22] In the idea of God, they both express the same order and necessity.

For Descartes, the *vestigia* were simple pores of the brain. By contrast, Spinoza awards them a much more important role, and considers them as the *fundamenta rationis*. They physically contribute to shaping the existence of particular individuals and determining their imaginative power. To appreciate the nature and scope of this claim we need, as we have seen, to avoid limiting the imagination to human beings. Since imagination is a cosmic phenomenon, we should not be surprised by talk about the imagination of an ant or a sunflower. Viewed in this light, Spinoza's pantheism becomes a panpsychism, and tends towards a kind of pansemiotism. In this respect, Spinoza's thought resembles some traditions with which he was acquainted, such as stoicism and Calvinism, and some works with which he was not, such as those of Vico and Peirce.

The notion of *vestigium* has to be considered as the *minimum* of a corporal modification. As such, it is none other than the physical aspect of inference. If ideas represent and mean from the standpoint of the attribute of thought, images, supported by *vestigia*, carry meaning from the point of view of the attribute of extension. This implies something simple, but of considerable philosophical weight: that meaning does not originate in humans. Rather than creating meaning, human individuals *modify* it. Human minds, together with their power to find meaning, are not an empire in an empire, but are always inscribed in the attribute of thought, as much as their bodies are inscribed in the attribute of extension. This is what we mean by 'realism'.

Let us now return to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. One of the major theoretical aims of this work is to demonstrate that prophetic revelation is of a form to be received by the imagination of the prophet. The prophet is the interpreter of God's revelations (this is how Spinoza translates the Hebrew word *nabi*). He or she understands God's message not intellectually, but by the power of imagination, that is to say by perceiving images (words, sounds, figures, etc.) and other signs. According to Spinoza, all prophetic revelations are adapted to the imagination of the prophet and to what we can call his or her *ingenium*. So the meaning of prophecy includes the revelation itself and its interpretation by the prophet, as a chain of images and other interconnected signs.

Even here, and in fact more than ever, the meaning of a sign will depend on the individual. Because every prophet has his own education, his own style and *ingenium*, in a word, his own way of imagining, a single sign will mean one thing to one prophet and another to another. As a result, no sign (including the signs that prophets demand in order to confirm their revelations) can be sufficient to guarantee that someone is a prophet. Doctrine, and above all good deeds, are also required. It is impossible not to be struck by the close relation between *Ethics* II p18s, where Spinoza talks about the different chains of imaginative ideas that characterize the minds of soldiers and countrymen, and the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, where we encounter Joshua, a prophet who is a *miles*, as well as Ezekiel, a prophet who is a *rusticus*. Was Spinoza thinking about the prophet when he wrote that scholium in the *Ethics*? It is possible. At least, nothing in his theory of the imagination makes it impossible. When he was writing the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza needed neither to change his philosophical theory in order to give us a clear explanation of prophecy, nor to force the true meaning of the text in order to save his theory of imagination. The two are entirely compatible.[23]

This does not mean, of course, that there are no differences between the imagination of ordinary people and the imagination of prophets. There certainly are. For instance, Spinoza says that the prophet has an unusually vivid imagination. But this difference is not sufficient to radically transform the nature of the knowledge that prophets possess or to differentiate it in kind from the imaginative knowledge of ordinary people. It is not wrong to say that the difference between the two mostly lies in the pragmatic fact that, on the basis of their knowledge, real prophets are prone to be good. Moreover, this conclusion confirms what we have already said about the pragmatic goal of meaning. To know that a prophet is a true prophet we need a sign, a doctrine, and above all the fact that the prophet is recognizable as a doer of good deeds.

At the beginning of the second part of *Wahrheit und Method*, Gadamer presents Spinoza as one of the fathers of the modern tradition of hermeneutics. There is no doubt that Spinoza contributed to the formulation of rational rules for interpreting a document or text from a philological and historical point of view, including the Bible. That is one of his great achievements and contributions to the science of texts. At the same time, however, he did much more. He conceived the imagination itself as a process of interpreting signs, as a natural, universal and unending *semiosis* in which all individuals as modes participate, each one according to its particular manner of being, traced and marked by other bodies.

Lorenzo Vinciguerra
University of Reims and the EHESS Paris
France
lorenzo.vinciguerra@libertysurf.fr

NOTES

[1] With some interesting exceptions: Mignini 1981; Fabbri 1998; Sini 2005.

[2] All translations are from *The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. 1, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[3] *Ethics* I p21.

[4] *Ethics* I p22.

[5] *Ethics* II p11c.

[6] *Tractatus de Intellectus Emedatione*, Section 35.

[7] Cf. Laux 1993: 33.

[8] See for instance Curley 1973: 30; for other interpretations, see Mignini 1981: 189–226; Moreau 1994: 307–78; Laux 1993: 13–88.

[9] For instance, in *Ethics* II p40sII.

[10] *Ethics* II p17s.

[11] *Ethics* II Dftn. In the section on physics after p13.

[12] *Ethics* II p13s.

[13] *Ethics* II p13s .

[14] For a discussion of this aspect of the physics, see Vinciguerra 2005: 121–37.

[15] See Moreau 1994: 321.

[16] On this particular point, cf. Vinciguerra 2005: 43–56; Sévérac 2011: 11–25; for a wider and historical approach, cf. Vinciguerra 2012.

[17] Cf. Messeri 1990: 195.

[18] We could say with Peirce, who seems to be very close to Spinoza on this point, that the sign is something which represents something to somebody, in view of something in some respect or capacity; for a comparison between the two thinkers, cf. Nesher 1994: 546–75; Vinciguerra 2001: 249–67.

[19] Cf. *Ethics* IV p39s.

[20] *Ethics* II, lemma 7s.

[21] *Ethics* V p1.

[22] *Ethics* II p36.

[23] More than that, the two texts, the second part of *Ethics* and Chapters I and II of the *Tractatus*, rely on the same doctrine and were probably written around the same time—around 1665.

REFERENCES

Curley, E. (1973), 'Experience in Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge', in M. Grene (ed.), *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays. Notre Dame, IA*: University of Notre Dame Press: Anchor Books.

Fabbri, P. (1998), *La svolta semiotica*. Bari: Laterza.

Laux, H. (1993), *Imagination et religion chez Spinoza. La potentia dans l'histoire*. Paris: Vrin.

Messeri, M. (1990), *L'epistemologia di Spinoza. Saggio sui corpi e le menti*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Mignini, F. (1981), *Ars imaginandi. Apparenza e rapprensentazione in Spinoza*. Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane.

Moreau, P.-F. (1994), *Spinoza. L'expérience et l'éternité*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Nesher, D. (1994), 'Spinoza Theory's of Truth', in G. Hunter (ed.), *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Sévérac, P. (2011), 'L'admiration de la naure chez Spinoza', in C. Ramond (ed.), *Spinoza. Nature, Naturalisme, Naturation*. Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux.
Sini, C. (2005), *Archivio Spinoza. La verità e la vita*. Milano: Ghibli.
Vinciguerra, L. (2001), 'Image et signe entre Spinoza et Peirce. Pour une lecture pragmatiste du spinozisme', in L. Vinciguerra (ed.), *Quel avenir pour Spinoza? Enquête sur les spinozismes à venir*. Paris: Kimé.
—— (2005), *Spinoza et le signe. La genèse de l'imagination*. Paris: Vrin.
—— (2012), *L'étonnement: histoire d'une passion. Philosophie, esthétique, éthique*. Paris: Klincksieck.