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SPINOZA, VICO, AND THE IMAGINATION OF RELIGION

BY J. SAMUEL PREUS

I. Religion continued unabated as a holy cause in the seventeenth century, but for many who wrote and thought about it, religion also loomed as an intellectual problem. Its problematic aspect may be described as a growing perception of its failure to explain and order the world. Contorted by conflict, relativized by discoveries of the wider world, and challenged by the rise of scientific assumptions and methods, religion became increasingly an object of wide-ranging critical inquiry. In some circles theological thought was seen as inadequate to provide the ultimate *explanans* of the world, being reduced to one of its *explananda*, while ecclesiastical institutions were perceived as part of the problem, rather than the solution to the problem, of order in the post-medieval world.

Two thinkers whose genius was fully engaged in questions of religion were Benedict Spinoza and Giambattista Vico. Aside from their own religious ideas, they contributed groundbreaking advances in the analysis of religion with regard both to explaining religion and to exploring its vital social roles apart from the question of its truth.

This essay addresses the question of Spinoza's influence on Vico.¹ It ventures to go beyond similar texts that could be cited by the dozens, focusing rather on three closely-related projects that engaged the interest of both: (1) a fundamental critique of traditional methods of interpreting ancient (especially religious) texts, predicated on (2) a grasp of ancient mythic world views as self-contained, prerational imaginative constructs, which (3) had generative power sufficient to create institutions that served social necessities and utilities.²

¹ See James C. Morrison, "Spinoza and History," in *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza*, ed. Richard Kennington (Washington, DC, 1980), 173-95; "Vico and Spinoza," *JHI*, 41 (1980), 49-68; and Vaughan, "La Scienza Nuova: Orthodoxy and the Art of Writing," *Forum Italicum*, 2 (1968), 332-58, and (essentially the same material) *The Political Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (The Hague, 1972), 44-51. Neither author refers to the similarities compiled by Giovanni Gentile, *Studi Vichiani* (3d ed.; Florence, 1968), 70-72, n. 1, or to Carlo Sarchi, *Della dottrina di Benedetto de Spinoza e di Gian Battista Vico* (Milan, 1877).

² My main primary sources are Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise* (*TTP*), in *The Chief Works*, tr. R. H. M. Elwes (New York, 1951); in the Latin edition: *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg, n.d.) 3.1-267; Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (hereafter *NS 3*), revised tr. T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (Ithaca, 1968). References for Spinoza, by Chapter, page in English/page in Latin (I do not always follow the Elwes translation), for Vico's *NS 3* by paragraph only, and *Opere*, ed. Fausto Nicolini (Milan, 1953); also to Spinoza's letters by number (*The Correspondence of Spinoza*, tr. A. Wolf [New York, 1929]; in Gebhardt, vol. 4); *The Ethics* (*The Ethics and Selected Letters*, tr. S. Shirley [Indianapolis, 1982]; Gebhardt, vol. 2); Vico, *The*

In different ways each worked largely free of ordinary constraints that determined popular as well as scholarly perspectives on religion—Spinoza because he was separated from the Jewish community of Amsterdam,³ Vico because, although a Catholic Christian, he focused his explanatory efforts exclusively (and prudently) on the religion of the *gentes* (religion outside the Jewish-Christian tradition).⁴

Neither of our authors bore an apologetic burden to “save” the special religious or philosophical significance of the texts he studied (the Bible in Spinoza’s case, Homer *et al.* in Vico’s), or the special dignity of the people that had produced them. Both undertook to explain religion in universalist terms because both denied the assumption that what they analyzed was to be explained by specific revelation. Spinoza denied outright the possibility of divine revelation as traditionally conceived;⁵ Vico restricted it to Jewish-Christian tradition. Consequently, both proposed to construct alternative explanations for the religious phenomena they studied, and it is through the construction of such alternatives that the modern study of religion emerged as distinct from theological thought and philosophy of religion.⁶

As is well known, Vico’s critique of the two “conceits” (the conceit of nations and the conceit of scholars), his doctrine of “imaginative universals,” and his notion of religion as *the* original human institution are pivotal elements of his thought. I will try to show that these very notions can be seen as adaptations and creative transformations of ideas already found in Spinoza—viz., his critique of the “skeptics” and “dogmatists,” his analysis of biblical prophecy as imaginatively determined, and his thesis that the so-called social contract is at the same time the

First New Science (hereafter *NS I*), as abridged in *Vico: Selected Writings*, tr. Leon Pompa [Cambridge, 1982].

³ See Lewis S. Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Boston, 1958), Chapter 1, on Spinoza’s excommunication.

⁴ Cf. *NS I*, par. 40: Our science, Vico writes, “must seek its principles among the modifications of our human mind in the descendants of Cain, before the Flood, and in those of Ham and Japheth, after it.” The Seth-Shem line is exempted, and the whole of sacred history, from analysis by natural causes.

⁵ Spinoza’s God is *causa immanens*, not transcendent (cf. *Ethics*, Pr. 18, I; Shirley, 46), and this God/Nature does not transcend the power of the mind to understand. Cf. André Tosel, *Spinoza, ou le crépuscule de la servitude: Essai sur le TT-P* (Paris, 1984), 148, and André Malet, *Le traité théologico-politique de Spinoza et la pensée biblique* (Paris, 1966), 108f., and 114f.

⁶ On the emergence of such alternative explanations, see J. Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven, 1987), ch. 4 on Vico. According to Elmer E. Powell, *Spinoza and Religion* (Boston, 1941), 340; “Personally Spinoza had no religious interest properly so-called, but only a scientific interest in religion, which is something quite different. . . . He made religion the object of reflection, not because it lay near his heart, but because the peculiar circumstances of his life thrust the subject in the way of his active intellect.” Tosel, *Spinoza*, 136, presents a particularly acute case for the scientific aim of Spinoza.

institution of religion. These three areas seem to me especially plausible with regard to direct influence, even though evidence is circumstantial throughout. I shall argue that Vico extended Spinoza's critical principles of historical textual interpretation so as to make them universal in their applicability; that Vico's doctrine of the imagination, especially of imaginative universals as the first stage of the development of reason in time, was adapted from Spinoza as well;⁷ finally, that the similarity of their views regarding the very origin of society and religion suggests the possibility of influence and lends insight into why the analysis of religion became an integral part of subsequent social theory.

Both Frederick Vaughan and James C. Morrison credit Spinoza with important, if carefully veiled, contributions to Vico.⁸ In one of many concise summary statements of the relationship, Morrison comments that "both Spinoza and Vico . . . secularize the divine"—and as a consequence, I would say, make religion an object of detached study—"Spinoza . . . by *naturalizing* providence and identifying it with the course of nature, Vico by *historicizing* providence and identifying it with the course of history."⁹ Vaughan claims Spinoza as "the most important influence on the formation of Vico's philosophy."¹⁰ He rightly stresses the importance of imagination for both, and devotes considerable attention to Vico's unveiling of the "true Homer," wherein he finds the influence of Spinoza particularly significant. This is because Vaughan believes that Vico's unveiling is really a disguised attack on the Bible.¹¹

It is quite true that Vico frequently notes the similarities between ancient Hebrew and Greek history and texts (more in *NS I* than in subsequent editions), noting, for example, that Moses' "narrative is woven entirely from words which have much in common with those used by Homer" (*NS I*, par. 28); further, that he was in no position to offer a frontal attack on the Bible, or on Mosaic authorship, had he wanted

⁷ For the essentially civil or institutional character of Vico's history, see above all Michael Mooney, *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric* (Princeton, 1985); on the relation of imagination and reason, Donald Philip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca, 1981); but see Leon Pompa's criticism in "Imagination in Vico," *Vico: Past and Present*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1981), 162-70.

⁸ Cf. the works of Gentile and Sarchi mentioned above, n. 1, and Peter Burke, *Vico* (New York, 1985), 16.

⁹ "Vico and Spinoza," 53. Cf. S. Alexander, "Spinoza and Time," in *Studies in Spinoza*, ed. S. P. Kashap (Berkeley, 1972), 68. For Vico, time is metaphysically real; for Spinoza, it is only a mode of imagination (cf. Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* [n.p., 1984], ch. 8 and esp. 199-200).

¹⁰ "*La Scienza Nuova*," 351.

¹¹ The critique of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* "might be applied with equal success to the two 'books' of the Christian religion, i.e., the Old Testament and the New Testament," for Vico "clearly intended to undermine the Bible" ("*La Scienza Nuova*," 351), but he could do this only "through a screen—the two books of Homer" (*ibid.*, 353). Morrison essentially adopts this view but lays less stress on it ("Vico and Spinoza," 55 and n. 16).

to launch one (indeed, even Spinoza's critique is veiled to some extent).¹² But it would excessively limit Vico's achievement to read his study of Homer as mainly a veiled critique of Scripture.¹³ Better to see it as an extension of Spinoza's work on the Bible to global scale (from Spinoza's "national" history of the Hebrew state to a universal history, from interpretation of Scripture to the interpretation of all ancient mythological texts), with tacit acknowledgment that the Hebrew Bible and the culture that produced it (even while officially exempted from Vico's science) could without remainder be explained in exactly the same way.

II. My first task, then, is to examine a similarity that to my knowledge has not been noticed in the literature: the degree to which Vico's Nations and Scholars may be a universalized and historicized version of Spinoza's Skeptics and Dogmatists.¹⁴ With Spinoza, this distinction focused a ground-breaking critique of the entire hermeneutical tradition, Jewish and Christian, by reducing it to two basic types, both of which Spinoza thought were misguided.

His critique rests on a simple, fundamental axiom—in the context of the tradition a revolutionary one: in the interpretation of the Bible (or, by implication, any text), we are in the first instance "at work *not on the truth of passages, but solely on their meaning*" (VII, 101/100, my italics; cf. 106/105; XII, 170-71/163).¹⁵

Stated negatively: we must avoid the prejudice of "ascribing to the author or him for whom the author wrote either more or less than his meaning, and we take into consideration nothing but what the author could have had in his mind, or what the time and occasion demanded"

¹² Powell thinks that "excessive prudence" caused Spinoza to "veil" his own views (*Spinoza and Religion*, 60-61). Fausto Nicolini rightly observes that had Vico applied his dating for the invention of writing to the OT, he would have to have come to Spinoza's skeptical conclusions about Mosaic and other authorship (*La religiosità di G. B. Vico* [Bari, 1949], 146f).

¹³ There are significant differences: e.g., Spinoza believes that Moses is a real author (VIII, 124/122); Vico's Homer is not. Spinoza says that some biblical figures (e.g., Solomon, Jesus, Paul) possess higher mental capacity than the typical prophets, who are reproduced as Vico's whole archaic humanity. Spinoza presupposes the capacity to write in biblical times; Vico does not. Thus, Vico's ideas applied to the Bible would have far more radical results than Spinoza's.

¹⁴ I find this both a more likely and illuminating source than Bacon's idols of the mind, concerning which see Verene, *Vico's Science*, 129-34. Gentile does not include this item in his list of similarities (*Studi Vichiani*, 70-72, n. 1).

¹⁵ Cornelius de Deugd rightly regards this distinction as "the basis of the whole method" (*The Significance of Spinoza's First Kind of Knowledge* [Assen, 1964], 141). Jacob Freudenthal emphasizes the importance of Spinoza's realization that meaning comes through the language alone—our only access to the past (*Spinoza. Leben und Lehre*, 2d part: *Die Lehre Spinozas*, ed. Carl Gebhardt [Heidelberg, 1927], 192f). On Spinoza's biblical interpretation, see the major studies of Sylvain Zac, *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'Écriture* (Paris, 1965), in addition, his articles cited later on, and Malet, *Le traité*.

(*ne de ullis aliis rebus cogitemus, quam de iis, quas author in mente habere potuerit, vel quas tempus & occasio exegerit*, VII, 111/110).¹⁶ This is a stringent requirement, for everybody and every religious community want the sacred text to legitimate their own views. Believers want the nobility and truth of the biblical texts to be both apparent and compatible with contemporary religious belief and practice. Whether Spinoza's approach should be regarded as reductionistic or not is a matter of dispute,¹⁷ but he is unequivocal in opposing all obfuscation of that sense of the text that can be truly discovered only from its own history and context.

This principle of contextual constraint underlies his definitive critique of traditional hermeneutics in chapter XV.¹⁸ The two groups of interpreters are labeled by Spinoza the Skeptics and Dogmatists (Skeptics = literalists, equally applicable to biblicistic Jewish commentators¹⁹ or to seventeenth-century orthodox Protestant theologians; Dogmatists = rationalistic or philosophical allegorists).

Briefly stated, the Skeptics "would make reason subservient to theology," forcing us "to accept as divine utterances the prejudices of the ancient *vulgi*" (XV, 190/180)—an obvious *reductio* of the principle of *sola scriptura*. The dogmatists, on the other hand, represented here above all by Maimonides,²⁰ read the prophets as though they were philosophers and so "ascribe to the prophets many ideas which they never even dreamed of, giving an extremely forced interpretation to their words"

¹⁶ Quoting the following passage twice, André Chouraqui characterizes it as "revolutionary": "The universal rule for interpreting Scripture is to attribute nothing as proof of Scripture which we do not have as clearly as possible from its history" (VII, 101/99; "Spinoza & l'interprétation de la Bible." In: *Revue de Synthèse*, 99 [1978], 101f.). But this is not as fundamental as the distinction between meaning and truth. Cf. Tosel, *Spinoza*, 123 on how "interpretation of the Bible by the Bible becomes the critique of the speculative authority of the Bible."

¹⁷ A spectrum of opinion runs from sharply reductionistic (Tosel, *Spinoza*, 129f.) to mainline contemporary theological (Malet, *Le traité*, 304, etc.) to mystical (Freudenthal, *Die Lehre*, 74), with Zac ("Spinoza, critique de Maimonide," *Études Philosophiques* N.S. [1972], 416f.) occupying a solid middle ground.

¹⁸ I use "hermeneutics" simply as the attempt to derive contemporary religious meaning from the biblical text—a procedure that required heroic measures, especially for Christians dealing with the Old Testament. The traditional doctrine of inspiration dictated that every text, regardless of its apparent sense, was capable of bearing religious significance. With non-canonical ancient texts (going back to Plato) hermeneutics involved the attempt to derive philosophical or other contemporary significance from an ancient text (e.g., Homer)—typically, Vico observes, by reading modern "wisdom" into the text (par. 378).

¹⁹ E.g., the Caraites, of particular interest to Richard Simon in his review of the traditions of interpretation (*Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, 1682-85).

²⁰ Cf. Zac, *Spinoza*, 65ff, for an extended discussion of Maimonides' own view; and Malet, *Le traité*, 117; Tosel, *Spinoza*, 141; Shlomo Pines, "Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, Maimonides and Kant," *Further Studies in Philosophy*, ed. O. Segal (Jerusalem, 1968), 3-54 (reprinted in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 20, ed. O. Segal [Hebrew University, 1978]).

(*ibid.*). When the Dogmatist interpreted a text, no matter how clear its meaning, “he would not feel certain of having grasped it so long as he was still able to doubt the truth of the matter” (*de rei veritate dubitare poterit*, VII, 115/114). And such doubt would arise often—whenever the literal sense clashed with reason. In such a case, says the Dogmatist, “even though the passage in itself seems perfectly clear, it must be interpreted *aliter*—in some other sense” (*ibid.*, 115/113), with disastrous results, both hermeneutical and political.²¹

The fault of *both* Skeptics and Dogmatists is that they fail to grasp the first principle: they collapse into one operation the establishment of meaning and truth because they share the assumption that the text *must* somehow be both true and edifying throughout. On the other hand Spinoza allows that both of them are about half right. The Skeptics rightly hold that the literal meaning generally accords with the intention of the ancient authors—that they straightforwardly said what they meant and generally believed what they said (when, for example, they conceived God anthropomorphically).²² The mistake of the Skeptics is that they think this plain sense is also *true*. Thus, for them, meaning = literal sense = truth.

The Dogmatists, on the other hand, are right that the *truth* of any biblical assertion depends on the judgment of reason (since the true “word of God” is reason itself); thus, in the case of God’s anthropomorphic presentation in the text, for example, the truth must be found elsewhere than in its literal sense.²³ The Dogmatists’ mistake is that they ascribe to the ancient authors an intention to conceal such rational or esoteric truths behind or beneath the often crude surface sense of the text, even though Scripture itself nowhere authorizes such a move. For the Dogmatists, meaning = esoteric, philosophical or symbolic sense = truth.

Thus, the first group saves the dignity of the text at the expense of rationality, while the other saves the rationality of revelation at the expense of the text. These faults can be corrected only by rigorously keeping separate the establishment of meaning and the judgment about truth. Interpreters should follow the Skeptics’ lead that Scripture should be explained by Scripture—that is, so long as it is only a question of “the meaning and intention (*sensu et mente*) of the utterances of the prophets”; but the moment the question of truth arises, one has to use judgment and reason to decide (XV, 191/181).

Vico’s criticism of the conceits of nations and scholars parallels Spi-

²¹ Cf. Spinoza’s eloquent denunciation of political hermeneutics at the end of ch. VII (116-19/114-17), and Tosel, *Spinoza*, 148.

²² “I have never seen,” Spinoza writes in *Letter 21*, “any theologian except the Socinian who was so dense as not to perceive that Holy Scripture very frequently speaks of God in human fashion, and expresses its meaning in parables” (Wolf, 180).

²³ Cf. the famous example of God’s “jealousy,” VII, 102f./100f., and Sylvain Zac’s analysis, “Spinoza et le langage,” *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 2-4 (1977), 624f.

noza's but extends it to a global scale, so that Spinoza's skepticism becomes the ethnocentrism²⁴ of peoples and by implication of religious communities, while Spinoza's dogmatism becomes the anachronism of scholars. The Nations and most of the Scholars have misled us about these ancient texts (such as the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, or the Twelve Tables of Roman law). Their misinterpretations are based on a common property of human thinking as such: when confronted by "distant and unknown things, they [both] judge them by what is familiar and at hand" (par. 122) in their own time, rather than understanding them according to their proper historical meaning. This is an "inexhaustible source of errors" regarding the origins of humanity (par. 123). The Nations (which can include any community whose history originates in myth) all share the same conceit: "Whether Greek or barbarian," each thinks that it is the oldest, that its "remembered history goes back to the very beginning of the world" (par. 125), and that it has "preserved its records from the beginning of the world" (par. 53). This conceit is common to all the nations of antiquity and all their primal histories presuppose it. It is also cherished by the Hebrews, Vico pointedly adds, but in their case alone, truly and justifiably (par. 53, 166, 172). This remark indicates that Vico is fully attuned to Spinoza's analysis, and we recall that it was Spinoza's rejection of this conceit that got him excommunicated from the synagogue.

Thus, Vico's Nations incarnate globally the implications of Spinoza's Sceptics: they are ethnic or religious groups that continue to believe that their own myths are literally true—particularly that their laws, institutions, and sacred texts were given to them by the gods at the beginning of the world. The truth of the matter is that they, or rather their remote ancestors, confronted by the psycho-social necessities of survival, imaginatively created these things themselves quite independently of one another, of *any* Ur-history, or of revelation (cf. par. 146).

I believe there is more here than mere similarity to Spinoza: Vico could not have found a more suggestive paradigm for his conceit of nations than Spinoza's Israel, nor a clearer extended analysis of it than the latter's detailed rejection of the claim of the Hebrews to be the original and elect people of the world. The whole of Spinoza's chapter III is an extended refutation of that claim, arguing at length that "there is absolutely nothing that the Jews can arrogate to themselves beyond other people" (III, 55/56), including antiquity (the Chinese are older; III, 56/57).²⁵ Moreover, Spinoza's Sceptics are precisely the Jewish and Christian interpreters that take all this material about Israel's eternal and exclusive election literally. Their view, then, perpetuates the conceit of

²⁴ The term comes from Burke, *Vico*, 53, 77.

²⁵ Cf. Tosel's biting analysis of the logic of superstition, which leads to the illusion of being God's favorites (*Spinoza*, 146).

nations, and Vico's comment that the Hebrews alone *deserve* to hold such an opinion provides a clear marker of his attention to Spinoza, even while his opinion is contradicted.

Meanwhile, the conceit of scholars is to maintain "that what they know is as old as the world" (par. 127)—i.e., that the familiar rationality with which they *now* apprehend the world was shared by the very founders of the nations and/or tellers of the ancient myths, and that therefore a philosophical message is to be assumed and sought beneath the surface of the text, however crude, which must have been "accommodated" to its audience. This is originally Plato's "blunder," described as follows in *NS I*: ". . . he elevated barbaric thought . . . to that perfect state of exalted . . . knowledge which he himself possessed, when, on the contrary, he ought to have descended or sunk from his 'ideas' back to those origins"(par. 85).²⁶

The fit to Spinoza's thought is such that Michael Mooney's description of Vico constitutes a rather precise description of both (even to the point of using Spinoza's own term, "dogmatism"): "Behind all allegorism and other intellectualistic theories of antiquity lay the dogmatism of a particular form of humanity—that of a refined philosophic sensitivity—to which was contrasted, by implication, a severe and equally extreme form of primitivism."²⁷

Furthermore, Vico contends, modern political theorists, reproducing Plato's blunder, mistakenly suppose that ancient authors self-consciously and rationally created the first human institutions. This is the "conceit" of such scholars as Selden, Grotius, and Pufendorf, who attribute to the barely human founders of the nations ideas originating "from the philosophers who did not appear until some two thousand years after the gentile nations were founded" (par. 313; cf. 329).²⁸

This brings us to the point at which the most significant overall contrast between Spinoza and Vico begins to emerge: the element of time, which frames Vico's whole system and is absent from Spinoza's. The latter criticizes the Dogmatists mainly for assuming that Scripture contains meanings beyond the capacity of the ordinary reader-hearer to understand. Contrary to this claim, the Bible has only one level of mean-

²⁶ Vico finds the same error in Aristotle on the origin of languages—"as though the people who invented the languages had gone to school to [Aristotle]" (par. 455), quoted by Nancy S. Struever, "Vico, Valla, and the Logic of Humanist Inquiry," *Vico's Science of Humanity*, 174f.

²⁷ Mooney, *Vico*, 260, "primitivism" equivalent to Spinoza's skepticism. Mooney's description of Vico's "scholars" fits precisely Spinoza's criticism of Maimonides, that the ancients are "made to conform . . . to the image of an ideal humanity, typically restricted to an elite among them."

²⁸ Vico's acute sense of anachronism is evident in such passages as *NS I* (par. 23): "The philosophers have meditated upon a human nature already civilised by the religions and laws in which, and only in which, philosophers originated, and not upon the human nature which gave rise to the religion and laws in which philosophers originated. . . ."

ing, and its teaching is easy for anyone to understand (cf., e.g., the criticism of Maimonides, VII, 115-16/113). Maimonides forgets that the addressees of the message were the general public, not the experts (XIII, 180/172; cf. XV, 190/180). The Dogmatists also fail to obey the rule that Scripture alone must be used to interpret the meaning of Scripture (VII, 117/115).²⁹

This criticism is stringent, but does not focus, as does Vico's, on the anachronistic dimension of the Dogmatists' interpretations. The Scholars' interpretations of the Greek and Egyptian fables are, Vico asserts, "as impertinent (*importuni*) as the historical meanings (*sensi storici*) they both must have had are natural" (par. 384). As Pompa observes,

the anachronistic features of the [scholars] have arisen from the assumption that the experience and life of poetic man is structured by the same rational conceptions which structure the experience of later periods in human history. The problem of anachronism is therefore a special case of a failure to have a correct grasp of the notion of what is historically possible, i.e., a special case of a failure to grasp the notion that conceptual possibilities differ in different historical periods.³⁰

How Vico conceives of the difference of such "possibilities" will emerge in the following section, as Spinoza and Vico unveil the determinative role of imagination in ancient times and texts.

III. The failure of interpreters to observe the distinction between meaning and truth stems from failure to understand a fundamental fact: that the texts in question are products of minds dominated by imagination. Spinoza's doctrine of the imagination and its relation to reason is a pivotal issue in the *Tractatus*, as in his epistemology (of which more below). His exposé of prophetic consciousness in the *TTP* is aimed at demonstrating that the Scriptures (contrary to the theologians) offer no speculative knowledge of God or his attributes.³¹ According to his analysis, the prophets were specially gifted not with intellect but with imagination (II, 27/29). Imagination was in fact the medium of "revelation" (e.g., I, 19/21, 25/28): the prophets perceived revelation *non nisi ope imaginationis*. The "parabolic and aenigmatic" clothing of prophetic discourse, and the "bodily" language in which they expressed spiritual

²⁹ Cf. the Preface, 9/10: "... I point out the way in which the Bible should be interpreted, and show that all its knowledge of spiritual questions should be sought from it alone. . . ." The "its" (*eius*) is dropped in the Elwes translation.

³⁰ Pompa, "Imagination," 163. Gentile and others have noted the similarity of Vico's axiom (that "every theory must start from the point where the matter of which it treats first begins to take shape" [par. 314]) to Spinoza's principle that the order and connection of ideas follows that of things (*Studi Vichiana*, 71 n. 1, citing Spinoza, *Ethics* Pr. 7, II, and Vico, pars. 238 and 106).

³¹ Cf. Zac, *Spinoza*, 69-82, against Maimonides; Malet, *Le traité*, 118.

teaching, conforms perfectly to the “nature of imagination” to speak in this fashion (I, 25/28). This speech is clearly “in harmony with the vulgar imaginations about God and spirits” (*ibid.*, 25/29 [NB: “vulgar”—*vulgaribus*—not “current” as the translation has it]). Such speech was necessary for achieving the prophetic mission, which was to communicate virtue and piety to the masses. This is precisely Vico’s conception of the mission of the poet/rhetorician: to communicate *inter rudes*.³²

Spinoza argues that when God revealed himself to a prophet, he “accommodated” the message so perfectly to the way the prophet already imagined God to be (a warrior, a king, etc.) that the revelation effected no change whatever in the opinions, prejudices, and knowledge of the prophet (II, 27/29). Likewise Scripture, to arouse devotion in common folks, appeals to “fantasy and imagination,” which means that it routinely speaks “improperly” even of God (VI, 91/91).³³

The prophets were limited by the outlook and knowledge of their own time. Further, if they had some “higher” understanding (as did Moses, Solomon, Jesus,³⁴ and Paul) they in turn accommodated their message to the common people (the *vulgi*). For the sole aim of the revelation was to teach obedience to divine law, summarized in the notions of charity and justice and in such a way that these principles could be understood by everybody.

Confronted by all this, the attentive reader eventually realizes that Spinoza’s pious remarks about accommodation are totally ironical.³⁵ Even while using its language, he is in fact standing the traditional doctrine of divine “accommodation” on its head. (That doctrine asserted that God adapts his revelation to the human capacity of the receiver.)³⁶ Spinoza’s text makes perfect sense once we see that he has transformed this doctrine into pure fiction, substituting a theory of imaginative pro-

³² Michael Mooney, “The Primacy of Language in Vico,” *Vico and Contemporary Thought*, ed. G. Tagliacozzo *et al.* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1976), 198. On the parallel between Spinoza’s prophet and Vico’s poet or rhetorician, cf. J. Chaix-Ruy, *J.-B. Vico et l’illumination athée* (Paris, 1968), 85, 96; and José Faur, “The Splitting of the Logos: Some Remarks on Vico and Rabbinic Tradition,” *New Vico Studies*, 3 (1985), 88.

³³ The prophets talked about God exactly as they imagined him, and true to their own temperament (examples in II, 30 *et seq.*).

³⁴ Zac points out that Spinoza’s Christ takes the place and role of Maimonides’ Moses (*Spinoza*, 73). The difference is that Moses’ own conception of God, according to Spinoza, was anthropomorphic, while Christ’s was not (*ibid.*, 84).

³⁵ Cf. Freudenthal, *Die Lehre*, 186.

³⁶ Cf. John Calvin: “For because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill and F. L. Battles [Philadelphia, 1960], 1.227).

jection for the doctrine of an “accommodated” revelation.³⁷ In fact we see that Spinoza—as much as Vico—has a conception of the prophets’ thought-world as a whole that is a coherent imaginative totality. He makes this especially clear in *Letter XIX*, where he says that the prophets constructed “a whole parable” (*een heele parabel*; Gephardt IV, 93) in which God the king-lawgiver issues commands, reveals the path of salvation, the rewards and punishments attendant thereto, etc.

In like manner, but universalizing Spinoza’s concept, Vico describes the primitive poetry of “all ancient nations, including the Hebrews” (*NS I*, par. 253; cf. 264):

Idolatry and divination are the inventions of a poetry which is, as it must be, entirely imaginative . . . [viz.] that the whole of nature is a vast, intelligent body, which speaks in real words and, with such extraordinary sounds, intimates to men those things which, with further worship, it wishes them to understand (par. 111).³⁸

The prophets, Spinoza goes on, “adapted all their words to this parable rather than to the truth” (whereupon Spinoza exits the parable and switches to his own system of nature, wherein God’s “laws” are the means or causes, rewards and punishments the effects).³⁹

For Spinoza—in the language of Vico—“prophetically” can be synonymous with “poetically.” Thus, anthropomorphic God-language is a “poetic” form of expression (VI, 92/91) aimed at an audience that imagines the deity to be “bodily” (VI, 93/93). Moreover, within the prophetic “parable,” as with Vico’s poetic discourse, the course of events is explained with direct reference to God, rather than to their natural or proximate causes:

. . . all the events narrated in Scripture . . . are referred directly to God because Scripture . . . does not aim at explaining things by their natural causes (*causas naturales*), but only at narrating what appeals to the popular imagination (*imaginationem*) . . . in the case of every miracle there were many attendant [natural] circumstances, though these were not always related, especially where the tales were sung *in the poetic style* (*praecipue cum stilo Poetico canantur*) (VI, 90/91, italics mine).⁴⁰

Once Spinoza has reduced prophecy to human imagination, his denial

³⁷ So also Tosel, *Spinoza*, 128f.

³⁸ For further background of Vico’s theory of myth, cf. Chaix-Ruy, *J.-B. Vico*, ch. 3.

³⁹ Cf. Spinoza’s analysis in the *Ethics*, Appendix Pr. 36, I (ed. Shirley, 36) and Appendix, V (60); Cf. Malet, *Le traité*, 108f.

⁴⁰ For both Spinoza and Vico, the critical difference between what they are doing as analysts—explaining things by their natural causes—and what their texts are doing, appears in statements such as that quoted. Cf. *Ethics* Appendix Pr. 36, I; Vico, *NS 3*, par. 182; and Leon Pompa’s introduction to *Vico: Selected Writings*, on the distinction between *scienza* and *coscienza*.

that prophecy was exclusive to Israel becomes an obvious corollary. He once more anticipates Vico with the notion that among the Gentiles as well, real prophets existed, but they were called “augurs and soothsayers” (II, 49-52/50-53). They were “true prophets” in precisely the same way those of Israel were—men of surpassing imagination. This parallels Vico’s contention that divination—the imagination that natural phenomena like thunder were signs from the gods— was the beginning of theology (par. 379).

Spinoza’s analysis of biblical discourse as parabolic is grounded in an epistemology that radically separates imagination and intellect. Nevertheless, Cornelius de Deugd has backed with painstaking textual analysis his claim that “very few things in the history of philosophy . . . have been so thoroughly underrated as the significance of Spinoza’s conception of imagination in the totality of his system.”⁴¹ Its prominent role in Spinoza’s thought is especially significant here on two counts: first, because it brings him closer to Vico in recognizing historical knowledge as a realm of “moral certainty,” even though lacking the clarity and distinctness of Euclidian demonstrations,⁴² and second, because Spinoza’s doctrine of imaginative universals is almost identical to Vico’s. On both counts, Spinoza is distanced somewhat from Descartes,⁴³ making more probable a sympathetic Vician reading of Spinoza, for Spinoza has already begun to open up access to ancient texts by recognizing imagination as their medium of discourse.

It is well known that for Spinoza the intellect is the source of all adequate ideas and actions of the mind, without any reference to the affections of the body.⁴⁴ Perceptions and imagination, on the other hand, always correspond to such affections and do not involve active reason. The limitations of imagination are evident from its definition: “Imagining is the idea whereby the mind regards some thing as present, an idea which, however, indicates the present state of the body rather than the nature of an external thing” (*Ethics* Pr. 34, V; 220). Thus, imagination

⁴¹ Cornelius de Deugd, *The Significance of Spinoza’s First Kind of Knowledge* (Assen, 1964), 8.

⁴² References to Euclid in *TTP*, VII, 113/111, and VII, n. 8, 270f./253.

⁴³ Nicola Badaloni notes that imagination is less curtailed in Spinoza’s than in Descartes’s epistemology (“La science chez Vico et le siècle des lumières.” *Organon*, 6 [1969], 99). Funkenstein observes that contrary to Descartes, Spinoza “seems to describe a positive function to ‘confused and indistinct,’ that is ‘inadequate’ ideas, since they correspond to indistinct entities (or *individua*) and thus have a legitimate ontic status” (“Natural Science,” 197 n. 32).

⁴⁴ For much of what follows, I rely on David Bidney, *The Psychology and Ethics of Spinoza. A Study in the History and Logic of Ideas* (New York, 1962), esp. 35. Cf. G. H. R. Parkinson, *Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford, 1954), 146; Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza*, v.2, *L’âme* (Paris, 1974), esp. 205-22; Isaac Franck, “Spinoza’s Logic of Inquiry: Rationalist or Experientialist?” *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza*, ed. Richard Kennington (Washington D.C., 1980), 247-72.

does not represent the external world in itself, but only certain relations between the body and its milieu. Physiologically, perceptions don't "know" anything, i.e., whether an image comes from in- or outside, since the same mechanism operates in both cases (e.g., whether with prophecy or ordinary sense perception). Imagination merely hands on, in confused images, the affections of the body.⁴⁵ This lack of discrimination leads to mistaken judgments; imaginations have to be corrected by the work of reason, for they lack any structure of logical universality and natural necessity that attaches to true knowledge.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, imagination is absolutely indispensable for knowledge of the world. De Deugd argues that in Spinoza's system it finally has "more actual value than intuitive science," the highest (third) kind of knowledge.⁴⁷ Imagination serves as the "all-purpose term for empirical knowledge"⁴⁸; indeed, *ratio*, Spinoza's second kind of knowledge, "cannot function without the materials given by *imaginatio* or *experientia vaga* (the first kind of knowledge) (Franck).⁴⁹ Although the quality of knowledge produced by imagination is unreliable, its vividness and immediacy yield "moral certainty."⁵⁰ The vivid imagination of the prophets was exactly of this sort; but it lacked two essential marks of true knowledge, i.e., clear and distinct ideas independent of sense experience, and universality.

All of this perfectly fits Vico's developmental scheme. In addition, Vico must have read with interest that an important function of imagination, for Spinoza, is its capacity to form universals without the operation of reason. Spinoza's imaginative universals are composite "generic images"⁵¹ derived from perceptions; they reduce similar perceptions to some order, and generate class or species names in our language. Such universals are distinct from *conceptual* abstractions formed by the intellect ("rational universals"),⁵² as they are also for Vico. Thus, even though dissociated from intellect and formed by the random association of sense images rather than by the linear rigors of logic, imaginative universals

⁴⁵ Cf. Gueroult, *Spinoza* 2.208, 216; Jean-Claude Fraisse, *L'Oeuvre de Spinoza* (Paris, 1978), 53.

⁴⁶ G. H. R. Parkinson, "'Truth is its own Standard': Aspects of Spinoza's theory of Truth," in *Spinoza: New Perspectives*, ed. Robert W. Shahan & J. I. Biro (Norman, Ok., 1978), 49.

⁴⁷ De Deugd, *The Significance*, 185.

⁴⁸ Bennett, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 200.

⁴⁹ "Spinoza's Logic," 269.

⁵⁰ Parkinson, *Spinoza's Theory*, 156-57. Contrasting Spinoza with Maimonides, see Malet, *Le traité*, 125; and cf. Verene, *Vico's Science*, 136.

⁵¹ Parkinson, *Spinoza's Theory*, 149.

⁵² Francis S. Haserot, "Spinoza and the Status of Universals." *Studies in Spinoza*, 53. Vico makes a similar distinction between imaginative and "intelligible universals"; cf. Verene, *Vico's Science*, 66. Mooney does not list Spinoza among Vico's likely sources ("The Primacy of Language," 204, n. 35).

constitute “common sense” and create worlds such as that of the biblical “parable.”⁵³

The meaning of the resulting universals falls short of true universality because they “vary from one mind to another, in accordance with what the body has more often been affected by and what the mind imagines or recollects more easily.”⁵⁴ The languages of various individuals, determined by their experience (and of discrete cultures, determined by the common meanings they attach to things) of course will vary accordingly. This analysis nicely accounts not only for biblical variations but for the vast variety in the mythologies of the ancient world—as well as for certain generic similarities arising from the fact that certain experiences are universal (cf. Vico’s comments on the variety of “Joves” among the nations, treated further below).

Finally, for Spinoza, since imagination is the customary mode according to which ordinary people picture and verbalize the world and the gods to themselves, and since it therefore must be the medium of biblical discourse, we discover a clear and critical distinction between “common sense” and “common notions,” which we should construe as similar technical terms for both our authors. The biblical discourse is based on “common sense” (a term Spinoza actually uses for the imaginative universal)⁵⁵ as distinguished from intellectual concepts. The former are known and transmitted only through “history and language” (XIV, 189/179), while the latter are based on the common notions of reason.

Two obvious principles of interpretation for ancient texts are implied by the above and support the earlier discussion: the text is not the source of speculative or philosophical truth (nor is it particularly reliable for historical truth), nor was it contrived so as to conceal beneath its surface esoteric religious or philosophical truths. But these are precisely the misconceptions of the Skeptics/Nations and Dogmatists/Scholars. Both fail to understand that the essential religious meanings of the texts come clothed in bodily, imaginative terms, and operate at the level of the common but particular ideas, opinions, and prejudices of the most ordinary people of its own times and places.

Thus, Spinoza’s doctrine of imaginative universals might have provided Vico exactly the categories he required to describe the sort of mind that created all the great myths of antiquity—a mind all bodily and passionate, creative and indiscriminating, operating by non-rational associations—for, as Verene asserts, belief in the power of imagination to

⁵³ As Jonathan Bennett describes the process (*Ethics*, II, 40): a universal term results from “a piling up of these [particular] imaginings, and so it will be a fuzzy mess except to the extent that my imaginings have been alike” (*Spinoza’s Ethics*, 39). Cf. Haserot, “Spinoza,” 50-53.

⁵⁴ Bennett, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, 40, quoting the *Ethics*.

⁵⁵ Parkinson, *Spinoza’s Theory*, 145.

“think particulars in universal form” is the basis of Vico’s whole method!⁵⁶ Describing how poetic universals are constructed, Vico writes: “The first founders of humanity applied themselves to a sensory topics, by which they brought together those properties or qualities or relations of individuals and species which were, so to speak, concrete, and from these created their poetic genera (par. 495).”⁵⁷

With Vico, we note again the most important difference from Spinoza: the latter sees the relation between imagination and intellect as essentially timeless. When Spinoza describes the imaginative mode of the prophetic discourse, he never explains it by asserting that these were a *primitive* people whose thought processes were on that account essentially different from our own. Rather, the reason (as stated above) is that both the prophets and their audience were *vulgi*, incapable of grasping concepts not because they were ancient but because they were ordinary and intellectually ungifted. And such *vulgi* are always pretty much the same.

Not so with Vico (cf. par. 387). By introducing the dimension of time, he transforms Spinoza’s hierarchical relationship into a scheme of temporal succession.⁵⁸ “Through his discovery of the imaginative universal, of *fantasia* as a way of thinking and acting, Vico finds a new origin for philosophical thought.”⁵⁹ Vico did not “discover” the imaginative universal, but to place it in time and to valorize it as the momentous creative origin of humanity was new and goes far beyond Spinoza’s notion of the imaginative prophetic rhetoric, even while echoing it. Vico temporalizes Spinoza’s permanent hierarchy of mentalities: Spinoza’s *lowest* becomes Vico’s *earliest*: the “less than human and almost brutish” creature (*inhumanum, paene brutem*; V, 78/78), living in the state of nature “without the use of reason” (XVI, 210/198), reappears as Vico’s brute who launched humanity in a burst of poetic activity.⁶⁰

Both similarities and differences emerge between Spinoza’s historical interest in the Bible and what we find with Vico: Spinoza demands a rigorous historical account of the *text* of the Bible (extended discussion

⁵⁶ Verene, *Vico’s Science*, 109. Moreover, both see an inverse proportion between the powers of imagination and reason in individuals (Gentile, *Studi Viciani*, 70-72, n. 1, citing *TTP* II, 27/29, and *NS*, par. 185). Cf. Morrison, “Spinoza and Vico,” 64, n. 42.

⁵⁷ Quoted by Struever, “Vico, Valla,” 181.

⁵⁸ Cf. *NS*, par. 460. On the intimate connection between imagination and memory, see Verene, *Vico’s Science*, esp. 98, 102.

⁵⁹ Verene, *Vico’s Science*, 35.

⁶⁰ One striking example of the difference between our authors on this score appears when we compare their use of the notion of “childish” or childlike thinking. Spinoza uses that figure with reference to historically constant lower and higher mental capacities, and never to the difference between the people of an earlier *era* and our own (see, e.g., II, 27/29; 39/41; III, 44/45; XII, 165/169). Vico’s ancients, by contrast, represent *in toto* the childhood of the human race (e.g., par. 186f.), simply incapable of rational thought. Imagination is all any of them had in that twilight zone before creatures “began to think humanly” (*incominciaron a umanamente pensare*, par. 338).

at VII, 99-103/98-103), but unlike Vico, he has no interest in, or even conception of, the historical development of the individual Israelite's mind. Spinoza's attention to historical development is found in his close analysis of the rise and decline of the Hebrew state, from the exodus to New Testament times⁶¹—which will be of critical importance in our final section. Otherwise, Spinoza's historical investigation has to do with the Bible as a book—the languages of the text, the topics treated in the various books, difficulties in interpreting them, the authorship of books, their editing, reception, canonization, and general textual careers—i.e., with matters external to the history being related in the text. In these matters, he deals with the history of the biblical text just as he would deal with phenomena of nature, even while recognizing the particularity of historical meanings in contrast to the universality of natural truths.⁶²

Granted, Spinoza is quite aware that meanings are derived from what is possible in “each age” (*aevi*; VII, 106/104) and that “time and occasion” (*tempus, occasio*) of writing must be determined in order to know “what the author intended or could have intended” (VII, 111/110). In such matters, then, Spinoza has a very clear historical sense, as he also does when discussing the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (in chapter VIII) and other books.

But when the question regards the unfolding of mental development, Vico ushers us into a new world,⁶³ proposing, as Pompa puts it, that “the capacity to reason abstractly is itself an historical product, a modification which the human mind undergoes at some but not all ‘times’ in its history.”⁶⁴ The critical “modification” that informed Vico's *New Science* and made it possible was thus a historicized version of Spinoza's sharp distinction between imagination and reason. In fact the discovery that Vico himself considered his most important—one that cost him twenty-five years of intellectual labor (*NS I*, par. 261)—was the insight that the most primitive people were “poets, who spoke in poetic characters” (*NS 3*, par. 34). This, Vico claimed, was the “master key” of his science of universal history, because it provided intellectual access to

⁶¹ Sylvain Zac, “Spinoza et l'état des Hébreux,” *Revue Philosophique*, 80 (1977), 201-32, showing the integral function of that analysis for Spinoza's overall aim in *TTP*, as he relentlessly hunts down the pretensions and ambitions of the Calvinist regime.

⁶² Cf. VII, 99/98: “the method of interpreting Scripture does not widely differ from the method of interpreting nature.” On the contrast between historical meanings and natural truths, cf. XV, 195/182.

⁶³ As Vaughan says, “man becomes rational in the course of time” (“*La Scienza Nuova*,” 337). For Spinoza human nature as always the same (e.g. *TTP*, III, 45f./46f.; XII, 166/160), in contrast to Vico's understanding of *natura* as *nascimento* (e.g., par. 147).

⁶⁴ Leon Pompa, *Vico: a Study of the New Science* (London, 1975), 47.

the true meaning of the ancient myths, a window into the actual history of earliest humanity.⁶⁵

Echoing Spinoza even as he goes beyond him, Vico calls the ancient mythmakers “poets” because their whole mental capacity, like that of children, resided in bodily imagination.⁶⁶ Insofar as they could conceive of anything at all, they did so in imaginative terms, creating imaginative universals (or fantastic, or poetic, characters).⁶⁷

. . . [T]he first men, the children, as it were, of the human race, not being able to form intelligible class concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters; that is, imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which resembled them (par. 209; cf. par. 933, on the formation of imaginative universals).

As we have seen, the power of imagination to create order from sense experience by overcoming the chaotic particularity of sensations is an idea fully developed by Spinoza. Verene is thus describing the doctrine of *both* when he cites Vico’s observation that through the power of imagination, “the minds of the first men achieve the stability of meaning within the immediate flux of sensations that cancel each other in succession. . . . Through *fantasia* the particular is formed as a universal.”⁶⁸

Inevitably, the earliest form of pre-thinking was anthropomorphic. “The nature of the human mind,” Vico says, “leads it to attribute its own nature to the effect” in nature that is frightening or not understood (par. 377; cf. par. 405). This anthropomorphism led to the imagination of the gods, beginning with Jove, the great flashing, mumbling sky, “because in that state their nature was that of men all robust bodily strength, who expressed their very violent passions by shouting and grumbling; they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove” (par. 377). True to Spinoza’s distinction, Vico reminds us that these imaginations were not “shaped by *reasoning*, for they [the first men] were not yet capable of that, but by *the senses*, which, however false in the matter, were true enough in their form—which was the logic conformable to natures such as theirs” (par. 502, my italics).

The similarities with Spinoza’s ideas are obvious: for both, imagination is the imaging of bodily sense experience. Imaginative universals are one of the products of the common mind and of everyday speech and are carefully distinguished from rational universals.⁶⁹ Most important, they

⁶⁵ On Vico’s claim to produce a “true history,” cf. *NS* par. 7, discussed in detail by Pompa, *Vico*, 100-101.

⁶⁶ Mooney notes that this derives from Aristotle’s *Poetics* (*Vico*, 207; cf. 227, n. 109).

⁶⁷ Verene provides all the terms Vico uses, with references: *Vico’s Science*, 66, n. 3.

⁶⁸ Verene, *Vico’s Science*, 81-82.

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 66.

are the language of religion, and religion's creators (whether Hebrew or primeval) are gifted with imagination, not reason.⁷⁰ Their rhetorical style is "poetic" not prosaic, imaginative not abstract, referring events directly to the action of the gods rather than to their natural, secondary or human causes. Imaginative projections, for both, are made without reflection or understanding (cf. Vico's par. 405). Therefore, they must be interpreted on their own terms (vs. the conceits of Dogmatists/Scholars).

Daniel (on Vico) thus summarizes both: "The meaning of poetic characters (figural icons which serve as imaginative genera) lies on the etymological surface of mythic expression. Such meanings are 'not philosophical, but historical,' in that they emphasize . . . how the origin and development of meaning is one ongoing historical process."⁷¹ On the other hand, explanation of these matters in terms of natural causation is what both our authors are engaged in.⁷²

But Vico goes beyond Spinoza in seeing imaginative universals as the first steps in the developmental saga of reason—"rudimentary forms of intelligible universals,"⁷³ that led finally to a capacity for philosophical and scientific thought. As Verene observes, "From the power of the mind to form the sky as Jove's body develops the power to shape all of nature as a system of gods whose signs can be read by divination."⁷⁴ Thus, science itself eventually evolves out of that primitive capacity to perceive nature as a system. While Spinoza explained no relationship between the biblical "parable" and the scientific paradigm, Vico's "anthropomorphic metaphysics"⁷⁵ becomes a stage in the unfolding of reason.

IV. With both our authors, the account of origins can be understood in the same two ways, just as Pompa describes it with reference to Vico: "to recount an historical transition from a state of nature to a social state," to recount it in terms of "the nature and ground of early man's

⁷⁰ Regarding the Hebrews, cf. *NS I*, par. 253: "poetry is shown to have been the first common language of all ancient nations, including the Hebrews."

⁷¹ Daniel, "Vico on Mythic Figuration," 68. The quotation is from par. 34.

⁷² On Spinoza, see Powell's observation, n. 6; and cf. Pompa, *Vico*, 168-69. Examining Vico's cultural context, Eugenio Garin concludes that he consciously and successfully undertook to do for the world of nations what Galileo had, about a century earlier, attempted to do for the world of nature: *Dal Rinascimento all'Illuminismo: Studi e ricerche* (Pisa, 1970), 117. Karl Löwith argues that Vico's *verum-factum* principle, however, presupposes the theological tradition: man, imitating his creator, knows what he makes, i.e., the social world ("Vicos Grundsatz: 'verum et factum convertuntur.' Seine theologische Prämisse und deren säkulare Konsequenzen," *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Phil.-hist. Klasse), 1968, 1 Abh.

⁷³ Richard Manson, *The Theory of Knowledge of Giambattista Vico* (n.p., 1969), 66-67.

⁷⁴ Verene, *Vico's Science*, 152.

⁷⁵ Pompa, *Vico: Selected Writings*, 18.

institutions.”⁷⁶ This provides an entrée to our final consideration: the making of the social world.

The gods are creations of human imagination: this thesis, already assumed in Spinoza’s *reductio* of the doctrine of accommodation, is an explicit element of Vico’s science as well.⁷⁷ But the notion that religious *ideas* are a creation of imagination by no means exhausts the interest of our authors. Both are profoundly concerned with the structures and quality of civic life, and both see religion as a critical social institution, not merely as a set of ideas. Indeed, it is fair to say that for both authors, religion is socially necessary even if, or where, it is not true.⁷⁸

Vico’s claim to originality rests largely on his creative speculation about origins, an effect of his liberation from Cartesianism and his unification of philosophy with “philology” (roughly, history; e.g. *NS 1*, par. 90). More compellingly than anyone before him, he imagined the rise of the human world out of a natural, brutish, pre-human state. It has perhaps simply not occurred to scholars to look for Spinozistic influence in this area, since Spinoza clearly does not share Vico’s obsession with history and with origins.

But the *TTP* is profoundly concerned with institutions, and striking similarities appear. It has already been noted that Spinoza traces the development, decline and fall of the Hebrew theocracy with care (cf. n. 61). Vico’s civil history of the gentiles is more than a faint echo of Spinoza’s account; it is a virtual reproduction and modification of it. For just as Spinoza’s Israel is an example of the universal transition from the state of nature to that of society (V, 74/74),⁷⁹ so Vico’s Israel is a guiding example for his schema of gentile history. We must resort to “sacred history,” to frame our project, he explains, because it offers “a more intelligible description than any gentile history of an original state of nature” and of original “theocracy,” Israel’s being “the first in the world” (*NS 1*, par. 25).

Detailed similarities include first, that both make a sharp distinction between the “state of nature” and the social world, i.e., society with its basic institutions in place. What we are used to associating with Vico we also find in Spinoza (although his is mainly a theoretical rather than

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Commenting on Vico’s *verum-factum*, Morrison clearly states the implications for understanding religion: “Men can know the divine *only insofar as it is a human creation*. Vico’s point is that human knowledge is limited to the human. It ends where the realm of history ends and that of nature begins” (“Vico and Spinoza,” 51, n. 7 [italics mine]). In creating their gods, the gentiles were at the same time convinced that these very gods were revealing themselves (cf. pars. 376, 379, 629, 916, 922), and it is the task of science to account for those creations.

⁷⁸ On the similarities and differences in their social-political orientations and ideals see Mooney, *Vico*, and Tosel, *Spinoza*.

⁷⁹ Zac, “Spinoza et l’état,” 213.

temporal construct):⁸⁰ he characterizes the state of nature in general terms as “uncivilized barbarism . . . almost animal life” (*barbare . . . paene brutalem*: V, 73/73). Moreover, in this state, the human is “without the use of reason,” living life according to sheer appetite or desire (XVI, 210/198), governed by self-interest alone (V, 73/73). For both our authors, then, the problem is to explain how “a world of inter-related human artifacts could come into being, without having to credit the creators of these artifacts with an implausible transcendent rationality.”⁸¹

In addition, for Spinoza (as for Vico) the state of nature is characterized by fear of solitude⁸² prior to any law and therefore to any lawful rights or obligations of person to person.⁸³ For Spinoza, there simply *is* no such thing as “natural law,” literally understood, for such a notion, like that of “divine decree,” is an anthropomorphism based on the biblical parable in which the universe operates according to a transcendent *will*, which Spinoza denies absolutely.⁸⁴ Reason knows that there is no “law” in the universe except the sort created by humans because there is no *will* in the universe except the human. When Spinoza uses the term “law” with regard to nature, he means it in the sense of its universal rules, according to which everything happens by necessity.⁸⁵ But if we are talking about the primal appearance of “law” that institutes, structures, and regulates societies, Vico and Spinoza agree completely that it is a creation of the human imagination and will, known, as Spinoza says, by custom or “revelation.”

Further, both authors say that the state of nature is also prior to any religion. Contrary to the deistic rationalists like Herbert of Cherbury, there is for Spinoza no such thing as “natural religion,” strictly speaking, for religion is an institution of human invention, not something inscribed by God as “common notions” of the mind.⁸⁶ “True religion” consists

⁸⁰ Funkenstein, “Natural Science,” 195, explains Hobbes’s and Spinoza’s “state of nature” as a “limiting case” such as would be used by Galileo, i.e., to posit “counterfactual conditions construed as the limiting case of all actual conditions of a body.”

⁸¹ Pompa, *Vico: Selected*, 19.

⁸² Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, VI, 316/297; cf. Mooney, *Vico*, 93, 197.

⁸³ On Spinoza’s non-moral understanding of natural right, see Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza* (Baltimore, 1951), 179-85.

⁸⁴ Cf. Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Appendix Pr. 36, I (ed. Shirley, 59), where divine laws are described as “figments of imagination.”

⁸⁵ Cf. XVI, n. 28, 276-77/n. 34, 264: “As regards the Divine natural law whereof the chief commandment is . . . to love God, I have called it a law in the same sense as philosophers style laws those general rules of nature, according to which everything happens”—and not in the sense of understanding God “as a sovereign laying down laws as a sovereign.” Cf. *Letter XIX* (Wolf, 150), explaining “law” in Scripture as part of its “Parable.”

⁸⁶ The same general idea is indicated in this contrast between the sources of “philosophy” and “faith” (for which we could substitute “religion”): “*philosophiae fundamenta notiones communes sunt, & ipsa ex sola natura peti debet. Fidei autem: historiae & lingua, & ex sola scriptura, & revelatione petenda . . .*” (XIV 189/179). Herbert of

of justice and charity, which do not exist in the state of nature (see for example XIX, 247/230). The *status naturalis* is “prior to religion” (*prior est religione*, XVI, 210/198). So it is with Vico.

Next: this “state of nature,” according to Spinoza, necessitates the foundation of society through some revelation of divine will (XVI, 210/198), since the brutes cannot be reduced to order through reason. To be sure, one can conceive a rationally-founded state, but such an ideal accords with no historical example.⁸⁷ When Spinoza requires “revelation,” he means that neither religion itself nor society could emerge purely by the light of reason. Both rise together on the wings of the prophetic imagination, proclaiming the revelation of divine will through prophecy, or auspices.⁸⁸

Exactly parallel, Vico posits a virtual identity of origin for religion and social institutions. The further reasoning of both authors is close to identical, including terminology about social “utilities and necessities.” Spinoza argues that society is a “useful, and indeed absolutely necessary” (*perutilis et maxime . . . necessaria*) remedy for the state of nature, for laws are necessary to restrain appetite and libido (V, 73/73). But sheer tyranny, or rule by fear, does not work; men must gain some inner awareness of the “utilities and necessities” of sociable conduct (V, 74/74—*ratio utilitatis & necessitatis rei agendae*—note the terminology). This cannot be fostered by fear alone, but requires the “hope of some greatly desired good” (V, 74/74)—which is provided by religion.

Recognition of the utilities and necessities of existence leads, then, to the primal “compact”—at once of society and of religion: “. . . it must be conceded absolutely that divine law (*jus divinum*) began from that moment in which men by explicit contract promised to obey God in all things, thereby as it were ceding their natural liberty” (XVI, 210/198). Thus, society is intrinsically and originally a religious institution: “Divine law, or the law of religion, originates in a compact; without such a compact, none but natural rights exist” (*ostendimus, constare jus divinum sive religionis ex pacto oriri, sine quo nullum est nisi naturali. ibid.*, 236/221).⁸⁹

The most striking thing here is the verbal identity with regard to “necessities and utilities,” which may indicate direct borrowing. But the

Cherbury had claimed that there were five “common notions” of *religion* inscribed in the mind by God; cf. Preus, *Explaining Religion*, ch. 2.

⁸⁷ So Zac, “Spinoza et l’état,” 211.

⁸⁸ For both writers, the originating moment of religion is thunder and terror: e.g. *TTP*, Pref., 4/5-6 (ignoring here the distinction between religion and superstition); XIV 189/179 (thunder at Sinai); *NS*, pars. 13, 191, 377, among many.

⁸⁹ This is Spinoza’s general picture; in the specific case of the Hebrews, it is Moses who turns a rude and unformed rabble into a people by “introducing religion” (V, 75/75)—i.e., instituting laws and persuading them that they come directly from God (Spinoza here echoing Machiavelli).

difference is striking too: Vico is trying to understand how the “necessities and utilities” of social life could somehow be grasped without reflection, reason, even language—surely without the capacity to enter into contractual arrangements (such an assumption would exemplify “the conceit of scholars” that the founders were “great and rare philosophers” [par. 384; cf. 128]). These founders, Vico insists, were “poets,” not philosophers; their “wisdom” was their imaginative grasp of the necessities and utilities of social life (*necessità o utilità*; e.g., par. 7, 51, 347), through which they became the very inventors of society, the first creators of the nations who laid the social basis for the laws of the gentiles, which only later developed into formal contracts and legal codes.

Spinoza also does not anticipate Vico’s even more radical next move—to the insight that the primal social institutions were not contractually constructed and then sanctioned by separate deities—they *were* deities!

In the first place, the fables of the gods were stories of the times in which men of the crudest gentile humanity thought that *all the institutions [cose] necessary and useful to the human race were deities*. [In this work, he goes on,] we consider at what determinate times and on what particular occasions of human necessity and utility felt by the first men of the gentile world, they, with frightful religions which they themselves feigned and believed in, imagined first such and such gods and then such and such others (par. 7, my italics).

That the gods are personifications of natural forces was already a commonplace in that age, but that they are personifications of *social necessities* not yet conceptually grasped is an astonishingly fruitful idea. It is indicated in texts such as the following:

We begin our treatment of law, the Latin of which is *jus*, contraction of the ancient *Ious* (Jove) . . . at the moment when the idea of Jove was born in the minds of the founders of the nations. . . . Law . . . was originally divine, in the proper sense expressed by divination, the science of Jove’s auspices, which were the divine institutions by which the nations regulated all human institutions (par. 398; cf. par. 342, 379).

As with the other areas of this study, then, we find Vico appearing to draw and expand on Spinoza as he formulates some of his own most remarkable proposals. The trajectory of their work as presented here illumines fundamental concepts of modern scientific study of religion—whatever their importance for an idealistic or romantic modern philosophy of religion (via Leibniz, Lessing, and Schleiermacher).⁹⁰ As Erich Auerbach has said, contrasting the typical romantic interpretation with the actual Vico, “The imagination of the [romantic] folk genius produces

⁹⁰ Cf. Henry E. Allison, *Benedict de Spinoza* (Boston, 1975) and *Lessing and the Enlightenment* (Ann Arbor, 1966).

folklore and traditions; the imagination of the [Vician] giants and heroes produces myths which symbolize institutions.⁹¹

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⁹¹ Erich Auerbach, "Vico and Aesthetic Historism," *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Romanischen Philologie* (Bern, 1967), 272. On the romanticization of the notion that the ancients were poets, cf. Frank E. Manuel, *The Changing of the Gods* (Hanover, N.H., 1983), 127-29 and 135-68 (on Herder).